

Farewell, My Master

*We'll meet in Two Rivers,
Robert Jordan*

Ross Douthat

In the long-gone days when my fantasy-novel obsession was at its height, I occasionally meditated on the alarming possibility that one of my favorite authors would die before he had managed to finish unspooling the multivolume story that I hung on. This was before every moderately successful genre author could claim a dozen fan sites parsing his every convention appearance and LiveJournal posting, but the photos and about-the-author paragraphs on the fat, shiny hardcovers—fantasy novels are required by law to gleam—suggested that Terry “Sword of Shannara” Brooks, David “Belgariad” Eddings, and all the rest were into middle age at least. In the case of Robert Jordan’s early books—he had just completed *The Dragon Reborn*, the third installment in his bookshelf-busting Wheel of Time series, when I discovered him—the author’s picture was an artist’s sketch, depicting a red-haired, Falstaffian figure with a flowing beard, and the biography was terse. It concluded by promising that Jordan would keep writing “until they nail his coffin shut.”

And so he did. Shortly after his death, from a rare blood disease, I found my way to his personal blog, where, once the diagnosis was handed down, he and his family members had corresponded with fans more faithful than I, filing updates on his medical condition and his progress through *A Memory of Light*, the final book in the Wheel of Time. He would beat the disease, he swore; he would finish the book. In June 2007, he apologized to his readers for only posting once a month: “I am trying to put every spare moment into *A Memory of Light*,” he wrote, and “there aren’t too many of those spare moments right now. My meds induce fatigue, so it is hard to keep going. I’ll fight it through, though. Don’t worry. The book will be finished as soon as I can manage it.”

Three months later, last September, with the book still not quite finished, Jordan—or James Oliver Rigney as I suppose I ought to call him, as Robert Jordan was a pen name—was gone.

It had been three years since I'd read a word he'd written, for all that once upon a time he'd been my favorite novelist in all the world—or any other, for that matter. For a shameful moment after hearing of his death, I couldn't even recall the title of the most recent Wheel of Time installment. Was it *Crossroads of Twilight*? *Path of Daggers*? I knew I had read it, out of a sense of duty to my teenage self if nothing else; I just couldn't for the life of me remember what it was called (*Knife of Dreams*, the internet reminded me) or whether it had been the ninth or tenth or even the eleventh (and so it was!) volume in the saga.

It felt strange to go back over the blog entries from his illness, and then to keep up with the site over the next few weeks, reading the posts left by his wife and friends after his passing, looking at the photos from the funeral and the tributes that fans left in the comments section. On the one hand, there was the peculiar intimacy of the internet age: the chance to peer into the personal life of a writer I had worshiped from afar as a teenager and known only from the sparse biographical details that Tor Books provided to his readers. To hear his voice through the blog, casual and unmediated, not telling stories but just talking. To hear from his wife, Harriet, long a presence on the dedication pages of his novels; to see her picture and the pictures of his family. To hear about where he went to church, what he liked to eat and drink, the songs he liked to sing. To see his Charleston, South Carolina, home, and even photographs of the inner sanctum itself, the carriage house where he wrote his novels, where the floors were piled with books and the walls were hung (of course) with antique swords.

And then there was a feeling of embarrassment or guilt, as though because I had allowed my fandom to lapse over the years, I was somehow trespassing on a grief reserved for more devoted readers. As though I were attending the funeral of a friend or lover I'd abandoned years before and remembered far too late to make a difference.

Jordan lived long enough, at least, to see his chosen genre become cooler than it has ever been before. When I was younger, fantasy languished in science fiction's shadow: The two were lumped together in the bookstore under the inexact and irritating rubric "sci-fi/fantasy," but science fiction enjoyed greater popular-culture cachet, both among the moviegoing masses (for whom science fiction meant *Star Wars* and *Aliens* and *The Terminator*, and fantasy meant *Willow* and *Legend* and *The Neverending Story*) and the hipster literati, who were considerably more likely to name-check *Neuromancer* than *Gormenghast*, Philip K. Dick than Ursula K. Le Guin. It was clear, to me at least, that a writer might hope to be reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* if his genre novel involved androids or clones or alien life forms; swap in elves or trolls or centaurs, and no dice.

It isn't hard to see why this might be: In a technology-mad, forward-looking society, it stands to reason that science would be cooler than magic; that the future would be sexier than the past; that dystopias would be hip and elegies square. Moreover, the entire modern fantasy genre has shivered for decades in J.R.R. Tolkien's long, long shadow. Contemporary science fiction has its much-imitated icons, too, but no single author bestrides the landscape the way that Tolkien does with fantasy, even as the singularity of his gifts makes slavish imitation the sincerest form of folly. No contemporary writer can hope to match the depth and detail of Tolkien's vision, his books' linguistic precision and mythological complexity, and the extent to which *Lord of the Rings* and its attendant works feel like found objects from a premodern past rather than works dreamed up in early twentieth-century Oxford. Yet many of his successors have too often tried, piling map upon map, appendix upon appendix, volume upon volume, striving to match Tolkien's strengths as a fantasist rather than improving on his weaknesses as a novelist.

This is where Jordan's saga lost its way, in the end. He was never going to write well enough to transcend his genre roots

entirely, but at his peak he was a wonderful middlebrow novelist, striking a near-perfect balance between world building, plotting, and characterization. But he didn't know where to stop building: There were always more characters to introduce, more customs to elaborate on, more interesting locales to visit, and more history and mythology to unpack. He was like a painter furiously adding detail to the landscape, never finishing the action in the foreground. His world sprawled; his story fizzled.

Yet he leaves behind a genre landscape that's been transformed, and I like to think that his achievements—both the wonderful books he wrote and the audience he built for them—helped pave the way for fantasy's burgeoning coolness. The genre has come to the masses, in the form of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* adaptations and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and all their imitators. It has come to the highbrow realm, where authors like Susannah Clarke, Neil Gaiman, and China Miéville are being name-checked by the same people who used to confine their genre references to *A Scanner Darkly*. And it may even be coming to HBO, of all places: The best of Jordan's high-fantasy successors, George R.R. Martin, is having his (unfinished! hurry up!) Song of Ice and Fire saga developed for the small screen by the same channel that gave us *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, and *The Wire*, and I can't imagine a more perfect fit.

I like to think two other things as well, where Jordan is concerned. First, I hope that his unfinished final book, which will be polished and padded into shape for publication by another novelist, will bring his saga to an overdue but triumphant conclusion, and that it will include enough of his own voice that I'll recognize the writer I loved when I storm through the book in a single day. Second, I like to think that his fellow fantasist C.S. Lewis was right when he suggested that in Aslan's country (God's, that is), no good thing is ever lost—and that this promise extends to the realms we fashion in our imagination as well as the world we actually inhabit. I hope that James Oliver Rigney is being permitted to explore the lands that he dreamed up—that he's walking the streets of Tar Valon and Ebou

Dar, sailing the Aryth Ocean and crossing the rugged Aiel Waste. And I hope that I can meet him there some day—in the Two Rivers, perhaps, where his great, unfinished story started, years ago—and shake his hand, and thank him.