

Soldier Of The Mist: first reading (mit spoilers)

The Urth list — 22 messages, 9 voices, 21 Jan 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5541>

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sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org — 21 Jan 2010, 18:42

I just finished Soldier in the Mist.

What a book! I'm sure I've barely begun to make sense of it's puzzles. Here are my first impressions, for whatever they might be worth. (Avast, thar be spoilers ahead!)

On a thematic level, the novel is dealing with notions of Self, Memory, and how those are shaped by historical texts and witnesses. Latro, an amnesiac who has only 12 hours of short term memory, has nothing to tell him who he is or where he came from besides a fragmented journal of what he previously witnessed as well as the accounts of those witnesses he finds around him. His predicament seems to be the human condition writ small. For what does any human culture know about itself? What do we know of our culture? We know what was written down previously in historical documents, and we know what the elders — who were witness to some portion of history — tell us. Beyond that is inference from what we see around us. Furthermore, what can we trust of any of it? While each person usually has to assemble these things once to get there bearings in life, Latro has to do this daily.

Another important concept is Anamnesis, literally the "loss of forgetfulness". Most people with any part of wisdom will concur that life's most important lessons, upon "learning them" seem like memories. We often just "know" something is right, because it awakens what feels like an ancient or eternal strand of wisdom in ourselves. This is known by the Greek philosophers as Anamnesis. Latro, while forgetful, remembers various things through the novel. He has flashbacks of leading a battle (seemingly the Battle of Thermopylae, seemingly as a general or commander in the Persian army). He remembers strategy and heroic skills of warfare, and he senses some things are very close to home. When he gets a tall capped foreign helmet, it seems to have been made for him. When he sees a staff with an eagle, he is heartsick. Through these spontaneous memories, as well as his consultation of his diary, Latro is constantly trying to lose his forgetfulness. The novel's narrative style also creates this feeling of anamnesis. With all of the names in translation, and places and objects being simply described, the entire book feels like a *deja-vu*. Scenes have a slippery familiarity to them. You read a scene and you think, "I must know this place from historical ruins." "I've seen this statue he's describing in a museum." or perhaps "I know this ghost king from a movie, he had great abs!"

It seems Latro is an early Roman. He's in the Persian army at the beginning and end of Soldier of Mist, and he seems at home in it, though he is not Persian. The eagle staff mentioned makes one think of the Roman SPQR staff. Perhaps that is why he is struck by the sight of it.

Why Latro is so favored by the gods is not clear to me, nor is why he can touch the Gods and make them visible to others. (I'm certainly not well versed in Greek Myth, so these are my best guesses) He seems to be favored at first by The Shining One (Apollo), but most of his interactions are with The Maiden Kore (Persephone) and The Grain Goddess/Mother Ge (Demeter), who seem to help him along. One of his companions, known as Eurykles the Necromancer, The Milesian, and Drakaina, seems at first to be a trifling sorcerer, then a spy for

The Great King (Xerxes), and an evil Gorgon-esque snake woman. (he/she is loyal to the Triple Goddess. is this Demeter, or another Triple Goddess? I'd guess NOT Demeter, because a wolf kills her, and wolves are Demeter's) At the death of Drakaina, (at the jaws of a werewolf) a snake leaves her body and the dying body claims to be Eurykles again, which seems to imply that a snake goddess was 'riding' him/her as the gods do in The Long Sun series. Drakaina seems to help the Spartan Regent Pausanias in his plans, which involve aligning Greece with Persia, with Sparta as it's favored city. According to a bit of research, the real Pausanias was accused of doing just that. Looking back, I can't find any point where Eurykles was changed into the snake woman, so I'm guessing that this is part of his/her nature from the first meeting.

The werewolf thread is strange. Early on, the bowman Oior (in Hyperiadés entourage) confides in him about the Neurians, who turn to wolves. He claims they are the enemy of his people, and that one is in their entourage. He asks Latro to kill the suspect, and Latro does when he is attacked by another bowman. However, at the end of the book, the Werewolf that kills Drakaina uses Oior's code "More than brothers, though I die" So Oior was actually a werewolf and Latro is connected to him by this oath of brotherhood, as well as the implication about the tall caps of the bowmen are like the helmet that seems tailored for Latro. The bowmen are also not Hellenes, like Latro.

I'm assuming all of Latro's companions are significant beyond their surface details. Why is "The Black Man" so loyal? Why is Io (the only character given an actual Goddesses name, unless I'm mistaken) able to hold her own against Drakaina's malice?

At the end of the novel, or first scroll, someone is approaching Latro, calling him Lucius in his own tongue. We're left with the impression that he's finally been delivered to his friends, as promised by Demeter.

Pedro Pereira — 21 Jan 2010, 21:19 · in reply to sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org

Date: Thu, 21 Jan 2010 13:42:54 -0500
From: sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org
To: Urth at urth.net
Subject: (urth) Soldier Of The Mist: first reading (mit spoilers)

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No problem there, he's a mercenary. Persians used plenty of them, usually greeks, but it's not far-fetched to imagine an Italian contingent in he's army.

The eagle staff mentioned makes one think of the Roman SPQR staff. Perhaps that is why he is struck by the sight of it.

This is one of those cases in which Wolfe makes a mistake. The Eagle as a symbolic Roman staff-motif was introduced by Marius late in the 2nd Century BC. At the time this novel takes place there were no Roman staffs with eagles on them.

Son of Witz — 21 Jan 2010, 23:00 · in reply to Pedro Pereira

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he is not Persian.

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Sure. I didn't mean to imply it's weird. just another layer onto the "stranger in a strange land feeling.

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I thought that I might be reaching with that. I wonder if it's safe to call it Wolfe's mistake. Perhaps I'm just seeing that symbol because I'm familiar with it. Perhaps there are other eagle staffs that predate it.

James Wynn — 21 Jan 2010, 23:58 · in reply to sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org

Interesting, that big about anamnesis.

There were thriving Greek colonies on the Italian peninsula, which explains Latro's knowledge of the language and aspects of Greek culture. If there's a deficit in the story, its that Latro's knowledge of Spartan's seems secondhand. I think the colonies closest to Rome were Spartan.

Why Latro is so favored by the gods is not clear to me, nor is why he can touch the Gods and make them visible to others. (I'm certainly not well versed in Greek Myth, so these are my best guesses)

Well, he's not merely *favored* by the Gods. He's cursed by Demeter because his part of the Persian army desecrated the grove near her Temple. This IIRC was listed as a reason for the Persian's defeat, particularly by the Spartan 300 (where Latro was wounded). But in Wolfian fashion, to be cursed by the gods is also to be blessed by them that is, in both cases one is merely touched by them. This is quite Lupine. From his other novels, we're already used to "enlightened" being the same as "insane". Prophets are insane until their prophecies come true.

Having been touched by a god, he has become a Mediator between god and man. He is both mundane and divine. So he can return the favor. He can touch the divine and make it mundane.

Looking back, I can't find any point where Eurykles was changed into the snake woman, so I'm guessing that this is part of his/her nature from the first meeting.

Um no. That snake we saw leave Eurykles's body was the little snake that Hekate (the black goddess with the dogs) put into his drink. Latro can see him slowly change first into an ugly woman with stubble on her chin, then as a beautiful woman wearing a snake belt. But to everyone else, it is just Eurykles in drag, until at one point Latro kiss her. This causes his divine nature to become "real", and Eurykles becomes the beautiful woman he already was...but no one could see it before.

J.

Son of Witz — 22 Jan 2010, 17:09 · in reply to James Wynn

Interesting, that big about anamnesis.

I'm curious to see how it develops in the other novels, if at all.

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J.

Ah, thanks for that. you're absolutely right. I somehow forgot about that part. I blame my short, fragmented reading bursts and addled memory banks... I went back and reread the Woman at the Crossroads chapter. How could I forget that? there's an illustration in there...

Jeff Wilson — 22 Jan 2010, 17:16 · in reply to sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org

On 1/21/2010 12:42 PM, sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org wrote:
I'm assuming all of Latro's companions are significant beyond their surface details. Why is "The Black Man" so loyal? Why is Io (the only character given an actual Goddesses name, unless I'm mistaken) able to hold her own against Drakaina's malice?

I am thinking "The Black Man" favors Latro because Latro has forgotten his tribalism and doesn't think to treat him like an outsider based on his race, and also because Latro is even more of an outsider and vulnerable to exploitation than he.

Io was the mortal priestess of Hera seduced by Zerus and then disguised as a heifer, etc. Not a goddess, as she was not placed in the heavens, at least not until Galilean times. I don't see much of a connection with the Io of myth, except the girl is a sort of mascot during their flight, similar to the heifer's flight from Hera's stinging gadfly

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
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James Wynn — 22 Jan 2010, 22:09 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

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Perhaps, but Latro gathers followers and admirers pretty quickly. We don't know how they met because Latro didn't write it down before he forgot the event.

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Well, I don't know if she was mortal. IIRC she was a nymph, a daughter of a river god. And she is typically associated with the Moon.

J.

Son of Witz — 22 Jan 2010, 23:33 · in reply to James Wynn

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I thought I had read as much. Also, isn't there a moon named Io in our solar system. don't planets and moons only get deity names?

brunians at brunians.org — 22 Jan 2010, 23:50 · in reply to Son of Witz

Io is a moon of Jupiter. Jupiter's moons are named after Jupiter's girlfriends (and one boyfriend).

.

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tribalism and doesn't think to treat him like an outsider based on his race,
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Dave Tallman — 23 Jan 2010, 02:17 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

brunians writes:

Io is a moon of Jupiter. Jupiter's moons are named after Jupiter's girlfriends (and one boyfriend).

Lo and behold, Ganymede pops up again. :)

Jeff Wilson — 23 Jan 2010, 03:27 · in reply to Son of Witz

Well, I don't know if she was mortal. IIRC she was a nymph, a daughter of a river god. And she is typically associated with the Moon.

Twister aside, I don't think she is intended to be the same cow that leapt over the moon. She had to run awfully far for refuge for a river nymph, across the Bosphorous and all the places called "Ionian".

I thought I had read as much. Also, isn't there a moon named Io in our solar system. don't planets and moons only get deity names?

In ancient times, but the Jovian moons were only discovered in 1610.

James Wynn — 23 Jan 2010, 20:06 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

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Twister aside, I don't think she is intended to be the same cow that leapt over the moon. She had to run awfully far for refuge for a river nymph, across the Bosphorous and all the places called "Ionian".

I agree, but I think there is an Io connection (maybe lots for all I know). That fountain Latro comes to before they take him to Apollo's temple is connected to the story of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. Cadmus intending to sacrifice a COW. He sent some men to that fountain

but there was a huge serpent there (the son of Apollo) which killed the men who went there to fetch water. Lots more happens, but they never get around to offering that cow for all I know.

In SotM, Io is being offered at the temple of Apollo, but the pythoness starts talking and, next thing you know, Io is on the road with Latro.

J.

James Wynn — 23 Jan 2010, 20:28 · follows James Wynn

I just looked up the story. The serpent was the son of Ares. I guess that makes Latro the dragon.
J.

I agree, but I think there is an Io connection (maybe lots for all I know).

That fountain Latro comes to before they take him to Apollo's temple is connected to the story of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes. Cadmus intending to sacrifice a COW. He sent some men to that fountain but there was a huge serpent there (the son of Apollo) which killed the men who went there to fetch water. Lots more happens, but they never get around to offering that cow for all I know.

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Jerry Friedman — 24 Jan 2010, 06:20 · in reply to sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org

Has there been any progress on some sort of amateur Festschrift for Gene Wolfe's 80th birthday? That discussion last year prompted me to write a narrative poem with connections to what I enjoy in his work. I'm finally done with the first draft. Is there any reason for me to save it for May 2011?

Also, if anyone is interested in workshopping the poem or just saying what worked and what didn't, I'm always grateful for that kind of thing, and I could e-mail it to a few people. (I don't want too many people to see the first draft or see the poem before the person it's dedicated to.) It's somewhat over 100 lines, and readers have to be able to stand exact rhyme and sometimes rather rough iambic pentameter.

Jerry Friedman

Son of Witz — 26 Jan 2010, 22:35 · in reply to James Wynn

Why Latro is so favored by the gods is not clear to me, nor is why he can touch the Gods and make them visible to others. (I'm certainly not well versed in Greek Myth, so these are my best guesses)

Well, he's not merely *favored* by the Gods. He's cursed by Demeter because his part of the Persian army desecrated the grove near her Temple. This IIRC was listed as a reason for the Persian's defeat, particularly by the Spartan 300 (where Latro was wounded).

I vaguely remember something about a desecrated grove. Do you remember what scene or chapter that was. thanks. ~witz

John Smith — 27 Jan 2010, 17:46 · in reply to Son of Witz

--- On Tue, 1/26/10, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:

From: Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org>
Subject: Re: (urth) Soldier Of The Mist: first reading (mit spoilers)
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Tuesday, January 26, 2010, 5:35 PM
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Well, he's not merely *favored* by the Gods. He's cursed by Demeter because his part of the Persian army desecrated the grove near her Temple. This IIRC was listed as a reason for the Persian's defeat, particularly by the Spartan 300 (where Latro was wounded).

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At the beginning of Chapter 1, Latro is told that he had been wounded "near the shrine of the Earth Mother, where the Great King's army fought the army of?Thought and the Rope Makers." I don't remember if Wolfe says anything about the desecration of the grove, but Herodotus does. — The Persian navy sailed to the sanctuary of Demeter. ?"There they beached their ships. ?They cut down cultivated trees, surrounded the ships with a stockade of stone and wood, and fixed stakes in the ground around the stockade." ? ?(The Histories, trans Robin Waterfield, Oxford World's Classics, p. 580.)

Best wishes,Jack

Son of Witz — 28 Jan 2010, 00:55 · in reply to John Smith

--- On Tue, 1/26/10, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:

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Best wishes, Jack

Thanks Jack.

This makes me curious about Herodotus. I've never read The Histories. Crap, I have to admit having never even read Homer. Better get cracking. ~witz sent from my iPad in the future

Jeff Wilson — 28 Jan 2010, 07:09 · in reply to John Smith

On 1/27/2010 11:46 AM, John Smith wrote:

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And Wolfe definitely loves his Herodotus; if you look at his portrait in The Faces of Science Fiction, it is perhaps the most prominently displayed volume in his basement library.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

James Wynn — 28 Jan 2010, 22:32 · in reply to John Smith

I don't remember if Wolfe says anything about the desecration of the grove, but Herodotus does.

I couldn't tell you exactly where, but I'm pretty sure Latro is told that it was Demeter who struck him.

J.

Russell Wodell — 28 Jan 2010, 22:44 · in reply to James Wynn

I believe the Maiden (ie, Persephone) spells this out to Latro when he descends below the floor of the temple. But it is never, I think, made clear how Latro could make amends for the desecration; certainly he is still cursed (unable to remember) in *Soldier of Sidon*, where he is manipulated by the Egyptian dieties as coldly as by the Greek ones.

Has Wolfe ever hinted at a fourth novel in the sequence, aside from complaining that he is probably too old (which we shouldn't take at face value, I suspect).

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2010/1/28 James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>

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brunians at brunians.org — 28 Jan 2010, 23:05 · in reply to Russell Wodell

There was some momentum behind the first and second novels, but when there was no market for the third, he went on to other projects, and if he lost the thread of where he was going (so to speak) no one should be very surprised.

When, years later, there was a market for the third novel, it is unlikely in the extreme (in my opinion) that the third novel he wrote then resembles the third novel he would have written originally, except perhaps in broad outline.

I do know that his original intent was to take Latro around the World, and give voice to his picture of the ancient World.

.

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