

Severian's lies

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 08 Nov 1999

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Ouroboros — 08 Nov 1999, 09:59

While I'm not totally convinced Severian never lies (but I am leaning that way), I will side with the defense on two points.

Jeremy Crampton wrote:

2) If Sev_thinks_ he has perfect memory, he's

not lying. p. 11-12 incomplete truth about the person in the mausoleum and why it looks like him (I would say this is a narrative deception to provide foreshadowing and gradual revelation of Severian's story--a "lie" by Wolfe then)<<<<<

Incomplete information does *necessarily* constitute a lie. No one speaking however frankly and honestly *ever* speaks *exhaustive* truth. I don't have Shadow with me, but I believe Severian only says that as a youth he would spend many hours in the mausoleum contemplating the corpse buried there. The fact that he didn't mention YET (or even at all if that HAD been the case) that at the time of his writing he knew more than he knew then does not make what he said a lie. I'll also mention that if Severian believes incorrectly that his memory is perfect, it is not a lie to say so.

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

Also, he met Ouen twice and on the second

occasion, in CITADEL, figured out that Ouen was his father. If he didn't get to know Ouen any better after that, it was his own fault.<<<<<

True, and if he didn't, that tells us something about Severian. Or even confirms what we suspected -- that Severian is an unreflective autobiographer. But it doesn't make him a liar. To say you "have never known" someone is not the same as saying you "don't know who he is". I know who the President of the U.S. is, but I would be a liar to say I "know him". How do you like my ironic analogy?

-Ouroboros

Ori Kowarsky — 08 Nov 1999, 21:59 · follows Ouroboros

While these lists of inconsistencies are interesting, they don't seem to justify calling Sev a liar. The closest I can come to a model where Sev is a liar about something important (and I hesitate to bring this up, I really, really do) is whether he is making up or fudging certain spiritual/mystical/religious experiences in the text in order to buttress his claims to having supernatural powers associated with the New Sun.

(I should point out my personal leanings towards an interpretation of BOTNS which says that there is nothing which Severain or "Increate-assisted Severain" is capable of doing (raising the dead, altering the Sun) which hasn't been shown, through history or experience, to be do-able or replicatable by the Hierodules and their masters, neither of whom are divine as I understand that term).

If Severain is a liar at all, then the lie is a big lie, namely that he is divinely ordained to effect certain changes on the Urth, when he knows that those changes are actually effected and controlled by an alien civilization. Whether Sev is a liar under the suppositions outlined above is therefore determined by whether he is a) genuinely a believer in his own power or 2) cynically manipulating the reader's understanding of events to push her/him into an understanding of those events which works in Sev's favour.

Ori