

Notes for Podcast: *Stranger in Olondria*, Book 1**World Fantasy Award winner · British Fantasy Award winner · Crawford Award winner**

Nebula Award finalist · Locus Award finalist · *Locus* Recommended Reading

Sofia Samatar received the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer

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Samatar was hired by CSU Channel Islands as an assistant professor in English. Her faculty profile page is still up, but she is not listed in the faculty directory. It may be that she is now writing full-time.

The biography listed in a *Locus* magazine interview (*Locus Magazine* is the newsletter of the fantasy and science fiction publishing industry) says,

*Sofia Samatar was born on October 24, 1971 in Indiana and lived in Tanzania, London, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Her father is from Somalia, and her mother is a Mennonite from North Dakota; she attended a Mennonite high school, and went to Goshen College in Indiana, also a Mennonite institution. She attended graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, studying African languages and literature. After getting her Master's, she married writer Keith Miller and moved to Sudan (now South Sudan) to teach English for three years. They then relocated to Egypt, where they also taught English. They lived in Egypt for nine years before returning to the US, where Samatar studied Arabic literature in Madison, where she recently completed her PhD. This fall she will begin teaching literature at California State University, Channel Islands. Samatar's debut novel **A Stranger in Olondria** appeared in 2013. She began publishing short fiction in 2012, and so far her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Apex*, among others. She also publishes poetry and book reviews.*

<https://locusmag.com/2013/06/sofia-samatar-stranger-scripts/>

The rest of the interview is quite interesting. I recommend you read it.

Before we get started on the novel, take a look at the map that is placed before Book 1. Maps are a common feature of fantasy novels. They help the reader imagine the terrain, and they help the author imagine the world and keep it consistent. Notice the city of Bain in the center, near the fold, on a narrow land bridge between two larger land masses. Bain plays a central role in the novel. Note also the sound of “Bain.” In English, we talk of something being the “bane” of something else. An online dictionary defines it as “a cause of harm, ruin, or death,” or “a source of persistent annoyance or exasperation.” It definitely has a negative connotation. But this name is spelled differently. It is not the same. Still, the negative connotations of the English word resonate, if only in the backs of our minds.

**Book 1, Chapter 1, Childhood in Tyom**

Read first paragraph

The book is written in first person, from the perspective of Jevick, the younger son of a spice farmer who is wealthy by the standards of the island. His older brother is more interested in communicating

with birds than in school or farming and is a profound disappointment to his father. Their mother is the father's second wife, taken because his first wife could have no children. Their mother says of Jom, her elder son, that it is clear he is the son of the wild pig god, and that sons of that god are more beautiful and tender than ordinary souls.

Jevick is better at schooling, and at pleasing his father, but is also not much interested in farming.

As we learn about the sons and their mother, we are also learning about the culture and religion of the island. We also learn about jut, the small statue made for each person, that is a kind of external soul.

Jevick's father travels across the sea to Olondria once a year to sell his spices. Jevick is fascinated with the stories he tells and the strange objects he brings back. He hides behind a potted plant to hear his father telling tales of Olondria to the other elders. One night he is caught. His father takes him outside and makes him eat dirt, saying "This is your life. This earth. This country. Tyom" (8). He calls Olondria a country of ghosts and devils. But it is Olondria that fascinates Jevick.

It is common for young people to see the familiar world around them as mundane and uninteresting, and to dream of exotic exciting foreign lands or different cultural worlds. It is easy for us to identify with Jevick.

By this point we are pretty deeply immersed in the culture of Tyom. It is a strange and beautiful culture becoming familiar, bit by bit, detail by detail.

### **Book 1, Chapter 2, Master Lunre**

The most important event in this chapter is the arrival of Master Lunre, a scholar from Bain who serves as Jevick's tutor. Lunre's behavior teaches us about the customs of Olondria and Jevick's mother's reaction to him teaches us more about her character and her religion. She thinks he is a ghost or a devil until he begins talking with Jom and learning the names of birds and plants in the language of the island. His treatment of Jom as a person of dignity softens her heart toward the Olondrian stranger.

Lunre introduces Jevick to books.

(Read on page 16)

And later to writing, which Jevick sees as sorcery.

(Read on page 18)

The odd thing about the effect of this chapter on the reader is that by this point, only a few pages into the novel, we have become comfortable with Jevick's viewpoint and his strangely beautiful culture, very different from our own. The culture of Olondria, with reading and writing, should be more familiar to us, yet we see it as strange through Jevick's eyes.

### **Book 1, Chapter 3, Doorways**

The opening paragraph makes it clear that Jevick has become not only literate, but a lover of books.

Read first paragraph on 19

Up to this point, we have been learning about the world and the characters, but we don't have any big questions about the plot or the motivations. In this chapter, we learn that Lunre misses Olondria, but cannot return. We want to know why. The other big event in this chapter is the sudden death of Jevick's father, which makes him head of household and gives him his most fervent wish, to opportunity to go to Olondria.

Read on page 26

Questions for Book 1:

1. We take literacy for granted, but this novel explores what it is like to be exposed to literacy as a teenager and fall in love with literature. Jevick moves from a world of orality, in which signs that can speak are an example of sorcery, into a world of poets, philosophers, and storytellers speaking from pages. But even as Jevick becomes highly literate and well-read, does he still think that written words are a form of magic?
2. Though Lunre misses the world of Olondria that Jevick desires, he also seems to be fascinated by the world of Tyom. Is this a contradiction? What message does this have for us?
3. Jevick's father makes him eat dirt and asks him "Who are you?" Jevick tells his father, over and over that he is "Jevick of Tyom." Is this a true answer? Is his father wise to ask this question?