

Helly, Dollo!

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 Jun 1998

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William H. Ansley — 12 Jun 1998, 12:46

Robert Borski wrote, on 6/4/98:

Unfortunately, Roy now can no longer handle even the minimal manual skills he needs to work his nets. This is a corollary of Dollo's Law; while he might regenerate his missing parts, the function of those parts would *not* be reacquired. And so he's forced to prostitute his wife to earn a living.

Robert Borski wrote, on 6/9/98:

The new Jeannine, like her brother in disguise, Victor Trenchard, is able to pull off the old switcheroo, and even to regenerate her lower extremities, but because of Dollo's Law is unable to produce functioning legs. That's why they're withered. (Also why as well Roy Trenchard can't use his hands post-train loss). And it's also why she can't get them fixed or a transplant. She's Annese, not human.

Dollo's Law applies to the evolution of organisms; to apply it to the development of an individual organism is to misapply it. I haven't read 5HoC in a while, so I can't say if Wolfe misapplies it the same way or not.

Wolfe does have (or says he has) ideas about evolution that are not in the main stream of scientific thought. It has been mentioned more than once on this list that Wolfe has said that he believes that Lamarck's ideas are correct.

Mark Millman wrote a very nice message on 6/5/98 which explains Lamarck's ideas (and why Wolfe may believe they are right) so well, I won't attempt to rephrase it here. And, although concise, it is long enough that I won't quote it here, except for this passage: "... it's fairly clear that Lamarckism confuses cause with effect. It would also require that changes in body parts could affect reproductive DNA, which does not happen." In other words, Lamarck was wrong.

Craig Christensen asked about "stories where Wolfe discusses or defends his belief in Lamarkism." There is at least one: "House of Ancestors" in Endangered Species. In this story, Wolfe comes up with the remarkable notion (defended by references to Lamarck) that by "scanning" a person's DNA, all of a person's ancestors, to the nth generation could be recreated, complete with their knowledge and personalities. This is nonsensical; even leaving out the knowledge and personalities, we only inherit half of each of our parent's genetic material, so even the complete genetic makeup of either parent could not be determined. Of course, you can postulate a mysterious nongenetic form of inheritance (which is what Wolfe does) but there is no evidence for any such thing.

Evolution occurring in an individual is one of a set of more or less scientifically (or logically) indefensible ideas that frequently crop up in science fiction. Others are time travel, faster than light travel, antigravity, inertialess drives and force fields. Certainly we can accept these ideas for the sake of the story, but there is little point in basing arguments about the validity of events or ideas in a story on them.

I think shape-shifting organisms are another such idea, but I'll save that for another posting.

William Ansley