

More About Severian As Unreliable (?) Narrator

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 18 Oct 1999

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Daniel Fusch — 18 Oct 1999, 18:10

Alex,

An insightful commentary. I don't think I would argue that Severian is a liar; I don't think he is. I agree with you; Severian tries to tell the truth. However, I think Severian gets things mixed up sometimes. Or maybe his memory isn't as infallible as he thinks. Early in the first volume, Severian comments that he considers himself at least a little insane (chapter 3 or 4, I think). Maybe this shows in his narrative?

You wrote:

(snip)

I'm curious as to instances of Severian

actually lying (as opposed to being mistaken) that people have found?<<

There MAY be a few instances, which are rather intriguing. I'm not sure as to the ramifications, if they ARE lies. If they are merely inconsistencies, then this means that Severian is "unreliable" in the literary sense. That is, he can't be trusted to give us everything straight perhaps because he does not have everything straight in his own mind.

So, here's a curious example. In the very first paragraph of Vol. I, Chapter 2, "I have never known my father and my mother." Yet it seems extremely likely that he has met his father in Volume IV. In which case...is he merely saying, "As a child, I never knew my father and my mother" (note tense) -- or perhaps "I have never known my father as my father" -- i.e., I met him as a grown man, and we never had a father/son relationship... He may also have met his mother, conceivably, if you take the woman who plays Katherine at the feast to be his mother, which I think has been suggested by someone, somewhere (an explanation that tidies up a few points, at any rate).

So, taking all these assumptions into account, since Severian is writing all this after it happens, are we to believe Severian? Is it an error on Wolfe's part (conceivable, since he had not yet come up with the idea for Dorcas, and hence had not worked out the identities of Severian's family members)?

I think there were one or two other minor things like this, for now I can't remember them.

I don't want to assign too much relevance to minor inconsistencies like this. They're just interesting. I think we should note, however, that with "gaps" (for lack of a better word) in the plot (e.g., the man-ape's arm), Severian is de facto an unreliable narrator. Meaning that you might be surprised at something much later on, since Severian left out some of the facts. Maybe it would be better to call him a "biased" narrator. Either way, this isn't a condemnation of Severian; his leaving out of facts makes the narration all the more interesting, I think (once you know what's going on).

So...maybe Severian as a "biased" narrator? (Aren't all narrators? But wait, that question leads into a vast literary discussion....)

Well, that's my two cents,

Daniel