The Choices We Inherit

Understanding Watch and the Life Behind It

> ***This page contains major spoilers for the entire novel and is intended for readers who have finished Watch.***

Watch is a novel about choice, but its central question reaches beyond whether a person is free or controlled. It asks how we choose when so much of what teaches us how to choose was already in place before we understood its influence.

The young man at the center of the novel spends much of his life believing that certain events simply happened to him. He found a watch. He met Salvatore. He received food, work, recognition, and something approaching a family. Later came Micah, Mira, Lena, the search for his past, and the discovery of a brother whose existence had been concealed.

Gradually, events that once seemed independent begin to reveal connections. Some were arranged. Others were influenced without being controlled. Still others arose through chance or through decisions whose consequences extended beyond anyone's intentions. The discovery that someone helped shape an event does not necessarily make the choices within it unreal, nor does it make every relationship that followed artificial.

The novel is not simply about discovering who controlled the narrator's life. It is about what happens when he recognizes the forces that shaped him, including those he has already begun carrying into his treatment of others. When someone else has helped determine the circumstances in which we choose, what part of the choice remains our own? And once we recognize those circumstances, what responsibility do we have for what follows?

The Order, the family, and Salvatore

One of the narrator's most consequential discoveries is that he was born with a twin brother, Luke. Luke had not simply disappeared. His identity had been obscured, he had passed through shelters and placements, and the brothers had deliberately been kept apart. His absence was not merely something the family suffered. It was something others had helped produce.

Behind that separation stands the organization eventually identified as the Order. Luke describes it not as the creation of one powerful individual, but as a structure built over time through obligation,

loyalty, protection, leverage, and decisions about who belongs. Its influence does not depend upon every participant knowing everything. In some respects, it depends upon their not knowing.

Salvatore operates within this structure. He possesses considerable authority and makes decisions that alter other people's lives, yet he does not control the larger system. He has inherited obligations, accepted explanations, and developed loyalties whose origins and purposes he may never have fully examined.

THE ORDER'S CENTRAL STORY

The Creed of the One Story

The Creed of the One Story is more than a statement of the Order's beliefs. It is the clearest expression of how the Order converts an understanding of the world into a system of authority.

Its appearance in the novel is significant. The narrator opens the envelope expecting technical material connected to Micah's equipment, the diagrams, the relays, and the unfinished system taking shape beneath the shop. Instead, he finds an internal council transcript followed by the Creed.

At first, the Creed seems to have nothing to do with the machinery around it. In another sense, it is the most important machinery he discovers.

The relays and circuits transmit information. The Creed determines how information will be understood.

The council transcript preceding it reveals that its language did not arise casually. The participants discuss the need for the same words and the same cadence. They want the Creed memorized because people hold most closely what they carry within themselves. They distinguish between private uncertainty, which can be "tended," and doubt spoken before others, which can become "permission."

That distinction exposes one of the Order's deepest concerns.

A private doubt can be isolated. It can be answered, redirected, softened, or made to seem like an individual weakness. A publicly expressed doubt may allow other people to recognize uncertainties of their own. What threatens the Order is therefore not merely that one person might question the accepted account. It is that questioning might become shared.

The Creed is designed to prevent that recognition from spreading.

Its language is not openly threatening. It does not praise cruelty, demand hatred, or describe domination as its purpose. It speaks instead of unity, steadiness, trust, harmony, service, and the relief of not having to carry uncertainty alone.

That is precisely why it matters.

The Creed would be less persuasive if everything it said were false. Human beings do need belonging. Communities require some shared commitments. Trust can relieve the exhausting burden of having to evaluate every question alone. Authority can carry genuine responsibility. Standing with others can make life more bearable.

The Creed takes those legitimate human needs and organizes them into an unequal relationship.

01	02	03
Those entrusted with authority will carry uncertainty. Everyone else will receive clarity.	Those in authority will decide which facts may enter the shared account. Everyone else will be relieved of the burden of deciding what those facts mean.	The whole will be protected. Individuals will bear whatever cost that protection requires.

> *This is the exchange hidden within the Creed. It offers rest from uncertainty, but the price of that rest is the surrender of judgment.*

The line declaring that authority is a burden is especially important. It allows those who exercise control to understand themselves not as people claiming power, but as people accepting a sacrifice on behalf of others. They do not have to believe they are superior in order to decide for someone else. They need only believe they possess knowledge or discernment that makes the decision theirs to carry.

Under that understanding, control can feel like service.

A leader may separate people who love one another and experience the decision as protection. He may conceal information and regard the concealment as restraint. He may remove someone from a community and believe he is preserving the whole. He may deny another person the right to choose while telling himself that he has spared that person from a burden he was not prepared to bear.

> *This is how the Creed helps explain one of the central questions of WATCH: how people who are capable of kindness can also become capable of profound harm.*

They do not necessarily stop recognizing themselves as good.

Instead, the language through which they understand the harm changes.

Taking **becomes placement**
Separation **becomes preservation**
Exclusion **becomes concern**
Silence **becomes discretion**
Control **becomes responsibility**

The person imposing the cost becomes the one carrying the burden, while the person upon whom the cost actually falls gradually disappears from the moral account.

The Creed anticipates this disappearance when it speaks of those who walk beyond the circle. It does not say that they are hated. It says they leave with the community's concern. Outside the strength of the whole, however, the burden of choosing becomes theirs alone.

This allows the community to withdraw support while continuing to regard itself as compassionate. The person who leaves is not described as someone who has been abandoned. He is described as someone who has chosen the loneliness and danger outside the circle.

The suffering that follows may then appear to confirm the wisdom of the group.

If the person becomes isolated, unstable, frightened, impoverished, or imprisoned, those remaining inside may interpret his condition as evidence that departure was dangerous. They may never see how the withdrawal of work, friendship, family, explanation, and belonging helped produce the suffering they now regard as proof.

The Creed does not need to order every act of separation directly. It creates the moral framework within which separation can be experienced as unfortunate but necessary.

Daniel Raines speaks from within that framework. He does not deny that Luke was removed from his family. He changes the language through which the act is judged. Luke was "relocated." The family

was unstable. The child carried something he could not survive. Someone had to decide. What appears from outside as the taking of a child becomes, within the One Story, an act whose mercy will supposedly be understood later.

Raines is not merely concealing what happened. He is interpreting it through the Creed.

Salvatore does the same, although he may never repeat the Creed word for word. Its logic has already entered his speech. He distinguishes placement from taking. He treats obedience as what holds a house together. He regards certain truths as burdens to be delivered only at the proper time. He believes that someone must set the cost and that leadership requires becoming the kind of man capable of doing so.

The Creed therefore does not originate with Salvatore. It explains him.

Before the narrator discovers it, Salvatore may appear to be the source of the system surrounding him. Afterward, it becomes possible to see that Salvatore is also one of its products. He has inherited its language, accepted its obligations, and learned to experience its demands as his own judgment.

He exercises real authority, and he remains responsible for what he does with it. But the Creed reveals that the man shaping the narrator has himself been shaped by a story he did not create.

This makes Salvatore more morally complicated, not less responsible.

It also explains why the Order can survive him. Its power does not reside entirely in one leader. It resides in a vocabulary, a pattern of interpretation, and a set of moral assumptions that can move from one person to another. Individuals may die, leave, or be exposed while the story through which their actions were justified remains available to those who follow.

New feet can continue wearing the same shoes.

Gabe demonstrates how the Creed operates farther from formal authority. He may never have seen its written words, but he has learned to live inside its assumptions. He believes those above him know more. He interprets obedience as trust and control as protection. Asked whether he truly believes the account he has accepted, he gives one of the novel's most revealing answers:

> *"I live like it's true."*

The Creed does not require everyone to possess certainty. It requires them to organize their lives as though the shared account must remain true.

That may be enough.

The Creed also reaches beyond the Order. Luke, the Bureau, and eventually the narrator himself all face versions of the same temptation. Each possesses information another person does not have. Each can claim a protective purpose. Each must decide whether knowing more gives him the right to arrange another person's circumstances or determine when that person may receive the truth.

When the narrator allows Micah's work to be used without Micah's knowledge, he does not act from the same motives as the Order. He wants to expose it. Yet his reasoning follows a familiar path. The objective matters. Disclosure would endanger the work. Someone must decide what Micah is allowed to know.

For a time, the narrator accepts that the decision should be his.

The Creed is therefore not included merely to explain the villains of the novel. It names a form of reasoning that can appear wherever one person believes a worthy purpose gives him authority over another person's choices.

Its danger is not confined to people whose goals we condemn. It may be most difficult to recognize when it appears within purposes we consider good.

The title of the Creed also creates a deliberate contrast with the form of *WATCH* itself.

The Order wants one story.

The novel gives us fragments.

Records are incomplete. Memories conflict. Photographs reveal only what entered the frame. People possess different parts of the truth. Even apparent villains have histories that complicate judgment, while apparently protective institutions employ methods that resemble those they oppose.

The narrator's task is not to replace the Order's account with another perfectly complete story. It is to resist forcing every fragment into an explanation merely because the explanation offers certainty.

Watching, in this sense, becomes the opposite of preserving the One Story.

To watch is to remain attentive to what the accepted account leaves outside the frame. It is to notice the person who pays for an abstraction, the fact excluded from a comforting explanation, and the voice silenced so that others may continue speaking as one.

Yet the novel does not argue that all shared belief is oppressive or that belonging itself should be rejected. Mira, Lena, Micah, and their families offer forms of community that do not depend upon one authorized account. They make room without first deciding who the narrator must become. Their relationships allow uncertainty, disagreement, privacy, and change without treating them as threats to the whole.

The deepest alternative to the Creed is therefore not isolation.

It is belonging that does not require surrender.

It is a community strong enough to survive more than one story.

Behind this part of the novel is a question drawn from lived experience. What happens when a particular interpretation of belief becomes inseparable from family loyalty, moral worth, and the right to remain in relationship with others?

Once that occurs, disagreement is no longer treated as an intellectual difference. It becomes a danger to unity. Separation may then be understood not as cruelty, but as faithfulness to something presumed higher than the relationship being sacrificed.

The Creed of the One Story gives fictional form to that process.

It shows how people may contribute to devastating harm without waking each morning intending to be cruel. They may instead wake believing they are protecting a family, preserving a community, carrying a burden, defending truth, or remaining faithful.

The novel asks what becomes possible when preservation of the shared story matters more than what the story is doing to the people required to live beneath it.

And it asks an even more difficult question:

> *Can we recognize that process only when it is used against us, or can we also recognize it when our own certainty, care, and good intentions begin asking someone else to surrender the right to choose?*

The narrator's father had also lived within this structure. His writings reveal a man who believed he answered to obligations greater than himself, and whose interpretation of those obligations helped organize his family around authority, loyalty, and silence. Eventually, however, he began questioning the system he had served. His willingness to reconsider what had once seemed unquestionable made him dangerous to those whose authority depended upon its preservation.

The events at B17 reveal how far the Order was prepared to go. The guardrail where the narrator's father fell had intentionally been removed. Salvatore was instructed to bring him there and pressure him near the ledge, but he was not told that the rail was missing. The danger awaiting the father was concealed from Salvatore as well.

Salvatore was responsible for agreeing to intimidate the man. That responsibility does not disappear because he lacked knowledge of the entire arrangement. But neither can his actions be understood accurately by assigning him intentions or knowledge he did not possess. The precise mechanics of

the fall remain unresolved. What becomes clear is that the Order deliberately created circumstances in which Salvatore would carry guilt for a death whose full origins had been concealed from him. That guilt subsequently became another means of controlling him.

The man who spent much of his life shaping others was himself being shaped.

Salvatore, the watch, and the arranged beginning

Salvatore is not revealed to be a man whose generosity was merely an elaborate disguise. He feeds people, remembers names, helps families, establishes a pantry, and gives the narrator employment, recognition, responsibility, and somewhere to belong.

The good accomplished through those acts remains real even after the narrator discovers what Salvatore concealed. But genuine care does not give someone ownership of another person's choices, and beneficial consequences do not erase the cost imposed upon those who never agreed to bear it. The most personal expression of this conflict emerges when Salvatore admits that even their first encounter was arranged.

As a boy sleeping outside, the narrator finds a wristwatch with a cracked crystal. A receipt leads him to Mercer Pawn, where he returns it in expectation of a reward. He receives twenty dollars. For years, he remembers what follows as a turning point arising naturally from his own decision. He found something, chose to return it, and encountered Salvatore near the deli beside the pawnshop.

But Salvatore later reveals that he deliberately planted the watch. He knew enough about the boy to expect that the possibility of a reward would bring him to Mercer Pawn, and he positioned himself where the boy was likely to emerge.

The disturbing part of this revelation is not that the boy's decision was imaginary. He really did choose to return the watch. He wanted the money. No one forced his hand. Salvatore's power lay in knowing enough about him to create circumstances in which the desired choice would seem to arise naturally.

The choice belonged to the boy. The arrangement belonged to Salvatore.

This is different from discovering that one's life was scripted. The boy remained capable of choosing, but he did not know that someone else had deliberately shaped the conditions surrounding his decision. What Salvatore appropriated was therefore more than an encounter. He altered the narrator's understanding of something the narrator had long believed belonged entirely to him.

The narrator eventually gives that loss a name:

> *“My beginning.”*

Belonging, departure, and the cost of leaving

One of the more difficult questions in Watch is why people remain loyal to an organization even when they recognize reasons to question its authority. It is tempting to assume that discovering manipulation or deception would make departure inevitable. But recognizing what is wrong and accepting the consequences of leaving are different things.

The scene at Newton Place exposes that distinction. When the narrator asks what people would do if they discovered an organization wanted them only for what it needed from them, the answers come quickly. They would leave. Why would anyone remain where they were being used?

Their certainty troubles him because it overlooks what leaving may require. An organization can provide employment, friendship, security, purpose, recognition, and a community within which people understand who they are. It can also offer relief from uncertainty by placing difficult judgments in the hands of people presumed better equipped to make them. These benefits need not be imaginary. Their reality may be precisely what makes the organization difficult to question.

The people at Newton Place are answering whether they would accept being used. The narrator knows something about what follows when someone refuses. He has lost more than employment. People he knew have withdrawn from him. Relationships that once seemed personal have proved conditional upon his remaining within an accepted structure. Leaving has not simply freed him from obligations. It has placed much of the life organized around those obligations beyond his reach.

His observation that Newton Place made room for the question, but perhaps not the answers, reveals the distance between imagining a decision and living with its consequences.

Gabe gives that conflict a more personal expression. When the narrator seeks him out after leaving Salvatore, he hopes their friendship might survive independently of the community in which it developed. Gabe, however, understands that their relationship cannot simply continue on its previous terms.

He acknowledges that people within the organization have questions of their own, yet accepts that certain decisions belong to those exercising authority. He believes they possess knowledge others lack and understands their control through the language of trust, protection, and love.

When asked whether he believes the account he has accepted, Gabe answers:

> *“I live like it’s true.”*

The words are revealing without requiring us to conclude that his loyalty is insincere. Whatever uncertainties Gabe may carry, his life remains organized around an understanding he has learned to inhabit. Questioning that understanding could threaten more than his beliefs. It could threaten the relationships and assurances through which his life has acquired meaning.

When the narrator insists that leaving Salvatore did not mean abandoning Gabe, Gabe cannot separate the two so easily. Their friendship exists within a community whose expectations reach into relationships that should have been their own to maintain. The painful possibility is not that Gabe has ceased caring. It is that his care may no longer be sufficient to preserve the friendship.

Their later encounter outside the grocery store reveals another dimension of that separation. Gabe asks about the narrator's condition and mentions that people have been questioning whether he is “steady.”

The concern is not necessarily unfounded. The narrator has been experiencing paranoia, hallucinations, and growing difficulty distinguishing what is happening from what he fears may be happening. His psychological deterioration is genuine. But those within Salvatore's circle do not possess the full account of the circumstances surrounding it. Their understanding can be shaped by information supplied or withheld by people whose authority the narrator has challenged.

The narrator's condition may be accurately observed while the explanation offered for that condition remains profoundly incomplete.

When someone who has left an organization is characterized as troubled, unstable, or dangerous to associate with, people who once cared about that person may begin withdrawing out of what they believe is concern or prudence. There need be no explicit prohibition against the relationship. The community's understanding of the person may already have changed sufficiently to make separation seem responsible.

The narrator's subsequent imprisonment gives the situation another disturbing possibility. Later revelations establish Salvatore's responsibility for arranging the imprisonment, but those who remain within his circle need not know that. To them, the narrator's arrest may appear to confirm warnings that departure has led him into danger. His imprisonment is real. His psychological distress is real. What is missing is an understanding of the circumstances that produced or contributed to those events.

An authority need not fabricate a person's misfortune to make use of it. By controlling the account of what happened, it can turn genuine suffering into apparent confirmation of its own warnings. Those

who remain may consequently become more confident that the organization protects them, even as their confidence depends upon an incomplete understanding of what happened to someone who left.

This does not make everyone who remains a knowing participant in deception. Gabe may genuinely fear for his former friend while also fearing what continued association would mean for himself. Both concerns can exist together.

And the narrator is not beyond those same needs. He still wants friendship, security, recognition, and somewhere to belong. His departure has not made him indifferent to what the organization once provided. The difficulty is that the things people receive from such structures may become inseparable from the authority they are expected to accept.

The question is no longer simply why someone would remain in a system that uses them. It is how a person comes to understand the surrender of certain choices as part of what makes life secure, meaningful, and worth preserving.

Luke, Mira, Micah, and the problem of choosing for others

Luke enters the narrator's life as a source of revelation, but he is not free of the habits the novel examines.

Separated from his brother and shaped by institutions of his own, Luke has learned secrecy, surveillance, strategic withholding, and carefully timed intervention. For years he watches his brother without approaching him. He conceals information from their mother, works with the Bureau, and helps arrange circumstances around people whose lives he believes he is trying to protect.

The Bureau itself is not presented as the moral opposite of the Order. It gathers information, cultivates informants, conceals its intentions, and exploits Micah's program without Micah's knowledge. The silent man within Salvatore's circle passes information to the Bureau, allowing one structure to observe another through methods that are not entirely dissimilar. Their purposes may differ, but that difference does not resolve every question raised by their methods.

Luke's involvement in bringing the narrator toward Mira illustrates the distinction between arranging an opportunity and determining what develops from it. He creates an opening because he believes his brother needs somewhere beyond the structures that have defined so much of his life. Mira knows nothing about the arrangement, and Luke does not control the relationship that follows.

As he tells his brother:

> *“I opened a door. The rest was you.”*

The circumstances of an encounter can be influenced without everything that grows from it becoming artificial.

Mira offers the narrator a kind of belonging unfamiliar to him. Salvatore's world required him to learn how to occupy a place within an established order. Mira makes room without requiring him to surrender his own judgment. She offers food, shelter, companionship, and the possibility of silence that does not demand obedience in return.

Yet the narrator gradually begins bringing something of his former world into that relationship. He withholds information, partly because he wants to protect her. He decides what she needs to know, when she should know it, and what consequences she should be spared. His intentions may differ from Salvatore's, but the underlying assumption is familiar: that possessing knowledge gives him the right to make another person's decisions.

Micah brings this contradiction into the open. Micah believes the computer program he is developing belongs to him and serves purposes he has chosen. In reality, the Bureau is exploiting it to gain access to the Order. When the narrator discovers what is happening, he remains silent because he believes preserving that access serves a greater objective. He understands the deception, knows Micah does not, and allows it to continue.

When Micah learns the truth, he expresses the injury in one sentence:

> *“It should've been my choice.”*

The narrator answers:

> *“Yes.”*

He does not defend his conduct by appealing to the importance of exposing the Order. He recognizes that he used the very reasoning through which others had denied him choices of his own.

It is easier to recognize the misuse of authority when we are the ones suffering beneath it. The more difficult recognition comes when we discover that our intentions, however honorable we believe them to be, have led us to exercise similar authority over someone else. Awareness of what shaped the narrator has not made him immune to repeating it.

His relationship with Mira is also changed by this recognition. He can choose what he reveals about himself and what risks he is prepared to accept. But he cannot rightfully decide what she must know or what place she should occupy in his life.

Where she stood was not his to choose.

Silence, watching, and the question of when

Silence is one of the novel's most persistent forms of communication, although its meaning changes according to who employs it and why.

For Salvatore, silence can express discipline or authority. For the narrator's mother, it becomes a means of survival. For the Order, it protects the accepted story. For Luke and the Bureau, it serves strategy. For the man in the dark coat, it conceals allegiance. With Mira, silence can leave room for another person without demanding an explanation.

The distinction is not simply between speaking and remaining quiet. Silence may preserve dignity or conceal injustice. It may protect someone or protect the person withholding information. It may allow another person to choose or prevent that person from knowing a choice exists. The narrator's development is therefore not merely a movement from silence toward speech. It involves recognizing what his silence may cost other people.

The title, Watch, undergoes a related transformation. At the beginning, watching is an instruction. Salvatore tells the boy to observe a man pleading for his life. The experience teaches him that watching is not necessarily passive. A person can become implicated in something by being required to witness it, even before understanding the world into which that act has drawn him.

Observation becomes one of the narrator's defining habits. He notices faces, hands, doors, records, pauses, and inconsistencies between what people say and what they appear to know. Watching helps him survive and gives him a way to examine events that do not make sense.

Eventually, the direction reverses. The man who has spent much of his life observing others discovers that he, too, has been watched. Salvatore, Luke, the Order, the Bureau, and others have followed and interpreted his actions while withholding much of what they knew.

By the end, watching acquires another possibility. It becomes the capacity to examine what shaped him without either blindly accepting it or pretending it never mattered.

Time develops through a similar pattern. The novel repeatedly returns to clocks, schedules, appointments, waiting, and decisions about when someone should learn the truth. Salvatore decides when. Luke decides when. The Order and the Bureau make similar judgments.

Those decisions may be defended as necessary, prudent, or protective. Sometimes they may even arise from genuine concern. But possessing information does not automatically settle the question of who has the right to determine when another person receives it.

Late in the novel, the narrator writes a single word on the back of a receipt:

> *"When?"*

The question extends beyond any particular appointment. When should someone speak? When does restraint become evasion? When does protection become possession? When does waiting cease to be an exercise of judgment and become an exercise of power?

Eventually the narrator tells Salvatore that he will go if he chooses, not when Salvatore names the hour. For much of his life, others have determined when he should act, when he should remain silent, and when he may know what they already know. His resistance is no longer simply to a particular instruction, but to the assumption that the authority to choose the hour belongs to someone else.

Faithfulness, mercy, and judgment

Near the end of Salvatore's life, white lilies arrive with a card from CAG:

> *"For the one who remains faithful."*

On its surface, the message honors loyalty. But faithfulness has acquired a troubling meaning by this point in the novel.

Salvatore remained faithful to the work, to his obligations, and to the belief that certain decisions must sometimes be made on behalf of others. He accepted burdens, concealed information, and acted within a structure whose purposes he believed he served. Yet that structure also deceived him.

The events at B17 demonstrate how his loyalty could be turned against him. The Order allowed him to carry guilt arising from circumstances it had deliberately concealed, and that guilt helped bind him more securely to the people responsible. Faithfulness becomes both a description of his life and a measure of its tragedy.

When the narrator visits Salvatore in the hospital, he possesses knowledge capable of altering Salvatore's understanding of his own past. He knows something of what happened at B17 and how Salvatore's life was influenced by people he trusted.

He could reveal what he knows. Instead, he asks whether Salvatore wishes to hear it. Salvatore declines, and the narrator allows the refusal to stand.

The decision remains uncomfortable in a novel concerned with withheld truth. Is the narrator respecting another person's choice, or has he found a more compassionate explanation for remaining silent? There is a distinction between concealing the existence of information and offering someone the opportunity to receive it. But Salvatore cannot fully understand what he is declining, and the novel need not pretend that the tension disappears.

The narrator later identifies what he offered as mercy. Mercy does not establish Salvatore's innocence, erase the consequences of his actions, or require the narrator to abandon his understanding of the past. It means that he can recognize another person's limitations without insisting upon a final acknowledgment that may never come.

Salvatore's death does not resolve the larger structure in which he lived. The Bureau may obtain what it needs, individuals may be exposed, and particular arrangements may collapse, but the Order continues. When Micah asks what becomes of it, the narrator answers:

> *"New feet. Same shoes."*

Removing someone from authority does not necessarily remove the beliefs, needs, or expectations through which that authority was established. The structure can survive because people remain capable of finding comfort in the very arrangements that make them vulnerable to control.

Why I Wrote Watch

Although the people and events of Watch are fictional, the questions beneath the novel emerged from experiences I had spent much of my life trying to understand.

I explored many of those experiences directly in my memoir, COR Values. But completing the memoir did not end my thinking about what had happened. In certain ways, writing it made the questions more difficult.

A memoir allows an author to examine experiences through memory, documents, reflection, and the understanding acquired over time. I began wondering whether fiction might accomplish something different. Could I create a story that allowed readers to experience uncertainty rather than simply read my conclusions about it? Could they discover alongside a character that someone responsible for genuine harm might also have been capable of genuine care, and that understanding the person more fully might complicate judgment without diminishing responsibility?

Those questions grew partly from my continuing effort to understand my father. I could have allowed the harm he caused to become the complete account of who he was. Such an explanation would have been comparatively simple, and perhaps emotionally satisfying. But it would have required me to disregard things I also knew.

I had witnessed generosity, kindness, dedication, and the genuine benefits of work he undertook for others. I had also witnessed division, manipulation, destructive authority, and decisions whose consequences were borne by people who had little opportunity to refuse them. The difficulty was not deciding which account was true. It was accepting that neither was complete without the other.

Over time, I became increasingly dissatisfied with explanations that resolved such complexity too conveniently. Categories such as good person and bad person, victim and villain, controller and controlled may express something real, but they can also end an inquiry at precisely the point where it becomes most revealing. I wanted to understand not only what someone had done, but what had made that person capable of doing it.

I had been thinking intensely about how to communicate these ideas through fiction. One evening, after spending considerable time with the problem, I went to sleep. The following morning I awoke with an unusually vivid and profound memory of a dream. It affected me strongly enough that I took the day off from work and began writing.

That was the immediate beginning of Watch. The questions behind it had been developing since I finished COR Values. The dream gave them a form through which I could begin exploring them.

Salvatore provided a compelling place to begin. Popular culture, through films such as The Godfather and Goodfellas, has accustomed audiences to powerful men who can exercise violence, inspire fear, love their families, help their communities, and sincerely believe they live according to a meaningful code.

I did not need to begin by persuading readers that qualities we regard as admirable could coexist with conduct we condemn. That contradiction was already familiar. What interested me was what lay beneath it. What had such a man inherited before he began consciously choosing for himself? What explanations had been given to him as truth? What had loyalty taught him to protect, and what had fear made difficult to question? At what point had his understanding of responsibility become permission to determine the lives of others? And what if the man exercising control had never fully recognized how much of his own life was governed by influences he did not understand?

Power can make someone appear to stand above the forces shaping everyone else. But a powerful person remains the product of a childhood, a culture, relationships, fears, loyalties, and an understanding of reality assembled from experiences and explanations supplied by others. None of that eliminates responsibility. It changes what we must consider if we want to understand responsibility more completely.

As the novel developed, the question could not remain confined to Salvatore. Luke, the Bureau, and eventually the narrator himself had to confront their willingness to shape other people's circumstances in pursuit of outcomes they considered worthwhile. The difficulty becomes particularly acute when conduct we condemn in others arises from intentions we recognize in ourselves. Would we judge the conduct differently because we believe we mean well?

That question reflects something I have tried, not always successfully, to apply to my own life. I do not want to accept an explanation merely because it makes me comfortable. When something I learn challenges an account I have believed, I want to examine the account rather than dismiss the evidence.

When evidence complicates my judgment, I would rather accept the complication than preserve the judgment.

That approach has sometimes made my past harder to understand, not easier. The closer I examined the circumstances surrounding my father's actions, the less satisfied I became with judgments that treated him as though he had developed independently of every influence in his life. But allowing that complexity into my understanding of him created another obligation. I had to consider it in myself.

What had I inherited from the world he helped create? Which assumptions had I accepted without recognizing them? How had my experiences influenced the way I interpreted other people, particularly those who had done nothing to create those experiences?

The inquiry could no longer stop at Who did this to me? It had to extend to What made them capable of doing it? What made me vulnerable to accepting it? What parts of it have I carried forward? And eventually, what will I choose to do differently?

I do not believe understanding requires forgiveness, nor that understanding someone's influences excuses what that person does. But I do believe judgment becomes more responsible when informed by as much reality as we can reach.

Fiction gave me a way to explore that conviction without requiring readers to accept my conclusions in advance. I could place characters within circumstances they did not entirely understand and allow their discoveries, decisions, and mistakes to raise questions whose implications extended beyond the story.

Perhaps the most important of those questions is one I continue asking:

How differently might we judge one another if we could see not only what people have done, but more of what shaped them into the people capable of doing it?

The Life Behind Watch

Several of the novel's central relationships and turning points have autobiographical origins described in COR Values. The novel transforms those experiences rather than reproducing them. Its characters should not be understood as simple fictional substitutes for people from my life, but some of the connections help explain why certain questions became so important to me.

The real experience behind the Order

The Order grew partly from my experience with my father, who was also my pastor.

His particular interpretations of religious belief became a framework through which questions of authority, obedience, family, loyalty, and separation were understood. Those interpretations did not remain private convictions. They influenced relationships and helped determine whose questions were acceptable, which disagreements could be tolerated, and when separation from another person might be considered necessary or even righteous.

For a child growing up within that environment, belief was not simply a proposition to be examined and accepted or rejected. It formed part of the conditions through which family, identity, approval, and belonging became understandable.

The Order in Watch is not intended to represent Christianity itself. It is a fictional expression of something I experienced more personally: what can happen when one person's interpretation of belief acquires authority over the lives of others, especially when questioning that authority threatens the relationships through which a person understands himself.

In the novel, the structure extends far beyond religion. But the process remains recognizable. An interpretation becomes a conviction. A conviction becomes an obligation. An obligation becomes a measure of loyalty. Eventually, questioning the obligation may be treated not as disagreement, but as betrayal.

I also became interested in what this process might do to the person exercising authority. Someone raised within such a structure may come to experience its expectations as his own conscience, without clearly recognizing where the expectations originated. He may believe he is freely choosing what he has never learned to question.

The road to Hutchings and the road to jail

The narrator's imprisonment has another important autobiographical origin. In my own life, a period of profound personal crisis culminated in my involuntary commitment to Hutchings Psychiatric Center. But the experience cannot be understood adequately by beginning with the commitment itself.

Years of family division, rejection, and estrangement had disrupted relationships through which I understood much of my identity. I was struggling not only with the loss of people I loved, but with explanations of that loss that seemed impossible to reconcile. Beliefs I had inherited were colliding with what I was experiencing among the people who had taught them to me.

I searched intensely for understanding. Religion, philosophy, meditation, memory, and questions about reality became increasingly central to my life. I wanted to understand what had happened and why, but the search gradually became entangled with uncertainty about which interpretations I could trust.

Sleep diminished. Meditation became increasingly consuming. Religious imagery, fear, suspicion, and memory began influencing one another in ways I could no longer reliably distinguish. At one point, I came to believe that another businessman might be my biological father and pursued that possibility with increasing urgency. Looking back, I could recognize that my behavior had become increasingly erratic, although much of it appeared logical to me at the time.

I do not regard what happened as the consequence of one event or one person's actions. It developed through an accumulation of circumstances, including estrangement, loss of belonging, conflicting explanations, unresolved questions, isolation, intensive searching, lack of sleep, fear, and increasing uncertainty about which interpretations of events were reliable.

Eventually I went to my grandparents' home, exhausted and confused. My father and brother arrived. Then came paramedics, police, handcuffs, and my commitment to Hutchings.

But the consequences extended beyond the hospitalization itself. Within my father's religious community, the event became part of the account through which my departure and subsequent difficulties could be understood. My psychological condition was real. I had experienced paranoia, increasingly uncertain interpretations of events, and behavior I would later recognize as erratic. But those who regarded my condition as evidence of the dangers of questioning or leaving the community did not necessarily know the circumstances that had contributed to it.

Family rejection, estrangement, conflicting accounts of events, isolation, and my increasingly consuming attempts to understand what was happening were not adequately represented in that explanation. My hospitalization could consequently reinforce the belief that departure from the

community's authority had led me into trouble, without requiring an examination of the circumstances surrounding my deterioration.

A story does not have to be false to be deceptive. Sometimes it need only leave out the truths that would change its meaning.

The jail in Watch fictionalizes something of both the breaking point and the way a crisis can be interpreted by people who do not know its history. By the time the narrator reaches confinement, his psychological condition has genuinely deteriorated. He has experienced hallucinations and paranoia. He also has evidence that people have deceived, watched, and manipulated him. What he cannot reliably establish is where those real circumstances end and his increasingly uncertain interpretations begin.

When Luke appears, he confirms that the narrator was not wrong to believe he had been watched. Salvatore, the Order, the Bureau, and Luke himself had all participated in forms of observation or intervention the narrator did not understand. But those revelations do not establish that every suspicion or interpretation the narrator formed was correct.

They give him something more useful: a firmer basis from which to begin separating what can be established from what he had previously feared, inferred, or imagined.

That distinction reflects something essential about my own recovery. I did not need another explanation that demanded unquestioning acceptance. I needed to learn how to examine explanations, compare them with evidence, recognize the limits of what I knew, and gradually establish a more reliable relationship with reality. Understanding required more than replacing one story with another. It required becoming willing to discover where my own stories had failed.

Why Luke is his twin

There was no literal Luke in my life.

Luke is a character with his own history, motives, imperfections, and choices. But his relationship to the narrator also grew from something I recognized within myself. He represents, in part, the possibility of examining an inherited understanding of the world from a position outside it.

That is one reason I made him the narrator's twin rather than simply another person who arrives with information. The brothers share a beginning, yet their different experiences have produced different ways of interpreting reality. Luke represents another possibility within the same origin.

But he is not an idealized version of reason standing opposite a brother governed by belief. Such a division would reproduce the simplification the novel questions. Luke conceals information, watches people, arranges circumstances, and sometimes assumes he knows when others are ready to

confront the truth. He can recognize certain forms of control more clearly than his brother while failing to recognize comparable habits in himself.

What Luke offers is therefore not a new authority to obey. He helps the narrator recognize that the beliefs, loyalties, fears, and explanations through which he understands his life can themselves become subjects of examination.

For me, that possibility reflects an important part of what followed Hutchings. Learning to question my understanding did not mean replacing every belief with its opposite. It meant becoming willing to test what I believed against what I could establish, including evidence that challenged my preferred explanations. Luke represents something of the distance required for that examination, not an escape from oneself, but the possibility of looking at oneself differently.

My father, the cost, and mercy

One of the strongest connections between COR Values and Watch comes from the final period of my father's life.

After decades of estrangement, I spent time alone with him in the hospital. During one of our conversations, he spoke proudly about a food pantry he had helped establish for people in need. I was genuinely proud of what he had accomplished. The pantry had served people who needed help, and I did not want the history between us to prevent me from acknowledging its value.

But the conversation also brought forward a question I had carried for many years. What had been the cost of the life he had built?

I was not questioning whether helping hungry people was worthwhile. I was asking about the people who had experienced rejection, separation, or harm within the family and religious world surrounding that work. I eventually raised the issue as one of collateral damage. Good had been accomplished. But had some of the people affected by the decisions underlying that life been required to bear costs they had never agreed to pay?

This experience became part of the moral structure of Salvatore's hospital scene. The narrator does not need to deny the meals, generosity, or genuine assistance Salvatore provided. He questions instead the assumption that those accomplishments justified the authority through which other people's lives were shaped.

The question is not only whether good was accomplished. It is who determined the price, who was required to pay it, and whether those people were ever given a choice.

In Watch, this problem finds expression through the recurring language of cost and the fee.

My final conversations with my father also influenced the novel's treatment of mercy. I continued asking difficult questions, hoping he might eventually acknowledge something of the damage I believed had been done. More than once, his response returned to essentially the same position: he had done the best he could.

I did not find that answer satisfactory. There were things I wanted him to understand, and things I hoped he might say. But as our time together became more limited, I began recognizing a distinction between what I wanted from him and what I could rightfully demand.

I could ask questions, explain my understanding, and offer opportunities to respond. I could not force an acknowledgment to become sincere. Whatever recognition or remorse might emerge would have to come from him.

What remained within my control was how I would use the time we had left. I chose not to spend every remaining moment pursuing a resolution he might be unwilling or unable to provide. I allowed our conversations to move elsewhere and tried to give him comfort.

That decision did not require me to revise my understanding of the past or conclude that my questions had been answered. It meant accepting that I could not determine his response, even as I remained responsible for my own.

Something of that experience found its way into the narrator's final encounter with Salvatore. Mercy did not require the revision of history. It did not demand that the harm erase the good or that the good erase the harm.

The good was real, and the harm was real.

I could acknowledge both without surrendering the significance of either.

From COR Values to Watch

Near the end of COR Values, I wrote that I hoped my father might never have fully understood the damage he caused. It was an unusual hope, but one grounded in an important possibility: that a clearer understanding might have allowed him to choose differently.

I was not suggesting that ignorance made his actions harmless or relieved him of responsibility. I was considering the relationship between what a person understands and the choices that understanding makes possible.

In COR Values, I explored how people can become attached to explanations that protect comfort rather than challenge them with reality. But another question gradually emerged: where do those explanations come from?

We often speak of beliefs as though they are objects consciously selected from among alternatives. Some may be. But many enter our lives before we possess the independence, knowledge, or experience necessary to examine them.

A father inherits convictions. A pastor interprets them. A family organizes itself around them. A child learns what earns approval and what threatens belonging. With time, these lessons can become so familiar that they no longer appear to be lessons at all. They become part of what the world seems to be.

This is what I think of as the architecture of belief. It is not merely the collection of ideas someone holds, but the relationships, expectations, fears, rewards, and experiences through which those ideas come to feel self-evident.

People can make genuine choices within that architecture without recognizing its boundaries. Watch allowed me to explore what happens when someone begins seeing those boundaries, then discovers how often he has acted within them himself.

This is where the novel moves beyond my attempt to understand my father. Discovering how we were shaped may help explain what we have done. But once we recognize a harmful pattern, we must confront what it means to continue participating in it. The past may explain why a choice comes naturally to us. It does not necessarily determine what we must choose next.

The watch, the hour, and home

The physical watch brings the novel back to its beginning, but under circumstances that change its meaning.

Salvatore originally planted the watch, knowing what the boy was likely to do when he found it. He used that knowledge to arrange their meeting, turning what the narrator remembered as a chance encounter into an event shaped by someone else's intentions. The boy made his own decision, unaware of the circumstances created around it.

Near the end of the novel, that same watch returns. Its crystal remains cracked, but its hands are stopped. There is “No ticking. No demand.” Engraved upon it are the words:

> *“For the one who named the hour.”*

The inscription recalls a life in which others repeatedly determined when the narrator should act, what he should know, and how long he should wait. Yet the watch itself imposes no obligation. The object once used to arrange his beginning has returned without instructions.

The watch most likely came back through arrangements made by Salvatore, though precisely how remains unknown. The possibilities are not difficult to imagine, and none needs to be established. Even if Salvatore arranged its return, that does not determine what the narrator must make of it. Its significance lies less in how it reached him than in what he chooses to do next.

The novel ends:

> *"The watch lay quiet. I turned toward home."*

Earlier in the story, the narrator describes home as more of an idea than a place. As a boy, he does not dramatically flee. He simply stops returning. What follows is a life spent seeking belonging, often within circumstances others have defined for him.

Salvatore offers him a place governed by loyalty and expectation. Luke gives him the discovery of family, though the brothers have no shared life from which to begin. Micah offers friendship and companionship through work. Mira offers something different: the possibility of belonging without surrendering the freedom to choose.

Near the end, she tells him:

> *"I just hope I recognize you when you come home."*

There is tenderness in those words, but also uncertainty. She cannot know who he will become, just as he cannot determine where she will stand. Whatever future they may share must remain something both are free to choose.

Home, then, cannot simply mean finding another person around whom to organize his life. Nor can it mean arriving somewhere beyond uncertainty, where he will never again have to question what he knows or what he wants.

The significance of the final sentence lies as much in "turned" as in "home." For much of his life, others have determined the direction he should take, often without his knowledge. Now he turns toward something he wants, without knowing everything that awaits him there.

He has not escaped his past or acquired certainty about his future. But he no longer needs either certainty or permission to choose a direction.

What Watch ultimately says about choice

The narrator does not reach the end of Watch free of everything that shaped him. He remains someone formed by his father, his mother, Salvatore, Luke, the Order, the Bureau, and the relationships through which he learned loyalty, fear, responsibility, and belonging. Those influences cannot be erased by understanding them, nor can he know every way they may continue to affect him.

But he can begin distinguishing what he inherited from what he is willing to accept. He can question assumptions that once seemed beyond examination and recognize when his desire to protect another person begins turning into the temptation to control them.

He may not always succeed. Awareness is not a guarantee of wisdom, and recognizing a harmful pattern does not make us incapable of repeating it. What awareness offers is the possibility of choosing with a more informed understanding of what is influencing us.

This is the idea I most wanted Watch to leave with its readers:

We choose, but we do not choose everything that teaches us how to choose.

We enter lives already in progress. We inherit beliefs, fears, loyalties, expectations, and explanations assembled by people who inherited much of the same from those before them. Some of what we receive may deserve our gratitude. Some may have harmed us. Often the same inheritance contains both.

Understanding it does not tell us automatically what to do with it. We must still ask what deserves to remain, what should be questioned, what can be forgiven, and what we must refuse to pass along.

The difficulty is that we must make those judgments using minds that were themselves shaped by what we are trying to judge.

Perhaps that is why the work is never entirely finished. We may never stand wholly outside the influences that made us. But we can learn to recognize more of them, question what once seemed inevitable, and take greater responsibility for what follows.

The narrator reaches the end of Watch without possessing a complete explanation of his life. He has learned enough to know that such completeness may never be available.

The watch remains. The crack remains. The past remains.

But the demand is gone.

And for the first time, home is somewhere he chooses to turn.