

What is a "satisfactory" narrator?

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 24 Oct 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1844>

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Daniel Fusch — 24 Oct 1999, 21:23

William Ansley:

snip:

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

But what ARE the "usual standards" of storytelling? What does it take for a narrator to be "satisfactory"? Literature is full of unreliable and inconsistent narrators who leave most of the work to the reader.

Is Ishmael, the completely enigmatic and often inconsistent narrator of "Moby Dick" -- satisfactory?

What about the poet who narrates "Paradise Lost" -- wherein the reader is expected to weed through the arguments and speeches in order to fill in what's missing, what's wrong, and what is intentionally deceiving?

What about the narrator(s) of "The Sound and the Fury" -- in which the reader supplies nearly ALL the details of the plot based on subtle clues?

How do we define a satisfactory narrator? For that matter, does the plot need to be linear and explained in order to qualify as good storytelling? (Of course, some people don't like the epics, and some people don't like modernism....)

Here's my point--or rather my question--isn't Gene Wolfe, through Severian, asking us to examine the way we perceive storytelling? Consider that storytelling is thousands of years old, and has passed through many forms--at one time it was an oral form in which the audience was invited to participate.

Consider the modern Japanese--I don't know about their stories, but in their nonfiction, they consider it an insult to the reader if they outright state the conclusion for the reader. The reader is expected to put the pieces together and draw the conclusion.

Severian's fictional audience may not expect the same manner of storytelling that we expect. "The Book of the New Sun" should really be treated--for all intents and purposes--as a work translated from another culture. That, after all, is the effect that Wolfe is trying to achieve.

My 2 cents,
Daniel

Michael Straight — 25 Oct 1999, 12:56 · follows Daniel Fusch

On Sun, 24 Oct 1999, Daniel Fusch wrote:

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[...]

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As I first read this, I wondered if you weren't conflating Wolfe and Severian. That last paragraph seems like handwaving, unless we have some evidence that Severian's culture has different narrative standards than our own.

We have some data to consider the question. Severian repeats several stories not of his own invention. Do they show any of the same idiosyncrasies as Severian's narrative?

-Rostrum