

Untrustworthy Narrators?

The Whorl list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 18 Oct 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/698>

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Jim Jordan — 18 Oct 1999, 09:56

How much fun is a Wolfe story where you know you can trust the narrator?

Since I've been away from Urth and Whorl for months, maybe you folks have settled this question, but for what it's worth, my recollection is that Wolfe says his narrators are not untrustworthy at all. At least not intentionally. Since they have a limited perspective, of course, they may not see or understand everything that we, the reader, may see or understand. But to assume that Latro or Severian are deliberately misleading the reader is, it seems to me, quite without foundation, and something that Wolfe has denied.

Nutria

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Michael Straight — 18 Oct 1999, 11:01 · follows Jim Jordan

On Mon, 18 Oct 1999, Jim Jordan wrote:
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In referring to "trust," I meant to include issues of error as well as deception. Don't forget "Seven American Nights," in which the narrator purposely keeps information from the reader.

If Horn made up, say, some of the scenes with Father Q and Father Remora, because he believed something like that happened, or if he put prayers in Silk's mouth because he believed that was the sort of thing Silk would pray in that situation, would you consider that "deliberately misleading" the reader?

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Alex David Groce — 18 Oct 1999, 12:35 · follows Michael Straight

I'm sending this to both lists, since the general issue of narrative reliability seems to be coming up on both lists. I'll try to avoid OBW spoilers, which shouldn't be too hard--I assume everyone knows (if you haven't read LONG SUN don't finish this sentence :) Horn and Nettle wrote "The

Book of Silk."

(1) Wolfe and his narrators make it tricky enough for the reader to figure out everything that's going on as it is. I generally assume Wolfe's narrators may be leaving out things that I would really like to know, either because they are not interested in them or because they wish to avoid thinking about them (Severian does more of the first, Weer in PEACE does a lot of the second), but that if they tell me something, it is true, although perhaps not true in the sense that I originally took it to be (indeed, New Sun in general is a multifoliate opening of new levels of meaning to Severian's narrative--and Severian famously says (I paraphrase) "have I said that the universe has a way of making all of our lies come true?").

Even Nardan (assuming it's him writing!) in "Seven American Nights" does very little apparent LYING to the reader--he deletes some things, of course, but his fundamental narrative honesty is notable in that we _can figure out that he left things out, and even what those things might have been_.

In the absense of an external source of information or massive internal inconsistencies, it seems to me that narrator unreliability is undetectable, and the safe assumption where there isn't this strong whiff of madness or misleading intent on the narrator's part is that the narrator intended to convey the truth. Success depends on the access of the narrator to the full truth, of course, and so varies. I assume Severian is basically telling the truth. Inconsistencies in Severian's narrative have always seemed to me to be either (A) in some cases mistakes on Wolfe's part or (B) hints that Severian is not living in only one time-line. I'm curious as to instances of Severian actually lying (as opposed to being mistaken) that people have found? That Drotte/Roche thing is weird, and I've never noticed it... Maybe with Severian(1) it was the other one?

"Unreliable narrator" is tossed around too often, I think--even old Humbert Humbert in LOLITA tells us mostly the truth. I think Wolfe has very few, if any, narrators, who are not _attempting_ to give us the straight scoop, occasionally failing. Severian is open to more intense questioning than most in that his "perfect memory" should give him an advantage in doing this, but the fact that Severian walks the Corridors of Time, returns from the dead, has a head full of Autarchs, and may have existed in several alternate time-lines where he failed that have some impact on his present time-line complicates the question of when he's actually mixed-up, and when he's telling the truth but the truth is "inconsistent" or weird.

(2) Sure the uncertainty principle is involved in the LONG SUN narrative, at a meta-level. I agree that Wolfe is absolutely correct to leave the Dr. Crane hypothesis open, but hard to swallow (if we talk about these as being real events, I think that if a sceptic I'd find the recurrence of so many parallels with the Exodus and the Gospels in a world seemingly without either to be pretty convincing evidence that something very strange was going on) from our perspective as readers--but perfectly open to those experiencing the events. Also, this leaves open how much Horn and Nettle made up--and how much what they made corresponds to the real deal. What I'm saying is that Wolfe is definitely making this somewhat like the composition of the Gospels/the Exodus story. So, although you are certainly not constrained to think otherwise by the text, I suspect that we will find, if we see Silk again (be quiet, people who've read OBW) that the sayings/feelings/events of LONG SUN match the Silk we see in any less suspect context very closely. And that it is safe to use even events/words that Horn and Nettle could not have verified in arguments about "what really happened" and what's likely to happen in OBW. I doubt this argument can really go anywhere, in that the only evidence we'll get is internal evidence from the text (unless we have another LONG SUN type "revelation" from Wolfe, but then he also squashed the Dr. Crane hypothesis from that one, as we could have foreseen--the danger of revelation) and that's unlikely to really verify things one way or the other (unless Silk says "Horn, what were you making up that nonsense for?" but I'm guessing we

won't see that scene).

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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