

Untrustworthy Narrators?

The Urth list — 6 messages, 6 voices, 18 Oct 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1840>

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Alex David Groce — 18 Oct 1999, 12:35

I'm sending this to both lists, since the general issue of narrative reliability seems to be coming up on both lists. I'll try to avoid OBW spoilers, which shouldn't be too hard--I assume everyone knows (if you haven't read LONG SUN don't finish this sentence :) Horn and Nettle wrote "The Book of Silk."

(1) Wolfe and his narrators make it tricky enough for the reader to figure out everything that's going on as it is. I generally assume Wolfe's narrators may be leaving out things that I would really like to know, either because they are not interested in them or because they wish to avoid thinking about them (Severian does more of the first, Weer in PEACE does a lot of the second), but that if they tell me something, it is true, although perhaps not true in the sense that I originally took it to be (indeed, New Sun in general is a multifoliate opening of new levels of meaning to Severian's narrative--and Severian famously says (I paraphrase) "have I said that the universe has a way of making all of our lies come true?").

Even Nardan (assuming it's him writing!) in "Seven American Nights" does very little apparent LYING to the reader--he deletes some things, of course, but his fundamental narrative honesty is notable in that we _can figure out that he left things out, and even what those things might have been_.

In the absense of an external source of information or massive internal inconsistencies, it seems to me that narrator unreliability is undetectable, and the safe assumption where there isn't this strong whiff of madness or misleading intent on the narrator's part is that the narrator intended to convey the truth. Success depends on the access of the narrator to the full truth, of course, and so varies. I assume Severian is basically telling the truth. Inconsistencies in Severian's narrative have always seemed to me to be either (A) in some cases mistakes on Wolfe's part or (B) hints that Severian is not living in only one time-line. I'm curious as to instances of Severian actually lying (as opposed to being mistaken) that people have found? That Drotte/Roche thing is weird, and I've never noticed it... Maybe with Severian(1) it was the other one?

"Unreliable narrator" is tossed around too often, I think--even old Humbert Humbert in LOLITA tells us mostly the truth. I think Wolfe has very few, if any, narrators, who are not _attempting_ to give us the straight scoop, occasionally failing. Severian is open to more intense questioning than most in that his "perfect memory" should give him an advantage in doing this, but the fact that Severian walks the Corridors of Time, returns from the dead, has a head full of Autarchs, and may have existed in several alternate time-lines where he failed that have some impact on his present time-line complicates the question of when he's actually mixed-up, and when he's telling the truth but the truth is "inconsistent" or weird.

(2) Sure the uncertainty principle is involved in the LONG SUN narrative, at a meta-level. I agree that Wolfe is absolutely correct to leave the Dr. Crane hypothesis open, but hard to swallow (if we talk about these as being real events, I think that if a sceptic I'd find the recurrence of so many parallels with the Exodus and the Gospels in a world seemingly without

either to be pretty convincing evidence that something very strange was going on) from our perspective as readers--but perfectly open to those experiencing the events. Also, this leaves open how much Horn and Nettle made up--and how much what they made corresponds to the real deal. What I'm saying is that Wolfe is definitely making this somewhat like the composition of the Gospels/the Exodus story. So, although you are certainly not constrained to think otherwise by the text, I suspect that we will find, if we see Silk again (be quiet, people who've read OBW) that the sayings/feelings/events of LONG SUN match the Silk we see in any less suspect context very closely. And that it is safe to use even events/words that Horn and Nettle could not have verified in arguments about "what really happened" and what's likely to happen in OBW. I doubt this argument can really go anywhere, in that the only evidence we'll get is internal evidence from the text (unless we have another LONG SUN type "revelation" from Wolfe, but then he also squashed the Dr. Crane hypothesis from that one, as we could have foreseen--the danger of revelation) and that's unlikely to really verify things one way or the other (unless Silk says "Horn, what were you making up that nonsense for?" but I'm guessing we won't see that scene).

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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Roy C. Lackey — 22 Oct 1999, 01:30 · follows Alex David Groce

First of all, welcome to Daniel Fusch! Most of the questions you raised have been addressed elsewhere in the archives. Note that I didn't say they had been answered. <g> Actually, for all the smart people there are on this list, there is relatively little consensus about *anything*, but the "miracle" you mentioned is one of them. Short answer: the eclipse was caused by the massive sails of the Hierodules' ship.

Re: the unreliable narrator: Alex and I are not often on the same page about most things, and we are at antipodes on religious matters (I'll be down there in Hell, with alga <g>), but I think that on this issue he is, by and large, correct. The testimony of the narrators can, for the most part, be relied upon to be truthful--in so far as they give it. And that is the problem with Wolfe's narrators. Overt lies are relatively few, but there is more than one way to lie, if we count as lying the broader concept of simply not telling the whole truth--the sins of omission. This kind of untruthfulness is where Wolfe's narrators--with a lot of help from Wolfe--often fail, just as Alex indicated, because they are not interested in what is happening (when they obviously should be), or because to tell the whole truth would put them in a bad light (and there is a lot of that). Most of the discussion on this list is not about what we are told by the narrators; it's about what we are *not* told by the narrators. And I'm not talking just about the perhaps minor details of the plot that some here decry as trivial, unworthy of discussion.

To confine my comments just to the Urth cycle, Severian leaves out so much, so many critical plot details about major events, that it's hard to conclude that his omissions are anything but deliberate. Most of this, of course, is due less to the narrator's deliberate disingenuousness than to Wolfe's chosen writing style, but not all of it. Is it Sev's fault that the cliffhanger at the end of SHADOW, the Piteous Gate affair, is never explained? He was there; he ought to know what happened, but it is never explained, and there has been a lot of speculation about it--but not in the text. Why doesn't he question, once he is autarch, the masters of the guild about his origins, about Holy Katharine or many other things which are mysteries to him, but need not be? Or Ouen about Catherine? These questions seem so fundamental, so obvious to me, that if Sev, when he wrote his memoirs, didn't know the answers to them already and just didn't elect to reveal them, for whatever personal reasons, then he is just too stupid to be believed. So, which

is it? Is he that dense, or does he have reasons to hide the truth?

For another, clearer example of his lack of forthrightness, take the case of Valeria. Within the fiction of the fiction Sev wrote two manuscripts, the first ten years after he became ruler. Valeria gets little mention in either, but in that first manuscript she is portrayed as a wistful, lovely, but lonely wallflower waiting for Prince Charming to come and sweep her off her feet. Instead, she got Severian. In the second manuscript, written at the conclusion of the events described in URTH, Sev doesn't want to talk about her at all, but from the little he does it is clear that his attitude towards her has changed radically; she's a pompous, unfaithful, conniving bitch. This change of heart came about, apparently, once he found out from Odilo and Eata that Valeria had wed another in his long absence. She was no Penelope to his Odysseus. But his feelings for her must have changed even before his trip to Yesod, because he was quick to bed other women when he had the chance. This probably played a part in her taking the thrust of the poisoned assassin's blade, just as he was complicitous in the deaths of Thecla and Casdoe, and could so easily turn his back on Dorcas once she remembered her past. Sev is definitely not one to turn the other cheek; he never forgets--or forgives--what he perceives as a slight. So, his reticence about Valeria says more about him than it does her, yet it was his courting-call on her at the end of CITADEL which concluded his first memoir, ten years later. Any hypothetical reader of both manuscripts could and would expect that the second one would take up where the first left off, or at least elaborate on the conclusion of the first. But it doesn't, at least with regard to Valeria.

Why write a memoir at all that purports to be a true and accurate account of one's adventures, bring up wondrous and even momentous events, then leave so many of them unexplained? In the context of the fictional memoirs it makes no sense unless their author is hiding something, whether from the reader or from himself, which is hard to do when you have a perfect memory. In this sense, Severian is an unreliable narrator.

And he does lie. In SWORD he claims to be a Grand Master of his guild. Sure, you can argue that the lie was not intended to deceive the reader, who knows that the statement isn't true. But it does serve to show that he can and will lie when it suits his purpose.

Roy

P.S.

Re: My use of "Caron" for the name of the old boatman in my recent Dorcas post: For those who may not have been aware of it, that name was not of my origination. It was advanced by Robert Borski. See Urth archives, Vol.25,

#31, for April 8, 1999. I would certainly not want to be thought taking one of Robert's names in "vein", or even vain. <g>

Roy

Tony Ellis — 22 Oct 1999, 15:19 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

Is it Sev's fault that the cliffhanger at the end of SHADOW, the Piteous Gate affair, is never explained? He was there; he ought to know what happened, but it is never explained, and there has been a lot of speculation about it--but not in the text.

I have to quibble here and say that the Piteous Gate affair -is- explained, see <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0010/0151.shtml>

But I agree that Sev's "sins of omission" are a good argument for calling him an unreliable narrator. My rejoinder would be "...of which narrative?"

Severian is telling the history of the events by which he "backed into the throne". Any history has to omit some events, and if you're someone with perfect memory the number of events you omit must seem, to you, astronomical. I don't have the quote to hand, but at one point Severian cheerfully admits to missing stuff out, explaining that if he didn't his story would go on forever.

It's frustrating for us, because the narrative we want reliably narrated is Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, but that's not quite the narrative Severian thinks he's telling. Perhaps he did later find out more about his mother, and/or Katherine: why should he tell us, now that he's finished his story of backing into the throne? Why record what went wrong between Valeria and himself in TUOTNS, when that's personal, happened before the new story he's telling, and in any case none of his readers are likely to have read his previous manuscript?

People will argue that you can't glibly separate Sev's 'how I became Autarch in my spare time and so can you' narrative from the broader, GW narrative, and I agree. But I think from Sev's perspective, he's just fast-forwarding past irrelevant events in a history that already contains too many digressions, rather than going out of his way to confuse or deceive us.

William H. Ansley — 23 Oct 1999, 01:59 · follows Tony Ellis

"Tony Ellis" <tony.ellis@futurenet.co.uk> wrote:

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Why should Severian tell us any of the things listed above? Because any normal, reasonable person knows that those are the very things that the reader of a tale wants to know!

It seems likely to me that Severian is not a reasonable nor a normal person. He has not lead a reasonable, normal life, for one thing, so he has plenty of excuses. But even allowing for that, he is one of the worst story tellers I have ever come across in fiction! He leaves things out (so much so that you wonder why he bothers to put anything in), he drops tantalizing hints which he never follows up, he's inconsistent and he never explains the things you really want to know. While I don't despise Severian as Roy Lackey seems to, I don't much like him and I certainly find him irritating. It is a measure of the spell Wolfe can cast as a writer that I come back to his books again and again. I don't claim to understand how Wolfe does what he does, but I understand even less the why.

The how, at least, seems to have a lot to do with leaving things out. All, or most of us, who participate in this discussion group want to know all the things that Severian (or Wolfe) doesn't [want to] tell us. We want to know so badly that we sit here teasing out meaning from the hints scattered throughout the text with tweezers made from the thousands of words that can be seen in the archives of this mailing list. In some cases I think that some of the hints have been teased to such an extent that they have long since crumbled away to nothing, but there is no consensus on which hints these are.

Part of the why seems to be a love of puzzles or at least of setting them for others. Wolfe's books can be justly considered as works that have to be solved as much as read. This invites you to analyze the text in a way that more ordinary books don't, but it tends to lead to the conclusion that every mystery Wolfe sets has a solution. And this is certainly not correct. While it can be argued that this is true to life, where some mysteries are solved while many others are not and some may have no solution, sometimes I think Wolfe just isn't playing fair with the reader.

Since I persist in reading Wolfe despite this (occasional) belief, I suppose it's my problem, rather than his.

Whether Severian is a reliable narrator or not, he is certainly an unsatisfactory one by any of the usual standards of story telling.

William Ansley

Jim Henley — 23 Oct 1999, 11:27 · follows William H. Ansley

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

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

Why write a memoir at all that purports to be a true and accurate account of one's adventures, bring up wondrous and even momentous events, then leave so many of them unexplained? In the context of the fictional memoirs it makes no sense unless their author is hiding something, whether from the reader or from himself, which is hard to do when you have a perfect memory. In this sense, Severian is an unreliable narrator.

It's important to remember that we are dealing with an author of a genre work here. The author is Severian and the genre is, as Tony suggests, the memoir by which a ruler justifies his power and authority. The BOTNS particularly is, in one sense, Sev doing the same thing he later does before Tzadkiel's dais - explaining why he deserves to be where he is. I _think_ that historical examples of the genre can also be reticent in quite arbitrary ways about their author/subjects' personal lives.

IOW, it makes sense even if the author is not "hiding something," except insofar as one considers any omission to be a "hiding."

Best,

Jim

"It ain't the knife thru your heart that tears you apart

it's just the thought of someone sticking it in"
-- Graham Parker, "Protection"

Ouroboros The Worm — 29 Oct 1999, 12:13 · follows Jim Henley

This is my first posting here so please be gentle.
I've done a search of the archives and I didn't find
the following point discussed anywhere.

Regarding whether Sev is an untrustworthy narrator, of course he is. It always bothered me that Severian keeps telling us over and over and over again that he never forgets anything. I read an interview of Wolfe where he said that he never gave the same hint twice. He said he hated it when writers keep bringing up the same details over and over to make sure the reader doesn't miss it when he felt perfectly capable of catching it the first time. So why does Severian keep droning on about his memory? Because it's a red herring.

But Wolfe gives us a quick glimpse up his sleeve at the end of chapter three of TSOTT. Here Severian admits to being a habitual liar and suspecting his own sanity, but that not the truly twisted part. He also says, "...I who remembered everything could not be certain those memories were more than my own dreams."

So the inconsistency between whether Drotte or Roche says he sees pikes at the beginning of the first chapter is probably not an error on Wolfe's part. The one part of a book every writer is sure to get perfect is the first page and that's where this occurs. And Wolfe hands us another hint on the first page too:
"In the recesses of my mind we stand shivering there even now. Just as all that appears imperishable [like Severian's memory?] tends toward its own destruction, those moments that at the time seem the most fleeting
recreate themselves--*not only in my
memory*....*making themselves new just as our
Commonwealth reconstitutes itself each morning in the
shrill tones of its own clarions* <emphasis added>

Now unless this is a hint, it's lousy writing in the context of the story and if I were his editor I would have encouraged him to throw it out. It drags down the story, and as a mere flourish, is un-Lupine. But actually, Wolfe is telling us that Severian's memory reconstitutes, recreates itself every day and so does the rest of the world.

Wolfe further explored this concept in "Soldier in the Mist": a soldier who forgets everything that happened

to him the day before--all he has is his diary which he reads and adds to every day, but which he can be no more certain is true than we are. He can't even be certain he wrote it, or if someone else added to it. In SITM, Wolfe uses this concept as metaphor for myth and history. I think he's doing something else with it in TBOTNS.

I think this would be a good point for some input in the way Wolfe uses the theory of "quantum tunneling" to investigate Being. Anybody?

-Ouroboros