Elidor Short Guide

Elidor by Alan Garner

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Elidor is a fast-paced adventure story containing plenty of tension, conflict, and danger, as well as a unicorn, treasures, magic spells, and chase scenes.

The reader must remain alert because transitions occur quickly, and fantasy and the everyday intermingle. The story is a fantasy, but most of it takes place in the real world and deals with real problems and responsibilities. Garner's fantasy is tough and challenging. He uses several ancient myths with which the reader may or may not be familiar, and he brings these myths powerfully to life. In addition, Garner gives scientific explanations for some of the unusual things that happen in the book. In a sense he brings the worlds of myth and science together, just as he joins the worlds of Elidor and Manchester.

Runner-up for the 1965 Carnegie Medal, Elidor is a humorous book with interesting ideas. In the actions of Roland, the youngest brother, the reader sees how a young person whom other children consider too sensitive and imaginative can take initiative and assume responsibility. At times, a smart, imaginative child can triumph over more physical opponents. Elidor offers funny and ironic scenes of modem life; it parodies slow-witted, unimaginative adults, who cannot live without television and panic when home appliances go berserk. Perhaps the adults of this book, not the young people, live in a fantasy world.

About the Author

English author Alan Garner is rooted in the language, places, and myths of his birthplace. Born in Congleton, Cheshire, on October 17, 1934, to a family of country people and craftsmen, he grew up in the village of Alderley Edge, where his ancestors had lived for generations. His village, now a suburb of Manchester, took its name from a great, wooded escarpment, a landmark on the Cheshire plain. Garner spent many childhood days exploring the land around Alderley Edge and getting to know the people of the countryside. Several severe illnesses, including a yearlong bout with meningitis, forced him to spend months in bed, where he read extensively and developed his imagination.

Gamer attended Manchester Grammar School, then one of the most demanding schools in the country.

There he found that home and school did not mix, that his dialect and even his way of thinking were not acceptable at school. Nevertheless, he rose to the challenge of the competitive environment and became a champion sprinter. After service in the Royal Artillery, he became the first in his family to attend a university. He studied classical languages at Magdalen College, Oxford. He left before taking his degree, but not before deciding to devote his life to writing. Returning to Cheshire, Gamer moved into a medieval timbered house only a few miles from where he grew up. Here he has raised his own family.

The sense of dislocation and alienation that resulted from Garner's background and educational experience became a predominant theme in his fiction. At the same time, his love of the Cheshire landscape, folklore, and dialects figures prominently in his works. As his career progressed, he also became an expert on the history, prehistory, geography, and geology of the area.

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen and The Moon of Gomrath, Gamer's first two novels, are shaped by the environment of Alderley Edge. His third book,Elidor, is set in Manchester and its suburbs; the house where the main characters live is the house where Garner grew up. Once, while exploring Alderley Edge, he found a stone axe, the centerpiece of Red Shift.

His own ancestors make up the family in The Stone Book. Garner's interest in mythology and folklore has brought the Mabinogian, Arthurian tales, Scottish ballads, and other folk material into his stories; and his ear for language has made the treatment of dialect particularly strong in the later novels.

Like the work of many novelists, Garner's is autobiographical. His subjects are sometimes so mature that, after The Owl Service, critics and reviewers began to discuss whether Garner was still a children's writer. An idiosyncratic, unpredictable author, he is constantly experimenting with new techniques.

The tension between Gamer's background and education seems to have been resolved in the Stone Book quartet.

Many readers find this series to contain his finest writing, and, like his other works, it is enjoyed by adults and young people alike.

In 1967 The Owl Service won the Carnegie Medal for the year's outstanding children's book published in the United Kingdom and in 1968 the Guardian Award (given by the English newspaper The Guardian) for the year's outstanding work of fiction for children by a British author.

Setting

Because Elidor is a novel of parallel worlds, setting is a crucial element in its structure. One afternoon, the four Watson children, tired of waiting at the Manchester station for their suburban train, decide to take a walk, choosing their destination at random. A streetfinder dial selects Thursday Street, which turns out to be an area of old Victorian buildings—some bomb damaged, some just dilapidated—which are being torn down. At the center of this desolate neighborhood stands an old church scheduled for demolition. As they enter the church one by one, the children are transported, through the intervention of a mysterious fiddler, to the land of Elidor.

Elidor is a desolate, nearly ruined medieval kingdom, a parallel world which can be entered through "thin places" in the ordinary world. The thin places are borderline areas like slums, boundary lands, and demolition sites. While it coexists with our world, it is normally unseen—-just as our world is mysterious and unseen to it. Movement between the worlds is not easy, but the children of Manchester enter Elidor briefly, and men of Elidor pass through to Manchester, by getting a "fix" on a mind or on a tone. Although the languages of the two worlds are apparently the same, the cultures are different. Magic and the power of the mind are more influential in Elidor, while Manchester is ruled by technology and the laws of physics.

Although the land of Elidor is the major influence in the novel, most of the story is set in Manchester and its suburbs. This is a world of identical houses, boring streets, interchangable gardens, concrete toadstools, washing machines, televisions, and dull parents. Once back in this mundane world, the children feel safe, and all but Roland begin to deny Elidor and the demands it has placed upon them.

The two worlds, although separate, have some mutual influence. The children bring the treasures of Elidor home and hide them in an attempt to save the kingdom. The treasures themselves generate an overload of static electricity in the neighborhood. The children are told that the triumph over evil in Elidor would "not be without its echo" in their own world.

As the desolation of Elidor appears to make people desperate, so the banality of suburban Manchester is reflected in the self-centered, unimaginative inhabitants who ignore or deny the strange events that begin to occur after the arrival of the treasures. The "struggle between good and evil," a standard theme in fantasy fiction, takes place only in Elidor, and we see little of it. In the ordinary world, there is no such struggle (except within the consciences of the children). The ordinary world contains only the pressures to conform, to be comfortable, to keep oneself out of trouble. As a result, the children deny Elidor until it is almost too late to act.

At second glance, the two worlds— Elidor and Manchester—are not really so different after all. The cold of Elidor matches the bleakness of ruined neighborhoods and the coldness of the respectable suburbs with their doors and windows closed to the outside. The sinister stone circles and magical mounds of Elidor are echoed in the empty church

and eerie stone rubble of the slums. We are confronted with two kinds of wastelands. The two worlds touch each other, but are now at odds. Only the children can resolve the tension.

For young American readers, the ordinary, everyday setting of Manchester may introduce more problems of understanding than the magical kingdom of Elidor. They may need to be told some things that are familiar to English readers. For instance, English children would naturally be attending different schools throughout the city, and using public transportation to get to and from school. Their "tea" is the same as our supper—the evening meal for children.

"Revising" is studying, "flats" are apartments, "queues" are lines of waiting people, and houses commonly have names. In the 1960s, when the book was written, many English cities were still rebuilding areas damaged by World War II. Finally, many American children are not familiar with prehistoric sites and may need pictures and explanations of dolmens, stone circles, and mounds.

Social Sensitivity

When Elidor was first published, Library Journal suggested it for grades five through seven, but it is not always easy to say what age group Garner's novels are written for. Some critics suggest that he writes for adults, but Garner himself has stated that his early books were written with young people of ages ten to eighteen in mind. Gamer has stated that he attempts to create works with several layers of meaning so that they can be read and enjoyed by young people of various ages.

When Elidor was published, some thought it might be "too terrifying" for young people. Although the novel has some frightening scenes, it does not seem terrifying by today's standards.

Readers may need to discuss the implications of the downbeat ending, which some find depressing.

Literary Qualities

Garner uses a concentrated, poetic style, moving deftly from scene to scene and world to world. The dialogue is terse, with few explanations; and sometimes the reader must draw inferences to fill in the gaps. Gamer effectively uses concrete words to emphasize dualities in his story, especially light and shadow.

Much of the novel's power lies in the myths which Garner integrates into the story. The epigraph, "Childe Rowland to the Dark Tower came—," suggests the Scottish ballad, in which Childe Rowland, guided by Merlin, enters elfland to rescue his older sister, Burd Ellen, who has been abducted by fairies.

Roland Watson, in our story, enters Elidor to rescue his sister Helen and his brothers. The Mound of Vandwy, in which they are imprisoned, is analogous to the Dark Tower of Childe Rowland.

The four treasures of Elidor and the names of the four castles come from Celtic mythology. According to these myths, the Tuatha De Danaan came to Ireland from the cities of Falias, Findias, Murias, and Gorias, and from the islands in the sea. With them they brought four treasures: the spear of Lug, the cauldron of Dagda, the sword of Nuada, and the stone of Fal. These are the same magical treasures that the children find in the mound and take home with them, transformed into a length of iron railing, a cracked cup, two pieces of lath nailed together, and a keystone from the church. The novel's title comes from the medieval fairy story, "Elidor and the Golden Ball," in which Elidor is the name of a person, not a place.

The treasures and the land of Elidor also echo the Grail legend of Arthurian tradition. The cauldron or cup reminds us of the Grail, and the other treasures also have roles in that legend. Elidor is the Waste Land, and Malebron the king with the wound that does not heal.

Roland is the knight on the Grail quest; he is the one who can heal the king and the land. The standing stones, so difficult to escape, may represent the Chapel Perilous, and Elidor also proves to be a Grail Castle (entered through the deserted church).

The unicorn is found in a number of legends, but in the final scene, with Helen cradling the unicorn Findhorn in her lap, we see an image from medieval Christian lore: the lady and the unicorn.

According to the story, the unicorn is so fierce and elusive that no hunter can ever capture it. But if a virgin is sent into the forest, the unicorn will be so attracted by her purity that it will lay its head in her lap, making itself easy prey for the hunters. This legend, with its themes of purity and sacrifice, reminded medieval Christians of Christ. In Elidor, Findhorn must be sacrificed, but it is the song of Findhorn that restores light to Elidor. Findhorn is apparently like the legendary swan that sings only at its death.

Garner's intent is not to retell the myths or represent traditional stories in modern form. Instead, he draws upon myth to add depth and power to his story. As long as young readers sense the power of the myths, it is not crucial for them to know the original sources.

Themes and Characters

A common criticism of Elidor is that, while the setting and plot are absorbing, the characters are shallow, stereotypical, and uninteresting. Although there is little depth of characterization, the children do have certain individual traits. In addition, Gamer makes the adult characters somewhat different from the stock figures of fantasy.

Of the four Watson children, Roland, the youngest, is the most fully realized, and much of the story is seen through his eyes. While his siblings criticize him for being overwrought and too imaginative, he is the best-equipped for the encounters with Elidor. He has the mental power to escape the stone circle and open the mound in Elidor, and is able to release his sister and brothers from the evil spell. Back home, when the men of Elidor are about to break through to the children's world, Roland faces the truth, while the other children continue to avoid it. Imagination, sensitivity, and concentration are Roland's strengths, and he uses them, not always wisely and well, but certainly in good faith.

The other children are less fully drawn.

But it is clear that Nicholas is the most practical one. He is reluctant to admit the full meaning of their experiences and refuses to recognize that Elidor will continue to reach into their lives so long as they protect the treasures. David, the scientist, looks for rational explanations for everything, including the weird occurrences in their own home and neighborhood. Helen is less aggressive in her denials, but provides Roland with little help. However, she demonstrates sensitivity and tenderness, and is courageous in the last scene. Perfectly ordinary children in their own world, the Watson children are mythical figures to Elidor. There, as in their own world, they must take responsibility and act; adults provide little protection, advice, or aid.

Unlike the kindly wizards of much fantasy fiction, Malebron of Elidor is a more ambiguous figure. He protects and encourages the children to a degree, but it is clear from the beginning that he is interested only in saving his land. He is on the side of "good" or "light," so, while they are in Elidor, the children's interests coincide with his. However, he has lured them into Elidor in the first place, knowing that he can hide the treasures with them. Later he calls them again, despite the great danger, when it is time to return the treasures. He is clearly capable of sacrificing the children to save Elidor.

Mr. and Mrs. Watson are no help to their children. It is not that they are bad or abusive parents, but their thinking is so shallow that they cannot possibly offer aid and advice in a supernatural emergency. Their obtuseness is laughable, and the triviality of their lives stands in sharp contrast to the life and death struggle in Elidor. The Watson parents are stereotypes and their way of life is satirized effectively.

Findhorn's identity is a mystery until the last few chapters, when he turns out to be a fierce, wild unicorn, both beautiful and terrible, perhaps a symbol of the best of Elidor. Some readers note that Findhorn substitutes for Roland, taking over his central role in

the final chapters of the novel. At any rate, Findhorn proves to be the sacrifice, perhaps the unwilling sacrifice, necessary for the renewal of Elidor. This redemption theme is common in mythology. More important, however, are the themes of boundaries and of responsibility and choice.

Boundaries separate myth and reality, childhood and adulthood, and life and death. Crossing these boundaries is difficult. But in Elidor the children do not enter a fantasy world and stay there. The most interesting scenes are those in which the two worlds touch: the scene in the slum church, where the children first enter Elidor; the men of Elidor rattling the door and the mailbox of the Watson house; the breakthrough of Findhorn at the bridge; the "shadows" of the men from Elidor as they attempt to enter the children's world; and the climactic return of the treasures. The two worlds themselves seem more or less lifeless; the tension in the story arises from their intersection.

The children—especially Roland— cross the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and between life and death. At the end of the book, we see them as "older and wiser" young adults.

During their visit to Elidor, Helen, Nicholas, and David are trapped in the mound of Vandwy—the grave. To rescue them, Roland voluntarily enters the mound in what is certainly a journey to the underworld. And at the end, the children must confront the death of Findhorn.

Roland uses the power of his mind to break down and set up boundaries. To escape the magic stone circle, he must imagine a doorway in order to enter the mound, and then destroy that same mental doorway to keep the men of Elidor out of his world. Sometimes boundaries need to be broken; sometimes they need to be built; and at times it is difficult to know what should be done. This is part of the ambiguity in the book.

Another important theme is that of choice and responsibility. Although Malebron has manipulated them, the children can still choose whether to become responsible for the fate of Elidor.

At first, Roland resists taking action: "It's nothing to do with me!" he cries. But once he decides that he must try to rescue the other children, he takes on a responsibility for Elidor which he does not lay down. The other children try to ignore their responsibility for the treasures, but all eventually realize that they will have to act—if only to save their own family and world.

Garner's stories are characterized by their intense endings, but Elidor is somewhat of an exception. Although the story quickly reaches a dazzling climax, it ends on an anticlimactic, almost depressing note. The children succeed, the treasures are returned, and Elidor is given a second chance; but Findhorn is dead, and, for Roland, the glorious restoration of Elidor is "not enough." This conclusion is puzzling, perhaps only because it is unusual.

One way of looking at the ending is to see it as a triumph edged with some bitterness and anguish. Roland has used his gifts as best he can to secure the other world's welfare. But he is depressed by the inevitable conclusion of the adventure and the corresponding end of his childhood: his task done, Roland loses his place in the fantasy land of Elidor and must be satisfied with his own "reality"—the slums and dull suburbs of Manchester. The children have fulfilled the task set for them by Malebron, but the thankless Elidor does not reward them. The Watsons realize that there will be no "happily ever after" for them at the end of this fantasy—only a return to everyday life. For them, this is "not enough."

Another view is that it was wrong for the children to meddle in Elidor. In this view, Nicholas is the most correct; he believes that they should mind their own business and let Elidor solve its own problems. The trouble with Roland, the dreamer, is that he has idealized Elidor.

When, at the end, he realizes that it is not a perfect place—no better and no worse than his own—and that Findhorn has been sacrificed to save it, he feels cheated and disillusioned. That is what is meant by "it was not enough."

Whichever view of the ending we take, the story is still about how children must draw on their own resources and do the best they can with no real guidance from "wiser" individuals.

Topics for Discussion

1. Roland is the youngest and weakest of the Watsons, but he seems to succeed in Elidor while his brothers and sisters do not. Why do you think this is so?

What kind of power does he have in Elidor? Does he have the same power at home? Why or why not?

2. How do people get into and out of Elidor? Malebron says that the fall of Elidor would have an effect on the children's own world. What do you suppose would happen in the ordinary world if Elidor fell to the forces of darkness?

3. Is this just a fantasy novel, or does it deal with real problems that young people have? What real-world dissatisfactions, frustrations, and problems do the children encounter? To what extent does their experience help them deal with these problems?

4. How do you feel about Malebron when you first meet him in the book? Is he a likable character? To what extent do you trust him? Does your attitude toward him change as the story moves along? Why?

5. Nicholas and Roland disagree over what should be done about Elidor. Who do you think is right? Or is there some other solution that no one has thought of? Do you think it was a good idea for the children to hide the treasures and try to help Elidor? Why?

6. What difficulties do the Watson children have with adults? Why? Do you think Garner has accurately shown what adults seem like to young people, or do you think he has exaggerated?

Which scenes seem true to life, and which seem exaggerated?

7. "You know, you're your worst enemy." When Mrs. Watson says this to Roland, she doesn't understand what is going on. But think about the times in the story when Roland and the other children may in fact be their own worst enemies. Think about the other enemies in the book. Where does the biggest danger come from in this novel?

8. Talk about the events on the last three pages. How did you expect the novel to end? Why do you think the book ended as it did?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Elidor is a fantasy world, but it is based on prehistoric and medieval sites that Garner is acquainted with. Read about dolmens, stone circles, or mounds built by prehistoric people. You might look up pictures and accounts of sites like Stonehenge and Avebury. Present a report to the class on one of these terms or sites.

2. Draw a chart comparing this novel with one of the Narnia books or with another fantasy novel about main characters moving between our ordinary world and another, magical world.

Think about characters, places, strange creatures, and final outcomes.

3. Is Findhorn a typical unicorn? Read about unicorn stories in folklore. Write or report on one. Or compare the unicorn as you have imagined it with Findhorn as Garner has portrayed him.

4. Garner hasn't provided us with a map of Elidor. From the information given in the novel, draw a map of Elidor.

Remember the four castles, the forest, the ring of stones, and the mound, but feel free to add any features you wish.

5. Garner doesn't tell us much about the events in Elidor either. We only know that a battle between good and evil is going on, and that the light has gone out of three of the cities. Write a story about something that has happened in Elidor before the children arrive. Or write a story about an event that occurs in Elidor during the year in which the children have the treasures.

6. We see all the events in the novel from the point of view of children from our world. How do you suppose things look from the point of view of the people in Elidor? Write a scene from the point of view of Malebron or another resident of Elidor.

7. The first part of Elidor was once a radio play written by Garner when he was working with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Try writing one of the novel's scenes as a short play.

For Further Reference

Chambers, Aidan. "An Interview with Alan Garner." Signal 27 (September 1978): 119-137. Reprinted in The Signal Approach to Children's Books, edited by Nancy Chambers. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980. A conversation about point of view, language, critics, and writing for children.

Eyre, Frank. British Children's Books in the Twentieth Century. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971. Eyre discusses Garner in the context of other British writers of books for young people.

Finlayson, Iain. "Myths and Passages."

Books and Bookmen (November 1977): 74-79. An interview with Garner, emphasizing his use of myth and archetype.

Garner, Alan. "A Bit More Practice."

Times Literary Supplement (June 6, 1968). Garner tells about his writing practices, including the research he does for each novel.

"The Death of Myth." New Statesman (November 6, 1970). In a review, Gamer discusses the uses of myth in literature and argues that myth should be restored to its original vigor.

Gillies, Carolyn. "Possession and Structure in the Novels of Alan Gamer."

Children's Literature in Education 18 (Fall 1975): 107-117. Gillies emphasizes the importance of the concept of possession (in the twin senses of "owning" and "being possessed") and the function of trios of characters in Garner's novels. Elidor's important trio includes Roland, Helen, and Malebron.

Jones, Cornelia, and Olivia R. Way.

British Children's Authors: Interviews at Home. Chicago: American Library Association, 1976. Short biography, interview, and good description of the environments important to Garner.

McMahon, Patricia. "A Second Look: Elidor." Horn Book 56 (June 1980): 328-331. Emphasizes the faith of Roland and the "terrible beauty" of the struggle for Elidor.

Philip, Neil. A Fine Anger, A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner.

New York: Philomel, 1981. An important work on Garner. It contains useful biographical information, and a complete chapter on Elidor.

Watkins, Tony. "Alan Garner's Elidor."

Children's Literature in Education 7 (March 1972): 56-63. Discusses the novel's use of myth to explore real childhood problems.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Elidor began as a half-hour radio play.

At the end of the play, the children returned to Manchester with the treasures.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996