

Death of the Navigator

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 17 Mar 1999

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Robert Borski — 17 Mar 1999, 03:25

From SWIMMING WITH THE UNDINES, my latest on-going project, Chapter 16:

After Severian and Jonas are arrested on the grounds of the House Absolute, they're confined in an underground antechamber, where a large remnant prison population already exists. Unlike themselves, however, many of their fellow inmates have never known a single day of freedom. Quite a few, in fact, appear to have been born there, as have their ancestors before them, perhaps even as far back as fourteen generations. Consequently--and small surprise, given such long-term isolation--prisoners' perspectives about the outside world tend toward the skewed, ludicrous side. Bees--"animals that made their own sugar"--carried "poisoned swords" and "were the size of rabbits." So reports cyborg Jonas at one point, having in addition to say this about the oral, passed-on nature of such misapprehensions. "Family memories, I suppose, you could call them. Traditions from the outside world that have been handed to them, generation to generation, from the original prisoners from whom they are descended. They don't know what some of the words mean any longer, but they cling to the traditions, to the stories, because those are all they have; the stories and their names."

Another one of these stories is later relaid to Severian by a little girl whose name is never given, but which we later learn in URTH is Oringa. Asked why he wears black clothes, Severian attempts to explain, prompting this response from Oringa: "Burying people wear black. Do you bury people? When the navigator was buried there were black wagons and people in black clothes walking. Have you ever seen a burying like that?"

Severian, quite honestly for his experience, tells her that no one wears fuligin clothes at funerals because it would mark the wearer--and scandalously so for the deceased--as a torturer. He then attempts to change the subject. But we as readers are still left with several questions. Is there, first of all, any relevance to this tale of the navigator? Who, for example, might this mysterious figure be that details about his funeral have been transmitted down through the ages, from one generation of prisoners to the next? Is he a true navigator in the denotative sense? Or is 'navigator' one of those words that the prisoners have lost all sense of, except perhaps metaphorically? Initially, given Jonas's history--he's the patched survivor of a spaceship crash--it's tempting to see the navigator as part and parcel of the same crash, only as a casualty. But how likely is it that the survivors of such a mishap could organize a funeral cortege like the one described, especially since it appears they've landed in extremis, not only in the future, but subject apparently to life-long arrest by the autarch's representatives? And why does Wolfe seem to place such special emphasis on not only the blackness of the wagon, but the fact that people walked behind it?

The answer is not that difficult if you think about it. Gene Wolfe, after all, is a staunch Catholic. And the Book of New Sun is filled with indelible memories. So it seems only fair that author Wolfe be allowed to include one of his own--especially since it also comprises one of this nation's most searing. Ergo, for those of you not yet born, or too young to remember, let me reprise the circumstances of that dark weekend (while those of you who were of age try, try, not

to recall where you were when you heard the horrible news).

On November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, Catholic President John Fitzgerald Kennedy--he who attempted to steer us through the perilous straits of the '60s--was shot dead by an assassin's bullet. Three days later, in Washington, DC, Kennedy's coffin was transported to Saint Matthew's Cathedral atop a black horse-drawn caisson, followed by the rest of the funeral entourage on foot, because the widow of the slain president refused to ride in a "fat, black cadillac."

JFK as navigator. Assassinated to be sure, but never forgotten, even after untold millennia. Especially by present-day, Catholic sf writers.

But now then, you say--how is it possible that people from our times--the original generation that passed on the tale of the navigator--wound up aboard the universe-crossing ship of the Hierodules? I believe Wolfe attempts to address this in URTN. Gunnie, at one point, is discussing apports, the creatures occasionally caught in the ship's massive specular sails. "Not all apports are animals," she says, "though there's a lot more of those than anything else. Sometimes they're people, and sometimes they live long enough to get inside the ship where there's air. You know, the others on their home worlds must wonder where they went when they were apported. Especially when it's somebody important."

So perhaps Wolfe's suggesting these people have been apported from our time to the ship--along with possibly such famous missing personages as Amelia Earhart, Judge Crater and Jimmy Hoffa!

Robert Borski