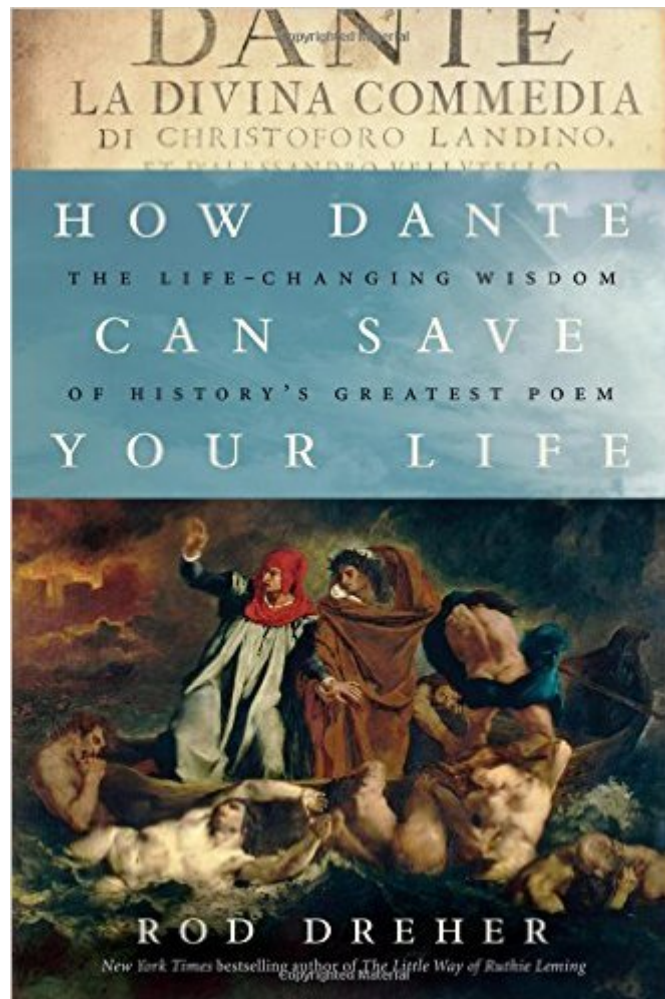


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# How Dante Can Save Your Life: The Life-Changing Wisdom Of History's Greatest Poem



## Synopsis

The opening lines of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri launched Rod Dreher on a journey that rescued him from exile and saved his life. Dreher found that the medieval poem offered him a surprisingly practical way of solving modern problems. Following the death of his little sister and the publication of his *New York Times* bestselling memoir *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*, Dreher found himself living in the small community of Starhill, Louisiana where he grew up. But instead of the fellowship he hoped to find, he discovered that fault lines within his family had deepened. Dreher spiraled into depression and a stress-related autoimmune disease. Doctors told Dreher that if he didn't find inner peace, he would destroy his health. Soon after, he came across *The Divine Comedy* in a bookstore and was enchanted by its first lines, which seemed to describe his own condition. In the months that followed, Dante helped Dreher understand the mistakes and mistaken beliefs that had torn him down and showed him that he had the power to change his life. Dreher knows firsthand the solace and strength that can be found in Dante's great work, and distills its wisdom for those who are lost in the dark wood of depression, struggling with failure (or success), wrestling with a crisis of faith, alienated from their families or communities, or otherwise enduring the sense of exile that is the human condition. Inspiring, revelatory, and packed with penetrating spiritual, moral, and psychological insights, *How Dante Can Save Your Life* is a book for people, both religious and secular, who find themselves searching for meaning and healing. Dante told his patron that he wrote his poem to bring readers from misery to happiness. It worked for Rod Dreher. Dante saved Rod Dreher's life—and in this book, Dreher shows you how Dante can save yours.

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## Customer Reviews

I follow Rod Dreher on Twitter, read his previous book *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*, and read a lot of what he writes for *The American Conservative*, so when he began blogging through *The Divine Comedy* I read his posts on it with great interest. Dante's *Comedy* is my favorite book and one I've read and reread for many years. When Dreher announced that the *Comedy* would be the subject of his next book I was elated, and preordered a copy. I couldn't disagree with the title: *How Dante Can Save Your Life*. He has certainly changed mine. I was not surprised, reading Dreher's columns, that he responded to it, too. *How Dante Can Save Your Life* picks up in the years following the events of his other memoir, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*, which chronicles his sister's fight with cancer. Following her death, Dreher had picked up and, after decades away from home, moved back to Louisiana, trying to reconnect and mend tattered relationships with his family. *Little Way* was the story of how he came to do that. *How Dante Can Save Your Life* is the story of how his attempt failed. Despite returning home, Dreher recounts that his relationships with family—especially his father and nieces—were terrible. I like Dreher a lot and value his opinions, but having read his work for several years now, he strikes me as a classic oversharer. Reading *Little Way*, I could only wonder, despite being moved to tears, what his family thought of such a soul-baring memoir. In my experience, a tell-all—even an affectionate, nostalgic tell-all—alienates people. This book gave me an answer: I showed Mike the manuscript of *Little Way* before I turned it in, and asked him to let me know if he wanted me to make any changes. He did not ask for changes, but as I learned later, the book displeased him greatly.

"*The Divine Comedy*" by Dante Alighieri is widely accepted to be one of the great works of human creativity, expressing universal truths about human nature. Anything that leads a reader to read "*Divine Comedy*" is a good thing. To the extent that this book, "*How Dante Can Save Your Life*" does that, it is useful. Beyond that, however, it is hard to sort out exactly what this book is. The body of each chapter weaves description and summary analysis of a selected canto or two of "*Divine Comedy*" with autobiographical passages on how that canto (allegedly) applied to the author's life. A text box of watered-down and not all that helpful self-help tips appears at the end of the chapter. Some credit is due the author for those portions that directly discuss "*Divine Comedy*" as they include interesting takes and ideas, especially in the "*Purgatorio*" and "*Paradiso*" parts. But I'm generally familiar with "*Divine Comedy*" -- I fear somewhat for the reader of this book who has not

read "Divine Comedy", as the content of this book seems to assume some level of familiarity even though it says none is assumed. So as an introduction to "Divine Comedy" to the unfamiliar, this book may work to a limited extent. But this book is more an over-sharing autobiography than anything else. The author apparently believes that his personal journey toward healing using "Divine Comedy" will serve as an example of how the reader can do the same. But this is an odd approach: "Divine Comedy" on its own beautifully accomplishes this already, in a way that applies to all humans and all manner of sin.

I purchased this book with high hopes. I have never read Dante and liked the idea of a personal journey through a piece of classic literature. The problem is that the journey was uncomfortably personal. Dreher is way too free with his family's history, grudges, conversations and failings. He comes to the conclusion that he is to love his family whether they show him love and acceptance or not, but I fail to see how this book will do anything but further the strain or sever those relationships. I also wonder how his therapist, Mike, and his priest, Father Matthew, feel about the book and the fact that their private conversations are in it. My biggest critique is that this book is 75% about Dreher and 25% about Dante. Dreher seems obsessed with how he thinks and reacts. Throughout the book, he uses narrative techniques to talk about himself: "I took a sip from the large plastic tumbler of ice water I kept with me at all times, since the Epstein-Barr virus left me perpetually thirsty" (p. 172). The book becomes less a testimony and more a personal narrative in which he is the hero. And he says as such (p. 219). This was distasteful. If people who talk about themselves all the time bug you, you might want to pass on this book. Dreher is the main character and everyone else--even Dante--only has a supporting role. Dreher's analysis of Dante, when it is allowed to muscle between Dreher's storytelling and introspection, is good. I wanted more of it. I really want to read The Divine Comedy, so there is that. Another problem with the book is that Dreher seems to have an epiphany every chapter. This is just unrealistic. He also seems to equate epiphany with growth and learning with change.

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