

Thoughts on Wolfe's Style

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 03 Jun 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1666>

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Michael Straight — 03 Jun 1999, 13:39

Ian A. York recently posted some insightful thoughts about Wolfe's writing in TBOTNS to the rec.arts.sf.written newsgroup. There are three posts you can find here:

<http://x35.deja.com/getdoc.xp?ANH2785527&CONTEXT'8430758.1223557179&hitnum=0>

<http://x23.deja.com/getdoc.xp?ANH2810122&CONTEXT'8430888.1255079962&hitnum=1>

<http://x23.deja.com/getdoc.xp?ANH2858787&CONTEXT'8430888.1255079962&hitnum=2>

Here's a few excerpts:

I suspect that a lot of people get turned off the Sevarian series because of the way Wolfe sets up expectations, and then smashes them. The books start with a series of the cliches of ACTION, ADVENTURE!!! fantasy. Here's an orphan, given weapons training from infancy, in a secret order, he's got a big honking sword, goes wandering about in a magical ... he even wears a cape, for God's sake!

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Personally, I find Sevarian an interesting and often sympathetic character. I find the writing elegant, subtle, and often understatedly humorous. The narrative style is deliberately designed to blur the distinction between ostensibly earthshaking events and the routine--a backhanded look at "making new things familiar, and familiar things new".

You have to realize, I think, that Sevarian is unshockable. He takes his world for granted; as, of course, he should. Too many writers have characters doing the equivalent of turning on a lightbulb accompanied by narrative tympani; it's good, maybe, to point out to a reader how amazing these "light bulbs" are, but the character shouldn't be surprised. Sevarian isn't, and so it's easy to miss, at first, the magic of his world.

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White Noise is the flip side of New Sun, in a way. In White Noise, the narrator also levels out the importance of things, as does Sevarian; but Jack whatisname in WN does it by increasing the importance of trivia, while Sevarian does it by flattening out the nominally important...

A major reason people's memories are inaccurate is that they edit after the fact. They put themselves into the center. In hindsight, they tell themselves they spotted the clues. They squeeze memories into the box of

narration, so that their memories make a story; if things don't fit the story, those get shunted aside--if something that didn't happen is necessary for the story, that gets added. (See a lot of the research on memory; these are all well-known phenomena.)

Sevarian doesn't--can't--do that. Where someone else would remember that he was in the center of a scene, Sevarian remembers, accurately, that he was on the sidelines. Where someone else would have added, after the fact, the critical clue to a later scene, Sevarian remembers accurately that he didn't know about it.

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-Rostrum