

The Book of Three Short Guide

The Book of Three by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The Book of Three is the first novel in the five-novel series, Prydain Chronicles.

Following in the tradition of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, Alexander creates modern fantasy out of the ancient Welsh myths of the Mabinogion, which date from the early Middle Ages, and the Arthurian traditions. Some of his characters are borrowed from these ancient tales, but others are wholly original creations. The reader follows the adventures of a young pig-keeper, Taran, who along with his friends—a princess, a harpist, and a wild twigcovered creature—attempt to rescue Hen Wen, the oracular pig of the wizard Dallben. On the mythic level the heroes encounter the dark lord of the underworld and meet the fairy folk who inhabit the hollow hills.

About the Author

Lloyd Alexander was born January 30, 1924, in Philadelphia, where he lived until graduating from high school. As a high school student, Alexander wanted to be a poet and devoted so much time to his poetry that the rest of his studies suffered. His father disapproved of his ambition and refused to fund his college education. Nor could he get a scholarship. Nevertheless, Alexander attended West Chester State Teacher's College in 1942 and Lafayette College in 1943, until leaving school for the military, where he was trained in military intelligence and sent to France. At the end of World War II, he stayed in Paris to attend the Sorbonne and there married Janine Denni.

Alexander returned to Philadelphia with his wife and her daughter and continued to write, first attempting young adult fantasy in 1963. While doing research for *The Time Cat* he stumbled across Welsh legends that he had liked as a boy and became obsessed with them. The five-novel series, *Prydain Chronicles*, his most popular work, resulted from his desire to write about those legends.

In 1959 Alexander received the Isaac Siegel Memorial Juvenile Award for the fictionalized biography *Border Hawk: August Bondi*. In 1969 he won the Newbery Medal for *The High King*, the final novel in the *Prydain* series. Subsequently he received the National Book Award for *The Marvelous Misadventures of Sebastian* and was a National Book Award nominee for *The First Two Lives of Lukas-Kasha* in 1979; both of these novels were written for juveniles.



Characters

Lloyd Alexander is unusually strong in characterization. Although the Chronicles of Prydain are fantasy, with a few conventionally archetypal roles, such as the wizard and the evil lord of the underworld, most of his major characters are unique and unforgettable individuals. Taran is a sympathetic protagonist, a naturally kind and gentle boy but complex in his restless, ambitious nature which is passionately intent on achieving great deeds. He complains of his servile job but is quick to act fearlessly and unselfishly when he discovers that his charge, Hen Wen, is missing.

His three companions in his quest are all distinctive individuals. The Princess Eilonwy is a talkative girl with a flair for the unexpected analogy.

When she is insulted, she retorts, "calling me those horrid names, that's like putting caterpillars in somebody's hair." A bold and energetic person, she completely defies the stereotype of the passive, quietly acquiescent female.

Her common sense, her quick eye for the task at hand, along with her inspiration for the imaginative simile endear her to the reader. Also strongly characterized is the bard, Fflewddr Fflam, possessor of a sensitive harp that responds to his words. With his gift for blarney, the bard loves to exaggerate, but his truthful harp intervenes by snapping a string everytime he speaks other than the literal truth.

Many a high-flying hyperbole is abruptly broken off by the twang of a broken string.

The third companion is probably the most original creation, and certainly the hardest to categorize. When he first appears and introduces himself as "Gurgi," he is described as looking like a walking beaver dam, covered with twigs and leaves. But he speaks as a human; in fact, his speech is lyrically enhanced with spontaneous rhymes and alliterations. Always hungry, Gurgi plaintively asserts his desire for "munchings and crunchings." Fiercely loyal to Taran, he fights for him "with slashings and gashings," but always with due concern for his "poor tender head." Is he human? As one character puts it, he is a "shaggy what-is-it." But Gurgi combines the loveliness of a huge furry pet with the staunch dependability of a close and loving friend.

Setting

The Book of Three opens at Caer Dallben, a farm run by the enchanter Dallben, whose animals include an acclaimed oracular pig, named Hen Wen.

When Hen Wen disappears, Taran defies Dallben's orders and leaves the farm to search for him. Taran's quest leads him to Spiral Castle, the home of the evil Achren; to the underground Kingdom of Tylwyth Teg; to Caer Dathyl, home of the heroic Lord Gwydion; and eventually back home. The book's only illustration is a map of the Land of Prydain. Alexander is very self-conscious of his setting, and his characters are constantly drawing maps or discussing their whereabouts.

Social Concerns

This work introduces several social concerns which remain central throughout the series. Especially significant is the notion of social equality.

The greatness of the individual has nothing to do with parentage, family, or social class. The protagonist is Taran, a lowly foundling who is an Assistant Pig-Keeper with dreams of becoming a renowned hero. That he indeed eventually becomes king is entirely a matter of his own personal qualities, not of social standing or even of education. Like the boy Arthur, he is raised by a wizard, but unlike Merlin, Dollben does not teach Taran to become a king.

Ecology is also a concern in this novel, where the threats of the evil Arawn are represented in his abuses of the environment. In contrast to this destructive god of the underworld is the depiction of the gentle Medwyn, who lives in a beautiful prelapsarian valley, in peace and harmony with nature and animal life. Medwyn's valley exemplifies the positive ideal.

Still another concern is the role of women. The Princess Eilonwy is an exuberant and independent young woman who repeatedly asserts her ability to act and to achieve, a role remarkable for a book written in the early 1960s. Witty as well as forceful, she has no sympathy with the slightest hint of feminine inferiority.



Social Sensitivity

The Book of Three introduces social concerns that remain central throughout the Prydain Chronicles. Especially significant is the notion of social equality. The greatness of the individual has nothing to do with parents, family, or social class. The protagonist, Taran, a foundling, is a lowly assistant pigkeeper who dreams of becoming a renowned hero. That he indeed eventually becomes king is entirely a matter of his personal qualities, not a result of social standing or education. Like King Arthur, he is raised by a wizard, but unlike Merlin, Dallben does not teach Taran to become a king.

Ecology is also a concern of Alexander.

The threats of the evil Arawn are represented in his abuses of the environment.

In contrast to the destructive god of the underworld, the gentle Medwyn lives in a beautiful, idyllic valley in peace and harmony with nature and animal life.

Medwyn's valley exemplifies the positive ideal.

Alexander successfully avoids stereotyping his characters in gender roles.

The Princess Eilonwy is an exuberant and independent young woman who repeatedly asserts her ability to act and to achieve. Witty as well as forceful, she has little patience with the concept of female inferiority.



Techniques

Alexander employs a variety of techniques in this literarily sophisticated series. One of the most effective and pervasive is his skillful blending of mythic and realistic materials. The main episodes in his plot are based on tales from Welsh mythology, especially the Mabinogion. Some of his characters are borrowed from these ancient tales, but others are wholly original creations. On the one hand, on the mythic level one encounters the dark lord of the underworld and meets the fairy folk who inhabit the hollow hills.

On the other, however, one follows the adventures of a young pig-keeper with his friends — a princess, a harpist, and a wild twiggy creature who eludes both categories.

Another successful technique is humor. Even in the moments of danger and tension, a comic tone and perspective lighten the narrative. Much of the humor is in the dialogue, as in the delightfully strained similes of Eilonwy and the irrepressible rhymes of Gurgi.

Alexander also incorporates humor in situations, frequently involving incongruities.

Still another technique is the use of characters as foils. Taran who wants desperately to become a ruler is offset by Eilonwy, a princess who wants instead to be free of her lofty role in order to have adventures. Dollben, the kind wizard who has raised Taran from infancy, is countered by Arawn, the evil god with wizardly powers who aims to destroy all who stand in his way.



Literary Qualities

Alexander employs a variety of techniques in this sophisticated fantasy series. One of the most pervasive is his skillful blending of mythic and realistic materials. The main episodes are based on tales from Welsh mythology, but these merely provide a jumping-off point for Alexander's own story. In his Author's Note, he comments, "This chronicle of the Land of Prydain is not a retelling or retranslation of Welsh mythology . . . The inspiration for it comes from that magnificent land and its legends; but essentially, Prydain is a country existing only in the imagination."

Alexander is adept in his use of humor.

Even moments of danger and tension are lightened by a comic tone and perspective. Much of the humor is in the dialogue, as in the delightfully strained similes of Eilonwy and the irrepressible rhymes of Gurgi. Alexander also incorporates humor in situations frequently involving conflict.

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Themes

One of the central themes of the Chronicles introduced in this work is the search for identity. Taran, the protagonist, is a lowly farm hand and a foundling, with no knowledge of his parents. His adventures throughout the series concern his attempts to discover the identity of his parentage, and thereby of himself. Taran's growing-up leads to self-discovery but in surprising ways, as he eventually comes to learn that authentic identity is not at all a matter of descent. A major theme closely related to the quest for identity is the nature of heroism. The boy Taran equates heroism with bold deeds on the field of battle and would gladly abandon his pig-keeping chores in favor of wielding a sword against an enemy. When Hen Wen, the oracular pig in his care, suddenly disappears, however, he immediately races off in search of her without even recognizing that his behavior in so doing is heroic.

Taran slowly comes to realize that heroism is not limited to aggressive actions or even to physical prowess, but that wisdom, humility, and compassion are heroic qualities superior even to courage in battle.

Also related to the identity theme is the desire for power. Taran, along with several other characters, discovers that there is a danger inherent in seeking power or even fame. Such achievements are not without a destructive side. Discerning the effects of the drive for power in both noble and tyrannical figures, Taran modifies his own ambitions and begins to value the homely virtues of quiet farm life. He also proves his own leadership abilities as he succeeds in his difficult mission not only to recover the pig but also to warn the Prince Gwydion of the approach of the dreaded Horned King.

Key Questions

1. How does Alexander use comedy? Does it enhance the novel or distract the reader from its serious themes?
2. What is the significance of the title?
3. What are Taran's heroic qualities? Is he a true hero?
4. How does Princess Eilonwy's use of analogies enhance or detract from the story and themes?
5. Compare Gurgi's human and nonhuman characteristics.
6. Discuss Taran's evolving maturity. What would you expect of him in future novels?



Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss Alexander's use of comedy. Do you think it enhances the novel or distracts from its more serious themes?
2. What is the significance of the title? 3. What is your conception of a hero? What are some of the heroic qualities inherent in Taran's character? Do you agree with Alexander's portrayal of Taran as a hero?
4. Discuss Princess Eilonwy's use of analogies. What are some examples from the book? Why is this figure of speech used?
5. What is the significance of Fflewddr Fflam's harp?
6. Gurgi is described by one of the characters as a "shaggy what-is-it," yet he has some distinctly human attributes as well. What are some of these qualities?
7. What are the dangers of too much power? Does Taran fall prey to the allure of power?
8. What is a foil? How does Alexander make use of such characters in his novel?
9. How does Taran mature throughout the novel? Does the way he feels when he returns to Caer Dallben reflect this maturity?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the tradition of the myth paying particular attention to Arthurian legends and the Mabinogion. In what ways does Alexander incorporate mythic themes and devices into his narrative?
2. Read J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and compare it with *The Book of Three*. Do the characters resemble one another? Are there any common themes?
3. Taran searches for "identity" in the novel. Analyze and describe the change in Taran's conception of identity. Why is he so concerned with finding his parents? What is your definition of identity?
4. Discuss Alexander's portrayal of Princess Eilonwy. How does she differ from traditional female characters in myth? How is she similar?
5. What is an archetype? Discuss the role of archetypes in myth and apply your knowledge to *The Book of Three*. What characters in the novel are archetypes and why?
6. Read some of the other novels in the *Prydain Chronicles*. How do they differ from the first volume? Is Alexander consistent in his portrayal of Taran and the other characters? Are there any clues in *The Book of Three* as to what is going to happen in the future volumes?

Literary Precedents

In his creation of modern fantasy out of ancient myths in the Mabinogion, Alexander is writing in the tradition of Kenneth Morris and Evangeline Walton. Unlike them, however, he uses the myths as a jumping off point for his own original story. The Arthurian tradition is also an influence in the episode involving Taran's discovery of an enchanted sword. Probably the most significant precedent is J. R. R. Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* contains some of the same features as the *Prydain Chronicles*. The ominous winged gwythaints, for example, resemble the ring wraiths in Tolkien's saga of Middle Earth, and some of the characters, such as the woodsy Gurgi and the king of the Fair Folk resemble the ents and the elves. A somewhat less specific precedent can be found in the *Narnia Chronicles* of C. S. Lewis, which also feature youthful protagonists who find themselves becoming kings and queens.

For Further Reference

The Mabinogion and other Medieval Welsh Tales, translated by Patrick K. Ford. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. These tales are Alexander's source for some of his characters.

Weber, Rosemary. "Lloyd Alexander." Twentieth-Century Children's Writers, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick. New York: St. Martin's, 1978. This article contains information about the author's life and works.

Related Titles

In the remaining books of the Prydain Chronicles Taran's search for his true identity continues as a central theme, but further themes are also introduced.

In *The Black Cauldron*, the sense of danger is more immediate, the perception of evil more disturbing. In this novel the imminent danger to all humanity is the Black Cauldron, a vessel that permits the Dark Lord to bring his own dead soldiers back to life again. A heroic young bard and a princely warrior sacrifice themselves in the struggle against the powers of the cauldron. Taran finds that he is no longer an innocent living a sheltered rural life but that he must deal with the pervasive presence of evil. He and his companions learn that self sacrifice may be necessary to avoid corruption.

In *The Castle of Llyr* the theme of power is explored in a variety of ways. The Princess Eilonwy proves her inner strength by destroying the potentially evil book of power although she is aware that the book would also assure her of sensational achievements otherwise unattainable. In addition, the new character, Achren the sorceress, seeks power through exploitation of others. Alexander also introduces a new foil to Taran in the person of Prince Rhun. While Taran dreams of being a king and a warrior, Rhun, already a prince, acts like a child without responsibility and repeatedly makes silly remarks and even sillier decisions.

Taran Wanderer, the fourth book in the series, is the most serious in tone and deals with the identity theme in an introspective and psychological manner. Although the irrepressible Gurgi is present, the Princess Eilonwy is not, and her absence contributes to the darkness of mood. As Taran enters manhood, he encounters a series of male figures who teach and influence him. He especially enjoys his relationship with the kind and gifted Andrew Clay Shaper. Most importantly he meets an elderly shepherd, Craddac, who claims to be his father. Without questioning the shepherd's story, the former pig-keeper who dreamed of becoming a king now submits to what he accepts as his destiny to be an impoverished shepherd.

Events transpire differently, but the experience is a lesson in humility for the young man.

In the Newbery Award-winning final volume, *The High King*, Taran finally learns that he is heir to the throne.

Alexander adds further themes and techniques, making this the most complex of the five novels. The narrative relates a major last battle to destroy the evil forces of Arawn. Here Alexander introduces a motif from the Arthurian myth that has been adapted by several other fantasy writers, including C. S. Lewis in the *Narnia Chronicles* and J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Alexander, however, provides a more detailed account of the actual fighting, making it a very exciting event. The theme of self-sacrifice returns here, with the bard Fflewdder Fflam burning his beloved harp to provide warmth for his friends and Eilonwy using her



magic bauble to light up the valley where the cauldron-forces of Arawn wait. The sadness of departure follows the victory in battle. The age of magic has now come to an end, and Taran must assume his human kingship with a merely human kingdom. All the peoples of the fairy world, including Gurgi and Fflam and even the wizard Dollben, must now leave, bidding farewell to the young king.

The chronicles end with this mature realization that every victory entails losses.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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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

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data



Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994