

True Confession?

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 05 Nov 1999

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Roy C. Lackey — 05 Nov 1999, 00:05

In the context of the recent discussion of the veracity of Severian's

narrative; on Fri, 22 Oct 1999, I wrote:

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.<<

Compare that with this excerpt from John Clute's review of OBW, recently cited on the Whorl list: (<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/current/excess.html>)

The four-volume Book of the New Sun, set inconceivably deep down the aisles of the future upon a world called Urth (it is our own Earth transfigured by time), professes to be the "confession" of Severian, the torturer's apprentice who becomes Autarch of his Brazil-like country, and who eventually redeems his folk by bringing about the coming of a New Sun--a white hole which scalds and drowns and cleanses the sacred Urth. But Severian himself has much to hide, and the text of his "confession" has become a honeypot for puzzle-solving readers. Severian's memoriousness--he cannot forget a thing--has been deeply analyzed, as have his family (which he never identifies) and the actions he undertakes to gain the throne (which he lies about, for he is a liar).<<

It seems that I am not alone in my assessment of Severian being an unreliable narrator, and that the rather glaring lacunae in his narrative are not just quirks of his (or Wolfe's) writing style. Sev is not being truthful. And Clute seems to think Severian an even bigger liar than did I.

Roy

Alex David Groce — 05 Nov 1999, 12:56 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Well, Severian TELLS us he's a liar, etc. But I'm still unclear about what you and Clute think he's lying about in a major way--Wolfe's narrators are, in my opinion, for the most part unreliable in not giving the whole truth, but only part of it. I really can't think of any instances (other than things that are just odd--who said what on page #1) where Severian outright lies. Of course, if he's lying consistently, there's no way we can tell--but that undermines the entire narrative, and also (to me) seems out of whack with Severian's role as bringer of the New Sun (unless we're to doubt that, too). The minor oddities--well, Severian may be lying about who was at the gate, but WHY? It's a very strange thing to (baldly) lie about, since it seems to have no real importance. I think Severian lies to other people in the narrative, but other than dodging the uncomfortable is reasonably honest (given that even perfect memory cannot grant him complete understanding of his own story) to US. Anyway, I've always felt that Severian was writing his narrative more for himself than for others--his slinging them into the Seas of Time is a romantic gesture, but

he's amazingly lucky that they ended up in Mr. Wolfe's back yard. :) In which case he may state things that are not completely true (his claim that Jolenta & Dorcas were sexually involved) but these are the self- deceptions that the non-Divine are prone to (and Severian, despite his post-human state at the end of Urth is still clearly not Divine). In this sense, ALL narrators are liars.

I think Severian's sometimes stingy with facts, but that the hypothesis that he's a serious liar is the quick path to total literary solipsism.

By the way, I noticed this past week that Ask and Embla are mentioned in C. S. Lewis' PERELANDRA--I wonder if that sparked their inclusion in Wolfe (we know he's read Lewis). The whole Lewis trilogy has an interesting feel compared to Wolfe--I think the visions of the cosmos in it are actually more similar than might be thought to Wolfe's in BOTNS--Lewis is just vastly less subtle about it.

Natural theology, at least to the extent that God's existence is knowable from observation of the natural world and the application of reason, is, if not a declared item of the faith, at least standard Catholic theology (ob: Aquinas). On the other hand, Silk's experience in Long Sun is a direct revelation, and so cannot be reasoned from natural experience.

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

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Tony Ellis — 05 Nov 1999, 18:32 · follows Alex David Groce

Kieran Mullen wrote:
Oh, MAN is that a badly written review.

"But Severian himself has much to hide, and the text of his
"confession" has become a honeypot for puzzle-solving readers."

<g>

You should try "Eden Sounding", the published extract of Clute's mysteriously un-published novel. An object lesson in how knowing lots of long words and being terribly clever doesn't make you a second GW.

Ron Hale-Evans — 05 Nov 1999, 11:43 · follows Tony Ellis

At 12:56 PM 11/5/99 -0500, you wrote:
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My take on Sev's claim to be a liar is that he is attempting to be as truthful as possible. That is, I have always thought of it in light of the saying that the greatest saints are the most aware that they are great sinners. No one is truthful all the time, and anyone who says he is not a liar is an even bigger liar, and not to be trusted. Severian's very admission that he is a liar provides a certain amount of paradoxical evidence that he is a trustworthy narrator, given what we know of his character.

If Severian were really concerned about saving face with his readers, or his place in posthistory, or whatever, would he have admitted that he raped Jolenta, for example? It seems more likely to me that Severian's lies are likely to be in places where it doesn't matter -- he might have some hangup about something he did as a child, for example, that no other adult person would hold against him for a second.

It is possible his "lies" are lies of omission; we already know he leaves things out. But there are alternative explanations for this as well that others here have already mentioned -- things that are interesting to us are not necessarily interesting to Severian, etc..

I am willing to grant that I have not read closely enough, and it has been a few years since I last read the Urth cycle anyway. (I am in the early stages of another reading at the moment.) Can *anyone* on the list provide more than one or two examples of Sev lying to the reader in a situation where it mattered?

Ron H-E

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