

Introduction and Breath

The Urth list — 50 messages, 18 voices, 13 Apr 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5994>

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.

Bart Everson — 13 Apr 2011, 20:33

Greetings Urth people,

I have been lurking here for a while, somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer volume.

Actually I don't care for the term lurking. I don't like what it connotes. I don't feel like I've been hiding in the shadows. I feel like I've been submerged, swimming through the endless flow of your words. Now that we seem to have hit a relatively calm spell, I thought I should be polite and introduce myself, even though I have nothing in particular to say. I feel like now I am coming up to the surface to take a breath of air.

Even as I write this I'm having a sense of *d?j? vu*. Have I introduced myself before? I don't think so, but I did some lurking (I mean swimming) here almost ten years ago, or so I recall. I've searched the archives but I can't see any evidence that I ever made my presence known. Then again, I can't be certain, I've used so many different aliases on the net. I do remember that I was turned on to *Little, Big* when it was mentioned here, so thank you for that, whoever you are.

I'm writing now because at this time I'm making my way through *The Book of the New Sun* yet again. I've lost track of how many times I've read it. This might be my 15th time or my 20th. I've read it aloud (three or four times) and I've read the books in reverse order and even read it chapter-by-chapter in reverse order or in randomized fashion according to a scheme I devised and have long since forgotten. I find new insights are revealed by contriving such juxtapositions.

Finally, I thought I'd ask something that has perplexed me for many years. I often read about Severian's supposed unreliability as a narrator. This notion greatly intrigued me at first as I think *Pale Fire* is one of the greatest books ever written, and each time I have revisited the story I have looked for clues, but I'm unable to figure this one out. What exactly is the nature of his unreliability? Every cited instance I've seen seems to be fairly trivial. What is the big lie? What am I missing?

Editor B

soloviev at irit.fr — 13 Apr 2011, 21:08 · in reply to Bart Everson

Greetings -

well, I am sure that it is my first posting to the list (glad that I am here).

I think an important example of withholding certain information (if not lie) can be found in the end of the "Book of the Short Sun" where Horn-Silk is visiting Urth with Jahlee and others, and Severian as a boy is helping him to return Scylla (Cilinia) to her coffin. There were several

meetings with Severian, meeting with Gurloes, Triskele etc. It gives some idea what information Severian may withhold in the "Book of the New Sun".

All the best

Sergei Soloviev

Greetings Urth people,

I have been lurking here for a while, somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer volume.

Actually I don't care for the term lurking. I don't like what it connotes.

I don't feel like I've been hiding in the shadows. I feel like I've been submerged, swimming through the endless flow of your words. Now that we seem

to have hit a relatively calm spell, I thought I should be polite and introduce myself, even though I have nothing in particular to say. I feel like now I am coming up to the surface to take a breath of air.

Even as I write this I'm having a sense of *d?j? vu*. Have I introduced myself before? I don't think so, but I did some lurking (I mean swimming) here almost ten years ago, or so I recall. I've searched the archives but

I can't see any evidence that I ever made my presence known. Then again, I can't be certain, I've used so many different aliases on the net. I do remember that I was turned on to *Little, Big* when it was mentioned here, so thank you for that, whoever you are.

I'm writing now because at this time I'm making my way through *The Book of

the New Sun* yet again. I've lost track of how many times I've read it.

This might be my 15th time or my 20th. I've read it aloud (three or four times) and I've read the books in reverse order and even read it chapter-by-chapter in reverse order or in randomized fashion according to a scheme I devised and have long since forgotten. I find new insights are revealed by contriving such juxtapositions.

Finally, I thought I'd ask something that has perplexed me for many years.

I often read about Severian's supposed unreliability as a narrator. This notion greatly intrigued me at first as I think *Pale Fire* is one of the greatest books ever written, and each time I have revisited the story I have looked for clues, but I'm unable to figure this one out. What exactly is the nature of his unreliability? Every cited instance I've seen seems to be fairly trivial. What is the big lie? What am I missing?

Editor B

From: "soloviev at irit.fr" <soloviev at irit.fr>

Greetings -

well, I am sure that it is my first posting to the list
(glad that I am here).

Hi, Sergei. Was it partly a mention of Pale Fire that got you to delurk (if you're the same Sergei Soloviev I remember from NABOKV-L)?

I think an important example of withholding certain information (if not lie) can be found in the end of the "Book of the Short Sun" where Horn-Silk is visiting Urth with Jahlee and others, and Severian as a boy is helping him to return Scylla (Cilinia) to her coffin. There were several meetings with Severian, meeting with Gurloes, Triskele etc. It gives some idea what information Severian may withhold in the "Book of the New Sun".

Like Editor B, I'm interested in why people call Severian unreliable. I find it so unlikely that he'd leave out the visits from Horn-Silk (who he thinks is Master Malrubius), that I've wondered whether that Severian is in a different timeline.

Editor B, Pale Fire is one of my favorite books too, but when I mention it or Nabokov here, no one responds.

Jerry Friedman

Allan Anderson — 13 Apr 2011, 23:01 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On Wed, Apr 13, 2011 at 3:41 PM, Jerry Friedman <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

Editor B, Pale Fire is one of my favorite books too, but when I mention it
or
Nabokov here, no one responds.

I adored Lolita and Ada, but haven't yet read Pale Fire or anything else by Nabakov. Oh, except for those lectures where he rips into Dostoyevsky and praises Tolstoy.

I haven't really thought about Nabakov in a critical fashion, so perhaps that's why little occurs to me when comparing him to Wolfe. What's an interesting place to start? The way they present their narrators?

I'm a tad skeptical of an explanation of the BotNS narrative's lacunae which relies completely on a book written so much later on. I don't mind if the answer isn't concrete, but I'd really want the book's puzzles to contribute to the experience of the book as it stands alone.

Adam Thornton — 13 Apr 2011, 23:25 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On Apr 13, 2011, at 5:41 PM, Jerry Friedman wrote:
Editor B, Pale Fire is one of my favorite books too, but when I mention it or
Nabokov here, no one responds.

I dig Pale Fire a whole lot too, but I've only read it once and can't claim to have gotten very much of it.

Adam

Gerry Quinn — 13 Apr 2011, 23:48 · in reply to soloviev at irit.fr

From: <soloviev at irit.fr>

Bart Everson:

well, I am sure that it is my first posting to the list
(glad that I am here).

Welcome!

I think an important example of withholding certain information (if not lie) can be found in the end of the "Book of the Short Sun" where Horn-Silk is visiting Urth with Jahlee and others, and Severian as a boy is helping him to return Scylla (Cilinia) to her coffin. There were several meetings with Severian, meeting with Gurloes, Triskele etc. It gives some idea what information Severian may withhold in the "Book of the New Sun".

This was written years (decades) afterwards, though. I don't think it can really be taken as characterising the general case.

One thing I've noticed on various boards is people confidently asserting that Severian is a liar, then clamming up when asked for examples.

He does of course mention minor lies, for example the executioner misleads the executee about the details of the ritual, which he suggests is for the benefit of the latter, though surely it is in part for the benefit of the former too. But such things hardly make his book unreliable.

- Gerry Quinn

Jerry Friedman — 14 Apr 2011, 04:07 · in reply to Allan Anderson

From: Allan Anderson <rubel at goosemoon.org>

...

I haven't really thought about Nabokov in a critical fashion, so perhaps that's why little occurs to me when comparing him to Wolfe. What's an interesting place to start? The way they present their narrators?

Here's my post at NABOKV-L recommending Wolfe to the people there:

<http://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv-cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0212&L=nabokv-l&P=R9842>

Here's one by another person:

<http://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv-cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0504&L=nabokv-l&P=626>

Let me also quote a letter Nabokov wrote to Katharine White at the New Yorker, who had rejected his story "The Vane Sisters" (which is on a rather Wolfean theme):

"Most of the stories I am contemplating (and some I have written in the past--you actually published one with such an 'inside'--the one about the old Jewish couple and their sick boy) will be composed on these lines, according to this system wherein a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent story."

It's not Nabokov's best sentence, but it sounds distinctly like Wolfe's system to me. At least a lot of people here read Wolfe that way.

(By the way, I recommend that story about the old Jewish couple, "Signs and Symbols"--though over 60 years later, there's no consensus on the interpretation.)

Jerry Friedman

Mo Holkar — 14 Apr 2011, 06:32 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

At 23:41 13/04/2011, Jerry Friedman wrote:

Editor B, Pale Fire is one of my favorite books too, but when I mention it or Nabokov here, no one responds.

It's one of my favourite books too, but the accumulated weight and years of Nabokov scholarship out there make me wary of saying much more than that about it :-)

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

soloviev at irit.fr — 14 Apr 2011, 07:26 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

Dear Jerry,

yes, it is me, but I visited this (Urth) list because I am a long time admirer of (most of) Wolfe's oeuvre. Glad to see you here.

(Nowadays I am still often looking the posts at Nabokov's list, but seldom posting myself.)

Cheers

Sergei

From: "soloviev at irit.fr" <soloviev at irit.fr>

Greetings -

well, I am sure that it is my first posting to the list (glad that I am here).

Hi, Sergei. Was it partly a mention of Pale Fire that got you to delurk (if you're the same Sergei Soloviev I remember from NABOKV-L)?

I think an important example of withholding certain information (if not lie) can be found in the end of the "Book of the Short Sun" where Horn-Silk is visiting Urth with Jahlee and others, and Severian as a boy is helping him to return Scylla (Cilinia) to her coffin. There were several meetings with Severian, meeting with Gurloes, Triskele etc. It gives some idea what information Severian may withhold in the "Book of the New Sun".

Like Editor B, I'm interested in why people call Severian unreliable. I find it

so unlikely that he'd leave out the visits from Horn-Silk (who he thinks is Master Malrubius), that I've wondered whether that Severian is in a different timeline.

Editor B, Pale Fire is one of my favorite books too, but when I mention it or Nabokov here, no one responds.

Jerry Friedman

António Pedro Marques — 14 Apr 2011, 13:00 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote (14-04-2011 00:48):

One thing I've noticed on various boards is people confidently asserting that Severian is a liar, then clamming up when asked for examples.

I think that's chiefly because the inconsistencies in the narrative are so obvious that asking for them is kind of a breach of social contract.

But the problem imo is that, like 'fantastic', 'unreliable narrator' is yet another label people attach to a thing, when in fact the author's purpose was just to write it the way he sees it. Just as Gene Wolfe points out that characterising parts of literature as 'fantastic' is but an artifact of being used to view 'naturalistic' literature, a comparatively recent fad, as the default or only kind of literature, so the 'unreliable narrator' concept is an artifact of being used to an omniscient, unerring, objective, transparent narrator, which in itself is a very questionable idea.

Craig Brewer — 15 Apr 2011, 15:35 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

I've always assumed that, in Severian's case, he gets the "unreliable narrator" tag for reasons other than outright lying. There are a number of reasons he might not be exactly reliable:

- 1) He's a (or an ex-) political leader writing his memoirs.
- 2) He's got multiple peoples' memories running around his head, and the narrator's "I" isn't always the same person's.
- 3) The cultural differences and "translations" that "Gene Wolfe" made from the manuscript mean that we don't share the same common cultural context. Thus, a "steed" or a "mount" isn't always a horse. Or "people" might not always be human, or humans as we know them. The tower is a rocket, but he doesn't explicitly mention that because he doesn't need to explain it to the audience he thinks he's writing for, etc...
- 4) The obvious point that he claims to have a perfect memory but occasionally mentions not remembering (or at least not having paid attention to) certain details.

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

From: Ant?nio Pedro Marques <entonio at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Thu, April 14, 2011 8:00:06 AM

Subject: Re: (urth) Introduction and Breath

Gerry Quinn wrote (14-04-2011 00:48):

One thing I've noticed on various boards is people confidently asserting that Severian is a liar, then clamming up when asked for examples.

I think that's chiefly because the inconsistencies in the narrative are so obvious that asking for them is kind of a breach of social contract.

But the problem imo is that, like 'fantastic', 'unreliable narrator' is yet another label people attach to a thing, when in fact the author's purpose was just to write it the way he sees it. Just as Gene Wolfe points out that characterising parts of literature as 'fantastic' is but an artifact of being used to view 'naturalistic' literature, a comparatively recent fad, as the default or only kind of literature, so the 'unreliable narrator' concept is an artifact of being used to an omniscient, unerring, objective, transparent narrator, which in itself is a very questionable idea.

Antonin Scriabin — 15 Apr 2011, 16:48 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Possible Urth of the New Sun Spoilers!

Good points concerning the nature of Severian's "unreliable narration".

That was one thing that struck me while reading New Sun (I have only read it once) ...

Severian's perfect memory seems selective. There are moments where seems to say "I have a perfect memory, except for when I don't". Furthermore, once the time travel elements in Urth of the New Sun are revealed, it seems clear that his memory being perfect or not is secondary in narrative importance to the fact that there are multiple versions of him running around through time, with various other minds trapped in his, etc. These seem to make him a problematic narrator more so than his tendency to lie / mislead (although that too is important).

On Fri, Apr 15, 2011 at 11:35 AM, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:

I've always assumed that, in Severian's case, he gets the "unreliable narrator"

tag for reasons other than outright lying. There are a number of reasons he might not be exactly reliable:

- 1) He's a (or an ex-) political leader writing his memoirs.
- 2) He's got multiple peoples' memories running around his head, and the narrator's "I" isn't always the same person's.
- 3) The cultural differences and "translations" that "Gene Wolfe" made from the manuscript mean that we don't share the same common cultural context. Thus, a "steed" or a "mount" isn't always a horse. Or "people" might not always be human, or humans as we know them. The tower is a rocket, but he doesn't explicitly mention that because he doesn't need to explain it to the audience he thinks he's writing for, etc...
- 4) The obvious point that he claims to have a perfect memory but occasionally mentions not remembering (or at least not having paid attention to) certain details.

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

From: Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Ant?nio Pedro Marques — 15 Apr 2011, 17:35 · in reply to Antonin Scriabin

Antonin Scriabin wrote (15-04-2011 17:48):

Severian's perfect memory seems selective. There are moments where seems to say "I have a perfect memory, except for when I don't".

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...'?

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

Daniel Petersen — 16 Apr 2011, 08:58 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

So glad people are asking about Severian as unreliable narrator! I suspect it's one of those ideas that someone said in a review and then it got blurbed on a jacket cover and then it just became the 'official' interpretation and is now in an endless repeat loop. I don't think I have ever yet mentioned it in comments or reviews about New Sun as I simply don't understand it. I'm totally open to being shown how it is the case, but the reasons given in this thread are, frankly, unconvincing. They show how Wolfe's narrative art overall is strange and tricky and indirect and elusive - things I *do* talk about in commenting on all of Wolfe's fiction - but not how Severian himself overall is helpfully and accurately described as an 'unreliable narrator' or how this is a central and significant trope that characterises tBotNS. It's all hints and suspicions and possibilities

- which are great, but should be left at that I think.

We still await the carefully documented and argued case for Severian as unreliable narrator.

-DOJP

2011/4/15 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Antonin Scriabin wrote (15-04-2011 17:48):

Severian's perfect memory seems selective. There are moments where seems to say "I have a perfect memory, except for when I don't".

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...'?

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

Tony Ellis — 16 Apr 2011, 09:48 · follows Daniel Petersen

Ant?nio Pedro Marques wrote:

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...'?

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

I've always felt that this looks far more like a faux-pas on the part of Wolfe than anything to do with Severian's memory.

antonio at gmail.com — 16 Apr 2011, 11:14 · in reply to Tony Ellis

No dia 2011/04/16, ?s 10:48, Tony Ellis <tonyellis69 at btopenworld.com> escreveu:

Ant?nio Pedro Marques wrote:

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...?'

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

I've always felt that this looks far more like a faux-pas on the part of Wolfe than anything to do with Severian's memory.

Obviously one can't complain about feelings, but I just can't understand how you may feel that way. Only if you feel it's too cartoonish to be true, but this isn't at all the only instance of such humour by GW.

Matthew Knapton — 16 Apr 2011, 11:47 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Hi.

I haven't read any ..Sun books outside of the Book of the New Sun, and don't have them to hand to look up references. However!

I buy into the unreliable-Severian. While it's certainly possible that his repeatedly-claimed perfect memory isn't actually perfect (and either he lies, or has convinced himself that his subconscious inventions are real memories), we can be generous to Severian and assume that his memory is indeed perfect. But that doesn't help his case, because perfect recall isn't the only thing required to be an omniscient narrator - he lacks perfect understanding as well. He might be able to remember every scene of his life, but if he misunderstands what he sees, or attributes purposes and implications to the actions and appearance of people around him incorrectly, he's just as unreliable a narrator as someone who doesn't well remember the scene in question. Maybe even more unreliable, so to speak, or at least less helpful, since the person-without-perfect-memory would admit to gaps in the story.

And of course, having a perfect memory doesn't mean it's all transcribed into his writing. At some point I think Severian actually writes that he has "left out details which are unimportant", noting a few sentences later (without irony) that he has "no sense of perspective".

Personally I also think his memory is faulty (though I tend to think he's deceiving himself that what he remembers is perfect, rather than 'actively' lying); the bits which got me early on were his recollections of Thecla. Like I say I don't have my copies of the books to hand, but fairly early on doesn't he give one account of Thecla's death, and then later (in an offhand comment) give an entirely different one? His description of their relationship as sexual or platonic seems to change as the books goes on, too.

I feel like cataloguing examples sort of misses the point though; if there's one thing a reader of Gene Wolfe knows it's that he isn't going to spell anything out in crayon :) and "unreliable narration", for one reason or another, does seem to be a recurring theme throughout a lot of his books.

On Sat, Apr 16, 2011 at 9:58 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:

So glad people are asking about Severian as unreliable narrator! I suspect it's one of those ideas that someone said in a review and then it got blurbed on a jacket cover and then it just became the 'official' interpretation and is now in an endless repeat loop. I don't think I have

ever yet mentioned it in comments or reviews about New Sun as I simply don't understand it. I'm totally open to being shown how it is the case, but the reasons given in this thread are, frankly, unconvincing. They show how Wolfe's narrative art overall is strange and tricky and indirect and elusive - things I *do* talk about in commenting on all of Wolfe's fiction - but not how Severian himself overall is helpfully and accurately described as an 'unreliable narrator' or how this is a central and significant trope that characterises tBotNS. It's all hints and suspicions and possibilities - which are great, but should be left at that I think.

We still await the carefully documented and argued case for Severian as unreliable narrator.

-DOJP

2011/4/15 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Antonin Scriabin wrote (15-04-2011 17:48):

Severian's perfect memory seems selective. There are moments where seems to say "I have a perfect memory, except for when I don't".

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...'?

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

Craig Brewer — 16 Apr 2011, 16:35 · in reply to Matthew Knapton

Depending on what you feel constitutes the beat criteria for an "unreliable narrator," I suppose SilkHorn in Short Sun would be just as good if not a better candidate for the label than Severian. His either confused or repressed or deliberately self-forgetting memory of his own identity makes him particularly difficult.

On Apr 16, 2011, at 6:47 AM, Matthew Knapton <eruantien at gmail.com> wrote:
Hi.

I haven't read any ..Sun books outside of the Book of the New Sun, and don't have them to hand to look up references. However!

I buy into the unreliable-Severian. While it's certainly possible that his repeatedly-claimed perfect memory isn't actually perfect (and either he lies, or has convinced himself that his subconscious inventions are real memories), we can be generous to Severian and assume that his memory is indeed perfect. But that doesn't help his case, because perfect recall isn't the only thing required to be an omniscient narrator - he lacks perfect understanding as well. He might be able to remember every scene of his life, but if he misunderstands what he sees, or attributes purposes and implications to the actions and appearance of people around him incorrectly, he's just as unreliable a narrator as someone who doesn't well remember the scene in question. Maybe even more unreliable, so to speak, or at least less helpful, since the person-without-perfect-memory would admit to gaps in the story.

And of course, having a perfect memory doesn't mean it's all transcribed into his writing. At some point I think Severian actually writes that he has "left out details which are unimportant", noting a few sentences later (without irony) that he has "no sense of perspective".

Personally I also think his memory is faulty (though I tend to think he's deceiving himself that what he remembers is perfect, rather than 'actively' lying); the bits which got me early on were his recollections of Thecla. Like I say I don't have my copies of the books to hand, but fairly early on doesn't he give one account of Thecla's death, and then later (in an offhand comment) give an entirely different one? His description of their relationship as sexual or platonic seems to change as the books goes on, too.

I feel like cataloguing examples sort of misses the point though; if there's one thing a reader of Gene Wolfe knows it's that he isn't going to spell anything out in crayon :) and "unreliable narration", for one reason or another, does seem to be a recurring theme throughout a lot of his books.

On Sat, Apr 16, 2011 at 9:58 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:
So glad people are asking about Severian as unreliable narrator! I suspect it's one of those ideas that someone said in a review and then it got blurbed on a jacket cover and then it just became the 'official' interpretation and is now in an endless repeat loop. I don't think I have ever yet mentioned it in comments or reviews about New Sun as I simply don't understand it. I'm totally open to being shown how it is the case, but the reasons given in this thread are, frankly, unconvincing. They show how Wolfe's narrative art overall is strange and tricky and indirect and elusive - things I do talk about in commenting on all of Wolfe's fiction - but not how Severian himself overall is helpfully and accurately described as an 'unreliable narrator' or how this is a central and significant trope that characterises tBotNS. It's all hints and suspicions and possibilities - which are great, but should be left at that I think.

We still await the carefully documented and argued case for Severian as unreliable narrator.

-DOJP

2011/4/15 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>
Antonin Scriabin wrote (15-04-2011 17:48):

Severian's perfect memory seems selective. There are moments where seems to say "I have a perfect memory, except for when I don't".

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...'?

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

David Stockhoff — 17 Apr 2011, 20:50 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

I think the test here is "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction." It's a pretty low bar Severian clears with ease, just by his lies of omission.

Gerry's comment that, to Severian, "just a moment ago" is long enough to compose ~50 written pages by hand is another example, however limited in effect.

On 4/16/2011 4:58 AM, Daniel Petersen wrote:
So glad people are asking about Severian as unreliable narrator! I suspect it's one of those ideas that someone said in a review and then it got blurbed on a jacket cover and then it just became the 'official' interpretation and is now in an endless repeat loop. I

don't think I have ever yet mentioned it in comments or reviews about New Sun as I simply don't understand it. I'm totally open to being shown how it is the case, but the reasons given in this thread are, frankly, unconvincing. They show how Wolfe's narrative art overall is strange and tricky and indirect and elusive - things I /do/ talk about in commenting on all of Wolfe's fiction - but not how Severian himself overall is helpfully and accurately described as an 'unreliable narrator' or how this is a central and significant trope that characterises tBotNS. It's all hints and suspicions and possibilities - which are great, but should be left at that I think.

We still await the carefully documented and argued case for Severian as unreliable narrator.

-DOJP

2011/4/15 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>

Antonin Scriabin wrote (15-04-2011 17:48):

Severian's perfect memory seems selective. There are moments where seems to say "I have a perfect memory, except for when I don't".

Am I misremembering, or one of the first pages of NS goes like this: 'So Drotte was doing something... did I mention I have a perfect memory? I have a perfect memory! Anyway, Roche was doing something...'?

Almost cartoonish. Roger Rabbitish.

Gerry Quinn — 17 Apr 2011, 22:31 · in reply to David Stockhoff

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

I think the test here is "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction." It's a pretty low bar Severian clears with ease, just by his lies of omission.

Gerry's comment that, to Severian, "just a moment ago" is long enough to compose ~50 written pages by hand is another example, however limited in effect.

I think the main meaning of this episode is the slightly cruel joke about Nicarete being left to wait on the Autarch's whim once again, after spending her life waiting in the antechamber of previous Autarchs. Severian's absorption in his writing just sets it up. I wouldn't call it an example of an unreliable narrator, really. He didn't notice the time passing. It's not an unnatural thing not to notice; anybody might be unreliable in the same fashion.

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this

strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' - but I personally feel that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong sense. Probably all Wolfe's characters are unreliable in the weak sense - consider the Nebraskan in 'The Nebraskan and the Nereid' discussed earlier, for example. We are told what he sees, but he does not realise that he is meeting the same girl in the inn and the sea-cave, so we are not told. But does that make him unreliable? It certainly does not make him a liar, anyway.

- Gerry Quinn

António Marques — 17 Apr 2011, 23:09 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on.

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator' simply means that the narrative isn't the absolute complete truth of what happened. Which, actually, applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as other did and do - is to craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

David Stockhoff — 17 Apr 2011, 23:39 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Absolutely. But I think the "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction" standard applies, in which case all the characters you mention are indeed unreliable. Often in SF, a character voices exposition, e.g., "We have occupied this planet since it was colonized by Terra in the First Empire. Our main exports are ..." This is something of a benchmark; we can always tell when the bad guy lies.

Villains, of course, say "Ours is a peaceful planet that has never known war, etc." Captain Kirk always gets to the bottom of this.

But the Nebraskan is a great example of unreliability, because he doesn't lie. Yet, we cannot trust his narration---that's all that "unreliable" means. Similarly, when Blood appears at the manteion unnamed, the narrator is, by conventional standards, being almost dishonest. The fact that he makes the reader guess is important, not the clues he offers.

On 4/17/2011 6:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

I think the test here is "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction." It's a pretty low bar Severian clears with ease, just by his lies of omission.

Gerry's comment that, to Severian, "just a moment ago" is long enough to compose ~50 written pages by hand is another example, however limited in effect.

I think the main meaning of this episode is the slightly cruel joke about Nicarete being left to wait on the Autarch's whim once again, after spending her life waiting in the antechamber of previous Autarchs. Severian's absorption in his writing just sets it up. I wouldn't call it an example of an unreliable narrator, really. He didn't notice the time passing. It's not an unnatural thing not to notice; anybody might be unreliable in the same fashion.

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' - but I personally feel that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong sense. Probably all Wolfe's characters are unreliable in the weak sense - consider the Nebraskan in 'The Nebraskan and the Nereid' discussed earlier, for example. We are told what he sees, but he does not realise that he is meeting the same girl in the inn and the sea-cave, so we are not told. But does that make him unreliable? It certainly does not make him a liar, anyway.

- Gerry Quinn

David Stockhoff — 18 Apr 2011, 00:35 · in reply to António Marques

Exactly.

On 4/17/2011 7:09 PM, Ant?nio Marques wrote:

Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on.

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator' simply means that the narrative isn't the absolute complete truth of what happened. Which, actually, applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as other did and do - is to craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

Urth Mailing List

Adam Thornton — 18 Apr 2011, 03:36 · in reply to António Marques

On 04/17/2011 06:09 PM, Ant?nio Marques wrote:

Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on.

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator' simply means that the narrative isn't the absolute complete truth of what happened. Which, actually, applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as other did and do - is to craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

If nothing else, there's the whole Severian-Thecla "My love for her was pure and chaste," when it's Severian, and "And then he was all-a-grabbin' my breasts," when it's Thecla doing the remembering.

Adam

Jerry Friedman — 18 Apr 2011, 04:29 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On 4/17/2011 6:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised > >behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's > going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' - but I personally feel that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong sense.

Probably all Wolfe's characters are unreliable in the weak sense - consider the Nebraskan in 'The Nebraskan and the Nereid' discussed earlier, for example. We are told what he sees, but he does not realise that he is meeting the same girl in the inn and the sea-cave, so we are not told. But does that make him unreliable? It certainly does not make him a liar, anyway.

Antonio Marques wrote:

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator' simply means that the narrative isn't the absolute >complete truth of what happened. Which, actually, applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as >other did and do - is to craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

The original meaning of "unreliable narrator", as used by Wayne C. Booth in /The Rhetoric of Fiction/, is that the narrator's /norms/ differ from the implied author's. He gives examples such as Barry Lyndon, morally as far from the author as possible (Booth says--I haven't read it), and Huck Finn, who calls himself bad when we can tell the author thinks he's good. Or the narrator "is mistaken, or believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him"--I suppose Kinbote would be a good example of that last, or Pooter in /The Diary of a Nobody/. Booth says irony on the narrator's part is not an example, but lying is, though an uncommon one.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=VfUgMbRYSW4C&pg=PA159>

No doubt the meaning has changed. I'm with Gerry Quinn. There's no point in making a big deal out unreliability unless it's "strong" unreliability--the story is or could be substantially different from what you get by believing the narrator.

From: David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

... But I think the "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction" standard applies, in which case all the characters you mention are indeed unreliable.

...

Okay, but why have some people stressed it so much?

But the Nebraskan is a great example of unreliability, because he doesn't lie. Yet, we cannot trust his narration---that's all that "unreliable" means.

I wouldn't call a person unreliable who didn't notice something in the dark, and I wouldn't say I couldn't trust what he told me.

(I suppose it's just as well if nobody has put forward an interpretation of that story where the actual narrator is unreliable, or Thoe is.)

Similarly, when Blood appears at the manteion unnamed, the narrator is, by conventional standards, being almost dishonest. The fact that he makes the reader guess is > important, not the clues he offers.

Yes, that fact is important, but it doesn't make him unreliable. He's just choosing an unusual way of communicating, one that his author likes. Similarly, Severian has his own way of telling us that Dorcas is his grandmother, and his choosing that way may tell us something about him, such as that he likes indirection (or is that Wolfe?) or that he's uncomfortable with having had sex with his grandmother. If that's one of what you called "lies by omission", I can't agree.

Jerry Friedman

Gerry Quinn — 18 Apr 2011, 10:38 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

From: "Jerry Friedman" <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

Antonio Marques wrote:

On 4/17/2011 6:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised > >behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's

going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator' simply means that the narrative isn't the absolute >complete truth of what happened. Which, actually, applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as >other did and do - is to craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

The original meaning of "unreliable narrator", as used by Wayne C. Booth in /The Rhetoric of Fiction/, is that the narrator's /norms/ differ from the implied author's. He gives examples such as Barry Lyndon, morally as far from the author as possible (Booth says--I haven't read it), and Huck Finn, who calls himself bad when we can tell the author thinks he's good. Or the narrator "is mistaken, or believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him"--I suppose Kinbote would be a good example of that last, or Pooter in /The Diary of a Nobody/. Booth says irony on the narrator's part is not an example, but lying is, though an uncommon one.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=VfUgMbRYSW4C&pg=PA159>

No doubt the meaning has changed. I'm with Gerry Quinn. There's no point in making a big deal out of unreliability unless it's "strong" unreliability--the story is or could be substantially different from what you get by believing the narrator.

I like Booth's attitude.

But the Nebraskan is a great example of unreliability, because he doesn't lie.

Yet, we cannot trust his narration---that's all that "unreliable" means.

I wouldn't call a person unreliable who didn't notice something in the dark, and

I wouldn't say I couldn't trust what he told me.

(I suppose it's just as well if nobody has put forward an interpretation of that

story where the actual narrator is unreliable, or Thoe is.)

Booth writes: "We should remind ourselves that any sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator."

This is my perspective also. 'The Nebraskan and the Nereid' is told in close third person; there is no explicit narrator other than the author. But when I wrote about earlier, I thought of the Nebraskan as the narrator.

In many ways, the third person 'pseudo-narrator' is more free to deceive than the most unreliable of direct narrators, though we can more easily believe that his deception is unintentional. When the author, writing from inside Cooper's head, refers in passing to "the dumpy little maid-of-all-work", we must accept this as what Cooper saw, even though later he encounters the same person in different circumstances, and does not recognise her. Had Cooper been the actual narrator, we would wonder if he was in some way lying when he describes her thus - this is close to the kind of 'lying' that Severian is being accused of. Severian (or the hypothetical narrating Cooper) would reply that he is merely describing as clearly as possible what was in his head at the time. To interrupt the story to describe exactly who she was would (apart from interfering with the flow of the narrative) do a disservice to the subjective history, in the purported interest of an objective history which will in any case be fully explicated by the end. "I am telling you the truth", Severian would say, "but I cannot do it unless you let me tell it in my own way!" Cooper does not have to answer this question; he can hide behind the coat-tails of the omniscient author. And yet the narrative methodology, apart from this really rather inessential difference, is almost the same in both.

Should we not speak of unreliable narratives, rather than unreliable narrators?

Antonio says above that every author does unreliability - Gene Wolfe crafts it, and other novelists achieve it as a "sub-product". I don't really agree with this distinction. All decent authors are aware of the issue, I think - they just go different ways to achieve the effect. It's present in most novels.

I guess this ties into my view that Wolfe is a much *clearer* author than his reputation would suggest. You just need to read him. Some people seem to use his reputation as an excuse to put their hands over their ears and say "Lah, lah, unreliable, I'm not listening..."

- Gerry Quinn

António Pedro Marques — 18 Apr 2011, 12:24 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote (18-04-2011 11:38):

Should we not speak of unreliable narratives, rather than unreliable narrators?

I think so, if we should speak at all.

Antonio says above that every author does unreliability - Gene Wolfe crafts it, and other novelists achieve it as a "sub-product".

Not quite. I didn't mean GW crafts unreliability. I meant he cares about it existing, and handles it accordingly. I also said others did and do it.

I don't really agree with this distinction. All decent authors are aware of the issue, I think - they just go different ways to achieve the effect.

Where I disagree is that it is an effect to be achieved. It's innerent, and I don't share the view that most authors tack it gracefully.

I guess this ties into my view that Wolfe is a much *clearer* author than his reputation would suggest.

Oddly enough, that's my opinion as well.

Jack Smith — 18 Apr 2011, 14:07 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

Wuthering Heights is what I think of as a good example of unreliable narrators. The story as a whole is told by an outsider, who doesn't understand the place or its people, and most of the tale is told to him by a character who may have her own agenda that is antithetical to the main characters. The love story emerges from speakers who don't understand it at all.

On Sun, Apr 17, 2011 at 9:29 PM, Jerry Friedman <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:
On 4/17/2011 6:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised > >behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' - but I personally feel that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong sense.

Probably all Wolfe's characters are unreliable in the weak sense - consider the Nebraskan in 'The Nebraskan and the Nereid' discussed earlier, for example. We are told what he sees, but he does not

realise
that he is meeting the same girl in
the inn and the sea-cave, so we are not told. But does that make him
unreliable? It certainly does not
make him a liar, anyway.

Antonio Marques wrote:

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator' simply means
that the
narrative isn't the absolute >complete truth of what happened. Which,
actually,
applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as >other did and do - is
to
craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

The original meaning of "unreliable narrator", as used by Wayne C. Booth in
/The
Rhetoric of Fiction/, is that the narrator's /norms/ differ from the
implied
author's. He gives examples such as Barry Lyndon, morally as far from the
author as possible (Booth says--I haven't read it), and Huck Finn, who
calls
himself bad when we can tell the author thinks he's good. Or the narrator
"is
mistaken, or believes himself to have qualities which the author denies
him"--I
suppose Kinbote would be a good example of that last, or Pooter in /The
Diary of
a Nobody/. Booth says irony on the narrator's part is not an example, but
lying
is, though an uncommon one.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=VfUgMbRYSW4C&pg=PA159>

No doubt the meaning has changed. I'm with Gerry Quinn. There's no point
in
making a big deal out unreliability unless it's "strong" unreliability--the
story is or could be substantially different from what you get by believing
the
narrator.

From: David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net>
... But I think the "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction"
standard applies, in which case
all the characters you mention are indeed unreliable.

...

Okay, but why have some people stressed it so much?

But the Nebraskan is a great example of unreliability, because he
doesn't lie.

Yet, we cannot trust his
narration---that's all that "unreliable" means.

I wouldn't call a person unreliable who didn't notice something in the
dark, and
I wouldn't say I couldn't trust what he told me.

(I suppose it's just as well if nobody has put forward an interpretation of

that
story where the actual narrator is unreliable, or Thoe is.)

Similarly, when Blood appears at the manteion unnamed, the narrator is, by conventional standards, being almost dishonest. The fact that he makes the reader guess is > important, not the clues he offers.

Yes, that fact is important, but it doesn't make him unreliable. He's just choosing an unusual way of communicating, one that his author likes.

Similarly,
Severian has his own way of telling us that Dorcas is his grandmother, and his choosing that way may tell us something about him, such as that he likes indirection (or is that Wolfe?) or that he's uncomfortable with having had sex with his grandmother. If that's one of what you called "lies by omission", I can't agree.

Jerry Friedman

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 18 Apr 2011, 14:35 · in reply to Jack Smith

Apologies if my replies appear out of order.

On 4/17/2011 6:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is? telling us? another, different story disguised > >behind the overt story the? narrator is? telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand? what's >? going on. I really don't think that either is the case with? Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't? know everything isn't? unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could? define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' -? but I personally feel? that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong? sense. ? Probably all Wolfe's characters are unreliable in the weak sense -? consider the Nebraskan in 'The Nebraskan' and the Nereid' discussed earlier, for? example. We are told what he sees, but he does not realise? that he is? meeting the same girl in the inn and the sea-cave, so we are not told. But? does that make him? unreliable? It certainly does not make him a liar, anyway.

Antonio Marques wrote:

I think you're doing overanalysis. 'Unreliable narrator'? simply means that the? narrative isn't the absolute >complete truth of? what happened. Which, actually, applies to any narrative. What Gene Wolfe does - as >other did and do - is to? craft that part of his work, instead of leaving it to be a subproduct.

The original meaning of "unreliable narrator", as used by Wayne C. Booth in /The? Rhetoric of Fiction/, is that the narrator's /norms/ differ from the implied? author's. He gives examples such as Barry Lyndon, morally as far from the? author as possible (Booth says--I haven't read it), and

Huck Finn, who calls? himself bad when we can tell the author thinks he's good. Or the narrator "is? mistaken, or believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him"--I? suppose Kinbote would be a good example of that last, or Pooter in /The Diary of? a Nobody/. Booth says irony on the narrator's part is not an example, but lying? is, though an uncommon one.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=VfUgMbRYSW4C&pg=PA159>

No doubt the meaning has changed. I'm with Gerry Quinn. There's no point in? making a big deal out of unreliability unless it's "strong" unreliability--the? story is or could be substantially different from what you get by believing the? narrator.

From: David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net>
... But I think the "more unreliable than is usual in science fiction" ?
standard applies, in which case
all the characters you mention are indeed? unreliable.

...

Okay, but why have some people stressed it so much?

But the Nebraskan is a great example of unreliability, because he? doesn't lie.
Yet, we cannot trust his
narration---that's all that "unreliable"? means.

I wouldn't call a person unreliable who didn't notice something in the dark, and?I wouldn't say I couldn't trust what he told me.

---Of course not. You just can't RELY on it. It's all in contrast to the omniscient narrator.

(I suppose it's just as well if nobody has put forward an interpretation of that? story where the actual narrator is unreliable, or Thoe is.)

Similarly, when Blood appears at the manteion unnamed, the
narrator is, by conventional standards, being almost dishonest. The fact that?>he makes the? reader guess is > important, not the clues he offers.

Yes, that fact is important, but it doesn't make him unreliable. He's just choosing an unusual way of communicating, one that his author likes. ?

---I should have said, by conventional SF standards. The whole point of that example is not that there are 2 definitions of "unreliability"---I think we should pick one and stick to it---but that the label of "unreliable" got applied to Wolfe because his narration does this kind of thing 5 times before breakfast (and if he still gets up at 5:00 AM to write the way he did before he retired from Plant, I mean that literally).

Similarly, Severian has his own way of telling us that Dorcas is his grandmother, and his choosing that way may tell us something about him, such as that he likes?indirection (or is that Wolfe?) or that he's uncomfortable with having had sex with his grandmother. If that's one of what you called "lies by omission", I can't agree.

---Not that Severian is uncomfortable with that fact---I didn't say that. But that it happened at all and he damn well knows it.

Jerry Friedman

António Pedro Marques — 18 Apr 2011, 14:39 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF
DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote (18-04-2011 15:35):

You just can't RELY on it. It's all in contrast to the omniscient narrator.

+1

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 18 Apr 2011, 17:52 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

Although as an afterthought I suppose there is still some distance between a narrative with a clearly delineated and limited viewpoint---and a narrative that pretends to even more severe limitations.

Taking as a model of reliability the Philip Marlowe (IIRC, I'm no Chandler expert) style of narration:

"A gorgeous redhead walked into my office..."

"I knew the name she hissed at me. He was a big shot around town ..."

Basically, the narrator may tell us

- (a) everything he sees, hears, knows, and thinks (as above)
- (b) only what he sees and hears but not what he thinks
- (c) only some of what he sees and hears (i.e., he withholds)
- (d) some dramatic combination, e.g., where he tells us everything but the identity of the killer, which he knew from page 1.

Mixing b and c by selective editing combined with relaying to us his internal dialog would be one obvious way for the narrator to make himself look good---too good. He might also lie outright or be unable to put obvious clues together, like Mr McGoo (think The Pink Panther as told by Inspector Clouseau). I'd consider these to be further limitations farther along the spectrum, but clearly more artificial than simply withholding for narrative effect. There are so many ways to play this, there seems little point in making any more precise distinctions.

As examples, consider these parallel treatments of the same event:

"I greatly feared that I was going to die."

"My heart pounded so hard I nearly fell over."

"I felt no fear, but heard a distant hammering like the ringing of giant gongs."

"I thought only of my dear Monica as I squeezed the trigger of my 9 mm Beretta three times, firing blindly in the dark. Thus, I brought justice to her killer."

"Only later did it occur to me that I had nearly met death at that moment."

To us, these are routine dodges/edits/misdirections, but if you take the Victorian novel as the benchmark for all modern fiction, some are indeed less honest than others, by omission at least.

Wolfe plays these tricks all the time, and indeed seems to love subverting the straight detective story, but he's only "unreliable" to readers who still follow the Victorian standard, which survives in genres like boys' adventure fiction. His storytelling is probably more "consistently" and "playfully" unreliable than it is dramatically or substantively unreliable.

Unreliability doesn't require lying, and Severian's tale is mostly just incredibly complex and fundamentally unbelievable. But compare Severian's failure to confess his incest to Humbert Humbert's not-well-hidden rape of Lolita.

(The Flashman series plays with this modern-vs-Victorian contrast by putting a cowardly narrator in charge of a story defined by a Victorian template. Compared to us, Victorians told everything straight but the sex, although they had certain rhetorical devices of debatable honesty at their disposal as well.)

--- On Mon, 4/18/11, Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com> wrote:
From: Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) Introduction and Breath

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 18 Apr 2011, 17:59 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

I was just looking for commentary on Lolita and found the following brief description of a minor character:

Valeria - Humbert's first wife, whom he married to cure himself of his addiction to nymphets. Humbert finds Valeria intellectually inferior and often bullies her. When he plans to move to America, Valeria leaves him to marry a Russian taxi driver. Valeria and her husband die in California years later.

I can't imagine Wolfe would appropriate the name Valeria lightly, especially given Severian's attraction to ... well, they aren't nymphets exactly.

James Wynn — 18 Apr 2011, 19:03 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

Well...Dorcas is a water nymph, and by extension a siren. One issue that might be important is that Valeria is, in a sense, Sev's "first girlfriend". He meets her before he met Thecla or any of the others.

On 4/18/2011 12:59 PM, DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote:
I was just looking for commentary on Lolita and found the following brief description of a minor character:

Valeria - Humbert's first wife, whom he married to cure himself of his addiction to nymphets. Humbert finds Valeria intellectually inferior and often bullies her. When he plans to move to America, Valeria leaves him to marry a Russian taxi driver. Valeria and her husband die in California years later.

I can't imagine Wolfe would appropriate the name Valeria lightly, especially given Severian's attraction to ... well, they aren't nymphets exactly.

James Wynn — 18 Apr 2011, 19:18 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

Additionally,

e) Almost all of what he sees and hears that he considers important and also his interpretation on that. However, 1) some things he describes that he considers incidental are more important than he realizes, 2) some things he sees as significant he interprets wrongly. In both, cases the author presents enough information (or believes he has) that the reader can properly interpret them.

f) All of the above, but neither the narrator nor the reader has enough information to interpret the data. This is done to add a sense of depth to the plot such as when the dwarves sing of Nargothrond in "The Hobbit". But, when Wolfe does it, he is far more ornery such as when Severian first meets Apu Punchau.

J

On 4/18/2011 12:52 PM, DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote:
Basically, the narrator may tell us

- (a) everything he sees, hears, knows, and thinks (as above)
- (b) only what he sees and hears but not what he thinks
- (c) only some of what he sees and hears (i.e., he withholds)
- (d) some dramatic combination, e.g., where he tells us everything but the identity of the killer, which he knew from page 1.

Roy C. Lackey — 18 Apr 2011, 19:26 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' - but I personally feel that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong sense. [snip]

In general I agree with you, but Severian is a special case because of his self-vaunted perfect memory. There are mistakes in his narrative (I once posted a list of them), most of them minor, but it's hard sometimes to decide which are his and which are Wolfe's. If Severian did not go on so much about his perfect memory, most such errors could be overlooked. There is one however that is not so easy to dismiss.

In the first chapter of SHADOW, Severian says that Vodalus handed his pistol to the big man we later learn is named Hildegrin. Thea then took the pistol from Hildegrin. But near the end of the first chapter of CLAW, while going on again about his memory, he recalls that night in the necropolis and says that Vodalus had given the pistol to his mistress. In the Appendix to CITADEL, Wolfe wrote that Vodalus had handed the pistol to Thea.

Which of the two Vodalus handed the pistol to is not in itself really important; Thea ended up with the pistol either way. But I find it a little hard to believe that Wolfe made this blunder because there was otherwise no point in having Vodalus first hand the pistol to Hildegrin, unless the detail served Wolfe to demonstrate that Severian's memory is not quite so reliable as he believed.

Severian was a teenaged boy at the time of the necropolis incident. What impressed him at the time was what he perceived as something of a heroic gesture; Vodalus declined to use his superior weapon against poorly armed rabble. He handed off the pistol and drew his sword to perform a rearguard action against superior numbers, thus putting his life in jeopardy. That act of perceived gallantry is what stood out in Severian's memory of the incident.

When he recalled the incident a couple years later, in another context in Saltus, he still admired Vodalus for that action. When he wrote about both occasions, ten years after Saltus, his opinion about Vodalus had changed but he still remembered the emotional impact of that first meeting in the necropolis. It seems to me that his emotions can and do sometimes distort his memories. In the case of the pistol, his admiration for the gesture seems to have colored his recall of the details of what had actually happened. As he wrote at the end of the first chapter of CLAW, "And in any case, the old, recalled emotions were too strong. I was trapped in admiration for what I had once admired, as a fly in amber remains the captive of some long-vanished pine."

-Roy

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 18 Apr 2011, 20:30 · in reply to James Wynn

True, and she was a girl when he met her. More of an Annabel Leigh, perhaps.

--- On Mon, 4/18/11, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) Incidental observation

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Date: Monday, April 18, 2011, 3:03 PM

Well...Dorcas is a water nymph, and by extension a siren. One issue that might be important is that Valeria is, in a sense, Sev's "first girlfriend". He meets her before he met Thecla or any of the others.

On 4/18/2011 12:59 PM, DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote:

I was just looking for commentary on Lolita and found the following brief description of a minor character:

Valeria -? Humbert's first wife, whom he married to cure himself of his addiction to nymphets.

Humbert finds Valeria intellectually inferior and often bullies her. When he plans to move to America, Valeria leaves him to marry a Russian taxi driver. Valeria and her husband die in California years later.

I can't imagine Wolfe would appropriate the name Valeria lightly, especially given Severian's attraction to ... well, they aren't nymphets exactly.

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 18 Apr 2011, 20:46 · in reply to James Wynn

Right. Similarly, Humbert Humbert tends to narrate by focusing on descriptions of his thoughts and emotions. This not only makes him appear a more reasonable person than he could possibly be, but tends to minimize all sorts of things central to the plot, perhaps especially Quilty (whom I can barely remember). Naturally he does not mention his murder of Quilty (IIRC), but he hardly even mentions Quilty at all. He's like a truly mad and dishonest Severian; his memory is intact but his attention has a vast blind spot.

--- On Mon, 4/18/11, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) Introduction and Breath

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Date: Monday, April 18, 2011, 3:18 PM
Additionally,

e)? Almost all of what he sees and hears that he considers important and also his interpretation on that. However, 1) some things he describes that he considers incidental are more important than he realizes, 2) some things he sees as significant he interprets wrongly. In both, cases the author presents enough information (or believes he has) that the reader can properly interpret them.

f)? All of the above, but neither the narrator nor the reader has enough information to interpret the data. This is done to add a sense of depth to the plot such as when the dwarves sing of Nargothrond in "The Hobbit". But, when Wolfe does it, he is far more ornery such as when Severian first meets Apu Punchau.

J

On 4/18/2011 12:52 PM, DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote:

Basically, the narrator may tell us

- (a) everything? he sees, hears, knows, and thinks (as above)
- (b) only what he sees and hears but not what he thinks
- (c) only some of what he sees and hears (i.e., he withholds)
- (d) some dramatic combination, e.g., where he tells us everything but the identity of the killer, which he knew from page 1.

Daniel Petersen — 18 Apr 2011, 20:58 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Man, talk about unreliable narratives/narrators! I've totally got snarled in trying to decipher who's said what in this exchange! Anyway, I'm largely rooting for the minority that are saying 'unreliable narrator' is not such an appropriate and distinctive label for Severian. (I'm almost certain Gerry Quinn is one person doing so and I'm sure there are some others with him.)

However, Roy's (I think) last post there about Sev's recurrent claim to perfect memory mixed with his own comments about how his emotions affect his view (and it might be added that he says eventually our minds turn falsehoods into truths, or something like that) have me thinking. Roy, can you link to your list you made? (I know someone said making a list of errors/inconsistencies 'misses the point' but I don't see how.)

Again, most of what's being argued is that Wolfe is a clever, indirect, complex writer (who's yet clearer than we give him credit for, especially in the fog of the built-up pre-aura from blurbs about his devious authorial ways) and/or Severian's a very complex, thoughtful character who only gives out certain information when he feels he's ready and given enough back story (or who just sometimes thinks 'oh! I should mention this too' or 'did I ever give that detail?' etc.).

Not convinced that's 'hard' unreliable narrator material (and yes, I think 'hard' and 'soft' are a useful distinction, the latter being what tons of authors do with the inherent trickiness of narration - we need something much more to name it as a main trope that Wolfe is allegedly [in]famous for).

-DOJP

On Mon, Apr 18, 2011 at 8:26 PM, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable' - but I personally feel that the expression 'unreliable narrator' should be reserved for the strong sense. [snip]

In general I agree with you, but Severian is a special case because of his self-vaunted perfect memory. There are mistakes in his narrative (I once posted a list of them), most of them minor, but it's hard sometimes to decide which are his and which are Wolfe's. If Severian did not go on so much about his perfect memory, most such errors could be overlooked. There is one however that is not so easy to dismiss.

In the first chapter of SHADOW, Severian says that Vodalus handed his pistol to the big man we later learn is named Hildegrin. Thea then took the pistol from Hildegrin. But near the end of the first chapter of CLAW, while going on again about his memory, he recalls that night in the necropolis and says that Vodalus had given the pistol to his mistress. In the Appendix to CITADEL, Wolfe wrote that Vodalus had handed the pistol to Thea.

Which of the two Vodalus handed the pistol to is not in itself really important; Thea ended up with the pistol either way. But I find it a little hard to believe that Wolfe made this blunder because there was otherwise no point in having Vodalus first hand the pistol to Hildegrin, unless the detail served Wolfe to demonstrate that Severian's memory is not quite so reliable as he believed.

Severian was a teenaged boy at the time of the necropolis incident. What impressed him at the time was what he perceived as something of a heroic gesture; Vodalus declined to use his superior weapon against poorly armed rabble. He handed off the pistol and drew his sword to perform a rearguard action against superior numbers, thus putting his life in jeopardy. That act of perceived gallantry is what stood out in Severian's memory of the incident.

When he recalled the incident a couple years later, in another context in Saltus, he still admired Vodalus for that action. When he wrote about both occasions, ten years after Saltus, his opinion about Vodalus had changed but he still remembered the emotional impact of that first meeting in the

necropolis. It seems to me that his emotions can and do sometimes distort his memories. In the case of the pistol, his admiration for the gesture seems to have colored his recall of the details of what had actually happened. As he wrote at the end of the first chapter of CLAW, "And in any case, the old, recalled emotions were too strong. I was trapped in admiration for what I had once admired, as a fly in amber remains the captive of some long-vanished pine."

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 19 Apr 2011, 04:18 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Daniel Petersen wrote:

However, Roy's (I think) last post there about Sev's recurrent claim to perfect memory mixed with his own comments about how his emotions affect his view (and it might be added that he says eventually our minds turn falsehoods into truths, or something like that) have me thinking. Roy, can you link to your list you made? (I know someone said making a list of errors/inconsistencies 'misses the point' but I don't see how.)

FWIW: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0307/3619.txt.shtml>

-Roy

Mo Holkar — 19 Apr 2011, 08:01 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

At 20:26 18/04/2011, Roy wrote:

In the first chapter of SHADOW, Severian says that Vodalus handed his pistol to the big man we later learn is named Hildegrin. Thea then took the pistol from Hildegrin. But near the end of the first chapter of CLAW, while going on again about his memory, he recalls that night in the necropolis and says that Vodalus had given the pistol to his mistress.

I suppose readers who hold the view that when Severian makes errors, they are significant, might interpret that as meaning that actually Hildegrin is Vodalus's 'mistress' -- or at least that Severian thinks he is. Hildegrin is often referred to as Vodalus's 'badger' -- perhaps that term has a further, illicit meaning besides the three obvious ones.

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

David Stockhoff — 19 Apr 2011, 12:02 · in reply to Mo Holkar

I agree that errors so proximate to a claim of perfect memory are particularly suspect. But I would think they would be more significant, i.e., intended to misdirect the reader from something Severian does not want the reader to see, not simply highlight his fallibility, although

that's possible.

On a related note, the other day I saw in a used book sale a dictionary of premodern sexual slang. Why oh why did I not pick it up?

On 4/19/2011 4:01 AM, Mo Holkar wrote:

At 20:26 18/04/2011, Roy wrote:

In the first chapter of SHADOW, Severian says that Vodalus handed his pistol
to the big man we later learn is named Hildegrin. Thea then took the pistol
from Hildegrin. But near the end of the first chapter of CLAW, while
going
on again about his memory, he recalls that night in the necropolis
and says
that Vodalus had given the pistol to his mistress.

I suppose readers who hold the view that when Severian makes errors, they are significant, might interpret that as meaning that actually Hildegrin is Vodalus's 'mistress' -- or at least that Severian thinks he is. Hildegrin is often referred to as Vodalus's 'badger' -- perhaps that term has a further, illicit meaning besides the three obvious ones.

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

James Wynn — 19 Apr 2011, 19:18 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 4/17/2011 5:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable'

What then would be an example in literature of a 'strongly unreliable' narrator?

J

Brian Short — 19 Apr 2011, 19:24 · in reply to James Wynn

Verbal from The Usual Suspects would be a strongly unreliable narrator by this definition.

Thanks,

-Brian

On Tue, Apr 19, 2011 at 3:18 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
On 4/17/2011 5:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. "I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. ?Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable'

What then would be an example in literature of a 'strongly unreliable' narrator"

J

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 19 Apr 2011, 19:58 · in reply to James Wynn

Humbert Humbert?

Also perhaps whoever narrated The Black Prince (it's been a while for me, but the setup is similar).

--- On Tue, 4/19/11, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) Introduction and Breath
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Tuesday, April 19, 2011, 3:18 PM
On 4/17/2011 5:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense.

Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable'

What then would be an example in literature of a 'strongly unreliable' narrator?

J

James Wynn — 19 Apr 2011, 20:00 · in reply to Brian Short

Ah okay. Then I do not believe the *strong* version to be a true definition of an Unreliable Narrator. Verbal is merely making up most of the story. He is "unreliable" only in the sense that he has incorporated real people into his fabrication and possibly real events.

An unreliable narrator generally attempts to speak the truth, but you can't RELY on him to do so. He's wrong, misinformed, covers up inadequacies, or has a screwed up moral code/worldview through which he interprets events.

Wolfean unreliable narrators:

Weer, because he excludes his culpability

VRT, because he is motivated by nature to completely disappear into Marsch Severian, because anyone who says "I am mad" is as untrustworthy as a guy who says "I always lie". Latro, because of his brain damage he cannot even say himself whether anything in his diary is true even to the question of whether HE wrote it. Nor can he know if he was rational at the times when he converses with gods. Bax, because he is a con-artist whom we know forged some of his letters and he has reason to lie to his sister-in-law and probably his brother.

On 4/19/2011 2:24 PM, Brian Short wrote:

Verbal from The Usual Suspects would be a strongly unreliable narrator by this definition.

Thanks,
-Brian

On Tue, Apr 19, 2011 at 3:18 PM, James Wynn<crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

What then would be an example in literature of a 'strongly unreliable' narrator?

J

On 4/17/2011 5:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't unreliable in this strong sense. Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable' and 'strongly unreliable'

Brian Short — 19 Apr 2011, 20:05 · in reply to James Wynn

Well, yes. One way to think about it is that Verbal is a liar, is aware that he's lying, and is doing it deliberately.

I agree with you that most unreliable narrators don't fit into that mold. When I think of typical unreliable narrators, I think of characters that have a different way of looking at the world from me (the reader) and the rest of society, but who don't necessarily think they're different. They're damaged in some way.

Severian (at least Severian Two) probably fits into this, but his aims in writing The Book of the New Sun aren't entirely clear.

Thanks,
-Brian

On Tue, Apr 19, 2011 at 4:00 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
Ah okay. Then I do not believe the *strong* version to be a true definition of an Unreliable Narrator. Verbal is merely making up most of the story. He is "unreliable" only in the sense that he has incorporated real people into his fabrication and possibly real events.

An unreliable narrator generally attempts to speak the truth, but you can't RELY on him to do so. He's wrong, misinformed, covers up inadequacies, or has a screwed up moral code/worldview through which he interprets events.

Wolfean unreliable narrators:

Weir, because he excludes his culpability

VRT, because he is motivated by nature to completely disappear into Marsch Severian, because anyone who says "I am mad" is as untrustworthy as a guy who says "I always lie".

Latro, because of his brain damage he cannot even say himself whether anything in his diary is true even to the question of whether HE wrote it.

Nor can he know if he was rational at the times when he converses with gods.

Bax, because he is a con-artist whom we know forged some of his letters and he has reason to lie to his sister-in-law and probably his brother.

On 4/19/2011 2:24 PM, Brian Short wrote:

Verbal from The Usual Suspects would be a strongly unreliable narrator by this definition.

Thanks,

-Brian

On Tue, Apr 19, 2011 at 3:18 PM, James Wynn<crushtv at gmail.com> "wrote:

What then would be an example in literature of a 'strongly unreliable' narrator"

J

On 4/17/2011 5:31 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

For me, the term 'unreliable narator' implies that the author is telling us another, different story disguised behind the overt story the narrator is

telling is; either the narrator is lying or he doesn't understand what's going on. ?I really don't think that either is the case with Severian.

A narrator who simply makes mistakes or who doesn't know everything isn't

unreliable in this strong sense. ?Maybe we could define 'weakly unreliable'

and 'strongly unreliable'

Adam Thornton IO — 19 Apr 2011, 20:24 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

On Tue, 19 Apr 2011 12:58:56 -0700 (PDT), DAVID STOCKHOFF
<dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:
Humbert Humbert?

Also perhaps whoever narrated The Black Prince (it's been a while for me, but the setup is similar).

Charles Kinbote, or perhaps, "Charles Kinbote", of course, as long as we're on Nabokov.

Adam

Jerry Friedman — 19 Apr 2011, 21:27 · in reply to Adam Thornton IO

From: Adam Thornton (IO) <adam at io.com>

On Tue, 19 Apr 2011 12:58:56 -0700 (PDT), DAVID STOCKHOFF
<dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

Humbert Humbert?

...

He's?massively unreliable in Booth's sense of differing ?from the author's norms, but he does seem to knowingly let you know most of the facts. Though some unreliable-narrator fans think Humbert invented the epiphany while listening to the children's voices, the murder of Quilty, and much of the rest of the book.

Charles Kinbote, or perhaps, "Charles Kinbote", of course, as long as we're on Nabokov.

He's the first who came to my mind.

Also, Agatha Christie narrators who committed the murder, and the third-person narration in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge".

Three where the question is whether they're reliable or not: the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart"; Horselover Fat, in VALIS, as I recall; and the governess in "The Turn of the Screw", a classic example.

Another definitely unreliable narrator:

S
p
o
i
l
e
r

f
o
r

K
i
m

S
t
a

n
l
e
y

R
o
b
i
n
s
o
n

The narrator of the first third of Icehenge, and maybe the narrator of the second third--it's been a while.

Jerry Friedman

James Wynn — 19 Apr 2011, 21:44 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

Essentially, an unreliable narrator is someone who:

- a) has motivation to distort the truth
- b) is obviously debilitated somehow in his perceptive/interpretive ability

There must always be a likelihood significant truth to the story or else narrator and the author merge into one voice -- that is, he is not a narrator, he is a spinner of tales.

On 4/19/2011 4:27 PM, Jerry Friedman wrote:

From: Adam Thornton (IO)<adam at io.com>

On Tue, 19 Apr 2011 12:58:56 -0700 (PDT), DAVID STOCKHOFF
<dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

Humbert Humbert?

...

He's massively unreliable in Booth's sense of differing from the author's norms, but he does seem to knowingly let you know most of the facts. Though some unreliable-narrator fans think Humbert invented the epiphany while listening to the children's voices, the murder of Quilty, and much of the rest of the book.

Charles Kinbote, or perhaps, "Charles Kinbote", of course, as long as we're on Nabokov.

He's the first who came to my mind.

Also, Agatha Christie narrators who committed the murder, and the third-person narration in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge".

Three where the question is whether they're reliable or not: the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart"; Horseslover Fat, in VALIS, as I recall; and the governess in "The Turn of the Screw", a classic example.

Another definitely unreliable narrator:

S
p
o
i
l
e
r

f
o
r

K
i
m

S
t
a
n
l
e
y

R
o
b
i
n
s
o
n

The narrator of the first third of Icehenge, and maybe the narrator of the second third--it's been a while.

Jerry Friedman

Bart Everson — 05 May 2011, 16:52 · in reply to Adam Thornton IO

Now that this thread seems definitively dead, I just wanted to revive it briefly and say thanks for the many thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to my query.

It seems the question of Severian's unreliability depends on one's definition of "unreliable."

I'm sure we all agree that Severian's narrative lends itself to deep reading and re-reading. The ostensible surface narrative isn't the whole story. There are depths to plumb and mysteries to explore. From that angle I see how the "unreliable" label can be applied. But on the other hand, Severian is not **strongly** unreliable in the sense that prevarications (or insanity) create that layered narrative. At least I don't think so. The layers of meaning stem from subtlety rather than active deception.

The contradictions and apparent lies that have been cataloged are quite interesting, but they

do not seem to me to suggest a deep alternate reading. If anything, they strike me as, perhaps, an authorial joke, or, in some cases, authorial error.

In any case, my main concern was that I was missing some huge aspect of Severian's narrative, and you all have collectively laid my mind to rest on that issue. I won't say that I've unraveled every riddle in these books. Far from it. But I think I'm aware, at least, of most of the outstanding questions. Having been through the story so many times, all Severian's subtleties have become very familiar, like an old friend. I enjoy this aspect of the narrative greatly.

I am currently reading the Book of the New Sun aloud to my wife, for the second time. The first time through I refrained from editorial comment. I did not explain beyond what was in the text. I wanted my wife to be able to experience the richness of discovery first hand. I'm not sure if she did. In any event, this second time though, I am taking the opposite approach and explaining each mystery, little or big, as we encounter them — to the best of my ability. She doesn't get the joy of unlocking the secrets herself, but she can appreciate Wolfe's ingenious constructions, and it doesn't reflect too badly on me either.

Perhaps you could say I've come to rely on Severian's unreliability.

Thanks again,

Editor B