

Count Dorcas (long)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 Oct 1999

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Jim Henley — 02 Oct 1999, 00:15

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com]On
Behalf Of Roy C. Lackey

I note that none of the responses to Carlton Greene's "Dorcas as outcast?" post addressed the larger question he raised: was Dorcas really the "nice Catholic girl"--as I believe someone here once described her-- she seems to be, or was there something more sinister about her?

I'm torn between admiration for the enormous effort you've put into developing your theory and typing it up, and a renewed gratitude for the presumption of innocence in our nonliterary lives.

As Alex Groce suggests, the dream "evidence" is the weak link in your case, fatally so IMHO.

1) In BOTNS specifically, it's just a bad idea to think that dreams can't represent foreknowledge.

2) You seem to treat dreams as inevitable reiterations of facts in the world - e.g. if Dorcas dreams of being poled across a lake by an old man, it must be that she remembers being poled across a lake by an old man. If she remembers being poled across a lake, she must not have been dead, or must have been "undead." If she sees an old man, it can't be her husband, who wasn't old. The weaknesses of this approach to real dreams strike me as manifold (and recently a plague on our legal system). It's possible that writers could make literary use of dreams in precisely this way - many have done. I don't think it's justified in this case. In the example above, Dorcas' dream of being poled across a lake can represent an intuitive reconstruction of what her situation must have been at the time of her death. Most of your other dream points go awry similarly, IMHO. e.g., lots of people must have blood bats in their dreams without being vampires or murderesses.

Lots of nitpicking follows:

BTW, welcome to Carlton and the slew of new posters;
where are they all coming from?

In my case, from Paul Duggan's fine website.

My thoughts proceed from the largely negative tone of the
few memories and dreams she relates.

Which is an approach that, pushed too far, leads to problems. Memory isn't passive and if we go with the canonical assumption, that D was resurrected by Sev, Dorcas' mental state throughout the saga is unsettled. She has been yanked out of time and in the other instances where we have seen this it causes serious difficulties for the resurrected. Frex the soldier in CoTA somehow ends up with a good bit of Jonas layered over his personality.

Why should they be so bleak? Was she
happily married? Did she want and love her child(ren), or did she have a

choice in the matter?

Excellent questions. They don't add up to vampirism or murder in themselves. The most parsimonious assumption would be a kind of conventional unhappiness.

If Agia's estimate of her age is correct
(16 or 17),
and the age at which Agia began to menstruate (13) is typical
for the times,
then Dorcas must have gotten married almost as soon as she had her first
period, in order for her to have been married four years at the
time of her death.

The first thing to note is that the people of the Commonwealth are extremely casual about time. Alex Groce makes the essential points regarding the unreliability of Agia's testimony.

Not only that, but if the boatman was in his seventies
when he died,
then he had to be about thirty when he married the girl. The
issue of their
ages alone makes their relationship suspect, an issue that was entirely
avoidable had Wolfe made her to be but a few years older.

This strikes me as presentism. There have been whole swaths of history in which a marriage between a thirty-year-old man and a teenage girl, even a young teenage girl, was not automatically suspect. I wouldn't say everything in the universe is a social construct but contemporary American ideas of what constitutes the age of consent certainly are.

Therefore, Wolfe did it deliberately. Why, if not to call
attention to the fact of it?

Perhaps he is calling attention to Agia's lies about Dorcas' age. Perhaps he is putting up another marker to remind us that, socially, the Commonwealth is Not Like Us. Perhaps broken-down Caron has the body of a much older man (it's a poor society and he ain't at its pinnacle); then he's in his sixties. And now you're looking at the marriage of a twenty-something to a girl in her mid- to late teens. This wouldn't have raised an eyebrow throughout most of the history _we_ know.

And even that event was
tainted by the fact that she was alarmed about Sev bending over her. Sev,
his mouth reddened from eating a pomegranate, woke her: "I
should have known
from the stains on your mouth. I thought you'd been sucking
blood all night.

You wake to find someone in a fright cloak bending over you with juicy blood-red lips. You've barely spent a day in his company so he's quite new to you, though one thing you do know is that he kills and tortures people. Like a lot of us, you're not fully alert when you wake up. And your mind is confused anyway for reasons you don't yet understand. You could momentarily think such a figure was a vampire even if you weren't one yourself or hadn't murdered your own child.

Or, and this should be considered, you might simply make the witticism after you've sat up, because hey, what's with the cloak?

The first of these dreams is the one in which she
becomes aware that
people regard her as "an unclean spirit who has wrapped itself in the
woman's body they see."

1) Hanging around with Agia for awhile will do that to your self-esteem.

2) A supernatural version of "survivor guilt." Dorcas has come back from the dead. She doesn't realize this consciously yet but her unconscious is trying to get the message across. Alas, if you're in a bad frame of mind the symbols your unconscious lights on are dire. What kinds of things rise from the dead? Unclean things. Evil spirits.

The size of the clothes--half a span--would be too small for a full-term baby. But if she has had a miscarriage--whether unintended or not--or an abortion, the tiny clothes would be of a proper size. If the tiny clothes had been intended for a doll it should not have the emotional impact that it does for her. Indeed, the dream evokes much more the sense of guilt than grief, as does the fact that the doll-related dreams are recurrent. Her sub-conscious mind is preoccupied with the subject, not just the nightmarish details of her interment.

This strikes me as the second-strongest part of your entire argument. Let me say right out that, yeah, could be. The interpretation that Dorcas had in life had a miscarriage or abortion that haunted her seems reasonable and does not do violence, to my taste, to the sense of the character or the work as a whole. Mind you, even Nice Catholic Girls have miscarriages.

However. Folks is folks. There could be someone out there for whom dolls _do_ have an emotional impact. Like for instance if you feel like a doll (I am the plaything of vastly superior forces), dolls in dreams might profoundly move you. The doll represents you, even if it is offstage and even if "you" are already in the dream. Hasn't someone advanced the notion that in your dreams _everything_ is you? The fact that the clothes are too small could indicate that Dorcas felt inadequate as a mother to the child she _did_ have (Ouen) since she "abandoned" him by dying. It could even be a symbolic communication that Ouen _is_ her child. ("Look lady, you've been involved with these two merchants - A & A - so I'm sticking merchants in here. Your association with them is linked to this restaurant where this man works, who is very significant. Now, you probably think of your child as tiny since that's how you remember him. Actually, you're not thinking of him at all yet, which is something else I'm trying to get through to you. Boy do we have a lot to talk about! Anyway, _little clothes too small_. Are you gettin this down, D? And remember where you've been involved with merchants, 'kay? Oh, and you were changing clothes there too.") Or that Sev is, um, you know.

Another avenue strikes me as worth exploring. Dorcas is buying tiny tiny clothes. This is a world lousy with giants. And Severian dreamed of himself as a puppet (doll)...

Life is cheap in the Commonwealth and familial bonds even weaker. She may well have been forced into marriage as a child and resented it. She probably had no choice about becoming pregnant.

May be. But this is likely a "normal" unhappiness for Commonwealth women. It doesn't add up to vampirism or child murder.

Who knows what problems and disagreements they may have had? But her conscience is bothering her about something, something to do with a baby.

Again, this is where I think you go too far. You are turning a symbolic language - dream - into an indicative one. Something to do with a child? Maybe. And Dorcas is described throughout as "childlike." And people dream about themselves.

The issue of age is raised once more in the second dream she relates. She dreams of being "in a boat poled across a spectral lake" and

"An old man poles it, and I lie at his feet." What prompted this dream image? Her dream cannot be prescient, because the dream is long after the fact of her interment. She can have no idea how much time has elapsed between her death and resurrection, even after figuring out that that is what has happened. The old man can't be her husband, because he wasn't an old man when she died. We have no reason to believe he even owned a boat then: he was a shopkeeper. Who was this old man in the dream? The Lake's equivalent of a mortician who poled the boat she was "buried" from? The other elements in the dream do not fit that theory: "Just as we are about to touch shore, I fall from the boat, but the old man does not see me, and as I sink through the water I know that he has never known I was there at all."

Yet it *was* near the shore where her body was found--and her husband couldn't find it in forty years of searching, though he was present when she was "buried". Something is wrong here: it doesn't add up.

And this vies with the blood bats for the weakest part of your entire argument. It was a dream. You just can't say "the old man can't have been her husband because he (probably) didn't even own a boat." And the fact that she dreams she "falls from the boat" without being seen by the boatman fails to fit the theory that the boatman was the mortician how precisely? I can't see any connection.

Her body was found near shore, sure. We're told that the place is vast, the currents tricky and the shoreline somewhat indistinct. (The whole building's geometry is wacky.) And we are once again vexed by the nature (natures?) of time in the saga. Perhaps her husband fails to find her because Sev will find her.

You create a further problem for yourself with the husband. First you adduce the (convincing) evidence that he's a lifelong fuckup. Then you assume he must surely be competent to find his wife's body in the lake. Your first argument is in considerable tension with your second.

To interpret her statement as meaning simply that all people have a dark side would have her stating a platitude; she has to be implying something more tangible.

Unlike Wolfe, Dorcas is not a great author. Why wouldn't she state a platitude?

My next point against Dorcas is one of these. (II, XXII) "The whip mark Dorcas had carried from the Piteous Gate burned on her cheek like a brand." This comment comes immediately after she related the dream about the old man in the boat. Who else in the novels has branded cheeks? Morweena. For what crime was she branded and killed? Killing her husband and child.

Let's assume this isn't a stretch. There is good evidence of Morwenna's innocence (the confession of her rival). Where does that leave the probative value of Dorcas' "brand?"

Look at it another way: Who branded (hurt) Morwenna? Who "hurts" Dorcas? Is the guilt indicated by Sev's choice of words actually his own?

She then recalled to Sev Dr. Talos's labeling him as Death, which Sev said was a metaphor. She said it was a bad metaphor and, as they were walking back to the others, Sev wondered to himself if "Dr. Talos's calling Dorcas "Innocence" had not been a metaphor of the same kind."

What makes it a bad metaphor (Sev as Death) is less its falsity than its incompleteness.

Unless we are to grant that Dorcas is prescient--the dream coming before the knowledge of the alleged bat bite--then the dream indicates to me that she had hostile feelings for Jolenta.

But of course she knew she had hostile feelings for Jolenta! Jolenta treats her like crap from the moment they meet, steals her man (well, takes him for a joyride), and is, let's face it, an enormous burden after they leave Baldanders and Dr. T. Surely being completely obtuse about one's own emotions is not a prerequisite for nice catholic girlhood.

As for Jolenta falling down a well, she is already, IIRC, sick. If someone is sick and might die you might dream of them falling down a well (esp if you've been interred in water...). You might dream this if you sense their psyche disintegrating and their will to live evaporating. If someone has become essentially an artificial creature, especially a kind of mannequin sexpot, you might dream that they are a doll.

The assumption is unwarranted because their geographical location and the behavior of the supposed blood bat does not agree with evidence presented elsewhere in the text.

This is interesting, but inconclusive.

1) Stranger things have happened. Her father's habitat description may be generally true (it may also be the sort of thing you tell your daughter to make her feel better) but allow for blood bat appearances this far north of Nessus.

2) It may actually be not a blood bat at all but another of Hethor's creatures. The man couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, I tell you. Indeed the Undine may even be calling Sev away in part to save him from the attack.

3) It may be a New Sun thing. A tropical creature appears at this latitude. Severian appears at this latitude. A portent of the warming to come and Sev's role in it. (And its cost.)

4) Maybe it's just a regular bat, not a blood bat at all. But Jolenta is already sinking fast...

I tend to go for option 2.

The Cumaen indicated that Jolenta should recover from her wounds, just as Sev did when he was later bitten by a true blood bat, but she didn't.

We are given to understand that Jolenta no longer wishes to live because she has lost the beauty that made life so enjoyable for her. They say you don't mind living on the ground floor until you've had a view. Jolenta has had one and it's gone. Now, if J has died instead because Dorcas has murdered her, the poignancy of J's loss becomes irrelevant. I can't see that making a better story.

And when Sev reached the roof of the tomb following the seance, Jolenta was dead and Dorcas was alone with her and bending over the lifeless body.

You're not a cop or prosecutor are you? I would not want to give anyone first aid in your district if so, or even grieve overmuch at the scene <g>.

He then recalled to her the earlier incident in Nessus, but this time used the word vampire to describe how he must have

looked to her. When asked by Agia, in the Botanic Gardens, what was the last thing she remembered, Dorcas answered: "Sitting by a window ... There were pretty things in the window. Trays and boxes, and a rood." Was this last to keep the vampires away? And which side of the window was she on? Why wasn't her weighted body where it was supposed to be? Why couldn't Caron (the name I am using for the boatman), who searched over and over almost daily for forty years, who had pulled some of the bodies up so often that he knew them by sight, find his wife's body?

Piling up rhetorical questions does not make a mound of evidence. Severian describes himself as looking like a vampire. And you seem to feel the vision of a vampire was frightening to Dorcas when she woke up in the field. How come her instinct wasn't to be grateful for the company? If a vampire is outside but "by" a window, what is she "sitting" on? If the rood is a bar to her, why does she lump it with the pretty things in her description? If she's already undead at this window scene, how come her memory ends after this? If she's lying about her last memory (since if she's had a continuous undeath, her memory shouldn't end that abruptly), why not pick another one? If Caron is so worried that his wife walks the night and is after him, why doesn't he get the hell out of Dodge?

He was present when she was interred. He had a "map". The most obvious answer is--she wasn't there.

Caron, for all the sympathetic portrayal of his searching for his too-soon dead wife for forty years, has always struck me as a ne'er-do-well.

But if this ne'er-do-well fails to find one body in a lake of bodies, or fails to recognize it when he pulls it up, it means the body must not be there?

Did the baby live? What became of the child? Ouen, presumably because he was old enough to get by without his mother, Caron retained until the age of ten, then farmed out as a potboy, never, apparently, to see him again until Ouen sought him out when he was grown. That act does not say much for Caron's fatherly instincts.

Right through the nineteenth century here in Maryland, you could indenture your children to someone. (The contract stipulated what the child would do for the new wards in the way of service and what they would provide in return. If your circumstances changed you could, and sometimes did, "ransom" the child back.) Did the act say more about the parental instincts of the people who did this or their poverty? And was the indenture system crueller and more capricious than our contemporary and heartwarming system of foster care? Do we have any noncareerist reasons to view Ouen's life as turning out especially badly? I mean, potboy is not a glamorous job, but if a person's work is not his worth and not his happiness, it's hardly a tragedy.

Yes, Caron may have been poor and unable to afford to keep the boy, but that seems to be largely his own fault. <snip bad things 'bout Caron>

This is your strongest argument. I have no problem assenting to your interpretation of Caron's widowerhood. It's at least possible that he was so shattered by grief that he lost the ability to live competently, however. In some ways, I could almost see him as one of the characters in a

Frost monologue.

He is haunted by
the memory of her eyes popping open when her body hit the water; his
conscience will not let him rest until he sees her good and dead. Was he
complicitous somehow in her death, whether overtly or by omission? We may
never know, but his conscience is bothering him about something

Too much certainty about too little evidence. People grieve in lots of different ways. Merely living when someone else dies can goad the conscience variously. You can feel guilty about surviving, you can feel guilty about your anger at being "deserted" by the deceased. You can be obsessively sad in ways that don't actually have anything to do with guilt. I can't help but feel that Wolfe comprehends a more complete sense of life than is contained within this particular brief against these characters.

While it is certainly possible that the old man just
happened to
die about the same time that Dorcas found him, it strains credulity.

"Honey, I'm home!"

[Thunk.]

Bit of a shock when your long-dead wife actually walks through the door.

OR Dorcas found him a long time ago. Her memories returned at an ever-greater clip as she approached that section of town. She went to the house and found him living there. Sure it's a dump, but he's one of life's losers, remember? She stays with him and cares for him for however long. She tells him who she is or she pretends to be someone else entirely. He hasn't seen her in decades, not even a picture, and his eyes aren't so good. One day he dies. Severian happens along at that time because the entire universe keeps arranging it so he's on the scene at significant moments. Or C died there relatively recently but, as you point out, Dorcas ain't strong, so she's not going to drag him downstairs and dig him a hole. But she can bring the flowers _up_. When the smell gets too bad she'll strike a match.

Note that when she talks to Sev of returning to Nessus
to find out what she can of her old life, she mentions
her male child--but not her husband.

Now _that's_ a Nice Catholic Girl. Even in her awful state she has enough consideration for her boyfriend's feelings to avoid the awkward subject of, actually, his grandpa. Ick! But I digress.

Curiously, she also never brings up the subject of how
she came to
be in the lake. From her perspective, if she had been truly dead, no time
should have passed between her death and resurrection.

IMHO, another completely unwarranted, and even contraindicated, assumption about how time works in the cosmos of BOTNS. Among other things, _we don't know what sense of time the dead have_. None of them tell us. Our other most sustained contact with a returnee, the soldier in CoTA, indicates that being wrenched out of time like that is incredibly disorienting and anything but straightforward. I do not think he is a vampire either.

She *has* to
know *something* about her own death--but never mentions the second child
she supposedly died giving birth to. Very curious. Yet she
remembers living
above the shop with her husband and first-born child.

Steve Young says he knows something about the concussion he suffered last week only thanks to videotape and the reports of witnesses. Neither are available to help Dorcas with her own

more final (not to say absolutely final) trauma. She simply _doesn't_ have to know something about her own death. We don't know which memories return at which rate. Nor is it _very_ curious that, even if she has remembered a second child in the _few feverish hours_ since she saw the chair, she doesn't mention a child she died giving birth to to Sev. Why would she? It's a painful subject and she's in a clearly distracted frame of mind. It's all she can manage to avoid upsetting Sev by mentioning her husband <g>.

How did she find him, anyway?

Is it easier for a vampire, a child-murderess or a woman who has had an abortion to find her husband under those circumstances than it is for a Nice Catholic Girl? Frankly, her finding him is one of the two things in the series that most strains my credulity, but it's not beyond the realm that, as I suggested above, the closer Dorcas got to the abandoned quarter the more memories returned, and when she came back to or staked out her old house, Caron was still there.

She was still a child when she died, as far as I am concerned

Because that is how we regard these things in the West at the close of the second millenium AD.

In any event, it may just have been a simplistic, catchall answer that Caron gave Ouen to shut him up when the boy asked about his mother.

Which would be Caron screwing up again:

"Your mom died in childbirth son."

"Oh," little Ouen said.

"Dad," he continued after a moment, "where's my baby brother then?"

* *

Seems like it would be safer, and more productive from a parent's perspective, to tell him she died from not eating her vegetables.

Caron didn't mention to Sev and Agia how Cas died, or even that they had any children, only that they were married for nearly four years. For a man so preoccupied with his dead wife, he seems to have been strangely reticent about her with the one person in the world who would want to know all about her--her son, Ouen.

Sev had a single conversation with Caron and a single meaningful conversation with Ouen. Roy, I have to ask, do you really have the sorts of conversations where both parties - even strangers - reliably get out all the relevant information, including the emotionally difficult parts? And can you teach me? <g>

Most people who die in Nessus are not interred in the Lake of Birds.

And some people are.

Why did Caron--if the decision was his--elect to inter her there, rather than in her native soil?

Beats me. _Was_ it his choice? Where was her "native soil," precisely? How much significance is attached to "native soil" in a world where you can't scratch the dirt without unearthing a human artifact? Did Caron see that his neighborhood was going downhill and fear that any grave nearby was begging to be violated? Did he decide that sticking her in the Lake of Birds would keep those damned necrophages from gettin her? Were they already suffering some kind of

financial difficulty that decreed a pauper's burial for his wife? Was it the wish of her parents? Does an author have to tell us every little thing? Would the book be better if these details were in it?

Vampires traditionally do not like water, and Dorcas was deathly afraid of water.

Cats don't like water either. Is she a cat? Or is this just what happens to you when you've been forced to stew in the stuff for a couple of decades?

Why **did** her eyes pop open when she hit the water?

Did they really? Memory is not passive. (He said again.)

Was it just a bad cement job? Or was it a mystical portent of her resurrection upon the return of the Conciliator?

I do suggest that Caron couldn't find the body in all those years because it wasn't there. Her body was put there, but whether by an agent of Yesod or an undine, is unclear.

Now this has possibilities: To ensure that Caron doesn't find it, the heirodules remove the body until Sev is coming. We can toss out all the vampire stuff and all the baby-killer stuff and be left with this striking possibility. It has some genuine virtues: It fits the shape of the story. Contrariwise, Count Dorcas is simply not easy to integrate esthetically into the design of the saga we know. It's far from clear how Count Dorcas would contribute to the overall theme. The Yesodian/Undinean body-snatching fits easily.

Of course, it could be that the reason Caron is unclear about so much is that what's really happening is that the heirodules (e.g. the Cumean) have been messing with his time stream. Maybe he only thinks he's been searching for decades. How did he get so old, then? Remember, time isn't a line or even a stream, it's an ocean. (We are told.)

Perhaps what I must consider your mistaken case for Count Dorcas has been worth your efforts precisely to arrive at your last, most plausible and shapely, account of the "body problem."

And there is still the mystery of what happened between chapters, from the moment that a hand was pulling Sev **down** in the water until Dorcas' hand was pulling him **up** from the water.

Dorcas wakes, convulses, panics, grabs, pulls. Momentum is conserved. She rises, Severian drops. Once she has a fraction of her wits about her, she realizes someone's alive down there and fishes him up.

She intends to drink his blood you see, but then Agia comes back and ...

<gdr>

BTW, the above probably seems like a vehement reaction to something you gave a lot of thought to and spent a lot of time on. Let me just say that I appreciate very much the opportunity to be vehement. And your last bit, about the undines and heirodules, genuinely intrigues.

Best,

Jim

What if we only get what we deserve?
Somehow, I couldn't quite summon the nerve"
-- Costello/Bacharach

Roy C. Lackey — 03 Oct 1999, 00:26 · follows Jim Henley

My Dorcas post was more a case of speculating in public than anything else. I don't see any good reason, in the context of TBOTNS, for Dorcas to be a vampire, either, and I am certainly open to any better explanations for all the bat business. My main point was that the circumstances of her life, death, and rebirth are mysteries still to be explained and that, taken together, there is enough evidence in the text to suggest that Dorcas may not be the Little Miss Innocence she seems. And that doesn't count sleeping with her grandson, of which she was ignorant, or with Jolenta, of which she wasn't, if she did.

As I said, I knew this wasn't going to go over well. I will note, however, that I did say:

"There is not enough direct evidence in the text for me to assert that Dorcas was a vampire or that she and/or her husband were somehow involved in the death of a baby, but the subject of bats comes up too often to be dismissed out of hand and the death of Jolenta is suspect, as is the timing of Caron's."<<

Aside from differences of opinion and cultural relativism, Jim Henley wrote: Perhaps he is calling attention to Agia's lies about Dorcas' age.<<

She wasn't lying. Sev himself thought she was 18 or 19.

As for Jolenta falling down a well, she is already, IIRC, sick.<<

No, she wasn't sick until after the "bat bite"; before that she was just sore from being beaten by Talos's cane and was in no danger of dying. It wasn't the wound that sickened her, it was acute anemia. (Is that the proper euphemism for losing a lot of blood in a short time?) <g>

It's all she can manage to avoid upsetting Sev by mentioning her husband <g>.<<

She did mention her husband, as I said, just not in the context of finding out what she can of her old life. And she wasn't concerned about sparing Sev's feelings. It was their last conversation, the oral version of the Dear John letter; she was leaving him, for good.

Frankly, her finding him is one of the two things in

the series that most strains my credulity, but it's not beyond the realm that, as I suggested above, the closer Dorcas got to the abandoned quarter the more memories returned, and when she came back to or staked out her old house, Caron was still there.<<

You are mistaken. Caron didn't live there. Their old home/shop was two-days travel downriver from the inhabited parts of Nessus. The boatman lived "...in a loft now. A man I knew years before, though that was years after Cas was gone, he lets me sleep there." (I, XXII) The quarters were, apparently, near the Citadel, which is where Sev first met him, the first day of the novel (last page, chapter II). The Citadel is within sight of the Botanical Gardens. So that should relieve you of one of the two gnats.

She was still a child when she died, as far as I am concerned

Because that is how we regard these things in the West at the close of the second millenium AD.<<

No, actually it has more to do with the fact that I have a child at least ten years older than Dorcas. It's a function of age, I guess.

BTW, the above probably seems like a vehement reaction to something you gave a lot of thought to and spent a lot of time on. Let me just say that I appreciate very much the opportunity to be vehement.<<

You're welcome.

Roy