

New Sun miscellany

The Urth list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 17 Jun 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/823>

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.

adam louis stephanides — 17 Jun 1998, 20:54

A few days ago I finished rereading BotNS and UotNS and skimming through the archive's posts on the books. (Whew!) I've already posted a few of my thoughts. I have some more questions and comments on various topics, which I'll gather up here.

1) I haven't seen the map in Plan[e]t Engineering, but I've read the discussion in the archive and accepted that the Commonwealth was South America, and thought I had a fairly good grasp of the topography. But then I came across this sentence in Citadel, ch. V: "I did have the impression (though I could not be sure it was correct) that it [Ascia] was a single land mass, and not a chain of islands like our south..." Where does this fit in with what else we know about the Commonwealth's geography? Of course, maybe Severian just means that the south contains a chain of islands; but that's not what he says.

2) After Little Severian dies, Severian is thinking about how that whole family is now dead, and tells us: "I knew then, on the arm of that giant figure, the ambition to conquer time..." (III, ch. 24) And as the New Sun, he does conquer time. Of course, before he actually becomes the New Sun he doesn't realize time travel is part of the package, but even the "bringing the New Sun" he expects to be doing would be "conquering time" in a sense, since it's reversing the effects of entropy. We know that the Hierodules are shaping Severian to maximize the probability that he will aspire to and succeed in bringing/being the New Sun; this raises the grim possibility that they somehow brought about Little Severian's death to help motivate Severian.

3) A few months ago, there was a discussion as to why Thecla's personality was so well preserved within Severian. Me and someone else both thought there was a passage saying it was because the Claw brought her to life within him, but couldn't remember where it was. I found it: it's in the conversation between Severian and the postulant Ava in IV, ch. 10. It's Ava who puts forward this theory, so it's not as authoritative as if it had been the old Autarch or the Hierodules, but Severian is convinced by it (his words at the altar, IV Ch. 14).

4) Does it strike anyone else that Severian's behavior at the start of Urth is just a tad irresponsible? He is (or so he believes) soon to undergo a trial which will have the most momentous consequences for Urth, as well as for himself. You would think he would be devoting himself to planning his strategy at the trial and figuring out what his predecessor had done wrong. Instead he first wastes what must be days recopying the manuscript of (our) BotNS (how long would that take, anyway?) so that people in other universes will know of his exploits. (Not even Typhon was so vainglorious.) Then, apparently out of sheer boyish exuberance, he tries to jump to the top of the mast and nearly gets himself killed. To be sure, he may have spent a lot of time pondering his strategy for the trial that he doesn't tell us about, but from his performance at the "trial" it doesn't look like it: all he can think of to do is to unconsciously parrot the old Autarch's speech, which a little thought would indicate is not necessarily the best move. Of course, his "trial" turns out to be a put-up job, so his dereliction doesn't matter. And he does have his guardian angel looking out for him, though I don't know whether even Tzadkiel could have done anything about his being lost in space (even the eidolon trick wouldn't work,

with no dead brain to draw memories from).

5) My final question is one that probably only Wolfe can answer, though the answer may be in some interview. We know that _Urth of the New Sun_ was not part of Wolfe's original intention, but was written as a compromise with his editor. And _Urth_ makes explicit a number of matters highly relevant to BotNS, but which are much more obscure there, and would often probably have gone unsuspected without _Urth_. My question is twofold: In doing the final revisions of BotNS, did Wolfe have the eventual existence of _Urth_ in mind? In other words, would these matters that are made explicit in _Urth_ have been equally explicit in BotNS, had Wolfe gained his first preference and not written _Urth_? And to what extent can we assume that Wolfe's vision of the New Sun universe is the same in _Urth_ as it was in BotNS?

As usual, comments are actively solicited.

--Adam

CRCulver — 18 Jun 1998, 05:02 · follows adam louis stephanides

<5) My final question is one that probably only Wolfe can answer, though the answer may be in some interview. We know that _Urth of the New Sun_ was not part of Wolfe's original intention, but was written as a compromise with his editor. And _Urth_ makes explicit a number of matters highly relevant to BotNS, but which are much more obscure there, and would often probably have gone unsuspected without _Urth_. My question is twofold: In doing the final revisions of BotNS, did Wolfe have the eventual existence of _Urth_ in mind? In other words, would these matters that are made explicit in _Urth_ have been equally explicit in BotNS, had Wolfe gained his first preference and not written _Urth_? And to what extent can we assume that Wolfe's vision of the New Sun universe is the same in _Urth_ as it was in BotNS?>

It is certain there are some things in the BotNS that would make no sense and have no observable purpose if Wolfe didn't already have some elements of UotNS planned. The first thing that springs to mind is the winged Tzadkiel in the Autarch's book.

- Christopher R. Culver

Peter Westlake — 18 Jun 1998, 10:20 · follows CRCulver

Adam said:

3) A few months ago, there was a discussion as to why Thecla's personality was so well preserved within Severian. Me and someone else both thought we there was a passage saying it was because the Claw brought her to life within him, but couldn't remember where it was. I found it: it's in the conversation between Severian and the postulant Ava in IV, ch. 10. It's Ava who puts forward this theory, so it's not as authoritative as if it had been the old Autarch or the Hierodules, but Severian is convinced by it (his words at the altar, IV Ch. 14).

I'm half a book behind Adam, and I spotted that too. Didn't someone on this or the Whorl list say that birds in Wolfe always tell the truth - and does "Ava" count? :-)

There's also a bit somewhere (books at home, sorry) where it is made fairly clear that the Autarch's "spirit" is alive in the same way as Thecla, almost certainly because of the improved method of transfer, using living brain cells. And in UtoNS there's reference to the Autarch talking to Severian before they all merged into a single(ish) personality.

4) Does it strike anyone else that Severian's behavior at the start of Urth is just a tad irresponsible?

I get the impression he expects to have a very long voyage, so a few days don't matter. Climbing the mast *is* rather silly, though I can see how he might get carried away once he was out there.

5) My final question is one that probably only Wolfe can answer, though the answer may be in some interview. We know that _Urth of the New Sun_ was not part of Wolfe's original intention, but was written as a compromise with his editor.

I hadn't heard that. What happened?

And _Urth_ makes explicit a number of matters highly relevant to BotNS, but which are much more obscure there, and would often probably have gone unsuspected without _Urth_. My question is twofold: In doing the final revisions of BotNS, did Wolfe have the eventual existence of _Urth_ in mind? In other words, would these matters that are made explicit in _Urth_ have been equally explicit in BotNS, had Wolfe gained his first preference and not written _Urth_? And to what extent can we assume that Wolfe's vision of the New Sun universe is the same in _Urth_ as it was in BotNS?

You took the words right out of my mouth! It seems to me that any puzzles in BotNS ought to have answers in BotNS, subject only to modification by things we find out later in UotNS. For instance, at the end of BotNS, we discover that the Severian who would have existed if the Hierodules had not intervened (and who did exist in an "earlier" time-track) travelled the corridors, spending some time as Apu-Punchau, eventually leaving the stone town for the last time and some time later dying and being buried in the mausoleum. In UotNS it turns out to be more complicated than that (right? I haven't re-read that far yet), but still consistent with the earlier book. This is an instance of what might be called the Reichenbach principle - exploitation of our lack of omniscience about what "really" happens in the world of the story. I think we should answer questions about BotNS first with reference to that book alone - as we would have had to for several years in real time - and then apply the extra knowledge from UotNS. If the answers come out differently, that in itself is interesting.

Christopher said:

It is certain there are some things in the BotNS that would make no sense and have no observable purpose if Wolfe didn't already have some elements of UotNS planned. The first thing that springs to mind is the winged Tzadkiel in the Autarch's book.

Granted we don't find out who that is, but do we really need to for BotNS? There are plenty of references to amchaspands and things outside time to give some clue as to what *kind* of thing Severian might be seeing. He gets a glimpse of a higher reality; it's one of those passages that give the impression that the author knows more about the world of the book than he is telling. It's one of the things the best authors can do, and contributes strongly to our belief in the world of the story.

While we're being miscellaneous, some older threads about things that I hadn't re-read at the time:

Jonas and Miles: Severian isn't the only one who sees Jonas in Miles. The Pelerine who sees Thecla in Severian comments that Miles is "like that too". Jonas really is there somehow. How he gets there, and what happens to his previous body, is another question!

Armigers: somewhere in the archives is a comment to the effect that armigers are people who

are allowed to bear arms, like Samurai. In fact, the kind of arms "armiger" refers to are coats of arms, like the rose/ship/fountain in the mausoleum. My apologies to those of you who knew this perfectly well already!

Hildegryn: I get the idea about S and A-P "merging", I think, especially after reading "Twin Mounds". William asked why one Hildegryn appeared to be struggling with something invisible; could it be that Severian is really seeing one Hildegryn, but with two pairs of eyes? As Apu-Punchau, he sees Hildegryn trying to capture him; as Severian, he sees H but can't see A-P. Not being able to see people who aren't quite in your own time is common to this and "Twin Mounds", though I would never have worked it out for myself. I'm still not entirely clear on this episode, in fact. Why was it fatal to Hildegryn? Would someone like to explain it all to me slowly? Bears are not universally intelligent, remember. [*]

Narrative reticence: I subscribe to the "remembering to put in details only when they become relevant" theory, mostly, with some clear-cut cases of "torment the reader". Severian not saying why he was leaving Thrax is a prime example. The disturbance at the gate of Nessus, where we only learn bit by bit that someone had tried to take a wagon along the road and been caught, is another.

Final Ignorant Question: what is Texas A & M, please?

Spectacled Bear.

[*] For the Whorl list, I adopted the name Spectacled Bear because (a) they are the only bear that lives in South America (and who would have thought reading Gene Wolfe would give new insight into the work of Michael Bond?!) and (b) I heard someone describing on the radio her research work with spectacled bears, in which a male bear was given a pole with which to knock down fruit that had been placed high up out of his reach. Instead he held it upright and tried to climb it, giving me a perfect analogy and excuse for unsupported conjecture. The research concluded that "bears are not universally intelligent".

Michael Straight — 18 Jun 1998, 10:15 · follows Peter Westlake

On Wed, 17 Jun 1998, adam louis stephanides wrote:

5) My final question is one that probably only Wolfe can answer, though the answer may be in some interview. We know that _Urth of the New Sun_ was not part of Wolfe's original intention, but was written as a compromise with his editor. And _Urth_ makes explicit a number of matters highly relevant to BotNS, but which are much more obscure there, and would often probably have gone unsuspected without _Urth_. My question is twofold: In doing the final revisions of BotNS, did Wolfe have the eventual existence of _Urth_ in mind? In other words, would these matters that are made explicit in _Urth_ have been equally explicit in BotNS, had Wolfe gained his first preference and not written _Urth_? And to what extent can we assume that Wolfe's vision of the New Sun universe is the same in _Urth_ as it was in BotNS?

Wow! I've been considering for days now how to ask this very question.

Like many people, I read the BotNS and was entranced but knew I wasn't getting all of it, and now know that I missed much more than I suspected at the time.

I read Urth directly after BotNS and was so disappointed that for a while I wanted to ignore it, pretend I'd never read it. The answers it gave to questions raised in BotNS were so different from the provisional ones I'd come up with, it was hard to reconcile.

I was also disappointed with the flow of the book. The first half spends a long time on Severian's journey in the ship to Yesod, a leisurely pace that I suppose is in keeping with the BotNS, but which made me impatient at the time, seeming too much like a digression.

Then the second half of the book seemed really rushed, like Wolfe had this checklist of things Severian needed to do to fulfill all the prophecies - do miracles and become the Conciliator (check), meet Typhon for the "first" time (check), go back in time to become Apo Punchau (check), bring the New Sun (check). They all just seemed kind of tacked on and not fully fleshed out. In light of your comment about Wolfe making a "compromise" I almost wonder if he initially wanted to leave these scenes to the reader's imagination but the editor convinced him to spell things out that he only wanted to hint at.

I also admit that I liked my initial impression that in BotNS the Conciliator legend was a jumble mixing stories of Jesus with a contemporary of Typhon and possibly other historical/mythological figures. So I was disappointed to see Severian acting it out so literally. If the Conciliator is "just" Severian and not in some way also a memory of Jesus, then it's harder to place Severian as the "Christian figure" Wolfe wants him to be. And it seems then like the New Sun/Long Sun multiverse is merely a new, self-contained, mythology rather than an extension of Christian mythology (which I would find more interesting, and I thought was Wolfe's intent).

Getting back to Adam's comments, I'm reminded of Borges, who was very interested in the idea of how our reading of a text changes because of what else we've read. (See especially "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" and "Kafka and his Precursors"). I think Wolfe very deliberately and successfully created with Exodus a book that almost rewrites the earlier books in the Long Sun series and am fascinated by how different a re-reading of them is after finishing Exodus.

Reading this list has convinced me that what Wolfe has done with Urth does in fact make BotNS more interesting than my original reading, and I'm way overdue in re-reading BotNS, but I'm also still interested in BotNS as it stands without Urth. I'd be interested in alternate interpretations of events in BotNS that Urth rules out. Is it certain, for instance, in the first four books that Severian himself will one day become the Conciliator? Are there any reviews or discussions of BotNS I could get my hands on that predate Urth?

-Ramblin' Rostrum

Michael Straight — 18 Jun 1998, 10:22 · follows Michael Straight

On Thu, 18 Jun 1998, Peter Westlake wrote:

You took the words right out of my mouth! It seems to me that any puzzles in BotNS ought to have answers in BotNS, subject only to modification by things we find out later in UotNS.

I think

we should answer questions about BotNS first with reference to that book alone - as we would have had to for several years in real time - and then apply the extra knowledge from UotNS. If the answers come out differently, that in itself is interesting.

A fascinating, but at best difficult exercise! Some might argue it is impossible, that having read Urth, there are some possibilities we just won't be able to see in BotNS anymore. I can't imagine, for instance, pretending anymore that the Urth is so old that the Sun is dying of natural causes, even though I read the whole series without catching on about the black hole.

The best route might be to read reviews that predate Urth or remember interpretations we had before we read Urth and in discussing them limit the "evidence" to BotNS.

-Rostrum

Peter Westlake — 29 Jun 1998, 09:55 · follows Michael Straight

At 11:20 1998-06-18 +0100, a foolish Bear wrote:

...

Armigers: somewhere in the archives is a comment to the effect that armigers are people who are allowed to bear arms, like Samurai. In fact, the kind of arms "armiger" refers to are coats of arms, like the rose/ship/fountain in the mausoleum. My apologies to those of you who knew this perfectly well already!

I couldn't find that in the archives when I wrote the message; imagine my embarrassment on finding it in the afterword to _Claw_! It actually says that the name suggests a fighting class, rather like the Samurai. The stuff about coats of arms is still true, of course, and arms were usually granted to knights, who were a fighting class too. My thanks to all who refrained from pointing out my mistake ;-)

Bears are not universally intelligent, remember.

Now this bit, I stand by.

SBear.