

# Deadman Switch Short Guide

## Deadman Switch by Timothy Zahn

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# Contents

<a href="#">Deadman Switch Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>

# Characters

Along with its attention to moral choices, *Deadman Switch* is a surprisingly strong study of character. This occurs through its close focus on Gilead Raca Benedar's emotions and actions. As a man of faith working in a commercial realm, he calms himself with "ritual thoughts" drawn from scripture. Later in the book they function as his conscience as well, sometimes reflecting his inner arguments as one scriptural passage conflicts with another. His skill in reading other people is a sharply limited paranormal ability, and it does not give him any special insight into their long range plans or personality patterns. It is almost as much of a burden as a boon.

Many people believe it more powerful than it is, and view him suspiciously.

Finally, the sense of moral conviction that drives him to take action also gives him fairly rigid attitudes. Only at the very end, where he shamefacedly admits to Kelsey-Ramos that he is disappointed in not being punished for his several illegal acts, does he go beyond them to accept the ambiguity of his choices. With all this, he is a surprisingly likeable two-fisted hero in the best space-opera tradition.

Lord Kelsey-Ramos, even as he is offstage for much of the book, is also an interesting and complex character.

Although he delights in the tense power-plays of interplanetary commerce, he also takes pride in the peaceful solution to the Cloud that Gilead stumbles upon — and cannot see until Kelsey-Ramos points it out. Their employer-employee relationship works well because it is based upon complementary needs and abilities. His son Randon is a reasonable facsimile of his father, who helps Gilead when it would not endanger his own mission too much.

Calandra Mara Paquin remains a mystery woman. A fallen-away Watcher with bitter memories of the past, she is somehow able to fool Gilead's truthsensing ability. The details of her past deeds and future fate are left hidden, for Gilead to mull over, as the book ends.

Aside from these, most of the other characters are less well explored, although they go beyond the stick figures often found in space-adventure novels.



## Social Concerns

In an interplanetary future, the only access to the heavy-metal ring of Solitaire is by traveling through the Cloud. Normal ships' drives will not operate in the Cloud. It can only be traversed with a dead (but recently alive) person at the controls. This phenomenon is a mystery. But the powerthat-be pay the price, because the galaxy needs the metals mined on the Solitaire moons. The usual practice is for each ship to carry two zombis, convicted criminals whose sentence is carried out just as the ship reaches the Cloud.

The Bellwether's voyage into the system would have been routine but for the presence of Gilead Raca Benedar, a high-level aide to a baron of interplanetary commerce. Gilead's value to Lord Kelsey-Ramos stems largely from his Watcher skills. The Watchers, a religious sect, perceive hidden emotions and other inner states through the disciplines they learn.

Gilead, accompanying his boss's son on a visit to some newly acquired companies, is quietly horrified when forced to observe the execution on the way in.

Then he meets the ship's out-zombi, a scared young woman from a Watcher background. Upon hearing her story, he is sure she was wrongfully convicted. He decides to save her by getting her a new hearing. This effort, and its complications, take up the rest of the book.

Although set in the far future, Gilead's problems have eerie echoes in our own society. He objects to any capital punishment, but can hope to have an effect only on Calandra's particular case. The needs and human costs of heavy industry, officials who do not want their routine disturbed with inconvenient facts, and the fact that Gilead may be putting his own job on the line, all add to his dilemma. The claims of conscience versus the established ways of commerce and law thus form the book's main conflict.

In addition, Gilead's personal situation may resonate with many contemporary readers. He is a man of faith in a world which finds religion somewhat odd. The fact that his Watcher training actually gives him unique perceptions does not help; it makes him even more suspect to most people.

Lastly, on the moon Spall, Gilead and Calandra discover a truly eccentric religious community, the Halo of God, and an equally eccentric new life form, the thunderheads. The observation post they set up there, and Lord KelseyRamos quietly supports, form a sort of impromptu research and development lab. The ecological discoveries that follow help solve the Cloud's mystery.

"Practicality" has kept the Solitarians from exploring their moon. The results from Spall make a good case for far-out scientific investigations.



## Techniques

Deadman Switch is told from the firstperson point of view of Gilead Raca Benedar, with Gilead's scriptural reflections the most unusual touch. These are chosen and interspersed so well that the reader catches on to Gilead's self-deceptions only about the same time that he does.

His attitude toward Calandra is a case in point. For most of the novel he idealizes her, applying such phrases to her as "She is far beyond the price of rubies." At the end of their adventures, he begins to reflect: "There are ways that some think are straight. . ." Shortly after, Calandra tells her ambiguous story to Lord Kelsey-Ramos, and Gilead realizes that all along he had multiple reasons for wanting to believe her innocent.

# Themes

Gilead Raca Benedar's faith is not always a help to him. It is not clear if Watcher skills are merely based upon close attention to body language, a form of psi, or even come from divine grace. One gets the impression the Watchers do not know either. And while Watching gives him some advantages in the commercial world, it tells him only part of other people's emotions and motives. It does nothing to solve the ethical dilemmas he plummets into. At the end, despite his successful efforts, he is left unsure of the extent of Calandra's innocence.

Nevertheless his background has given him an ethical compass. In a universe where commerce or politics determine most actions, this sets him apart. The theme is not a simple one about religion making people better than the unchurched. Indeed, a Watchers leader brought disaster to the sect several decades before. But Gilead's Watcher faith serves as a channel for values. These inspire him to act in a situation which conflicts with these values, where others might simply do nothing.

Although there are many distinguished works of fantasy with religious motifs or themes, the same is not true of science fiction. Deadman Switch is one of the few science fiction novels which takes religion seriously. It is shown as a carrier of values and a shaper of character, without examining Watcher beliefs in minute detail.

The novel's other theme might be summarized as "the law of unintended consequences." Gilead does not know that Spall will reveal secrets of the whole bizarre Solitaire system when he goes there; he simply hopes to find a smuggler's base to help in his campaign to free Calandra. Likewise the thunderheads may be using humans for an elaborate defense, while the humans think themselves acting from their own motives. It is a big and complicated universe out there. In this novel, Zahn gives the reader a glimpse of some of its paradoxes.



# Key Questions

The book's characters and values dilemmas are more provocative than the plot, which ends up with a fairly standard saving-the-planet-from-disaster scenario. But some readers may enjoy discussing the latter. The religious topics are unique enough to evoke meaningful discussion without coming too close to contemporary religious tensions.

1. If our society discovered a "Deadman Switch" obstacle to a needed resource, would we go after it anyway?

If so, how would we rationalize our decision?

2. At one point Lord Kelsey-Ramos tells Bendar: "There are things in this universe that only someone with a deceitful, manipulative mind can understand." Do you agree?

3. Kelsey-Ramos makes the statement above when they realize the thunderheads are using humans as they use the stinging insects, to defend their own species against invaders. Could the situation be instead a case of symbiosis, where both species benefit?

4. The Haloans meditate or "Seek" in a sort of trance. At first it merely seems a bizarre religious practice.

Later on it proves very helpful both for communicating with the thunderheads and as a possible alternative for piloting ships through the Cloud. Do you think Zahn was trying to make a point with this? Or did he just use it to make the plot work out?

5. The human fleet's reluctance to summarily destroy the Invaders before they reach Solitaire seems at odds with their willingness to use the deadman switch. Does this have anything to do with guilt vs. innocence? The number of deaths involved? A Prime Directive to not destroy possible new species?

6. Aikman, who hates Gilead, tells him Watchers have no right to do what they do, because it invades the privacy of others' thoughts and may lead to self-incrimination. Aside from the legal argument, do you think he has a point?

7. Will the Solitarians' society change now that travel through the cloud no longer costs a life? How?

8. Will Gilead change as a result of his experiences? What assignments might Lord Kelsey-Ramos give him in the future?

9. What will happen to Calandra?

Does she need therapy?

10. Is a society like the one shown here, where most people have no religious beliefs, a plausible future development? Why or why not?



## Literary Precedents

Deadman Switch joins a small but growing number of science fiction novels which use space opera devices to explore issues of religion, ethics, and character. James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* (1958) is a famous predecessor, with a Jesuit protagonist and a race of lizardlike Lithians almost as alien as Zahn's thunderheads. More recent examples include Sheri Tepper's *Grass* (1990) and Lois Bujold's *Barrayar* novels, although in Bujold's books honor replaces religion as a source of values.



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