

All the Bad Guys in Books are Afraid of Death

My Fresh Perspectives title is “All the Bad Guys in Books are Afraid of Death.” As soon as I wrote the title, I thought of a villain who isn’t afraid of death, and I bet you can, too!

But let’s focus on what I was trying to get at with this title—the thing that makes a lot of villains in stories villains, is that their fear of death causes them to do evil things.

Anakin Skywalker is so afraid that his wife might die that he is willing to switch to the dark side, killing hundreds and thousands of innocent people in the hopes that his one beloved won’t die.

Dr. Frankenstein makes his monster in the hopes of conquering death and then goes on to do more terrible things.

Dracula becomes a monster in order to live forever, again, killing many, many people.

Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter series is willing to kill many people, including a baby, so that he might live forever.

Probably my favorite example of good people turned bad due to fear of death occurs in JRR Tolkien’s Middle-Earth. In this book, *The Silmarillion*, he explains that death is a gift, given by God. But the evil, Satan-like figure of that book series convinces people to be afraid of death, because they are afraid of the unknown, of endings, of loss. And so the people turn away from the true God. They start collecting material wealth, as ways that they can leave something of themselves behind. They try to gain power, fooling themselves into believing that having power now will make them feel better about not having power over death. They start to worship the evil Satan-like figure, in the hopes that he will give them eternal lives. If you know Tolkien’s books, you know that the ring wraiths did, in fact, get a form of eternal life—but it’s a terrible, unhappy, un-life of servitude to evil.

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Being afraid of death can be normal. We don't know what will happen after death for sure, and we are afraid of feelings of loss. But these fears can drive us to behave in ways that we should not behave, which is why all of these authors try to convince us that we shouldn't let fear of death guide our behaviors.

Professor Dumbledore, in the Harry Potter series, tells Harry that, "to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."

This is not to say that we should search for death or jump into it before our time. Life is a gift, to be lived to its fullest.

But what Dumbledore and all of these authors are trying to tell us is that we should try to put our fears of death aside.

Why and how can we do that?

For one thing, we can learn from Tolkien's story. The good characters in it trust that God is good. So death, too, as part of God's universe must be good. In the appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the main characters—a king--models this belief by willingly lying down to die, after a long and full life. He comforts and says goodbye to his loved ones, passes the crown onto his child, and lets his body die, trusting that God is good.

But, for another thing, our memories and the memories of our loved ones can last eternally. Our beloved one's memories are like a presence that shape us, which means that they shape each new generation. They appear to us when we least expect them to, but particularly when life is hard and we need them. We see this in the Harry Potter series. His parents, who die at the very beginning of the first book, appear to him over and over—not as ghosts, but as memories who strengthen and sustain him. That book shows us that the presence in our lives of those who have died is almost magical—it's something that we can often feel, smell, or see.

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Our first reading today is a poem that speaks to this idea; it tells us that death is natural, and that, rather than fearing death, we should honor the memories of our loved ones every year, by telling their stories and living the way they lived. When we do that, it's as if our loved ones magically appear to us, strengthening us, loving us, reminding us of who they hoped we would be. Likewise, we can count on the fact that those who love us are shaped by us and will conjure up memories of us when we are gone.

And, finally, we believe, as do many believers of other faiths, that death is not really the end. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus brings his friend Lazarus back from the dead. This isn't supposed to be some creepy, zombie thing. Jesus brings him back as a symbol, to show us that our loved ones are always with us, and to show us all that we are promised resurrection.

So what's the moral of these stories? Don't be like Voldemort, Anakin, and Dracula, who were guided by their fear of death. Instead, trust in God, in the natural order of life and death, and in the promises of Jesus.

Will you please pray with me: Dear God, when we get scared of death, please help us to remember that you are good and so, whatever death is, it is good. Help us to remember our good ancestors and to keep their memories alive by telling their stories and following their examples. Help us to believe that death is not the end, but a time to be reunited with you and our ancestors. Amen.