

South America

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 03 Nov 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6096>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Lee Berman — 03 Nov 2011, 12:04

Jerry Friedman: The Commonwealth is clearly in the southern hemisphere, and there are far more suggestions of South America than of Africa or Australasia, but I don't think we're supposed to connect it with the real present-day South America, still less connect the mountains with the Andes or Nessus with Buenos Aires.

Interesting! The debate does carry on after all. I would agree with the assessment that there are far more S. America references than to any other geographic location on earth. This includes extant and fossil animals and human cultural references.

So I guess the question becomes: if Wolfe didn't intend us to associate the Commonwealth with South America why did he use such an overwhelming volume of South American references?

Jerry Friedman — 04 Nov 2011, 03:18 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com>

Jerry Friedman: The Commonwealth is clearly in the southern hemisphere, and there are far more suggestions of South America than of Africa or Australasia, but I don't think we're supposed to connect it with the real present-day South America, still less connect the mountains with the Andes or Nessus with Buenos Aires.

Interesting! The debate does carry on after all. I would agree with the assessment that there are far more S. America references than to any other geographic location on earth. This includes extant and fossil animals and human cultural references.

So I guess the question becomes: if Wolfe didn't intend us to associate the Commonwealth with South America why did he use such an overwhelming volume of South American references? ??? ???????? ?????? ??? ?

Color and flavor. These things aren't incidental--you remember that BotNS started with a cool costume for a con, and the storyteller in "The Tale of the Rose and that Nightingale" says that "fantasy, color, and pathos are the chief" merits of a tale. Writers have to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.

A good source of solid details is real places and cultures. South America worked well--it's not overdone like medieval Europe, it's different from Byzantium, it ties in with the character who has resemblances to Borges.

I agree with something David Stockhoff said--we can see the continent as the result of a glance at a map of South America, not detailed study of the map. I put it too strongly when I said I didn't think we were supposed to connect it with South America, but I still see no reason to connect the mountains with the Andes or Nessus with Buenos Aires.

Jerry Friedman

Lee Berman — 04 Nov 2011, 13:01 · follows Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman: I agree with something David Stockhoff said--we can see the continent as the result of a glance at a map of South America, not detailed study of the map. I put it too strongly when I said I didn't think we were supposed to connect it with South America, but I still see no reason to connect the mountains with the Andes or Nessus with Buenos Aires.

I wouldn't (of course) argue that the Commonwealth is an exact match to South America but I don't think you are recognizing how close the match is. The Commonwealth has pampas where S. America has pampas. There are the cold islands to the south. There is the mention of the large Ouroboros river just where we'd would expect the Amazon to be. Gyll tracks quite nicely to the Rio de la Plata + Rio Uruguay. There is even a town named Salto on the route north. There is the mention of "the cataracts" in the vicinity of where Iguazu Falls would be. And what other mountain range in the world has a lake with floating islands other than the Andes? These are not incidental features of S. America but (except Salto) are all major, defining landmarks of the continent.

With regard to Nessus, it does track geographically with Buenos Aires but there is also the resident blind librarian there who surely can't be dismissed in evoking Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges.

The name "Nessus" sounds a bit like Buenos Aires and I'm sure Wolfe was aware of that in picking it. But I don't think that was his primary purpose. We are told the name Nessus is meant to suggest poison and this is an ironic twist to the "good air" meaning of Buenos Aires.

But I think the primary purpose for choosing the name Nessus and invoking poison was to focus a laser pointer on the Hercules story. I don't think Wolfe was successful in this for most of his readers, unfortunately. But I see much in the subtext of Severian's story which tracks to that myth. But that is a different discussion.

Jerry Friedman — 05 Nov 2011, 22:55 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com>

Jerry Friedman: I agree with something David Stockhoff said--we can see the continent as the result of a glance at a map of South America, not detailed study of the map. I put it too strongly when I said I didn't think we were supposed to connect it with South America, but I still see no reason to connect the mountains with the Andes or Nessus with Buenos Aires.

I wouldn't (of course) argue that the Commonwealth is an exact match to South America but I don't think you are recognizing how close the match is. The Commonwealth has pampas where S. America has pampas. There are the cold islands to the south.

All the continents but Africa have big grasslands at temperate latitudes and cold islands off their high-latitude coasts. I don't see these as "defining features", as you call them below.

There is the mention of the large Ouroboros river just where we'd would expect the Amazon to be.

Perhaps not "just" where. It's around the same latitudes.

Gyoll tracks quite nicely to the Rio de la Plata + Rio Uruguay.

What about the Parana? Did I miss another river?

There is even a town named Salto on the route north. There is the mention of "the cataracts" in the vicinity of where Iguazu Falls would be.

Although that area is close to the mountains in the Commonwealth and far from them in South America.

And what other mountain range in the world has a lake with floating islands other than the Andes?

The Himalayas.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prashar_Lake

According to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Floating_island, they're fairly common. To take you less literally, I don't know of another place where people live on artificial floating islands, and as I think I said, I do think Lake Titicaca is the inspiration for Lake Diuturna.

These are not incidental features of S. America but (except Salto) are all major, defining landmarks of the continent.

As you see, I don't agree.

With regard to Nessus, it does track geographically with Buenos Aires

Except it's on the west coast, not the east. Also, Master Ash says Nessus was once a city by the sea, not a river. However, at Buenos Aires the Rio de la Plata has fresh water and isn't a very good choice for the metaphor for time that Ash is suggesting.

but there is also the resident blind librarian there who surely can't be dismissed in evoking? Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges.

I did mention him.

The name "Nessus" sounds a bit like Buenos Aires

A little bit.

and I'm sure Wolfe was aware of that in picking it.

...

So neither of us thinks it's a perfect match for South America or unrelated to it, but I think it's less close than you do, and in particular I don't think we can use geographical details of South America to help us read the book.

Thanks for making me waste lots of time looking up the geography of South America and other places :-)

Jerry Friedman