

Severian's sister/ancestry - query.

The Urth list — 17 messages, 6 voices, 06 Aug 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5691>

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Jane Delawney — 06 Aug 2010, 01:16

Just wondered if any more knowledgeable person on the list had any suggestions about this query, which has bugged me for years.

Severian speculates early in **Shadow** that the elders and masters of his Guild must have information on the ancestry / antecedents of newly recruited apprentices. Indeed this is highly likely given the recruitment methods of the Guild which takes its apprentices solely from amongst the children of their 'clients' (victims). We get only brief insights throughout the four volumes of BOTNS into the bureaucracy of the Commonwealth, and less than that into the records kept by the Seekers of Truth and Penitence; but there **are** records, and we are not given any reason to doubt that early speculation on Sev's part.

So - well, when Severian becomes Autarch, he has, effectively, total command of the Commonwealth and its various bureaucracies. He has the Words and he has the authority. After ten very, very successful and popular years in power (he is by that time 'Severian the Great' after all) he has likely won over many early hold-outs who may have disapproved of his succession or of the Autarchy in general (though I doubt he's won over the 'Agiatii' or whatever they are called after Vodalus's unlamented demise ... what wouldn't I give to hear more about this no doubt epic struggle!). So one may assume that most if not all of the Commonwealth's bureaucracies are his to command.

He has 'reformed' but not abolished his old Guild; also of note, since there would have been no need for a wholesale destruction of records during a mere 'reformation'. One would hope indeed that the Autarch's representatives would have been able to prevent such a thing had it been thought of.

So ... why on Urth, with the power and authority invested in him as Autarch, does Severian not require access to the records of the Seekers of Truth and Penitence, and thus learn beyond any doubt just who are his parents, his grandparents, and his sister? The flip answer is of course 'because GW does not want us to know', but I hope for more than that. Sev could have asked, and he would have been obeyed. He doesn't ask.

Why? Any ideas?

jd

Paul B — 06 Aug 2010, 02:15 · in reply to Jane Delawney

One possible explanation is that it's guild tradition not to tell (sorta like an adoption agency, see), and Severian didn't want to resort to something like having Palaemon or Gurloes tortured for the information. I find that all the more plausible since Severian seems to be the sort of guy who doesn't contradict rules, especially ones he was raised in, even if he technically can now.

Paul

On Thu, Aug 5, 2010 at 9:16 PM, Jane Delawney <jane_delawney at sky.com> wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 06 Aug 2010, 03:45 · in reply to Jane Delawney

On 8/5/2010 8:16 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

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I believe he does open the records, which is how he knows his mother's name and hair color, which Ouen confirms, and that he does it almost immediately upon his ascension, before Dorcas can get over her grief of the boatman and flee their house in the ruins.

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

Jeff Wilson — 06 Aug 2010, 04:08 · in reply to Paul B

On 8/5/2010 9:15 PM, Paul B wrote:

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Dude, are we reading the same books? Sev says multiple times he's broken every oath he's ever made, every guild stricture, ...he breaks rules left and right, starting with treason as he breaks curfew on his way home from playing truant and swimming in polluted water. He is **literally** a rebellious youth from opening page until he crowns his career of evil by eating the king's brains!

Then he takes about a decade break and only lies,, cheats, and steals in the approved fashion of statecraft before he shows he still has what it takes to break all the rules by allying with alien monsters from another universe that help him destroy the world!

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Ryan Dunn — 06 Aug 2010, 04:14 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Aug 6, 2010, at 12:08 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

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You had me until alien monsters. Severian at no point that I saw allies with alien monsters with the intention of destroying Urth.

Do you really think his action of bringing the New Sun was breaking all the rules? And eating the king's brains was an act of evil? Are you sure?

He did break curfew, though, and was more than happy to help his masters deceive the Autarchy by staging his own death after giving Thecla the knife.

For starters.

...ryan

Jeff Wilson — 06 Aug 2010, 05:06 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

On 8/5/2010 11:14 PM, Ryan Dunn wrote:

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Alpheta, Tzadkiel, Famulimus, Barbatus, and Inire are all alien creatures from beyond time and space whose existence follows physical laws foreign to all urthly experience. They masquerade as humans, befriend and seduce Severian in furtherance of their alien agenda and are the parties responsible for the White Fountain and its genocidal, climate changing, mass-extinction-event, continent shuffling flood.

They all had good reasons for doing all this, but it's not like they asked permission or gave due process.

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Ryan Dunn — 06 Aug 2010, 05:12 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Aug 6, 2010, at 1:06 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

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True, I just got wrapped up in the hero quest aspect of the text, I guess, and the need for a new Sun, come hell or high water (or both).

...ryan

David Stockhoff — 06 Aug 2010, 12:14 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

When did Severian stage his own death?

Ryan Dunn wrote:

On Aug 6, 2010, at 12:08 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

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Ryan Dunn — 06 Aug 2010, 13:28 · in reply to David Stockhoff

I meant the scene where he's offering Gurloes ways of "dying" so that his betrayal won't shame the guild, even though to do so would be illegal and immoral.

I believe he offers up drowning as an option, which sort of made me laugh on a second reading, knowing what we know of Severian and drowning.

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Ryan Dunn — 06 Aug 2010, 13:36 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

I shouldn't have put quotes around dying. He truly meant to die for his sin.

...ryan

On Aug 6, 2010, at 9:28 AM, Ryan Dunn <ryan at liftingfaces.com> wrote:
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Lee Berman — 06 Aug 2010, 14:06 · follows Ryan Dunn

Jeff Wilson- I believe he does open the records, which is how he knows his mother's name and hair color, which Owen confirms, and that he does it almost immediately upon his ascension, before Dorcas can get over her grief of the boatman and flee their house in the ruins.

I generally agree with Jeff Wilson. Severian is least forthcoming with us in regard to his problems with incest. We are given enough information to fairly easily deduce that Dorcas is his grandmother though he never comes out and says so.

Given his initial intense curiosity, it seems almost impossible that, as Autarch, he would not use his power to investigate his own family tree (just as it seems impossible that there was no buggery going on among torturer's apprentices). Such things draw attention to themselves by their conspicuous absence.

How can Severian admit to us that he discovered all the major loves and conquests of his life were family members, Dorcas, Thecla, Valeria, Jolenta and Cyriaca all being prime candidates, I think. Sometimes I doubt whether Wolfe would set up a scenario and then disguise it so impenetrably. Then some other new subtle revelation makes an appearance 30 years after publishing and I once again believe it.

David Stockhoff — 06 Aug 2010, 14:11 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

Right, of course.

Yes, there are some hilarious passages. I am currently rereading by audiobook, and am enjoying Severian's dalliance with Jolenta (rhymes with "polenta") and the comic play that follows.

Ryan Dunn wrote:

I meant the scene where he's offering Gurloes ways of "dying" so that his betrayal won't shame the guild, even though to do so would be illegal and immoral.

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Urth Mailing List

Jane Delawney — 07 Aug 2010, 01:14 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Sorry for monkeying with the subject line again, I want to get my own posts sent back to me and this is the only way I can get Sky's mail server to do this. And apologies *again* if you have heard this a few too many times already.

On 06/08/10 04:45, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 8/5/2010 8:16 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

So ... why on Urth, with the power and authority invested in him as Autarch, does Severian not require access to the records of the Seekers of Truth and Penitence, and thus learn beyond any doubt just who are his parents, his grandparents, and his sister? The flip answer is of course 'because GW does not want us to know', but I hope for more than that. Sev could have asked, and he would have been obeyed. He doesn't ask.

I believe he does open the records, which is how he knows his mother's name and hair color, which Ouen confirms, and that he does it almost immediately upon his ascension, before Dorcas can get over her grief of the boatman and flee their house in the ruins.

Dunno. Seems to me that Sev has had sufficient information prior to becoming Autarch to at least be able to make an informed guess that Dorcas was probably his grandmother and Ouen his father. Opening the records would have provided confirmation for sure, but did he really need that to take the actions he did ie. compel Ouen to care for Dorcas (since he knows that he (Severian) would be the last person D. would ever want to see again after her return to Nessus).

Whether this is the case or not though - one is still left to wonder why, given that he simply must have been able to demand the relevant information from the Guild, Severian still does not know (even at the end of UOTNS he does not know - one might think that by that time, both Sev and GW have passed beyond worrying about it, but if Juturna is in the mix that is not the case at all, is it?) who his *sister* is. GW spends altogether too much time and effort setting Severian up as one of twins (or at the very least of a brother-sister pair with appropriate names) for this to be an irrelevant or insignificant question, surely?

I gather that in one of GW's later works (which I have not read) there is a scene set within the Matachin Tower which involves Severian, a 'cacogen', and Merryn (at the time either apprentice

or 'journeywoman' Witch) and that during this scene Merryn claims that Severian is her brother. This may be a generic term (Severian refers to 'the Witches, our sisters' in 'Shadow'; here the usage appears to be generic, though for any individual Seeker or apprentice there is the possibility that this term is literally true, given what we are told about how these two guilds obtain recruits) but it's possibly not. Merryn I know has been fingered as Severa by more than one commentator, but so have quite a few other characters (Juturna, the mandragora, Jolenta, and so on and so forth). If Sev as Autarch can be assumed to have confirmed his earlier suspicions and deductions about Dorcas, Ouen et al., then why, apparently, has he not succeeded in discovering further information about his sister?

I still think this is a major lacuna and pretty strange.

jd

Jeff Wilson — 07 Aug 2010, 11:18 · in reply to Jane Delawney

On 8/6/2010 8:14 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

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Let us think what information that the guild would have retained. We could expect them to have:

- * the official documentation commanding Catharine's imprisonment and her torture and execution if any. These would record her name, residence and position, a brief or lengthy physical description for identification purposes, and the charges against her.
- * the official guild records kept for inspection by the authorities, accounting for her disposition and that of any children who arrived with her or she bore.
- * the internal accounts or logs kept by the masters for later consultation of their own, their fellow masters, and masters yet to come.

I don't think this would necessarily include any details of any family members who had not fallen into their hands, except by chance inclusion: "...found guilty of the murder of her husband the Autarch's servant Pancras for which the sentence of death is to be carried out...". Of course, an exultant's family would be identifiable from their name, *if* that name were faithfully recorded and there was no complicating factors like disinheritance or abdication.

Of any siblings, the guild records would say that a girl with such-a-color hair and eyes and marks was given to the Witches if the birth came after incarceration, or such-a-color hair and eyes and marks and the name of X if the girl came with her mother to the tower.

Severian's lack of mention of a sister suggests to me that either he came without one, or that any on record are no longer locatable.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
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Lee Berman — 08 Aug 2010, 10:27 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson- Severian's lack of mention of a sister suggests to me that either he came without one, or that any on record are no longer locatable.

This is a plausible explanation and it surely could be what Gene Wolfe had in mind with regard to "severa".

Among the most popular alternate explanations I've seen are that Severian's sister is the witch, Merryn as hinted at in Return to the Whorl. Another is that he discovered that his sister is someone he had sex with and doesn't want to openly reveal it, managing to drop (conscious or not) hints about it, similar to the hints regarding Dorcas being his grandmother and similar to the hint Agilus drops that he and his sister have a sexual relationship.

I think Wolfe leaves it to each reader's personal preference which explanation to lean toward. There is even latitude for those who are comfortable with the ambiguity of three (or more) parallel explanations and no need for choosing one over the others.

Jane Delawney — 09 Aug 2010, 00:07 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On 07/08/10 12:18, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 8/6/2010 8:14 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

GW

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- * the official documentation commanding Catharine's imprisonment and her torture and execution if any. These would record her name, residence and position, a brief or lengthy physical description for identification purposes, and the charges against her.

Of course, this kind of record would have been routine for any 'client'.

- * the official guild records kept for inspection by the authorities, accounting for her disposition and that of any children who arrived with her or she bore.

Re: the second point - Well yes, one might *indeed* expect these details to be recorded, especially if she bore twins and one of them was retained by the Seekers (because a boy) and the other handed over to the Witches (because a girl). As I've already mentioned I think GW provides the reader with so many hints and suggestions re: Sev's name and the possible existence of a sister that I can't think why he would have done this, unless we are supposed to assume that he did in fact have a sister. Otherwise, why bother? Just to be able to turn around and say, 'Ha ha, fooled you?'

Can't see it somehow.

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For sure. But if Sev was raised by the Guild from a baby (as his recollection of being nursed by a woman within the Tower strongly suggests he was - though his assumption that this woman was his mother is yet another example of his 'unreliable narrator' status since he has informed us within the first chapter or two of his narrative that when the Seekers have a suitable newborn in their hands, they will engage a wet-nurse; the baby doesn't necessarily get nursed by his own mother) and he did have a twin sister, the delivery - by natural means, or by the Guild's rough form of C-section as the text suggests - of twin babies, one of each sex and one taken or given to be raised by each of the sibling Guilds would surely be a notable event, and I can't see it not being recorded.

It's always possible of course that Catherine was subjected to this rough surgery and that consequently, only one of her twins survived. If so, why keep harping on the 'twins' theme? Unless of course the (IMO) wild suggestion that the mandragora is Sev's twin happens to be correct.

Severian's lack of mention of a sister

Though people who came into contact with him keep suggesting the possibility, over and over again.

suggests to me that either he came without one, or that any on record are no longer locatable.

This on the other hand is entirely plausible. Sev as Autarch could have requisitioned the records and discovered that he had a sister, given to the Witches, who was not named at birth (because the Witches would give her a name) and was therefore untraceable. This bit of information would close out all kinds of hints and suggestions within the four volumes; but it's not given.

I still find this odd. Further comments more than welcome, this stuff (alongside plenty more in the books) has puzzled me for years!

many thanks to all who have replied and hopefully I don't have to explain yet again why I have altered the subject line (sticking to one thread at the moment because I don't want to confuse more than one of them).

JD

Jeff Wilson — 09 Aug 2010, 01:24 · in reply to Jane Delawney

On 8/8/2010 7:07 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:
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Can't see it somehow.

There's a sister somewhere, but that doesn't mean the clues to her identity have to be where Severian can find them, just where the
reader can find them.

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He was probably being brief for the benefit of his listeners at the time. The guild would not perform c-sections on **every** pregnant woman who comes into their hands regardless, that could be extra punishment without orders. But after the woman has passed, the restriction no longer prevents them from opening her body to take the babes.

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Nah, there's likely no shortage of aborted fetuses in Nessus, and there seem to be viable fetuses kept at the Witches' Keep, some must go bad now and then. Besides, the mandragora's been locked in the alchemy lab for centuries.

I'm sure there's a sister **somewhere**, but even if we figure it out, that doesn't mean that Severian ever would.

Severian's lack of mention of a sister
Though people who came into contact with him keep suggesting the possibility, over and over again.

I'm speaking in particular of the final sections regarding Dorcas, the boatman, and Ouen, the natural times for him to mention his sister with regard to his new information.

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The Witches are also a service guild of the Autarchy, and he would simply go to their tower and have their records opened. In fact, I suspect he would do so regardless. If the sister were dead, given his fascination with the mausoleum he almost certainly would have had the body moved there from its humble grave, or at least have had some kind of closure worthy of recording. So, the sister must surely still be missing as far as he and the Witches know.

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