

Book and Urth

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 20 Jun 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 20 Jun 1998, 13:52

On Fri, 19 Jun 1998 I wrote:

Spectacled Bear 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.

OTOH, _Urth_ is evidence of Wolfe's intentions in writing BotNS, just as interviews with Wolfe are (although neither of these sources are infallible). So if we allow the interviews as evidence, as we usually do on this list, we should allow _Urth_ as evidence also, even if we're only interested in BotNS.

I neglected to say that I basically do agree that the answers to interpretative questions about a work of fiction should ideally be deducible from that work itself. Thus I prefer evidence from the novels to evidence from interviews, and in interpreting BotNS I would prefer evidence from BotNS to evidence from _Urth_.

This raises an interesting philosophical (and very Borgesian) question: can the meaning of BotNS by itself be different from the meaning of BotNS as part of the five-volume "Fictions of the New Sun" (Peter Wright's useful term, IIRC) including _Urth_?

I was thinking more about the relationship between BotNS and _Urth_, and came to the conclusion that this problem is not as serious as it might be, because BotNS and _Urth_ are basically complementary. What I mean by this is that, IMO, the essential "matter" of BotNS is Severian's personality, as revealed both by the tale he tells and by the way he tells it; the setting of Urth and Briah-Yesod, while of great interest, is essentially background material. Thus, while _Urth_ may contain information about the New Sun cosmos which contradicts the best inferences we could have drawn from BotNS, this doesn't change the basic meaning of BotNS. Conversely, _Urth_ is essentially about this cosmos, and doesn't tell us much that's new about Severian's personality (which may be one reason why some people find it a disappointment).

--Adam