

Pirate Freedom notes

The Urth list — 6 messages, 3 voices, 25 Nov 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6312>

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Gwern Branwen — 25 Nov 2012, 06:13

Finally got around to reading it. Quick read, reasonably entertaining. Sadly, I find myself even less interested than The Sorcerer's House in figuring out the secret - but I am more interested, and I enjoyed

Pirate Freedom more, than An Evil Guest. Faint praise, perhaps. Reading through the old email threads to see what I missed, I'm not sure about some of the ideas floating around.

First, where's this stuff about him being cloned coming from? The one bit of evidence I've seen is a quote to the effect that "my father made me"; I can't find this in my Pirate Freedom EPUB (but FBReader seems to have buggy search so this may not count). But at face value, this seems completely unconvincing to me: he's a *Mafia* guy! All "my father made me" means is that he's a "made man", as one would expect of the son of a big Mafia figure. Chris even says at one point to a new pirate something to the effect 'now you're a made man'. Presumably no one thinks Chris just zapped him with some tailored RNA viruses... "Half-human monster" is more promising, but in context, there's no mention of simply human: "The artists of the Middle Ages painted allegories, we say. What really happened was that they saw more clearly than we do, and painted what they saw angels and devils, beasts, and half-human monsters like me." The artists were painting clones? Or is this just more Christian thought a la Pope? The best line is "I am taller than most people my father told me once he got me engineered that way and I was taller than he was by quite a bit." but height has been known to be hereditary since Galton and a fair number of genes have already been identified responsible for variance, so even simple embryo selection (make multiple embryos, sequence the genomes of each, implant the best-scoring one) would work for that.

Second, there's something really weird about the lack of attention paid to the timeslips. Chris doesn't even explicitly mention anything about time travel until like pg 80 where he says it just sank in (?!?!), and the implication is that the timeslip happened long before he left for the entire monastery: the enrolled kids are, after the closure of the school is announced, implied to be different from the previous kids, and at some point Chris notices no one has wristwatches. Now, this is the same Chris who after wandering around colonial age Cuba and sailing ships still hasn't noticed what time period he is in, so the safe assumption is that the wristwatches disappeared when the school closed. So the entire monastery has been timeslipped for many years, and we are told that some of the monks go out to hear confessions each week, so the timeslip could not have gone unnoticed for more than a week at worst. So what's going on here with the monastery? The lack of contact is curious, as Chris points out and as is emphasized when we learn that Chris thinks his house is so close that he'll just walk there - he didn't sneak out at any point, or have a vacation or break? (His father can't visit him, but nothing is said of Chris visiting his father.)

His obliviousness and rationalizings are supposedly not that: he claims to pump the farmer he meets with the horse, but why didn't he just turn around and go back to the monastery and ask 'hey guys what happened?' He also then rationalizes blatantly: 'And it was not there. I decided then that there were two Havanas, or maybe the city had changed its name and this little town

had taken it over.' Sure, Chris. Sure.

Having read a bunch of theories, I can't say any of them seem especially plausible. No one has a good explanation of Jaime's self-immolation or disappearance, Valentin & dog's murder, the apparent foreknowledge of Lesage, Chris's father (if he is a later Chris, why is he much shorter than his 'son'?) or the monastery's behavior. Nothing that ties them all together. It's a little frustrating, since once the various points are identified it feels like there should be an obvious answer.

I feel a little like *_The Sorcerer's House_* or *_An Evil Guest_* here: by the end we've identified what the solution ought to look like (another time traveler acting at various points in the story / Bax killing his twin and usurping his identity / Cassie going to Woldercon and maybe time-traveling herself), but we don't know how to go beyond that and make the whole thing fall into a satisfying whole (who and how and why / how the letters were mistakenly or deliberately rearranged and the deceptions before the final deception-letter / what Cassie actually did).

On a sidenote, the speech about the many Church sex abuse scandals is disgusting. I don't take this as Wolfe deliberately giving us evidence of Chris being a depraved monster, it reads too sincerely and is consistent with the crankery I've documented elsewhere (although I fully expect someone to reply saying 'no, don't confuse the text with the author, let's interpret it as charitably as possible', just like they did with the *non*fiction predictions I posted); the leadup to his speech is itself misleading and slanted, completely ignoring the central enabling coverup role the Church played for decades upon end. There is no reason to not mention the Church's role, since the Bishop is not otherwise portrayed sympathetically and mentioning it would both be factually accurate and continue characterizing the Bishop... The setup is also, shall we say, curious for making the victims adolescents and not younger still as they so often were. It's also a little strange that Wolfe expects the 'Communists to fall'. Even when this was being written, Cuba's government had been substantially liberalizing and privatizing. There's pretty much no reason to expect them to 'fall' as opposed to follow a gradual transition to being, like China, Communist in name-only.

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

David Stockhoff — 27 Nov 2012, 14:23 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On 11/25/2012 1:13 AM, Gwern Branwen wrote:

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them to 'fall' as opposed to follow a gradual transition to being, like China, Communist in name-only.

I agree that the mention of Cuba comes across as very odd, a bit like a 1950s judgement transplanted to the 1990s, or something like that---disconnected and out of place. I took it as a hint to not take the history stuff (aside from timelines) too seriously, since we can't tell whether Chris ends up in our own past or in the past of a future that is itself a consciously made-up "alternate history" that is not our own. That's the best way I can put it.

As for the Catholic molestation cover-up stuff, I was also alarmed by its basic dishonesty. The facts and true extent of the official conspiracy were widely known in 2007. One could argue that Chris simply didn't want to "go there" or that he himself is blind to true evil, but come on. Chris is a murderer many times over---he should recognize evil in others, at least. More likely that Wolfe himself didn't want to "go there" but, as you say, not for any good reason. Again, why not bring true evil into a story about evil? (And Chris himself was not writing in the 1990s, so ...)

One is forced to at least suspect that Wolfe doesn't get it and doesn't want to. Which would be understandable if also unfortunate and disappointing.

Jerry Friedman — 27 Nov 2012, 15:55 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>

...

First, where's this stuff about him being cloned coming from? The one bit of evidence I've seen is a quote to the effect that "my father made me"; I can't find this in my *_Pirate Freedom_* EPUB (but FBReader seems to have buggy search so this may not count). But at face value, this seems completely unconvincing to me: he's a *Mafia* guy! All "my father made me" means is that he's a "made man", as one would expect of the son of a big Mafia figure. Chris even says at one point to a new pirate something to the effect 'now you're a made man'. Presumably no one thinks Chris just zapped him with some tailored RNA viruses...

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If there was one with the right gene combinations for considerably greater height.

The other clue that Chris is a clone (or has a genome created from scratch or something) is that he never mentions his mother. ?He doesn't even say that he's especially tempted to go to New Jersey and see the mother he never knew.

However, I don't think this is proof.

Second, there's something really weird about the lack of attention paid to the timeslips.

I agree.

Having read a bunch of theories, I can't say any of them seem especially plausible. No one has a good explanation of Jaime's self-immolation or disappearance, Valentin & dog's murder, the apparent foreknowledge of Lesage, Chris's father (if he is a later Chris, why is he much shorter than his 'son'?)

That's a good point. I think it pretty much settles the question.

or the monastery's behavior. Nothing that ties them all together. It's a little frustrating, since once the various points are identified it feels like there should be an obvious answer.

I don't know about that, though.

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On a sidenote, the speech about the many Church sex abuse scandals is disgusting. I don't take this as Wolfe deliberately giving us evidence of Chris being a depraved monster, it reads too sincerely and is consistent with the crankery I've documented elsewhere (although I fully expect someone to reply saying 'no, don't confuse the text with the author, let's interpret it as charitably as possible', just like they did with the *non*fiction predictions I posted); the leadup to his speech is itself misleading and slanted, completely ignoring the central enabling coverup role the Church played for decades upon end. There is no reason to not mention the Church's role, since the Bishop is not otherwise portrayed sympathetically and mentioning it would both be factually accurate and continue characterizing the Bishop... The setup is also, shall we say, curious for making the victims adolescents and not younger still as they so often were.

I just looked at it again, the part I can see at GB, and I read this very differently from you and David Stockhoff. "Chris makes it clear that there were little girls who were victims too, just not in the cases the bishop mentions. So we're not being told that all the cases were like the ones in their church. (Does this mean, though, that Chris knew about little girls being molested and didn't report it)"

Also, we've all heard endless condemnation of the molestations and the cover-ups. There's no need for either Wolfe or Chris to join in that. What Chris does comment on is what's important to him, namely violence (and non-violence). He gives the reader, who already condemns the church for the molestations and cover-ups, an additional reason to condemn it.

By the way, in our reality, did American Catholic priests teach boys to "act like sheep"? "Did they discourage fighting even in self-defense"

It's also a little strange that Wolfe expects the 'Communists to fall'. Even when this was being written, Cuba's government had been substantially liberalizing and privatizing. There's pretty much no reason to expect them to 'fall' as opposed to follow a gradual transition to being, like China, Communist in name-only.

What you describe is certainly the way to bet, but I think there could still be a revolution there, maybe after a hard-line Communist reaction. It's not too implausible for fiction. Also, as David Stockhoff says, the book may take place in an alternate universe. The monorails certainly

suggest that, as does genetic engineering if we assume Chris is born or decanted not too long after the publication date.

Jerry Friedman

Gwern Branwen — 27 Nov 2012, 19:13 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On Tue, Nov 27, 2012 at 9:23 AM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

I agree that the mention of Cuba comes across as very odd, a bit like a 1950s judgement transplanted to the 1990s, or something like that---disconnected and out of place. I took it as a hint to not take the history stuff (aside from timelines) too seriously, since we can't tell whether Chris ends up in our own past or in the past of a future that is itself a consciously made-up "alternate history" that is not our own. That's the best way I can put it.

That's charitable, yes. If we go by Thalassocrat's timeline, he claimed IIRC, that Chris was born in 2007?

If he really was, then the monorails are not very strong evidence of being in an alternate world since there's still time for monorails to go up depending on how late he's talking of them, or Wolfe back in 2007 could've been optimistic about monorails. (We've already seen how bad he is at predicting the future, and from my personal experience in collecting and judging thousands of predictions, people really stink at predicting infrastructure developments.) And for that matter, the wristwatch thing is strange for another reason: at least in 2007, (male) kids were stopping the wearing of wristwatches as cellphones spread; should we chalk this up to it being Cuba, even free-of-Communists-Cuba, or Wolfe being Wolfe?

Much more important would be the embryo selection / genetic engineering and possible cloning: human cloning would be pretty much impossible for even a rich mafiosi to do in 2007, genetic engineering almost as hard, and embryo selection doable but very expensive: while genome sequencing has been falling exponentially (is now ~<\$1000 a genome, projected to hit \$100 2014-2015) that also implies that back in 2007 a sequenced genome would probably cost scores of thousands of dollars and the more embryos you sequence in order to implant only the embryos with the most height-linked alleles, the more you're going to pay out. For a few dozen embryos (which would let you pick an embryo, on average, with 5 or 6 binary variants set as you please), that's going to run you a few millions. Hard to imagine a mafiosi caring about height *that* much.

On Tue, Nov 27, 2012 at 10:55 AM, Jerry Friedman

<jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

But Chris is not a "made man" in the Mafia sense, as I understand it. He's never been part of the Mafia. But I don't remember him saying such a thing and it's not at Google Books.

Does he ever explicitly say he was not a made man, even honorary? He does seem pretty handy with a knife as his father taught him...

The Chris quote is:

"When the fight was over, I had the men come up to Jarden and me one at a time. I shook hands with each of them, told them how well they had fought and how much I appreciated everything they had done, and got Antonio to clean out any wounds and bandage them. Antonio himself was next to last, because he had been busy with a couple of wounded men. I had Simoneau and Yves holding lanterns so he could see what he was doing. I shook his hand like I had everybody else's and told him he was a full member of our crew now, a made man. "If you want or need

anything, if you've got any kind of problem, you come to me, capeesh? You'll get a hearing and fair treatment." I was leaning on the handspike when I said that, and to tell the truth I was just about tired enough to fall down without it."

"a full member of our crew now, a made man". (Is 'capeesh' the right spelling? I thought it was 'capisch'.)

If there was one with the right gene combinations for considerably greater height.

Perfectly possible. Random recombination, after all.

The other clue that Chris is a clone (or has a genome created from scratch or something) is that he never mentions his mother. He doesn't even say that he's especially tempted to go to New Jersey and see the mother he never knew.

However, I don't think this is proof.

Me neither. If it were a more normal character, this would be a good argument from silence since mothers are important to most people, who would be homesick either at the monastery for years and years and not even allowed home. But this is the ultra-oblivious Chris we're talking about. His silences mean essentially nothing because he's as thick as a brick.

That's a good point. I think it pretty much settles the question.

I should note that the height thing could be usefully employed in some sort of progressively refining time-loop like in *_New Sun_*: the old Chris-father thinks back and decides additional height would've been useful and made his life easier and pays for it (but would he be willing to pay enough? see previous). Severian benefits from his height, doesn't he, which gets him unearned respect and deference.

Also, we've all heard endless condemnation of the molestations and the cover-ups. There's no need for either Wolfe or Chris to join in that. What Chris does comment on is what's important to him, namely violence (and non-violence). He gives the reader, who already condemns the church for the molestations and cover-ups, an /additional/ reason to condemn it.

Chris, however, spends the entire book lecturing us on how pirates really are, what life was really like, how the websites and movies get it wrong, in passage after passage. His speech is just another lecture. Personally, I've heard plenty in the past about female pirates and how pirates were democracies, and I was mildly surprised at Wolfe not being contrarian and asserting that pirate vessels were just as bad... Chris was content to lecture us with these old tropes, so why not the scandals?

By the way, in our reality, did American Catholic priests teach boys to "act like sheep"? Did they discourage fighting even in self-defense?

What lesson should one learn from the Church's insistence on settling out of court and using non-disclosure agreements? Doesn't sound like standing up for oneself or punishing the guilty.

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 27 Nov 2012, 19:52 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>
To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>
Sent: Tuesday, November 27, 2012 2:13 PM
Subject: Re: (urth) Pirate Freedom notes

On Tue, Nov 27, 2012 at 10:55 AM, Jerry Friedman
<jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

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As I read the book, I noticed the total absence of any mention of a mother and wondered whether the book were at least partly conceived as a response or in opposition to Peter Pan. Let's just say, Chris is no Wendy Darling.

Jerry Friedman — 27 Nov 2012, 23:11 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>

On Tue, Nov 27, 2012 at 9:23 AM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

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Another good one, though maybe we should chalk it up to the monastery, since novices have no need to talk on the phone all the time.

Much more important would be the embryo selection / genetic engineering and possible cloning: human cloning would be pretty much impossible for even a rich mafiosi

(That's plural. The singular is "mafioso".)

to do in 2007, genetic engineering almost as hard, and embryo selection doable but very expensive: while genome sequencing has been falling exponentially (is now ~<\$1000 a genome, projected to hit \$100 2014-2015) that also implies that back in 2007 a sequenced genome would probably cost scores of thousands of dollars and the more embryos you sequence in order to implant only the embryos with the most height-linked alleles, the more you're going to pay out. For a few dozen embryos (which would let you pick an embryo, on average, with 5 or 6 binary variants set as you please), that's going to run you a few millions. Hard to imagine a mafiosi caring about height *that* much.

It seems to me that Chris was born either later than 2007, or in another universe. (Or Wolfe was sloppy.)

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The Chris quote is:

[snip helpful quote]

"a full member of our crew now, a made man".

He obviously knows the concept. But my understanding, mostly from Wikipedia, is that a "made man" has worked for the Mafia for years, has killed someone on a contract, and has gone through a ceremony. Chris gives no hint of anything like that.

(Is 'capeesh' the right spelling? I thought it was 'capisch'.)

Apparently it's "capisci" (familiar) or "capisce" (formal). In English it's spelled all kinds of ways. By the way, if you ever need the answer, it's "Capisco" (I understand)--or, I suppose, "Non capisco", though you might want to be careful with that one.

I'd think Chris would know the Italian spellings, since thick as he may be, he's good at languages. Either he used an anglicized spelling so readers would understand it, or Wolfe did regardless of what would be in character for Chris, or the copyeditor did.

If there was one with the right gene combinations for considerably greater height.

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Sure, but not guaranteed. I was just picking a biological nit; it doesn't have anything to do with the story.

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Because he's interested in piracy and wants to talk about his experiences with it last. He's not so interested in Catholic scandals. Or Wolfe is writing a book about piracy and the Catholic parts are only incidental.

By the way, in our reality, did American Catholic priests teach boys to "act like sheep"? Did they discourage fighting even in self-defense?

What lesson should one learn from the Church's insistence on settling out of court and using non-disclosure agreements? Doesn't sound like standing up for oneself or punishing the guilty.

I don't see what that has to do with my question. I hope someone who was raised Catholic will answer it. (Or has it already been answered on this list?)

Jerry Friedman