

Severian - unreliable narrator?

The Usenet list — 6 messages, 6 voices, 04 Aug 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/67>

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adrianmarley — 04 Aug 2006, 14:48

I'm currently working my way through Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun. I have read quite a bit about this work and know that it is very highly regarded among sf critics and fans. A lot of what I've read, though, refers to Severian as being an unreliable narrator.

My question is this: In what way is Severian unreliable? Can anybody point out specific instances of where is being unreliable or where he is telling lies?

Cheers,
Adrian.

vivian — 04 Aug 2006, 17:02 · in reply to adrianmarley

On 4 Aug 2006 07:48:58 -0700, adrianmarley at yahoo.co.uk wrote:
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Adrian:

The Wolfe on-line discussion list is filled with information like you request, but is somewhat difficult to search given its massive amount of posts. Here, at any rate, are two that may help:

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0427.shtml>

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

viv

Andrew Wheeler — 04 Aug 2006, 21:52 · in reply to adrianmarley

adrianmarley at yahoo.co.uk wrote:

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I don't have chapter and verse in front of me, but one big red flag is that Severian both says that he has perfect recall and then (as the books go on) says that he has "forgotten" some detail or other.

Andrew Wheeler: Professional Editor, Amateur Wise-Acres

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If you enjoyed this post, try my blog at
<http://antickmusings.blogspot.com>

If you hated this post, you probably have bad taste anyway.

seanc — 04 Aug 2006, 22:59 · in reply to vivian

On 4 Aug 2006 07:48:58 -0700, adrianmarley at yahoo.co.uk wrote:

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vivian wrote:
Adrian:

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Thanks to the original poster for asking a question I have also wondered about, and to viv for providing explicating links.

I'm not entirely convinced that this evidence makes Severian an unreliable narrator; at the very least, the subtle discrepancies described in the linked material don't necessarily mean that he got the more significant portions of his story wrong.

Even supposing that the evidence is sound, there's still the matter of motive. My underlying question is, what purpose would it serve for Severian to prevaricate?

Best,

Sean

Rich Horton — 04 Aug 2006, 23:28 · in reply to Andrew Wheeler

On Fri, 04 Aug 2006 17:52:45 -0400, Andrew Wheeler
<acwhee at optonline.com> wrote:
adrianmarley at yahoo.co.uk wrote:

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That's Roy Lackey's reading -- wherever Severian remarks on his perfect memory, he is shown to stumble. However, that does not make him a classical "unreliable" narrator -- that is to say, one who lies for self-serving (or narrative-serving) reasons -- but simply an imperfect narrator.

Michael Grosberg — 05 Aug 2006, 09:32 · in reply to adrianmarley

adrianmarley at yahoo.co.uk wrote:

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Well, he doesn't lie outright, but from time to time he may hold information from the reader to maintain suspense.

One specific instance is the one where he is lured into a cave by, as it turns out, Agia (I don't remember the exact circumstances - it's been a long time since I read it). As he's going in he already suspects she is inside, but he doesn't tell the reader. He also fails to inform the readers about his motives for not telling Dorcas he knows about her past.