

Severian as a student

The Urth list — 15 messages, 8 voices, 31 May 2008

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5037>

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Dave Tallman — 31 May 2008, 23:55

The feat of reconstructing the entire "Book of the New Sun" from memory is sufficient to prove to me that Severian had a photographic memory as he claimed. Nobody would even attempt such a task without one. If they did, it wouldn't read like something carefully written; it would be full of mistakes and backtracks.

But when he left the guild, Master Palaemon tried to give him advice for the road. Severian missed it because he wasn't paying attention. Palaemon said, "Now you must do without it, but doubtless you would have forgotten everything anyway."

At first it may seem strange that Palaemon regarded him as having a poor memory. But there is a simple explanation. Early on, Severian must have learned that it was a poor strategy to be a teacher's pet in a school filled with other boys trained in the art of excruciation. He learned to act the part of a poor student. This is similar how "I, Claudius" had to act the part of a fool to survive.

"I had lied often to Master Gurloes and Master Palaemon, to Master Malrubius while he still lived, to Drotte because he was captain, to Roche because he was older and stronger than I, and to Eata and the other smaller apprentices because I hoped to make them respect me."

Here's an example of how it worked. "Outside, feigning ignorance, I asked Master Palaemon who Vodalus of the wood was." Severian got a rebuke for listening to the words of a client, and another for keeping his hands in his pocket (a deliberate act to deflect the Master's anger). Just as he intended, he got Drotte to tell him about Vodalus without revealing that he already knew the name.

They say it's more difficult to lie than to tell the truth because a liar has more to remember. Severian wouldn't have a problem with that. Then also suggests that discrepancies should be harmonized where possible instead of treating them as signs of lies. Severian should be most consistent when he is lying. If this book was a rewrite from memory he got a second chance to fix any mistakes.

The hand-off of the gun from Vodalus to Hildegryn or Thea is easily reconciled. Hildegryn said he couldn't use it, so it was clearly with the approval of Vodalus that Thea took it next. Thus he "gave the pistol to his mistress" even though he handed it first to Hildegryn.

Roy C. Lackey — 01 Jun 2008, 06:45 · follows Dave Tallman

Dave Tallman wrote:

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By "reconstructing", I can only conclude you are referring to the copy Severian made from memory shortly after boarding the Ship.

[snip]

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Again, what do you mean by "rewrite" and "second chance"? His original manuscript was written shortly before boarding the Ship and sent to Ultan. Whichever version Wolfe "translated", we have no means of comparing the Ship copy to the original. The events recounted in the manuscript were first written down ten years after Sev became autarch. There was no running account made over the years that he could redact at leisure. The copy seems to have been written out only days or weeks after completing the original manuscript.

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I made a longish post here years ago about mistakes and inconsistencies of memory in NEW SUN. IIRC, I concluded that the mistake about the gun was probably Wolfe's, not Sev's, because the second mention of the hand-off, this time to Thea, is repeated by Wolfe in the appendix to CITADEL. (It is possible that the first mention in SHADOW is a left-handed hint by Wolfe that Sev's memory isn't entirely to be trusted, but the revelation would be rather far from the source.)

Most of the mistakes of memory are about things that are not, in themselves, worth lying about. It doesn't really matter whether the pouch Dorcas sewed was made of doeskin or manskin, or if Roche or Drotte said they saw the pikes on the second page of the story. Unless they are all mistakes by Wolfe, the errors were put there by Wolfe to let the careful reader know that Sev's memory isn't quite as ostentatiously accurate as Sev loudly claims it to be.

Sev is an admitted liar, but his worst deceptions are his omissions.

-Roy

Jeff Wilson — 01 Jun 2008, 08:01 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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If you combine these concepts, the Roche or Drotte mistake could be a redaction error where for example a fourth boy's presence was elided by inconsistently assigning his dialogue to another, making it as lie-worthy as anything.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Dave Tallman — 02 Jun 2008, 05:35 · follows Jeff Wilson

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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Perhaps I am making an unjustified assumption, but I thought it was a given that the copy made on the time-traveling Ship was the only copy that Wolfe could have obtained and "translated." If the copy given to Ultan is the version we are reading, then my point is not valid. Severian could consult all the resources available to an Autarch to write the first one. If this is the second manuscript, it's too good in the level of detail and style to be the work of a person with an ordinary memory attempting to re-create the book they just wrote.

Even though it was written soon after the other one, it still gave Severian a second chance to notice "Hey, what I wrote here is inconsistent with what I wrote there." The fact that it was rewritten within a short time makes the inconsistencies even more strange. His memory has to play tricks on him not only about the events themselves, but in his memory of writing about them.

Roy C. Lackey — 03 Jun 2008, 05:34 · follows Dave Tallman

Dave Tallman wrote:

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For purposes of this discussion, it doesn't matter which document Wolfe translated. The text we have is all there is. The conceit is that, thanks to Severian's vaunted memory, the copy he made is identical in content to the original manuscript -- and we have no way of knowing otherwise.

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We are talking about inconsistencies within the same document, not comparing documents. When Sev relates some incident in his document, then has occasion later in the document to make reference to the same incident, and the two accounts are inconsistent, then obviously at least one mistake has been made. It doesn't really matter whether Hildegryn or Thea received the gun from Vodalus; neither used it. The only question is whether Wolfe or Sev made the mistake.

If Sev ever had occasion to notice that he had contradicted himself, then he had the opportunity to correct his account by amending it, either by changing the first mention to agree with the second, or the other way around. And we would never know that he had made a mistake of memory. He takes such pains to insist that his memory is perfect that he would never knowingly demonstrate that it wasn't.

The doeskin/manskin pouch thing is not as easily dismissed as most of the other mistakes. Doeskin and manskin have very different connotations. It is almost impossible for me to believe that Wolfe made that mistake. It is almost equally difficult for me to believe that dear Dorcas would sew a pouch made from human skin to house the most celebrated religious icon on the planet.

-Roy

Dave Tallman — 04 Jun 2008, 11:02 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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There is a line in Claw which helps clarify matters:

"But I can remember more than many would credit: the position of each object on a table I walked past when I was a child, and even that I have recalled some scene to mind previously, and how that remembered incident differed from the memory I have of it now."

Severian's memory is vivid and detailed to him, but not necessarily perfect. He also mentions weak judgement. Perhaps he records the memories as they occur to him at the time of writing, not judging between versions if the differences are trivial.

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It may also be that the rewriting just used memories of the act of writing itself in order to re-create the book quickly. Sev may not have exercised additional editorial judgement in the process.

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The sheath of Terminus Est was manskin, which was an appropriate material for it. Probably Dorcas used doeskin and Sev's memories of the sheath got mixed in somewhere.

I found an additional reference to his student days: "It was my power of recollection that made me the favorite pupil of Master Palaemon." Going back to my theory, I think that this may have been true in the early days of working with Palaemon until Sev decided it was dangerous to show up the other students. Then he went into the act of having a poor memory.

The eidolon Malrubius said, "You were always the most careless of my boys." Sev at first

pretended that he didn't remember studying the seven principles of governance, but when pressed he could name them. That also fits the poor-student-act theory.

Tony Ellis — 04 Jun 2008, 13:53 · follows Dave Tallman

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For what it's worth, speaking as a copy editor I have absolutely no problem believing Wolfe could have made that mistake. Writers make all sorts of mistakes, and one I regularly see is the accidental substitution of one word for another that apparently sparked some of the same synapses in the author's brain.

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 04 Jun 2008, 22:35 · follows Tony Ellis

On Wed, 04 Jun 2008 23:53:22 +1000 Tony Ellis
<tonyellis69 at btopenworld.com> wrote:

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Also for what it's worth, recall the old boatman talking about the corpses submerged in the botanic gardens. He says the waters turn their skin to leather - not like a boot-heel, but like a lady's glove. Doeskin is/was I think a common material for gloves.

Probably doesn't mean anything, but maybe some context for an accidental substitution by Wolfe.

John Smith — 05 Jun 2008, 01:11 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

It's interesting that the people of Urth find nothing strange about using human skin as a fabric. Does this simply reflect the poverty of a society that is running out of energy and resources? Or is it more of a comment on the immorality of a society that treats people as things?

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Lane Haygood — 05 Jun 2008, 01:15 · in reply to John Smith

Why assume that the two things are unrelated? Form follows function; morality follows, in many respects, the practicalities of the situation, at least insofar as we're willing to define morality by consequences. Running out of resources could have directed the moral change.

Or it could just be for the shock value.

Lane

On Jun 4, 2008, at 8:11 PM, John Smith wrote:

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strange about using human skin as a fabric. Does
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Adam Thornton — 05 Jun 2008, 01:24 · in reply to John Smith

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treats people as things?

Oh, much more the second, I think.

Of course, it's not entirely unknown as a bookbinding even on plain old Earth.

Adam

Jeff Wilson — 05 Jun 2008, 02:09 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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Why not? The greatest sacrifice to honor the greatest sacrifice.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Jeff Wilson — 05 Jun 2008, 02:16 · in reply to John Smith

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treats people as things?

Mechanical limbs, animal parts on otherwise human bodies, human faces on animals, and relics of many epochs are everyday sights around Nesus and the Citadel; I doubt leather made from human skin turns many heads of any species any more.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Roy C. Lackey — 05 Jun 2008, 20:59 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson quoted and wrote:

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Why not? The greatest sacrifice to honor the greatest sacrifice.

There are two basic types of sacrifice -- those made voluntarily and those in which the subject of the sacrifice is a reluctant participant. The overwhelming majority of sacrifices involving human skin are of the second kind.

Theories that equate the Conciliator in any meaningful way with Christianity are fundamentally flawed. The latter is about the sacrifice of a god for the world and the people in it. Severian the Conciliator sacrificed the world and the people in it, while he got to survive, sitting on the beach in Ushas, writing his second memoir while watching the girls go by and otherwise enjoying the pampered pastimes of a petty god.

-Roy

Jeff Wilson — 06 Jun 2008, 07:43 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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So are the overwhelming majority of crucifixions, yet the cross is still a positive symbol for Christians.

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I'm comparing them chiefly in the capacity of people to honor their highest beliefs in ways that don't necessarily scan for people of other beliefs.

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I don't know that Severian would necessarily be accepted as the Sleeper in that distant time; he would seem to have no Conciliator abilities left, and the ability to walk the Corridors of Time doesn't seem accurate enough to take advantage of impressing people in a particular place and time. He's a leftover vessel, empty of power except for his compelling narrative.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
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