

THE PATHS OF DARKNESS
By R.A. Salvatore

A Book Report
By Shawn L. Perrot

You wouldn't expect to find a story of redemption and rehabilitation in a fictional book about warriors and dwarves, wizards and elves, dragons and magic, but that's exactly what I found when I picked up and read **The Paths of Darkness**, by R.A. Salvatore. This collector's edition, containing more than 1,100 pages, held within it 4 separate books, **The Silent Blade**, **The Spine of the World**, **Servant of the Shard**, and **Sea of Swords**. What I didn't realize before picking this up was that there were 15 books before this one, but the author, R.A. Salvatore, is a master at his craft, and told the story in such a way that I was provided with all the background information needed to gain a full understanding, and perhaps more importantly, he did it in such a way that wouldn't have been boring to those who'd already read his previous works.

At first, I thought this was going to be a stereotypical work of fantasy fiction, in which the characters embark on a magical quest to save the world. However, as I began to work my way through it, I quickly realized how wrong I was. Instead, this was an amazingly well written story about the pain and suffering felt by the main character, Wulfgar the warrior, and its far-reaching impacts. While things like magic, elves, wizards and dragons are obviously a work of fiction, R.A. Salvatore nevertheless manages to blend them into a wonderfully accurate description of one method in which an alcoholic's formed, and more importantly, how he's able to obtain redemption.

The plot was full of twists and turns, with adventure lurking around every corner, but what really struck me was how the author managed to develop his characters. Through them, I could feel their pain and anguish as they watched their friend self-destruct. I could understand their internal struggles, desires and motivations. All along, even when our warrior was committing some truly heinous acts, I couldn't help but feel compassion for him, while hoping that he'd eventually recover and come to his senses.

Salvatore uses this as an opportunity, not only to explore the reasons for alcoholism, but to demonstrate how easy it is to turn from a life of honor and virtue to a life of crime. However, no matter how helpless and hopeless Wulfgar feels, Salvatore somehow manages to convince you that all is not truly lost, just misplaced. You truly believe that somehow, at the end of the story, our main character will find redemption, even in spite of his newfound friendship with a character of extremely questionable morals.

Like most people, our warrior is not without the love and compassion of those who care for him, but as with any who've struggled with addiction know all too well, they're pushed away. Rather than taking offense or trying to pressure him, Wulfgar's allow him the space he needs to find his own way, while making it clear at every step of the way that, while they don't approve of his actions, their love is unconditional. Eventually, when our warrior finds himself willing and in need, he finds that they're just around the corner. Before that happens, however, our hero falls deeper and deeper into the grips of his addictions, leading a life of increasingly serious criminal activity. What started as a means of dealing with his pent-up anger quickly spirals out of control. Branded and outcast, he turns to a full-fledged life of crime just to support himself and to provide for his next drink. He, along with his newfound friend, become highway robbers, until one day he begins to realize how much his values have changed. From that moment on, he sets out to redeem himself. In a surprising plot twist, he refuses to abandon his new friend. Instead, he drags him, kicking and screaming, back to the path of righteousness in a manner befitting a man of Wulfgar's true convictions. In doing so, he demonstrates the true value of friendship, and the loyalty that accompanies it, something many of us have forgotten.

This story, while definitely a work of fiction, is nevertheless an inspiration. It tells me that no matter how lost I may seem on the path of life, as long as I'm alive, there's always a chance that I can redeem myself. This might not be an easy journey, but nothing worth doing comes without a struggle. It also shows me that no matter what people may think, feel or say, in the end, the choice is mine, and mine alone. My path to redemption and rehabilitation will never really be complete until it's been done, on my terms, and only after I've truly understood the impact of my actions. Redeeming, or rehabilitating, myself for the benefit of others detracts from that feat, rendering it less worthwhile, and ensuring that it won't last. This is truly a book worth reading, and I'd recommend it to anyone seeking insight into their own actions.

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