

What is _Urth of the New Sun_ about?

The Usenet list — 21 messages, 14 voices, 30 Dec 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/57>

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Mike Ward — 30 Dec 2003, 03:04

What is _Urth of the New Sun_ about?

I've read it and _Book of the New Sun_. I remember the story of _Book of the New Sun_ pretty well. But I don't remember a single thing about _Urth_. Well I recall a few vague things about him being on a space ship at the begining, but otherwise I'm drawing a blank.

Somebody jog my memory, please.

Mike

AnomJ7t7 — 30 Dec 2003, 03:59 · in reply to Mike Ward

What is _Urth of the New Sun_ about?

It's been awhile since I read it, but it seems to me an underlying theme was that Severian was supposed to be procuring some sort of nuclear device from an alien race that would 'restart' the sun which, of course a million years into the "Urth's" future, was dying.

AnomJ7t7 — 30 Dec 2003, 04:29 · in reply to AnomJ7t7

And just another brief aside...I'm not overly well read in the science fiction genre, but it doesn't seem to me that this was ever a really popular theme (dying sun or million years into the future type stories) alternate histories, near future dystopias and space operas are a dime a dozen, but I suppose this sort of sub-genre (if it really can be called that) would require quite a bit more imagination and ability to pull off. The only books I can think of in this genre are 'the Night land' by William Hope Hodgson (God-awful and damn near unreadable after chapter 10 or so....some of the ideas are amazing though, given it's pre WWI) Jack Vance's 'Dying Earth' series, Wolfe's "Book of the new sun" series and of course 'the Time machine' by H.G. Wells. Anyone know of any other examples?

Mark Jeffcoat — 30 Dec 2003, 11:30 · in reply to AnomJ7t7

anomj7t7 at aol.com (AnomJ7t7) writes:

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My summary may contain spoilers. As the original post suggests, though, this is not necessarily a plot-oriented sort of book.

Severian becomes Autarch in The Book of the New Sun. The old sun of the world he rules is dying. In Urth, Severian travels to meet an alien being who will test him. If he passes the test, Severian will return with/as the New Sun (a white hole dropped into the old sun's center, to rejuvenate it with new matter). If he fails, there will be penalties.

The first part of the book takes place as the space (kinda)-ship is traveling: Severian has adventures, meets aliens, learns stuff, etc. This part is weird.

Then Severian reaches the heaven-ish kind of place. Wolfe draws a lot on a cosmology I usually think of as cabalistic (q.v. the "Tree of Life"), though I have no idea where this structure comes from originally. This part is weirder.

Severian brings the New Sun. Yay! ... But we're only about half way though the book. Severian's Grand Journey Through Time is next. You'll forgive me if I don't even try to recount any part of the plot here, 'cause not only do things get even weirder and ridiculously complicated, but Wolfe also shows us scenes from earlier books through new eyes (and possibly in new versions of the universe), forcing us to re-interpret ... pretty much everything. This project will expand to fill any time you give to it, but you have to enjoy that sort of game.

Any questions? Too bad. I'm pretty much out of answers.

Mark Jeffcoat
Austin, TX

James Nicoll — 30 Dec 2003, 15:38 · in reply to AnomJ7t7

And just another brief aside...I'm not overly well read in the science fiction genre, but it doesn't seem to me that this was ever a really popular theme (dying sun or million years into the future type stories)

Dying sun scenarios have the problem that while it was a reasonable scenario when Wells was writing [and Verne would toss in cooling of the Earth's interior, which he felt was going to be Very Bad Indeed for us] the current model suggests that the sun will continue to get brighter until it cooks Earth and only much later end up as a cooling white dwarf.

OTOH, at some point all the stars will run out of material to fuse and the universe will become rather dark. I know Stephen Baxter has played with that scenario. Part of Darwinia is set after things have cooled off a bit, although only a little as far as the POV characters are concerned.

"The Union Nationale has brought [Quebec] to the edge of an abyss.
With Social Credit you will take one step forward."

Camil Samson

Mike Ward — 30 Dec 2003, 15:54 · in reply to AnomJ7t7

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Edmund Hamilton's City at World's End is about a modern city thrown so far into the future that the earth is starting to cool. They find ruined domed cities that had relied on geo-thermal energy until the earth itself had cooled then apparently they had left the earth.

The classic Superman story "Superman Under the Red Sun" also by Hamilton I believe has Superman trapped on earth in the far future where the sun has turned red which eliminates Superman's powers. All the people have long since migrated into space, and only androids and strange new creatures which have evolved to live in the new environment remain on earth.

Mike

Mike Ward — 30 Dec 2003, 15:57 · in reply to Mark Jeffcoat

Mark Jeffcoat <jeffcoat at alumni.rice.edu> wrote in news:87pte6ee6d.fsf at local.invalid:

anomj7t7 at aol.com (Anomj7t7) writes:

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Okay that's the stuff I sort of remembered and its becoming clearer now.

The first part of the book takes place as the space (kinda)-ship is traveling: Severian has adventures, meets aliens, learns stuff, etc. This part is weird.

Yeah. I mentioned have fuzzy memories about him on the space ship. I think it's the fact that it was weird that makes my memories so fuzzy.

Then Severian reaches the heaven-ish kind of place. Wolfe draws a lot on a cosmology I usually think of as cabalistic (q.v. the "Tree of Life"), though I have no idea where this structure comes from originally. This part is weirder.

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That helps a little. I think part of my problem is that because he goes back to events from the BotNS that I confuse the events of the two books.

Mike

AnomJ7t7 — 30 Dec 2003, 19:23 · in reply to James Nicoll

Dying sun scenarios have the problem that while it was a reasonable scenario when Wells was writing [and Verne would toss in cooling of the Earth's interior, which he felt was going to be Very Bad Indeed for us]

Yes, if I'm not mistaken, Wells and Hodgson were working from Lord Kelvin's theories on the sun's age.

the current model suggests that the sun will continue to get brighter until it cooks Earth and only much later end up as a cooling white dwarf.

Thank you for mentioning this, because it reminds me of a book which I had on my 'To Read' pile quite a few years ago that I ended up forgetting about and losing in the shuffle, and that's Brian Aldiss's 'Long afternoon of earth'. Although I never read it it seems to me that it was about a future period (not sure exactly how many years) where the sun is expanding and the tropical greenhouse like environment as well as the strangely evolved life forms it creates. I'll have to look for this book again.

Back to the original subject.... That in turn reminds me how that in 'The book of the new sun' Severian would always refer to the "Great jungles of the north" or something similar.... did Wolfe ever give a scientific explanation for this reversal of the Urth's environmental make-up or was it something I missed?

Michael S. Schiffer — 30 Dec 2003, 19:26 · in reply to AnomJ7t7

...

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Severian lived in the Southern Hemisphere. (South America, specifically, from clues in the text that I don't currently remember.)

Mike

Michael S. Schiffer, LHN, FCS

Mike Ward — 30 Dec 2003, 20:34 · in reply to AnomJ7t7

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I think it was because BotNS was set so far in the future that the earth had just changed that much.

Mike

LugoMan — 30 Dec 2003, 21:39 · in reply to Michael S. Schiffer

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Severian lived in the Southern Hemisphere. (South America, specifically, from clues in the text that I don't currently remember.)

I remember one passage talked about the southern lands being made up of individual islands while the north is one large continent. I guess I always took it to be the eastern hemisphere. The southern lands being Indonesia, Philippines, New Zealand and Australia* and the north being Asia (wasn't the enemy called ascians? Their system of government was kind of a take off on communism). I don't know enough geology to know if the above mentioned land masses are drifting north or south so I don't know what the globe will look like thousands of years from now.

Just now thinking about it I am tempted to reread the whole series and imagine Severien with an Australian accent. It will probably completely change the whole tone of the book.

Matt Austern — 31 Dec 2003, 00:37 · in reply to Mike Ward

Mike Ward <m at d.w> writes:

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I think it was because BotNS was set so far in the future that the earth had just changed that much.

Simpler explanation: most of the action of the book is south of the equator. There are lots of places in the world today where you'd go north to find jungles. Why not in the distant future, too? (If you'd like, you can assume a bit of continental drift so that most of the big land masses are in the southern hemisphere.)

Jim Cambias — 31 Dec 2003, 20:38 · in reply to LugoMan

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Book of the New Sun takes place in a somewhat altered South America. The enemy come from what we would call Central America, as their name Ascians means "no shadow" people -- i.e. the sun shines straight down where they live.

Cambias

Steve Simmons — 02 Jan 2004, 14:41 · in reply to Michael S. Schiffer

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Severian lived in the Southern Hemisphere . . .

Well south of the Equator, too.

(South America, specifically, from clues in the text that I don't currently remember.)

There were a number of references to the pampas, but given Wolfe's tendency (in BoTNS, anyway) to reuse words for new meaning, that probably doesn't mean much. I got the impression that there had been major re-arrangements of the continents, not dissimilar to what happens near the end of EoTNS.

Note also that the timescales are often over-estimated by readers, not to mention Severian.

Ron Henry — 06 Jan 2004, 16:35 · in reply to LugoMan

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enemy called ascians? Their system of government was kind of a take off on communism). I don't know enough geology to know if the above mentioned land massed are drifting north or south so I don't know what the globe will look like thousands of years from now.

No, really, It's pretty clear from references in both the New Sun and Long Sun series that Severian and the people of the Whorl who come from the same Commonwealth as Severian, were South Americans. (One off the cuff reference I can think of is that they drink maté.)

As far as the time-scale of the sun "dying", theories of solar evolution (I know I'm gesturing at another part of this thread, sorry) are irrelevant, as it's implied in several places that the sun was deliberately damaged or poisoned at some point. Best estimates I've seen put the action tens of thousands of years in the future, not millions or billions.

There's a huge amount discussion of all this in the archives of the Urth mailing list, which you should be able to Google without much trouble if you feel motivated to spend a month or two reading them (they go back many years).

Ron Henry

jack starr — 07 Jan 2004, 03:00 · in reply to Ron Henry

On Tue, 6 Jan 2004 11:35:24 -0500, "Ron Henry" <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> wrote:
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Shit, I dink mate and live in New Jersey

William December Starr — 19 Jan 2004, 20:58 · in reply to Ron Henry

In article <bteo4e\$30n\$1 at news01.cit.cornell.edu>,

"Ron Henry" <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> said:

No, really, It's pretty clear from references in both the New Sun and Long Sun series that Severian and the people of the Whorl who come from the same Commonwealth as Severian, were South Americans. (One off the cuff reference I can think of is that they drink mat💎.)

How likely is it, though, that the equation "they drink mate' in that culture" == "that culture is located in South America" is going to remain continuously true for tens of thousands of years?

Ron Henry — 20 Jan 2004, 14:35 · in reply to William December Starr

"Ron Henry" <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> said:

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Well, as I've written before, I don't think the time BotNS/BotLS take place is nearly as distant as most people suppose. Most of what happens in the book is pretty recognizable and comprehensible to us, and suggests at most a couple thousand years have passed, at most.

Honestly, I think this is one of the subtle Wolfean trickeries at work -- it appears because of some tricks he is playing with sfnal tropes -- like the dying sun, which a close reading reveals was deliberately damaged, not fading from age, or a landscape seemingly more altered, even tectonically, from our own (Severian might just be confused with directions on occasion) -- to be much more remote from the contemporary reader than it really is. Wolfe might also be teasing with or satirizing some of these sfnal tropes -- it really doesn't take tens or hundreds of thousands of years to spread urban blight down (or up) a river valley, or to carve up the faces of mountains into monuments, as 20th-c. American history shows us pretty plainly. Most of the "lost advanced tech" in the story is hardly "far future" (unless one accepts now-naive "Golden Age" sf ideas of what the "far future" will be like) -- hover cars, ray guns, neural torture devices, rocket ships as big as buildings, whatever viral technique does the memory transfers, etc.

That's how I read it anyhow. I'm sure milage will vary!

Ron

Nancy Lebovitz — 21 Jan 2004, 08:49 · in reply to Ron Henry

In article <bujec7\$jba\$1 at news01.cit.cornell.edu>,

Ron Henry <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> wrote:

"Ron Henry" <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> said:

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What about the beach where all the "sand" is actually broken glass?

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Nancy Lebovitz nancy at netaxs.com www.nancybuttons.com
Now, with bumper stickers

Using your turn signal is not "giving information to the enemy"

wthyde — 23 Jan 2004, 22:25 · in reply to William December Starr

"Ron Henry" <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> said:

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How likely is it, though, that the equation "they drink mate' in that culture" == "that culture is located in South America" is going to remain continuously true for tens of thousands of years?

Incredibly unlikely.

Today we might say that the English are known for drinking tea and port. Three hundred years ago they drank neither. Three hundred years ago they drank beer for breakfast. Few now do.

Also, Wolfe explicitly tells us that he is using some

English words to describe objects/concepts that do not exist today. Just because they are said to be drinking "mat'e" doesn't mean they are actually doing so.

We might as well claim they are Armenian, because of Severian's name.

William Hyde
EOS Department
Duke University

wthyde — 23 Jan 2004, 22:33 · in reply to Ron Henry

"Ron Henry" <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> writes:

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Even a thousand years is too many for the mate reference.

Most of what happens

in the book is pretty recognizable and comprehensible to us, and suggests at most a couple thousand years have passed, at most.

Having just read the books I have to disagree. The strata shown in "Sword of the Lictor" are not going to be laid down in less than hundreds of thousands of years. As they have since been uplifted, more time must be added for that.

Nor do I think the geography fits. There is no river equivalent to Gyoll today, nor would there be even if sea level were to drop due to polar glaciation.

It's either the very far future, or not our Earth.

Honestly, I think this is one of the subtle Wolfean trickeries at work -- it appears because of some tricks he is playing with sfnal tropes -- like the dying sun, which a close reading reveals was deliberately damaged, not fading from age,

Actually that's pretty obvious. And even at the time Wolfe wrote the book most of his audience would be aware that the sun grows brighter with age, not dimmer.

William Hyde

EOS Department
Duke University