

# Darkness in Fiction: How Dark is Too Dark?

By  
Chawna Schroeder

## Evil exists.

We might want to ignore it. We might want to hide from it. We even might want to deny its power completely. But open a newspaper, flip on the television or click into the internet, and we are reminded once again how very real evil is.

No, the problem is not whether evil exists. The problem is what to do with it, both in life and in fiction.

## Is Evil Permissible?

**God is holy.** He cannot stand any sin or any evil, from the tiniest lie to the worst mass murder. Anything that carries even a smudge of such darkness is banished from His presence under normal circumstances (see Job 1 and 2 for an exception).

Therefore, shouldn't Christian fiction reflect this?

Of course. But that doesn't mean we should banish the evil from our stories. Putting aside the fact that such a void would cause the story to ring untrue, we rather must consider how we incorporate and portray the darkness. For even God didn't fail to include the stories of the Fall, Abraham's lies, David's adultery, or Judas's betrayal in Scripture.

But just because evil or sin is acknowledged, a novel isn't necessarily dark. So what about dark fiction makes it dark?

## When Evil Takes Over

**God is light (1 John 1:5).** Therefore, the darkness must be the antithesis of Him. So a "dark" book would be a novel where there is more darkness—those things opposite of God—than the light, the attributes of God. So in the simplest terms, a dark story is where evil or the attributes of Satan (e.g. despair, deception, death) dominates the story.

Again, a question arises: does that make it wrong?

Not necessarily. For evil is strong—often more than we want to admit—and sometimes (dare I say often?) it appears to be the ruling force. Since fiction is to mimic reality, such a world must be portrayed occasionally.

Moreover, how can we show the power of God and hope in Him, one of Christian fiction's primary goals, if we don't show the darkness? For no one hopes for what he already has (Romans 8:24). Accordingly, God provided us Judges and Revelation, two very dark books filled with hope and the comfort of His Sovereignty.

## So How Dark is Too Dark?

Ah, we've reached the core of this issue. It's a hard question, one I've wrestled with many months as my writing has taken me to a level of darkness I did not want to go.

On one hand, it is an individual matter, based on personality, experience, maturity, and amount of immersion.

Because I am an introspective person with an overactive imagination, my tolerances for darkness are very low. I cannot read Peretti or Dekker, even though I know they're both good authors with much of value to say. But *my* personality makes them wrong for *me*.

Likewise, the age will make a difference. For an extreme example, it isn't wrong to write or read about rape—unless the intended reader is eight years old. That level of evil is inappropriate for that age. And this is one reason I struggled with the darkness level in a Christian YA novel, *The Book of Names*. The level felt too strong for the majority of the intended readership.

The other factors, experiences and immersion, also affect this. If you read only dark fiction, you've probably become desensitized on a level that requires withdrawal from such books, making them wrong for you. And if you are in the midst of difficult times, especially those evoking emotional distress, such fiction *could* prey on you, causing more damage than healing.

That all said, there must be a concrete line, for some books irrevocably cross it, no matter the personality, maturity, immersion level, or experiences of the reader.

### Where's the Line?

Like so much in life, *it all comes down to balance*. If the darkness is strong, the light ultimately must be shown as stronger. To do otherwise is to break moral law (those spiritual truths written into the universe much like the law of gravity—as what goes up must come down, so the one who sins must die). For God is *always* the strongest, and in the end, He *always* wins. Books that even imply differently lie and therefore cross the line.

But a direct lie is not the only way to cross the line. There are several other things that create a gray zone around the line. Walk too near the edge with too many factors, and they will push you over the edge, just like too much weight and erosion on a cliff causes it to crumble. So these things must be considered:

- *Does the evil appear most powerful?* For in reality, light is always stronger: no amount of darkness can extinguish a flame, no matter how small.
- *Is there a reasonable hope?* Evil always has chinks in its armor, and if we can see these, hope and light are ignited. But if they remain hidden, a lie of evil's strength is told.
- *Is the evil internal or external?* External evil is easier to cope with (and therefore does not seem as dark) because it is based on experiences which few of us have experienced. But internal or psychological evil—now that is a reality we all deal with daily, making the evil and its power more real and personal. However, the darkest place is a combo of the two, for it gives evil the advantage, again promoting the idea that it is strongest.
- *Are good and evil confused?* I'm speaking of the values here, not a good side vs. an evil side. For heroes can have flaws and villains virtues *if they are presented as what they are*. It is when flaws are called virtues and virtues flaws that trouble comes.
- *Is evil portrayed as the only option, whether for hero or villain?* This is a common lie in our culture, but all of us *always* have a choice.

- *Are there shafts of light?* Small victories go a long way in breaking up the darkness; it reveals the chinks in evil's armor. Humor also helps, for it defies the hopelessness that darkness has won.

So while Dekker and Peretti are dark, they have counterbalanced it (I have heard) with humor, externalizing most of the evil, and an ending so filled with light and hope that the darkness of the previous pages receded. And yes, *Two Towers* and *Return of the King* are dark, but humor, small victories, a clear line of good and evil, the chink of Mt. Doom and the resulting reasonable hope, and the offers of redemption for even the villains (only possible if light is stronger) reminds us of the power of the light.

And this is where I felt *The Book of Names* failed. The intent was good without a doubt. The author never intended to cross a line, I feel. But the execution of the story was faulty: it walks too close to the edge on too many issues without the proper counterbalance.

The line between good and evil magic is too blurry. Victories are small and shallow; even the climax victory is defused with the body's disappearance and the following murder of Chapter 47. Darkness dominates both externally and internally (both heroes and villains), making the already powerful evil more potent. And most of all, not enough hope is provided. Not enough chinks are known to the reader, few to none to the heroes, and even the mention of Tal Yassen at the end is insufficient from lack of set up and information.

No one of these would have sunk the book. But all these together create an evil too powerful with chinks too few and a solid, reasonable hope too weak. This, combined with the target readership and the fact that series tend to get darker before lighter, caused me grave concern.

Of course, there's always hope I'll be proven wrong. :o)

### **About Chawna Schroeder**

Chawna Schroeder spends her days working as a professional liar, better known to most people as a novelist. She loves spinning stories and fabricating fantastical tales about characters caught between two worlds—not to mention fiction writing provides the easiest explanation for her imaginary friends. Otherwise people tend to look strangely at a 20-something adult conversing with invisible people.

When Chawna isn't working or meeting other novelists' imaginary friends, you can usually find her poring over her studies in biblical Greek and Hebrew. She has studied both languages under a seminary-trained pastor for several years and has done some teaching of the Greek and Hebrew.

Since she doesn't have a split-personality (despite what family members and friends may contend), these dual passions for fiction and Scripture must share the same mind and therefore often collide. Sometimes that's not a problem; fiction and Scripture meet and part on congenial terms. But at other times they get into a fight. So what is a writer to do? Write, of course!

So Chawna is writing *Bearing the Sword*, a six-part a curriculum teaching discernment in and through fiction. The first part is available this spring. In addition to this, she posts frequently on her blog, Imagination Investigation ([www.chawnaschroeder.blogspot.com](http://www.chawnaschroeder.blogspot.com)). There she explores the boundaries of fiction and faith, reviews books, and talks about the occupation of writing.

Not convinced that you trust this strange person named Chawna Schroeder? Stop by [www.chawnaschroeder.com](http://www.chawnaschroeder.com) to find out more about her and the stories she writes, or contact her directly at [imaginationinvestigation@yahoo.com](mailto:imaginationinvestigation@yahoo.com).