

Sir Stalwart: A Tale of The King's Daggers Short Guide

Sir Stalwart: A Tale of The King's Daggers by Dave Duncan

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Overview

Stalwart is in training to become one of the King's Blades, knights bound by oath and magic. Too youthful in appearance to be convincing as a Blade, young Wart is sworn by oath alone into a secret mission.

In his search to find a conspiracy of sorcerers plotting to kill the King, he is aided by Emerald, a White Sister just expelled from the school where she was trained to detect magic.



About the Author

Fantasy author Dave Duncan was born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1933. His father was Norman Duncan, a Dundee businessman, who married Winnifred Anderson.

She taught household management until she married and became the mother of two sons. Dave was the elder son. He studied geology at the University of St. Andrews.

He moved to Canada in 1955, and lived in Calgary, Alberta, working for the next thirty years as a geologist and businessman.

Duncan and his wife, Janet, have been married since 1959, and have one son, two daughters and four grandchildren. They live in Calgary and Victoria, British Columbia. Duncan regards his wife as his in-house editor and critic. Without her input, he believes that his stories would still be moldering in slush piles. "She really ought to be listed as co-author," Duncan says in an autobiographical essay posted on his Web site. "Although she is an omnivorous reader, she doesn't much care for fantasy or science fiction, which may be why she does such a good job of identifying my mistakes."

Duncan's brother had commented to him once when they were young men that he would like to be a writer. Duncan's response then was that he would never want to be a writer, but that he would like to write a book one day. As a child, Duncan scribbled stories in notebooks and taught himself to type with two fingers, on a Remington 4 machine that he found in the attic.

Something of that wish to write must have risen in him as time went on. He took a writing course and worked on several short stories without much success, or as Duncan puts it, "I took up the secret vice of writing in my fifties." In 1984 he began writing a novel for his own amusement. After an encouraging rejection letter from a publisher, he worked on other novels as well.

He made his first sale at age fifty-three, two weeks after a cyclical slump in the oil business put him out of work for the first time in his life. He never looked back. Within a year and a half, he had two novels in print and had sold four others.

Duncan enjoys writing, and he works as hard at it as he ever did as a geologist. He now types using four fingers, on a wordprocessor. Writing every morning can be very lonely, but he is an active member of both the Science Fiction Writers of America and SF Canada, the Canadian SF writers association. "Even after thirty or so books, it gets no easier," Duncan admits. "I try never to repeat myself and yet not wander too far from the sort of entertainment my fans have enjoyed in the past and expect in the future."

Duncan's published works as of December 2000 included thirty-two novels, some short stories and a poem in the Tesseracts anthology series. He has two pen-names: Ken Hood for his "Years of Longdirk" series of three novels, and Sarah B. Franklin for Daughter of Troy, a sensual re-telling of The Iliad from the point of view of Briseis.



Readers looking for Dave Duncan's many works should not confuse him with the late science fiction author David Duncan, who passed away in 1999.

Sir Stalwart is the first novel that Duncan has written expressly for young adult readers. At the request of his publisher, he used the setting of his novel *The Gilded Chain* to write not only sequels, but also novels that would be suited for the publisher's young adult imprint.

Duncan attends science fiction conventions each year both in Canada and internationally. He is a popular guest author, often doing readings from his newest works and speaking on panel discussions. Though he is an excellent speaker and answers questions on writing with confidence, at these conferences Duncan often wears pinned to his jacket a badge which says: "I Just Write The Stuff."

Setting

The story is set in the kingdom of Chival, a fantasy country somewhat reminiscent of late medieval England. The character King Ambrose IV was based to a great extent upon King Henry VIII of England. In this fantasy country there are dukes and barons, stableboys and merchants, castles and inns, and a most interesting blend of swords and sorcery. There is also mention of foreign raiders from across the sea.

When we meet him, Stalwart is in his fourth year of training at Ironhall, a bleak stronghold on the plains of Starkmoor. Emerald comes to the story as a White Sister, newly-promoted after four years of education and training in the park-like cloister of Oakendown.

Social Sensitivity

Each character in this novel has a distinct voice and personality, even including some of the stableboys scrambling to hold a horse's head to earn a penny. There are no spearcarriers in this story, unlike some fantasy novels where acres of soldiers line up for the hero to kill as impersonally as possible.

While Wart and Emerald do not learn the names of every person who passes them by in an inn, each person who speaks does so as an individual.

This becomes very clear when the pattern is broken: Emerald cannot tell which name belongs to which of two men-at-arms, who are bound by obedience spells to the sorcerers. We understand thereby that the obedience spells make the men-at-arms dull and de-personalized and incapable of independent action, and so are far different from the loyalty spells that bind the Blades to energetic personal service, with all their skills and perceptions. We can be confident that the sorcerers are indeed cruel, and not merely resisting the King's taxation laws.

When asked in a recent online interview with the Internet Book Information Center what he loves most about being a writer, Duncan answered confidently: "The sense of creating something unique and perhaps worthwhile."

In his previous work as a geologist, Duncan was successful at finding oil and gas fields, but he admitted, All I was doing was getting to them before the competition did. Those reserves would have been discovered sooner or later. We would still have relativity without Einstein, without Gates there would be something much like Microsoft, but only da Vinci could have painted the Mona Lisa.

When I complete a book, I have produced something nobody else would have written.

He added: "Of course there is an added kick when people tell me they enjoyed the result, so I know the trees have not died in vain."

Literary Qualities

It would be unfair to call this novel a "fantasy lite" because it is more brief than Duncan's previous works. The story does get to the point quickly, with one adventure rather than several, and so is much shorter.

Young readers who are ready to move on from the mass-marketed formula fantasy and horror novels by R. L. Stine and Chris Pike will find *Sir Stalwart* to be an enjoyable challenge, as the plot and characters are far more sophisticated than in the "Goosebumps" and "Fear Street" short novels. The vocabulary and grammar are not too demanding for upper elementary students, though.

The literary merit of the novel *Sir Stalwart* is as great as many of the thirty novels Duncan wrote previously. This story was not "dumbed down" simply because the author was hired to write, for the first time, a novel intended specifically for young adults. He spent his usual effort to create a believable fantasy world and to populate it with strong, realistic characters. Readers will find the story immediately engaging and the plot as dependable as a fantasy novel demands. (Fantasy in general is more formula-driven than even a romance novel, but also more challenging.)

Duncan's writing has two trademarks which are ideally suited to the short scope of a novel for young adults: his protagonists always have a strong sense of honor, and he always has a plot twist affected by the motives of the protagonist or his/her allies. During the course of a longer novel or a series, these trademarks can allow for a considerable number of adventures. Duncan's novels in general, and this one in particular, are dependably strong on character and plot and do not descend to mere formula.



Themes and Characters

An important element of the novel is the strong sense of duty felt by both Stalwart and Emerald. Wart is already a competent minstrel, but he feels that it would be far more worthy to defend the King's peace as a knight. Emerald's sense of duty comes more from her training to perceive the balance of the natural elements, and from her father's lingering death while in the care of sorcerers who may have kept him alive until her family was bankrupt.

Multiple motives and choices make each character well-rounded and complex. Wart consents to search for the conspirators who create monsters and threaten the King, even though he knows that he may be killed.

Emerald discovers that she is the bait in the trap after she is expelled and sent home on a slow cart. Her fury is only at being drafted without her knowledge and kept ignorant of her danger, not at the search itself.

The masterminds behind the search are old Blades, who regard these seventeen-year-old trainees as young soldiers in a terrible war that has cost the lives of dozens of Blades, White Sisters and civilians. Even if both young lives are forfeit, the terrorist sorcerers must be tracked to a secret lair.

The old Blades know they are manipulating children when they arrange to expel a girl who is the only support for her crippled mother, and recruit a beardless boy who has no family but the Blades, but it is done anyway. Four months' more training would only give the conspirators further opportunities to attack the King and court; additional information would only put Wart or Emerald in more danger from torture by sorcerers who can detect lies.

No motive is simple, and no choice is made without consequences.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is duty? What duties does a citizen owe to the leader of his or her country? What duties are owed to a king? Does a citizen with special abilities or training have a special duty, and if so, to whom?
2. What duties does a leader owe to his or her people? What duties does a king owe? Does a leader have private duties, and when do they take precedence over public duties?
3. What is informed consent? Does age or experience matter? Does it matter what act is being consented to? What about societal circumstances?
4. What is the difference between a volunteer and a conscript?
5. Is it true what Wart believes, that it is more worthy to earn his living as a knight than as a minstrel?
6. Is it true what Emerald believes, that it is best to maintain an emotional and elemental balance?
7. Is it socially just to have an advantage over someone else? Does it matter if the advantage is an accident of birth or native talent, or if it comes from training or study?
8. Is it socially just to benefit because of your advantage over someone else?
What if you benefit at someone else's expense?
9. If someone who has an advantage over another hurts that person, is the crime the same as if both persons were equal?
10. If Wart had been killed and Emerald tortured, who would be responsible?
11. Is Wart sent out utterly alone on his journey, or is he being kept on a leash short enough to keep him safe?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The students who come to Ironhall on Starkmoor are often in trouble at home, or have a record that would label them as "Young Offenders" here and now.

Since there is no Ironhall in modern North America, what are the possible fates for these youths in our society?

2. The students who come to Oakendown have an opportunity for education that is rare for women in their country. What are the short-term effects (for one year or five) of educating a female? What are the long-term effects for her lifetime?

What are the effects of educating females (or not educating them) upon a family, or a community, or a country?

3. What is lost and what is discovered when Wart smashes his archlute? How desperate were his mentors to arm him, when they hid a sword inside a fine instrument? It cost more than he could hope to earn in ten years' service as a Blade. What is the worth of that, or any lute or artifact, compared with putting two young lives in deadly danger?

4. Is art in the service of life or is it a rejection of violence? Does Wart repudiate his musical talent when he takes up the sword?

5. The enchanters who tended Emerald's father said they could cure his terminal illness, but his pain grew worse until he needed a fresh enchantment every day.

While they may not have made his sickness worse, they kept him alive till his family spent all they had, even losing their family farm. Was this the proper duty of a healer? What is the proper duty of a healer?

6. How can profiting from a patient's illness motivate a healer? How can healers be motivated by the health of all their patients, rather than by the possibility of profiting from each patient's illness?

7. Emerald's only prospect for a respectable profession is gone when she is expelled. She is willing to marry even though it will be hard to find a husband she wants who is also able to bring financial security to her and her crippled mother. Is it respectable to marry for security rather than love? Is it more respectable than prostitution?

8. What makes a profession respectable? Does gender matter? Does culture? What about resources?

9. The instructors at Oakendown do not discourage their White Sisters from leaving the order to marry, even after only two years of service. Was the four years of training wasted on the women who leave to marry? Their talents are not lost but are being called on in the current emergency. How can the kingdom at large benefit if educated



women who can also detect magic are scattered throughout various towns and farms? Is Oakendown working for short-term or long-term goals?

10. Is it ever right for officers to give soldiers orders which are very likely to result in the soldiers' death? Must a soldier or an officer follow all the orders given by superior officers? What is the result when an army is made up of volunteers rather than conscripts? What is the result when any army goes to war (whether against another army or a natural disaster)?

11. Why would an author writing a fantasy story write about characters who have made moral choices (good or bad)? A fantasy story is free from the need to be a true account of an actual event; is it also free from morals and ethics? What kind of stories are written about characters with no morals or ethics? What are some of the purposes of fantasy stories?

For Further Reference

Van Belkom, Edo. *Northern Stars*. Quarry Press: 1998. Interviews with Dave Duncan and other Canadian science fiction and fantasy authors.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Anyone who has enjoyed Sir Stalwart is likely to find Duncan's further novels in the "King's Daggers" series (The Crooked House and Silvercloak) equally interesting. The novels in the "King's Blades" series are set in the same fantasy world, and cover some connected events; though intended for adults, these novels are quite accessible to young adult readers. There are some sexual references, but these are less "adult" in nature than Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (which is on Canadian school curriculums).

Other novels by Dave Duncan, though intended for adults, will have considerable appeal for young adult readers. Most of his novels are still in print and available in bookstores, and his earlier novels can be found in libraries and second-hand bookstores. Some of Duncan's earlier novels are out-of-print but are now becoming available in online and print-on-demand formats.

A surprising number of translations have been made of Dave Duncan's novels, in many languages and many countries.

Related Web Sites

Dave Duncan Web site <http://www.daveduncan.com>. May 8,2001. This web site contains all sorts of information about his novels, including how they are available, excerpts and free samples, reviews, interviews and articles. Includes many links to related web sites for commentary on writing and for bookselling.

"An Interview with Dave Duncan." Internet Book Information Center
<http://www.internetbookinfo.com/ibic/IBIC.Journal/sf/Duncan.html>. August 1998.

Favorable review noting that "Duncan's *The Gilded Chain* brings to mind comparisons with Alexandre Dumas and Rafael Sabatini. Simply put, this is an almost perfectly entertaining fantasy novel. It falls into a familiar category in fantasy fiction—'swords and sorcery'—but it is entirely original.... I trust that anything Dave Duncan writes will be fresh, entertaining, mature, and intelligent. He is truly a Grey Lensman."

White, Claire E. "A Conversation with Dave Duncan." *Writers Write: The Internet Writing Journal* <http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/feb99/duncan.htm>. May 8, 2001. Topics of discussion include Duncan's early literary successes, writing habits, current work, and advice for aspiring writers.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996