

No lie?

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 12 Nov 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1954>

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Roy C. Lackey — 12 Nov 1999, 05:15

Jim Henley 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.

So it was his own fault. The question is whether Severian lies, not whether he has character flaws.

This is another case where someone seems to confuse the specific case (Sev lies) with the general (Sev is a Bad Guy). Evidence of the latter does not constitute evidence of the former. When people point this out it is suggested that they are somehow unwilling to see Sev as having flaws.<<

I'm not confused about it. You seem to have been distracted by my comment about Sev not bothering to get to know his father better. I was pointing out another instance where Sev made a statement to the reader which was contravened elsewhere in his memoir. We can argue about what "never known my father or my mother" means, but in the context of the first pages of SHADOW, chapter II, where the statement occurs, Severian is talking primarily of simply knowing *who his parents were*, not how well he knew them.

"Having been reared among the torturers, I have never known my father or my mother. No more did my brother apprentices know theirs." . . . "Thus none of us knows our decent. Each would be an exultant if he could..." . . . "As boys each of us formed his own conjectures..." . . . "Eata, believing himself descended of that family, drew the arms of one of the great northern clans..." . . . "For my part, I had already adopted as my own the device graved in bronze..."

Sev boasts often of having a perfect memory. I have pointed out several instances (and there are more) where he contradicts himself. Either his claim to having a perfect memory is true or it isn't. If true he has, at times, given false testimony. If not true, then his claim to having a perfect memory is itself a lie, and anything he says is suspect.

Of the instances that I cited, more than one of them are cases where the statements which are elsewhere contradicted are--literally--parenthetical comments, which need not have been made at all. The fact that they occur at all, as well as the way in which they are made, lead me to believe that Wolfe went out of his way to make them, that they are not mistakes on his part.

What seems to be overlooked in some of the responses to the "lies" or memory lapses I pointed out is that, in the context of the fiction that Wolfe was merely translating Sev's manuscript, Sev was not writing a dramatic, on-going, real-time narrative of his adventures as they happened to him. It was all written ten years after the events it describes, in the days just prior to his leaving

for Yesod. There was never an occasion where subsequent events would cause him to amend unconditional statements made in his manuscript. Thus, when he writes "last time" it means "last time", not "last time except for that other time". When he writes "never went again" that means "never went again" not "never went again except for all those other times I went". He's lying needlessly or he can't remember correctly, either the events or what he just wrote of them.

In his conversation with the mandragora he said: "No one has ever accused me of being an honest man, and I've told lies enough when I thought they would serve my turn, ..." In the very next chapter he interrupts his account of events ten years ago to relate the visit of Dr. Talos in the present, while he is writing his manuscript, just days before leaving for Yesod:

"You have bettered yourself," he said . . . "You may recall that I invariably affirmed you would. Honesty, integrity, and intelligence cannot be kept down."

"We both know that nothing is easier to keep down," I said. "By my old guild, they were kept down every day."

As the text makes clear several times, the torturers' guild was almost unknown to people outside the Citadel. It had very little impact on the lives of people in Nessus or the Commonwealth. Yet Sev was reared in that guild. If his comment means anything, he was talking about himself. He was the product of his environment and was short on all three qualities.

Jim Henley also wrote:

Is there anything to demonstrate that Sev knows the complete truth about the mausoleum before the events of URTH? This is a genuine rather than rhetorical question.<<

Chapter XXXVIII of CITADEL: "I know too in whose mausoleum I tarried as a child, that little building of stone with its rose, its fountain, and its flying ship all graven. I have disturbed my own tomb, and now I go to lie in it."

Thank you. It's established. It doesn't make Sev a liar though,<<

I didn't say it did. I just answered your question, without comment.

just shows that for a novice writer he has an instinctive sense of pacing.

I mean, that would be a good book, wouldn't it? Chapter Two: "So there was this tomb I used to play in as a boy. It was my tomb, and I was some kind of time traveller. Not that I knew that right at that moment. See, time isn't like a river, it's like an ocean with ripples. That's what these space guys told me years later. Their names were . . . "<<

Or better yet, what he actually *did* write, the last line of chapter I: "It was in this fashion that I began the long journey by which I backed into the throne."

Roy

Tony Ellis — 15 Nov 1999, 17:58 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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Well, that can be argued either way. You can just as easily say (and I do) that the parenthetical nature of the contradictions shows that GW wasn't thinking too hard when he wrote them. He's on the umpteenth rewrite, he adds a few little insights, rewords a couple of weak-looking paragraphs, and because he's Severian's creator, not Severian, he makes a few mistakes. It's all too easy, as anyone will know who's ever had cause to regret inserting what seemed at the time a brilliant last-minute argument into an essay five minutes before deadline.

Nobody, not even GW, is perfect. Once you start milling down any work of literature as finely as we do, you're going to find ugly, illusion-shattering errors. Lady Macbeth: did she have children or didn't she? Robinson Crusoe: swims naked to the wreck, fills his pockets with useful stuff. Dr John Watson or Dr James Watson?

I would be more convinced by the Severian forgets\lies to us theory if the contradictions were -less- parenthetical.