

Rereading the Short Sun

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 02 Jul 2002

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Stephen Case — 02 Jul 2002, 02:46

I got a summer job at the planetarium here in town, and it's given me a lot of time to read. Over the course of the past couple weeks, I've been rereading the Short Sun books for the first time. I'm almost done with Return to the Whorl, and I know they've probably been discussed to death on the list; but I didn't really get involved in the discussion much, and I thought I'd voice my thoughts now. If you feel this has already been covered, don't respond. Or direct me to the proper places in the (intimidatingly immense) archives.

First of all, with all the talk that went back and forth around here a while back as to the merits of the books themselves, a rereading has firmly convinced me of my opinion. Whether or not the books bring up questions that should be answered and are not or are answered ridiculously vaguely, a rereading reminded me that I really love these books. The characters, the conversations, the way Wolfe shows us what they feel in the way they speak. One scene in particular that illustrates what I like so much about these books: Hound, Horn, and Pig are sitting in the ruins of Blood's villa. Not only is the atmosphere soaked in the memories that we have from the Long Sun, but just listening to the characters talk to each other-- I love it. Hound is so solid, a simple, good man. Silk is showing through in everything Horn says. And even Pig's dialect doesn't bother me. It's a riddle trying to figure out what he says, but it adds weight somehow. Maybe that doesn't make sense, but I didn't come out and say it as firmly as I should have earlier when all the discussion as to good/bad book was going around. The Short Sun, IMO, deserves to stand in the ranks with Long Sun and New Sun.

Okay, I KNOW this has been covered before, but again, just voicing my own thoughts. Feel free to skip this whole paragraph. When did Horn become Silk? I think it was determined pretty surely that of course Horn is dead in the lander on Green and somehow his spirit is in Silk in the Whorl, sort of. But it really struck me how Wolfe shows this transition in his writing, something that I think I missed in my first reading. In In Green's Jungles and Return to the Whorl, I LIKE the narrator. I really like him. On Blue's Waters, I didn't. Horn bugged me. He was whiny and unfaithful and hated his son for what I still don't think was any good reason. (This is still one of my biggest unanswered questions in the books: why does Horn hate Sinew so much?) But after a bit through In Green's Jungles, I like the narrator. He's a good guy. He doesn't just whine about trying to be a good guy; he is. (And yes, this is the same good guy that's in Gaon in OBW, but I don't think we spend enough time with him there to really know him) Even though he thinks he's Horn, anyone that's read the Long Sun and admires Silk as much as I do, sees the change. Okay, this is probably very elementary to all you, but I caught it the second time though and enjoyed it. Maybe that's what makes the difference. The first time, I read each book as it came out. The second time I read them all together, and they seem to flow much better. Go figure.

Anyway, this is my longest post to the list so far and I'm sure everything I've said is old news to you guys. But there it is.

-Steve

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Jul 2002, 17:45 · follows Stephen Case

I'm a bit behind where Stephen is -- partly because I have so much else to read (yes, Kevin, the reviews are coming, and soon); I'm about halfway through rereading IGJ and would strongly confirm & agree with his opinion that these are really very good books, especially when read as a whole rather than spaced several months apart.

Also I have to agree with Stephen that there is a strong and recognizeable break in the personality of the Narrator from OBW to IGJ -- the former took me almost two weeks to reread; the latter I am almost racing through (well, for me these days) & have read half of it in four days.

I'm simply not convinced of Marc's overarching tree theory at this point, and doubt that I will come away convinced from the whole. There's clearly something weird going on with the trees, but for them to "be" the Neighbors, just doesn't work with what I'm seeing. Nor does it appear to me that Horn dies in the pit: yes, Seawrack thinks he has, but her experience of life and death on land is very narrow; something comatose in the ocean might as well be dead, because it will be, as she puts it, food. The bigger carnivores just won't wait for brain activity to stop, you know?

While I'm not 100% sure of (Marc's?) "Horn goes into Babbie at the end of OBW" theory, it does explain a great deal, and I'm definitely wanting to favor it. Right from the beginning of IGJ, the Narrator starts talking with a lot more of Silk's speech patterns (which, though not as, ah, blatant as Pig's, are nonetheless recognizeable and distinctive). I see no other specific point at which this very clear change is likely to have taken place.

The question is -- who writes the passage where the transition actually seems to take place? I offer this semi-analysis.

Silk, grieving for Hyacinth, is "dying in spirit." Despite the repeated attempts to say he is committing suicide, I find this untenable; the Neighbor makes it clear that they are moving Horn into a healthy body, and it's well-established that gashing your arms with a knife is standard mourning practice in Viron. Silk is either replaced or totally submerged by Horn. Later, the bit of Silk which came from Silk-in-Pas and resides in Pig is transferred to the Silk body that contains Horn. This is small and weak, so to say, but it's there and begins to affect the Narrator's behavior to the extent that he can make some Silk- like decisions while he is the Rajan of Gaon.

Now, the Outsider, for His own reasons which we need not know ("That's ineffability for you," observes Crowley), decides to straighten out the mess, and removes Horn -- probably to Babbie's body, which explains a great deal about Babbie's appearance and behavior on Urth. Note that every other case of something that is not human but becomes [more] human during the "astral travel" sequences is in fact carrying human soul: Oreb carrying (a piece of) Scylla, the various inhumi carrying (bits of) soul taken from their human victims. I think there's a strong implication that Babbie, too, has somehow acquired human soul. OTOH, this leaves begging Seawrack's comments that he is already a "person" near the end of OBW ...

The rather confused state of the final paragraphs of OBW, then, seem to me to reflect the state of the Silk persona, which has been pretty much submerged up to this point, just influencing the Narrator but allowing Horn to remain in control. This has just changed. The Silk persona really does not know what has happened (though he recognizes it as something 'good') and is trying to reassemble himself with his formerly-dominant personality gone. He stumbles through the kinder, gentler forest of Blue and comes upon Brother and Sister, spends some time with them, and when he is more "together" moves on, meeting Cugino and getting the staff.

The mystery now is, why he still denies that he is Silk. Is it because the only way he can understand the removal of the Horn persona is that it has died? That he cannot accept the guilt of living at the expense of Horn's death? Perhaps. Or perhaps he, submerged in Horn so long, is in the habit of thinking he is Horn; or perhaps, simply, that to acknowledge that he is Silk means acknowledging that Hyacinth is gone.

Or something else I haven't thought of. (I'll be watching the transition from IGJ to RTTW very carefully. I suspect that there is another major developmental step in that interstice.)

Some other bits...

Re: Stephen's "Why does Horn hate Sinew so much?" That's a darn good question. It does, however, provide more fodder for the idea that Silk becomes the dominant personality of the Narrator somewhere around the break between the two volumes. In OBW, when the Narrator speaks of the relationship between himself and Sinew, he is almost venomous; he makes it clear that he's done all he can and the trouble between them is Sinew's fault. This element seems to me entirely missing from the second volume.

Re: the Narrator as inhumu. While the "Oreb alarm" seems to militate against it, there are two factors to consider that make this bit of evidence somewhat more ambiguous. First, there is Oreb's long disappearance after the Narrator is brought back to Blue by the Gaonese, leading me to think that he is in some way disturbed by whatever the Narrator is or has become ... though of course this probably has more to do with the scrambled souls than anything else. When he returns, he seems to have decided that, yes, this is Silk after all.

Second, Oreb seems capable of recognizing that (say) Fava has become a 'good girl' rather than a 'bad thing, thing fly.' An inhumu with Silk's personality might well be a 'good Silk' to him. (Of course, all of this ignores the question of what effect Scylla has on Oreb's ability to detect the presence of 'bad things'.)

Nonetheless and notwithstanding ... I don't really think that the Narrator is an inhumu. The strongest bit of evidence, his general lack of appetite, is established fairly clearly in Silk in _Long Sun_; he only seems to get really hungry when he hasn't eaten in a day or longer. This tendency would likely increase with age. (I suspect that his genengineered body simply has a tremendously efficient metabolism.)

sad experience teaches me

matthew.malthouse — 09 Jul 2002, 12:37 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On 08/07/2002 18:45:32 Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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Quite possible - added extras along with the inspirational ability. But it's unnecessary. "Hunger" for those of us in the developed world is more a matter of habit. It's not that difficult to become accustomed to a far small intake and operate quite well on it.

Matthew

Robert Borski — 09 Jul 2002, 19:48 · follows matthew.malthouse

The bug-eyed one having writ:

Silk, grieving for Hyacinth, is "dying in spirit." Despite the repeated attempts to say he is committing suicide, I find this untenable; the Neighbor makes it clear that they are moving Horn into a healthy body, and it's well-established that gashing your arms with a knife is standard mourning practice in Viron. Silk is either replaced or totally submerged by Horn.

I don't like the suicide theory either (can't see Silk committing selbstmord, it being too heinous a sin in Wolfe's Catholicism), but like the-slash-and-gash-boohoo-theory even less. This is because, if memory serves me right, there's no mention of the practice anywhere in the Short Sun books. Thus the mystery of Silk's death--the how and the why and under what circumstances he receives his lethal wounds--cannot be resolved by simply reading SS alone. This seems most churlish and meanspirited of the author, and hardly likely to win him new readers, especially if Soleil Bref is their first encounter with the Sun books; whereas if the answer can be gleaned without resort to a completely different series (as I believe all the central questions of SS can and must be), it's a much tidier, well-crafted, and aesthetically-pleasing book.

Robert Borski