

The El Dorado Adventure Short Guide

The El Dorado Adventure by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The second in the five-book series, *The El Dorado Adventure* continues the exciting experiences of Miss Vesper Holly, daughter of deceased anthropologist Benjamin Rittenhouse Holly. Narrated by Vesper's guardian Brinnie, the plot involves Vesper and Brinnie's trip to El Dorado, where the two encounter Dr. Helvitus, their adversary in *The Illyrian Adventure*. As in the previous book, Vesper must foil the schemes of Helvitus, who now plans to exploit the Chirican Indians by taking their land and destroying their heritage. During the course of the adventure, Vesper and Brinnie make friends with an assortment of unusual characters and become involved with the Chiricans and their problems. Brinnie is deceived by the surface appearance of one handsome young man, while Vesper is attracted to another. The book ends with good triumphing over evil, although as usual, Dr. Helvitus escapes to scheme for later adventures.

About the Author

Born January 30, 1924, to stockbroker/importer Alan Audley Alexander and his wife Edna Chudley Alexander in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the young Lloyd Alexander was a lover of stories, especially tales from Greek and Celtic mythology. Alexander, who declared from age fifteen that he wanted to write poetry, worked as a messenger boy in a bank until he could afford tuition to West Chester State Teacher's College. In 1942, at the end of only one semester of college, Alexander left his studies for a more adventurous life in the army. After a few unexciting months in Texas, he was assigned to a military intelligence training center in Maryland. Shipped to Wales, Alexander discovered "an enchanted world," one where "I recognized faces from all the hero tales of my childhood Not until years afterwards did I realize I had been given a glimpse of another enchanted kingdom" (*My Love Affair with Music*, 1960).

In Paris, Alexander became first an interpreter and then a member of a counterintelligence unit. Receiving his discharge while still in France, he attended Paris' Sorbonne University, where he met his future wife, Janine Denni. After receiving his degree from the Sorbonne, Alexander returned to Pennsylvania with Janine and her young daughter Madeline.

Working at various jobs—cartoonist, advertising writer, layout artist, and associate editor—to support his young family, Alexander completed three rejected novels before his first publication *And Let the Credit Go* (1955), an anecdotal work which pokes fun at his frustration with writing. This achievement was quickly followed by three more works—all of which were written for adults: *My Five Tigers* (1956), *Janine Is French* (1958), and *My Love Affair with Music* (1960).

Research for his first young adult novel, *Time Cat* (1963), led Alexander to the romantic quest series that brought him national recognition. Reading Welsh mythology for an episode in his time-travel fantasy, Alexander felt as if he had "stumbled into an enchanted cavern lost since boyhood." Although Welsh mythology gave Alexander the roots of his *Prydain Chronicles*, he eventually "invented" his own mythology to produce *The Book of Three* (1964), the first in a five-book fantasy series. The quests of the protagonists of the *Prydain Chronicles*, Assistant Pig-Keeper Taran and Princess Eilonwy, proved to be successful with both reading public and critics. *The Book of Three*, which received an American Library Association notable book citation, was followed by *The Black Cauldron* (1965), recipient of the Newbery Honor Book Award. The series concludes with *The Castle of Llyr* (1966), *Taran Wanderer* (1967), and *The High King* (1968), a 1969 Newbery Medal winner.

From 1965 to 1977, Alexander wrote three children's books set in Prydain.

These include *Coll and His White Pig* (1965), *The Truthful Harp* (1967), and *The Foundling and Other Tales of Prydain* (1973). Another highly acclaimed work written during this period is *The Marvelous Misadventures of Sebastian* (1970), for which Alexander received the National Book Award in 1971.



Alexander's Westmark trilogy reached the reading public in 1981, with the publication of *Westmark*, the first of the series. *Westmark* was followed by *The Kestrel* (1982) and *The Beggar Queen* (1984). Although set in the imaginary land Westmark, the novels are not fantasy; instead, they explore the brutalizing effects of war and the political evolution of an imaginary land and its people. Praised by reviewers for inventive plots and subtleties of style, each work has received an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults citation. *The Kestrel* and *The Beggar Queen* also received Parents Choice Awards.

While the Westmark trilogy "delves into the wide grey area between good and evil," Alexander's most recent works, the Vesper Holly series, are lighter reading. Alexander states that the series "came about as an attempt to heal my own spirits after the anguished dilemmas raised in the Westmark Trilogy" and were "intended as entertainment for the author as much as anyone, with a gloriously fearless heroine, fiendish villains, outrageous melodrama in the grand tradition of the Victorian thriller and penny-dreadful." Humorous as well as melodramatic adventures, the books are set in "imaginary places that seem real."

In spite of the lighter tone of his recent books, Alexander continues to use favorite themes from earlier works; in addition, he stresses feminist issues.

The first in the series, *The Illyrian Adventure* (1986), received the Parents Choice Award.

Setting

The *El Dorado Adventure*, like all the *Vesper Holly* books, is set during the Victorian era, either in the United States, in an imaginary country, or in both. The Victorian setting is important because Vesper is not a stereotypical young lady of the period. Her adventures and her behavior are directly opposed to those expected of a wellbrought-up young lady from Philadelphia.

The action in *The El Dorado Adventure*, which takes place in 1872, begins at the Holly estate in Strafford, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, and quickly moves to the imaginary El Dorado, a country similar to Panama, in Central America. At the beginning of the story, Vesper learns that she has inherited property near Puerto Palmas, a river port in El Dorado. Intrigued by the idea of owning a volcano, Vesper convinces her guardian Brinnie that he needs a relaxing ocean voyage to Central America. Although the voyage is relaxing, El Dorado is not, since Vesper and Brinnie are soon lost in the vast jungle, running from Alain de Rochefort and Dr. Helvitus, who plan to dig a canal across the isthmus on Vesper's property. Vesper objects to a canal on her land, which morally, if not legally, belongs to the Chirican Indians; she must try to save Brinnie and herself from an untimely death, the Chiricans from exploitation, and the Chirican culture from extinction.



Social Sensitivity

The El Dorado Adventure stresses issues which have concerned readers of any era: how characters attain personal growth, and how societies reward good and punish evil. In The El Dorado Adventure, Vesper, Acharro, and de Rochefort attain personal growth; Helvitus and his henchmen are punished and the Chiricans and their friends are rewarded. In recent years, stories in which less sophisticated cultures are exploited, in which environmental issues are explored, in which women are active rather than acted upon, have become common. In The El Dorado Adventure, the Chiricans overcome their exploitation, El Dorado maintains its environmental integrity, and Vesper and the Chirican women act to save themselves and their people.

While it is true that the character of the girl detective is not new to adolescent literature, Vesper is more than a Nancy Drew figure. Rarely does Nancy Drew solve mysteries through her intellect; more often, coincidence is involved in the conclusion of the mystery. As Nancy Drew embodied the ideal of the independent girl of the early twentieth century, so does Vesper embody the ideal of the late twentieth century.



Literary Qualities

The Vesper Holly series follows established precedents in literary tradition. In all five books, Alexander uses the mystery pattern set by Conan Doyle in the most famous of all Victorian mystery series, Sherlock Holmes.

Like Holmes, Vesper solves mysteries with her powers of observation and her intellect. As Holmes is challenged by that Napoleon of crime, Professor Moriarty, so is Vesper challenged by Dr. Helvitus. Like Watson, her guardian Brinnie is the first-person naive narrator of the adventures. Because Alexander employs a naive narrator, he is able to drop clues, build suspense, and amuse the reader at the same time.

Much of the humor in all the Vesper Holly books comes from Brinnie's understatement and stilted language. For example, in *The El Dorado Adventure*, while being kidnapped, Brinnie worries about hygiene: One of the ruffians had thrust Vesper's bandanna into her mouth.

Another forced some vile rag into my own—I dreaded to think it might be his handkerchief. Clearly, these were men without scruples or sense of human decency.

Alexander's love of Charles Dickens is reflected in the Vesper Holly series, just as his reading of mythology is reflected in his *Prydain Chronicles*. Alexander states that "Dickens was one of many authors who helped me grow up." A master writer, Charles Dickens created the social melodrama by combining melodrama and social criticism, thereby giving readers "the pleasures of seeing the follies of men and institutions" and "the satisfaction of witnessing the triumph of virtue and the punishment of vice" (John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, 1976).

Alexander gives young readers these same pleasures and satisfactions in the Vesper Holly series. In each book, virtue is rewarded and vice is punished.

Each book contains characters (for example, Slider and Smiler of *The El Dorado Adventure*) who are as humorously grotesque as such Dickens characters as Mr. Skimpole and Mrs. Jelleby of *Bleak House*. Brinnie, Vesper's guardian, exhibits some of the same naive behaviors of Mr. Jarndyce, guardian of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*.

Alexander neglects neither style nor technique in the series. Themes are cleverly reinforced by language or events. For example, in *The El Dorado Adventure*, when Dr. Helvitus plots revenge, he mentions his plan to reopen the Corinto opera house with the the opera *Rigoletto*, which focuses on the revenge of its protagonist. Later, when Helvitus revenges himself on Vesper and Brinnie, Vesper realizes that Helvitus, "with delicate irony," has imprisoned them in the prompter's box of the Corinto opera house.



Themes and Characters

Although the Vesper Holly series is melodrama, recurring characters are more fully developed than one might expect of a genre which tends to stereotype characters. The protagonist, sixteen-year-old Vesper Holly, may have waist-length marmalade-colored hair and green eyes, but she also has "the digestive talents of a goat and the mind of a chess master." Vesper, who is accomplished in art, music, science and mathematics, often uses "her own special mixture of cajolery, browbeating and willpower" to get her way, especially when dealing with Brinnie, her guardian. Because Vesper is an excellent judge of character and possesses a well-developed sense of social justice, she uses her intelligence to solve mysteries, outfoxing the wicked and championing the good. It is through Vesper, who is feminine and logical, compassionate and aggressive, that Alexander emphasizes his profeminist theme.

Vesper's guardians are Professor Brinton Garrett and his wife Mary.

Although Mary plays only a minor role in *The El Dorado Adventure*, Brinnie is one of the three major characters. A proper Victorian, Brinnie judges people by class or education; the best are those who look, speak, and act like Philadelphians. Because Brinnie is class conscious, Alexander can use him to point out prejudice or bigotry. Nevertheless, once Brinnie does understand where good and evil lie, he is a staunch supporter of good. Fiercely protective of Vesper, Brinnie rushes in where wise men fear to tread; he even jumps into an open fissure caused by an earthquake to rescue her.

All melodramas must have a villain, and in the Vesper Holly series, the recurring villain is Dr. Desmond Helvitus, a man whose morals are so deplorable even his name suggests his ultimate destination. Vesper and Brinnie first meet and temporarily defeat Dr.

Helvitus in *The Illyrian Adventure*, but Helvitus is a master criminal. Described by Brinnie as a man of "scholarly achievement" and "incalculable wealth, of high academic qualifications in science, . . . technology," and "classical antiquities," Helvitus is also a gourmet cook, an opera lover, and "the most reprehensible of archvillains." In *The El Dorado Adventure*, Helvitus masterminds a plot to build a canal which will increase his own wealth and destroy the Chiricans' pre-Columbian civilization. Oil deposits discovered on the property make his schemes even more profitable.

The diabolical Helvitus also plots revenge. Because his attempt to take over Illyria was foiled by Vesper and Brinnie, mere death will not suffice.

Helvitus devises a "trap of the spirit" by manipulating their minds and emotions. Twice he imprisons them, allows them to escape, and then recaptures them just as Vesper and Brinnie believe they are free.

The second villain, Alain de Rochefort, plots a twist on Helvitus' revenge theme: this time Helvitus is the victim.



A French engineer blackmailed by Dr.

Helvitus to construct the El Dorado Canal, de Rochefort seems to be as evil as Helvitus; subsequent events prove him to be morally weak rather than morally depraved. Although de Rochefort is aware that the geologist report on the oil deposits also states that Ocotalpa is an active volcano, he does not tell Helvitus. When Ocotalpa erupts, Helvitus's schemes are foiled.

Two recurring characters who make their first appearance in *The El Dorado Adventure* are the twins, Slider and Smiler, the pilot and the chief engineer respectively on the *Libertador*, a riverboat on the Culebra River in El Dorado. Brinnie feels the twins are disreputable at best, because they left the United States after a "small judicial misunderstanding," but Vesper, who has an unerring eye for good guys, quickly wins their respect and loyalty.

Master of the *Libertador*, Captain Blazer O'Hara, is an Irishman who fled County Mayo with English troopers hot on his heels. When Brinnie insists that a canal would make El Dorado an economic power in Central America, Blazer expresses another theme in *The El Dorado Adventure*: money and power gained at the expense of people and the environment are too costly to be worth pursuing.

Blazer's son by marriage to a Chirican princess is handsome young Acharro, chief of the tribe. Alexander stresses the themes of prejudice and sexual bigotry through the conversations among Brinnie, Vesper, and Acharro. Brinnie thinks Acharro is a savage until he speaks perfect English. Although Brinnie does note that Acharro "conveyed the same calm authority as that of our oldest Philadelphia families," he does not see that Vesper finds Acharro attractive. Acharro may be a Cambridge man, but he is still an Indian. Vesper thinks the male Acharro is chauvinistic; Acharro thinks the female Vesper cannot be logical. When Acharro accepts Vesper's plan to defeat Helvitus, each learns not to make assumptions based on stereotypes.

Alexander's themes about prejudice and feminism are reinforced with the introduction of Suncha, the Chirican school mistress. Suncha informs Vesper and Brinnie that the superior cloth she is wearing was woven by the women of her village, not the men as Brinnie assumes. The men, who have been taught by Acharro to release their aggression on the cricket field instead of the battlefield, never work: "and when they are not playing they sit talking about matches won or lost. They are a little foolish. They are, after all, men." Ironically, when Vesper and Brinnie are held captive by Dr. Helvitus, it is Suncha and the village women who save them, not the brave warriors who have traditionally refused these same women a voice in the tribal council.



Topics for Discussion

1. How is Vesper atypical of young women of the Victorian era?
2. Describe Vesper's relationship with her guardians, especially with Brinnie.
3. Alexander's use of Brinnie as narrator is a way to build suspense. How would the story change if Vesper were the narrator?
4. Captain Blazer O'Hara compares the Chirican Indians to "croppies."

What is a croppy boy? Why would O'Hara, an Irishman, empathize with the Chiricans?

5. Vesper describes some of the horrors of the women's suffrage movement in America to Acharro. What was the suffrage movement? How is it important to the story? To the Chirican women?
6. How are Vesper, Brinnie and Acharro guilty of making prejudgments?

How are these prejudgments resolved?

7. Which characters in the story are static? Which ones are dynamic? How and why do the dynamic characters change?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The El Dorado Adventure is a melodrama. Look up the term "melodrama" in two different books of literary terms.

Compare the definitions to the text of The El Dorado Adventure. How does it meet the definitions? How does it differ?

2. Read one of the Sherlock Holmes mystery novels. Compare and contrast the characters (particularly Vesper, Brinnie, and Dr. Helvitus), the method of narration, and the method of mystery-solving to those in the Holmes story.

3. Vesper Holly is a feminist. Research the women's suffrage movement in the United States in the nineteenth century as well as in the twentieth century. How are the movement and the issues used in the text of The El Dorado Adventure?

4. Brinnie is a first-person naive narrator. Look up the terms "first person narrator," "naive narrator," and "third person limited narrator" in two different books of literary terms. Read another mystery—preferably one with a first-person protagonist who narrates his or her own story. Compare this method of narration with The El Dorado Adventure. Why is the form of narration important to the plot, characters, and conclusion of the text?

5. In The Philadelphia Adventure, Vesper Holly is twenty years old. Read the book and then write an essay which discusses the changes in her character since The El Dorado Adventure. What experiences and people have brought about these changes?

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May, Jill P. *Lloyd Alexander*. Boston: Twayne, 1991. Provides a short biography and critical commentary on Alexander's important works.

Turner, Michael O. *The Prydain Companion: A Reference Guide to Lloyd Alexander's Prydain Chronicles*. New York: Greenwood, 1989. A useful compendium of terms, place names, and commentary.

Related Titles

The El Dorado Adventure is the second of four other adventure books in the series. These include The Illyrian Adventure, The Drackenberg Adventure, The Jedera Adventure, and The Philadelphia Adventure.

The Illyrian Adventure presents Vesper and Brinnie's trip to Illyria during an economic and political situation similar to that between Greece and Turkey at the end of the Ottoman Empire. After she finds an archaeological treasure, Vesper makes peace between the two opposing cultures but gains the lasting enmity of Dr. Helvitus, whose schemes of economic exploitation are spoiled.

In The Drackenberg Adventure, Vesper, Brinnie, and Brinnie's wife Mary visit the Grand Duchy of Drackenberg, a quasi-German province in Europe. During the diamond jubilee celebration of Drackenberg's ruler, Vesper discovers that Dr. Helvitus is plotting against the grand duchess with her nephew and heir. Vesper solves Drackenberg's problems with help from a roving gypsy band and from Mary, who is much braver and more capable than Brinnie had ever imagined.

The Jedera Adventure takes place in North Africa where Vesper and Brinnie travel to return a priceless book loaned to Vesper's father before his death.

During their adventure, Vesper and Brinnie run into Slider and Smiler of The El Dorado Adventure, who inform them that Vesper's friend Acharro is well, although missing Vesper, and that de Rochefort, a reformed character, has married Suncha. After being sold in the slave market and being rescued by a mysterious blue-skinned desert sheik, Vesper helps to overthrow Dr. Helvitus and establish a new and more benign government in the walled city Bel-Saaba.

In The Philadelphia Adventure, during the Centennial Exposition of 1876, Vesper is approached by President Grant to rescue two children in the care of the Emperor of Brazil, who is visiting Philadelphia. Joined by her new love interest, Toby Passvant, twenty-year-old Vesper, with Brinnie, Mary, and the twins Slider and Smiler, challenges and once more defeats the perpetrator of the plot, Dr. Helvitus.

While the most obviously related titles are those in the Vesper Holly series, The El Dorado Adventure does have some relation to Alexander's earlier series, the Prydain Chronicles. By creating an exciting, feminist heroine who will appeal to readers of the 1990s, Alexander has also created a protagonist who is as much a creature of fantasy as his characters in Prydain. Not only are the books set during the Victorian period—a time when even American women had few freedoms—but the protagonist is a very young woman who visits very conservative places.

Youthful readers need to be made aware that a king (The Illyrian Adventure), a patriarchal Indian tribe (The El Dorado Adventure), a grand duchess (The Drackenberg Adventure), a North African Muslim (The Jedera Adventure), and President Grant (The

Philadelphia Adventure) would be most unlikely to seek the help or take the advice of a sixteen-year-old girl, no matter how intelligent.



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