

Memories

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 15 Aug 2000

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Roy C. Lackey — 15 Aug 2000, 00:48

I have been reading the Urth Cycle yet again, trying to ignore the story line (which isn't easy), and pay attention to the details, the little clues that Wolfe drops here and there to larger plot elements, often in unlikely places. This too often leads to more questions than answers, but that's the way Wolfe writes, and the reader has little recourse unless he is content with staring at the rear-ends of a pair of Clydesdales--which is the plowman's normal view. <g>

One element often overlooked, it seems to me, in deciphering Severian's narrative is the fictional fact that he has written a memoir, ten years after the main events it purports to relate. It is not an on-going narrative of things as they happened; it's all hindsight. For example, when he gives his account of the challenge leading to the avern duel, the identity and motive of his challenger was known to him. Sev elected, for dramatic reasons (and likely other, less honorable reasons in other instances), to withhold from the reader what he already knew. Sometimes, as in this example, the mystery is later revealed to the reader, but by no means always. But the reader must bear in mind that Sev _does_ know the answers to most, if not all, of the mysteries that are presented but not fully explained in the text. He has to. He is absolute dictator of the Commonwealth, in a better position than anyone on Urth to command the answers to the enigmas he himself puzzled over, let alone his readers.

The circumstances of his birth and what happened to his mother are but two examples of questions of this nature. It's not just that _I_ want to know the answers; so did Sev. "It struck me, and not for the first time, that Master Gurloes and Master Palaemon too must have known whence all the apprentices and younger journeymen had come, having approved their admissions originally." (I, VII) It's not credible that he didn't ask.

It is sometimes offered that inconsistencies in his narrative--where he misremembers, lies, evades the truth, and is otherwise an unreliable narrator--may be due to altered details in the lives of the various versions of himself. That argument fails when you consider that, however many times he may have died or otherwise been sent back to do something over again, the text he wrote was written from memory, his memory, about which he, at least, has complete faith. He wrote it just before leaving for Yesod, then reproduced it from memory just after boarding the ship. It is this latter version that we are supposed to be reading. Unless he got himself killed between chapters and forgot to note it, then the version of himself who wrote the first chapter of the memoir also wrote the last. If he writes in chapter I of SHADOW that Vodalus handed his pistol to the "heavy man" (Hildegrin), and that Thea then took it from "the heavy man's hand", then writes in chapter I of CLAW (immediately after once again vaunting his famous memory) that he remembers "he [Vodalus] gave his pistol to his mistress", then, unless Wolfe is more careless than I believe, Wolfe is telling the reader that Sev's memory can't be trusted. And this is about a detail that Sev would have no reason to lie about. Imagine how creative Sev's memory might become when he has something to hide.

The consensus here seems to be that Sev was born and raised in the Matachin Tower. He says that his earliest memory is of piling pebbles in the Old Yard (I, II), but later undermines that

statement with two memories (II, XXVII & IV, XXXV) of being an infant too young to crawl, which would be too young to pile pebbles. That Catherine was "taken" for an unspecified offence does not imply that she was sent to the torturers. The Matachin Tower is definitely not the City jail; it seems to be reserved for political prisoners and others who have incurred the wrath of the autarch or someone near him. Running away from a religious order or even being involved in whatever petty crimes Ouen was in trouble with the law for would not likely get her sent there, much less killed for.

If Sev really believed he was born as well as reared in the torturers' tower, then the first night of his life spent away from it might have induced him to say, needlessly, as he prepared for sleep on the bed where Baldanders lay, that he was spending the first night of his life outside the tower. Instead, he wrote: "... I blew out the candle and lay down to spend the first night outside the Matachin Tower that I could recall." That he could recall? What reason did he have to suspect it could have been otherwise?

Roy