

Severian and Horn's perfect memory

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 09 Jul 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4070>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

James Wynn — 09 Jul 2003, 01:34

Jeff Prucher wrote:

" the ability to record all the events of a person's life which is what Severian's memory does."
and Chris said: "Now, with normal people who don't have Sev's perfect memory..."

Crush goes off on a tangent:

This has always bugged me. I don't believe Severian really does have a perfect memory, but it is interesting that he thinks he does. In "On Blue's Waters" Horn makes a similar claim that he does not believe he has "forgotten anything" that he and Nettle wrote in the Book of Silk.

I don't believe Severian has a perfect memories because of the error in memory he makes at the very beginning of tSotT. A previous review of the archives showed me that Bill Carmichael addressed this question way back in Oct 1999

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0209.shtml> but it seems to have gotten zero rise out of the list back then. Has this been determined to be a typo? If not then....

If Severian and Horn are not merely ignorant of facts, or concealers of unpleasant facts, or shaders of the truth, or even out-right liars -- but if their memories of events are just plain faulty as well, then this carries the concept of the untrustworthy narrator to a whole new level. But why is Wolfe playing this game over again?

The questions I pose are:

1. What does the false belief in one's flawless memory mean in these stories? That is, what is Wolfe driving at here?
2. What is the connection between Severian and Horn that we are surely expected to draw from their shared claims of perfect memory?

I am still winding my way through tBotSS, but I have a sneaking suspicion regarding the answer to the second question; however I have no clue about the answer to the first.

Can anyone take these on?

--- Crush

Jeff Veyera — 09 Jul 2003, 01:12 · follows James Wynn

I've always wondered myself if Severian's commentary on his memory wasn't a grim joke regarding the infallibility of the Autarch.

There are certainly gaps in Severian's narrative if not his memory---what happened during his long captivity amongst the Ascians, for instance? It is strange that a man who "forgets nothing" should neglect more than a passing mention of this.

Alternately, if there's as much fooling with timelines going on as there seems to be, it might not be Severian's memory which is faulty---perhaps Roche pointed out the pikes in one world, Drotte in another, and this incident is a signpost to tinkering with the past.

Of course, it might just have been a typo.

Teflon

-----Original Message-----

From: James Wynn [mailto:the.wynns at usa.net]

Sent: Tuesday, July 08, 2003 6:35 PM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: (urth) Severian and Horn's perfect memory

Jeff Prucher wrote:

" the ability to record all the events of a person's life which is what Severian's memory does."
and Chris said: "Now, with normal people who don't have Sev's perfect memory..."

Crush goes off on a tangent:

This has always bugged me. I don't believe Severian really does have a perfect memory, but it is interesting that he thinks he does. In "On Blue's Waters" Horn makes a similar claim that he does not believe he has "forgotten anything" that he and Nettle wrote in the Book of Silk.

I don't believe Severian has a perfect memories because of the error in memory he makes at the very beginning of tSotT. A previous review of the archives showed me that Bill Carmichael addressed this question way back in Oct 1999

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0209.shtml> but it seems to have gotten zero rise out of the list back then. Has this been determined to be a typo? If not then....

If Severian and Horn are not merely ignorant of facts, or concealers of unpleasant facts, or shaders of the truth, or even out-right liars -- but if their memories of events are just plain faulty as well, then this carries the concept of the untrustworthy narrator to a whole new level. But why is Wolfe playing this game over again?

The questions I pose are:

1. What does the false belief in one's flawless memory mean in these stories? That is, what is Wolfe driving at here?

2. What is the connection between Severian and Horn that we are surely expected to draw from their shared claims of perfect memory?

I am still winding my way through tBotSS, but I have a sneaking suspicion regarding the answer to the second question; however I have no clue about the answer to the first.

Can anyone take these on?

--- Crush

--

Chris — 09 Jul 2003, 02:03 · follows Jeff Veyera

Chris makes a flailing attempt to help:

All I can say regarding Horn is that I didn't read anything he said in Short Sun to be a categorical statement of perfect memory. When he refers to his own memory, it always struck me as being the sort of thing where he's acknowledging "Yes, I have considered the possibility that I might be mis-remembering, but as far as I can tell I don't think so." As far as the connection to Severian, I believe there's an interview with Wolfe in which he comes close to outright stating the connection between Severian and Silk. I don't remember which interview, but the question had been one where they were asking whether Silk was an incarnation of Severian, or Severian an incarnation of Silk, or something along those lines.

I find Severian to be a more interesting case. If we knew he was a liar that would definitely give us a direction to look in the text; *usually* people lie for a reason, so we could examine what he was trying to conceal and what he gains by lying in this particular way. So, just as an exercise, can anyone think of something he gains by telling this story as if he had perfect memory when he knew he didn't? (I can't come up with any myself, but one thing that makes a very large difference to this question is the purpose of the text. He seems to have written it for cathartic/personal reasons, but on the other hand it could have been deliberately written to become a religious text).

Speaking of the book itself, it occurred to me at least once that his perfect memory could be a metaphorical reference to him having read or having at hand a copy of... the Book of the New Sun. If so, when did he get it/read it? I don't think this possibility is trivial, but I tend to disregard it because it seems to lead in too many possible directions.

If he *did* have perfect memory and there are discrepancies in the text, then these probably again point to something that he wanted to conceal. Or that some later copyist wanted to conceal. Another possibility that I have to admit seems a bit too trivial for Wolfe's taste is that Severian simply was distracted and not paying attention to detail in those places. Personally while my memory is not perfect, I have made errors in writing of something that I remember perfectly well, but was not actively calling that detail to mind at the moment. To make another connection with Horn, at one point in his narrative he refers to his sons as "Hoof and Horn" and then as "Horn and Hide". Certainly both Horn and Silk know perfectly well the names of Horn's sons, and there's no reason to lie about something the reader already knows. The passage, however, is a particularly emotional one and we can guess that it's a kind of Freudian slip. The idea of Severian having Freudian slips would itself be interesting, if we knew for a fact that's what they were.

As a final note (I have rambled too long), I've also wondered if perhaps Severian had a normal memory, but came to believe that his memory seemed perfect to him because of the recursive-alzabo-effect I was talking about earlier. Even receiving partial memories an infinite number of times would lead to perfect recall, but only of *those* memories. Depending on how it worked it could be confusing in a number of ways, some of them crippling; it could even lead him to believe that he'd had perfect memory all along. I discarded this theory, however, after recalling (perhaps imperfectly) that in BotSS I believe that Silkhorn describes Severian as having a strange memory - and Silkhorn meets Sev long before his experience with ingesting alzabo. (This, if reliable, also tends to argue that if Sev's perfect memory is a lie, it's a lie he's been telling since childhood and not just in his book).

Hope that wasn't entirely useless,
Chris

Crush goes off on a tangent:

This has always bugged me. I don't believe Severian really does have a

perfect memory, but it is interesting that he thinks he does. In "On Blue's Waters" Horn makes a similar claim that he does not believe he has "forgotten anything" that he and Nettle wrote in the Book of Silk.

I don't believe Severian has a perfect memories because of the error in memory he makes at the very beginning of tSotT. A previous review of the archives showed me that Bill Carmichael addressed this question way back in Oct 1999 <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0209.shtml> but it seems to have gotten zero rise out of the list back then. Has this been determined to be a typo? If not then....

If Severian and Horn are not merely ignorant of facts, or concealers of unpleasant facts, or shaders of the truth, or even out-right liars -- but if their memories of events are just plain faulty as well, then this carries the concept of the untrustworthy narrator to a whole new level. But why is Wolfe playing this game over again?

The questions I pose are:

1. What does the false belief in one's flawless memory mean in these stories? That is, what is Wolfe driving at here?
2. What is the connection between Severian and Horn that we are surely expected to draw from their shared claims of perfect memory?

I am still winding my way through tBotSS, but I have a sneaking suspicion regarding the answer to the second question; however I have no clue about the answer to the first.

Can anyone take these on?

--- Crush

--

Lisa Schaffer-Doggett — 09 Jul 2003, 08:23 · follows Chris

On Tuesday, July 8, 2003, at 06:34 PM, James Wynn wrote:

2. What is the connection between Severian and Horn that we are surely expected to draw from their shared claims of perfect memory?

I am still winding my way through tBotSS, but I have a sneaking suspicion regarding the answer to the second question; however I have no clue about the answer to the first.

Can anyone take these on?

--- Crush

Don rushes in,

I'm fool enough to recklessly speculate on this question, but only on the understanding that I've still only read Long and Short Suns once each and your post is the first time I've thought of such a connection.

Assuming that Silk is an embryonic clone of Typhon (which I wholeheartedly believe) and Hyacinth is an embryonic clone of the original Kypris (who I also believe is Katharine) then it stands to reason that Typhon might have put his whole nasty family on the Whorl, especially since he went through the trouble to put them all in Mainframe as gods and gave them the ability to possess people. I have been thinking seriously that Musk might very well be Hierax, thus his and Silk's mutual hatred of one another. It is possible that Horn might be another Severian especially if you believe as I do that Sev is Typhon's genetic son. I think it's a stretch though. The only thing that gives it thematic appeal is that it would mean that Horn is Silk's son and that in a bizarre way Severian is the author of all the Sun books. That's almost too much even for me. Almost.