

The Grey King Short Guide

The Grey King by Susan Cooper

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Overview

The Grey King and its companion volumes resulted from Cooper's deep convictions about the nature of the world.

Young Will Stanton, the novel's main character, is a worker of magic, armed with the special powers of an Old One.

Not every twelve-year-old can face the evil in the world and master his own darker instincts. But everybody, whether children or adults, must cope with these forces to the best of their abilities. In her acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal, Cooper states that she hopes her books help children confront the darker aspects of life.

Few present-day writers surpass Cooper's ability to produce exactly the right emotional effects, whether for young or older readers. For example, when the forces of evil appear in *The Grey King* and an awesome grey eminence takes shape before Will Stanton's startled eyes, the reader shares Will's fascinated horror.

About the Author

Susan Mary Cooper was born on May 23, 1935, in Burnham, Buckinghamshire, England. She attended Somerville College of Oxford University, receiving her master's degree in 1956.

Upon graduation she was hired as a reporter and feature writer for the London Sunday Times, where she worked from 1956 to 1963. In 1963 she married Nicholas J. Grant, a college professor, with whom she had two children. She and her husband moved to the United States later that year, and from 1963 to 1972 Cooper was a columnist for the Western Mail, Cardiff, Wales.

In 1965 Cooper published in England a book based upon her dispatches, *Behind the Golden Curtain: A View of the U.S.A.*, which appeared in America a year later. Her first fantasy novel, *Over Sea, Under Stone*, came out in 1965. She did not originally envision this book as part of a series, and eight years passed before she published a sequel, *The Dark Is Rising* (1973), which became the title for the series of Arthurian fantasies that followed—*Greenwitch* (1974), *The Grey King* (1975), and *Silver on the Tree* (1977).

In the meantime Cooper produced three other books: a collection of writings by J. B. Priestly, entitled *Essays of Five Decades* (1968); *Priestly: Portrait of an Author* (1970); and a realistic novel for children, *Dawn of Fear* (1970). She also wrote a book for younger children, *Jethro and the Jumbie* (1979). During the 1980s she wrote *The Silver Cow* (1983), and collaborated with Hume Croyn on two plays, *Foxfire* (1983), and *The Dollmaker* (1985).

Cooper has gained recognition as one of the finest contemporary writers of fantasies for young adults. *The Dark Is Rising* won the Boston Globe-Horn Book award and was a Newbery Honor Book in 1974. *The Grey King* won the Newbery Medal in 1976. Cooper was given the Tir na y-Og Award in Bangor, North Wales, for the best children's book dealing with a Welsh subject.



Setting

Wales, and North Wales in particular, is the country of origin for many of the Arthurian legends. Will Stanton comes to the Dysynni Valley in North Wales to stay with an aunt while recovering from a serious illness. His aunt lives near Cader Idris, a mountain that dominates the landscape. The setting is an actual place, although Cooper admits that she has taken certain liberties with it. The inhabitants of this part of the country are mostly Cymry Cymraeg, as they call themselves, Welsh-speaking Welsh.

Never independent for much of its long history, and incorporated into the United Kingdom since 1536, Wales is nonetheless very much a separate place, where people cherish their history and cultural traditions.

Social Sensitivity

Cooper does not approach the problem of evil philosophically, nor does she belabor abstractions. She portrays the powers of the Old Ones and the forces of the Dark as supernatural. They are angels and devils in everything but name, and the Old Ones are cast as saviors who rescue, however temporarily, an endangered world. Some critics suggest that these subjects are too weighty for a series of children's fantasies, but few readers agree.

Cooper has more than a literary interest in the war between good and evil. She was of the generation of British children who lived through the Blitz of 1940 in London, during which she lost a close friend in an air raid. Her book *Dawn of Fear* (1970), about children of that time, is autobiographical to a great extent and portrays the evil wrought on Britain during World War II. Further, she says that she is sensitive to the very atmosphere of places associated with evil deeds.



Literary Qualities

Cooper has made copious use of the Matter of Britain, the cycle of stories centering on King Arthur. She lists as one of her primary sources the Welsh Mabinogian (circa tenth to fifteenth centuries), which probably predates all other stories of Merlin and Arthur. Both C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, who were Cooper's teachers at Oxford, used these materials in their works of fantasy.

But Cooper's blend of ancient, medieval, and modern elements bears her own unique stamp and ranks as an imaginative achievement of the first order.

Cooper's use of the Welsh language adds authenticity to the narrative. Part Welsh herself, she exhibits a keen instinct for the sound of the language and has researched the accuracy of her character's phrases. In addition, when Bran gives Will a lesson in the pronunciation of Welsh words, readers gain this knowledge as well. Although *The Grey King* is an integral part of the series, it can be read independently, as one of the best novels with a Welsh background to be published in recent years.

Cooper also makes use of a Welsh characteristic, which has been described by another Anglo-Welsh writer, Jan Morris, as "A strong strain of animism, the belief that God resides in all natural things, even in rocks and running water" Cooper did not invent the *Brenin Llwyd*, the Grey King, which is the name that the people call the ragged clouds and mists that hang over their rainy country. But she makes this' one of the faces of the Dark. Also enrolled on the side of evil are the huge grey-white foxes, which are ghostly creatures that can change their shapes. Only Will, Bran, and Cafall can see them.

The concluding episode is masterfully dramatic. Cooper blends two old stories into a fitting climax of her book. The legend of the Six Sleepers, like many other Arthurian themes, has been associated with the mountains of Snowdonia since medieval times. The Sleepers were the survivors of the great king's army, who after his last, fateful battle with Mordred fell asleep on their shields to await Arthur's second coming.

In addition, the climax of the battle against the Dark resembles the biblical story in which a herd of swine, possessed by demons, rushes headlong into the sea and drowns.

Some critics have charged that Cooper lacks a sense of humor, but her characters, absorbing plot, use of Welsh dialect, and skillful use of the myths in the very setting where these ancient stories were first told, more than compensates for the serious tone.

Themes and Characters

In her *The Dark Is Rising* series, Cooper creates two basic character types—contemporary human mortals, and ageless figures drawn from ancient British mythology. In *The Grey King* Will Stanton is a normal modern boy, as well as the last-born member of a small select group with special powers, the Old Ones. In *The Dark Is Rising*, Will celebrates his eleventh birthday in the manner usual with his family, but he is also initiated into the group of immortals whose number includes King Arthur and Merlin the Sorcerer. Merlin in his last manifestation as Merriman Lyon is Will's teacher. Through him Will learns to step in and out of time whenever he likes, to exercise control over natural phenomena such as fire, and to prepare himself to do battle with the dark forces of Evil. He and the other Old Ones are the Light who have been opposing the Dark since the world began.

Will is at once an English schoolboy who rides about on his bicycle and a supernatural power capable of soaring far above the planet. Cooper's writing is in itself magical, and Will is equally believable in both of his roles. The human boy has succumbed to a severe disease and has come to stay with an aunt in North Wales while he recuperates. The disease has caused him to forget temporarily the nature of his quests, and he gradually remembers what is expected of him. He develops as a boy and as an Old One, and becomes confident enough of his powers to work more independently.

In North Wales, Will finds a special assistant, Bran Davies, the albino son of a Welsh shepherd, Owen Davies (or so Bran believes). Bran's colorless hair and skin stand out in marked contrast to this community of dark-haired, dark-complexioned Welshmen. His eyes are those of a cat or an owl. Made to feel an outsider all of his life, he gradually learns how much of an alien he really is.

It is revealed that he is the son of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere brought back into time by the Light to bear his part in the war against the Dark.

Guinevere appeared with baby Bran in her arms quite suddenly before Owen Davies' cottage, lived with Owen a few days, and as suddenly disappeared, leaving Bran to be reared as the shepherd's son.

Now twelve years old, Bran meets a stranger on the mountain one day, who tells him to expect Will's coming. Bran has a white dog, Cafall, which has also been called from the distant past where he was King Arthur's favorite hound.

Will's quest in North Wales is to find a golden harp that will awaken the Six Sleepers, ancient warriors now lying dormant in a mountain cave. Information for that quest is in a poem that he has memorized. The poem also mentions a "raven boy"; Bran's name means crow in Welsh, and he comments that many of the people named Bran in the Welsh legends were linked with ravens.



As the novel progresses, Bran develops from a resentful outsider in this mountain community into a confident young person aware of his powers and of the role he will play in the struggle with the Dark.

Cooper offers vivid depictions of the inhabitants of this isolated Welsh farming community. Most of the half million speakers of Welsh, the largest group to make daily use of a Celtic language today, live in North Wales. Cooper has been praised by critics for her skill in presenting their bilingual speech. Her portraits of those living in the shadow of Cader Idris are memorable. John Rowlands is the best man with sheep in Wales. He has a quiet strength although only of average size. He is also sensitive to the many things that are strange in these mountains. Owen Davies still laments the loss of his Gwen (Queen Guinevere), who even after an absence of a thousand or more years is still hauntingly beautiful. Will's uncle and aunt, David and Jen Evans, are the owners of the farm where Rowlands and Davies work.

Will meets Caradog Pritchard when he first arrives in North Wales and immediately senses that the farmer is an unwitting tool of the Dark. He has yielded to the Dark's temptations, and as a result is losing his mind. During the few days Gwen stays with Owen Davies, Pritchard breaks into the cottage and tries to rape her, only to be stopped by Owen's return. John Rowlands prevents Owen from killing Pritchard, and over the years Pritchard, tormented by guilt and envy, hates everybody connected with the incident. He shoots Caffal, Bran's dog. A naturally compassionate boy, Will feels sorry for Pritchard but knows that he cannot help him.

The mythological figures in the novel are drawn from the ancient Celtic tradition. Merriman is King Arthur's old adviser and teacher, Merlin. According to the myth, he was the son of a devil and a human mother, but in medieval lore, not all devils were evil; some were good, and Cooper makes Merriman a leader of the Old Ones, the principal figures in the struggle against the Dark. He has a genuine affection for Will but is coldly ruthless in the pursuit of his goals. His stern figure appears in all of the books in the series, providing an element of continuity.

King Arthur himself makes two appearances in the book. Midway in the narrative Will Stanton and Bran Davies, fleeing a brush fire on the mountain near the Evans' farm, step out of time into a great hall where three figures await them. All are dressed in robes of different shades of blue. The central figure, who calls Bran his son, is obviously the one in authority. One of the three calls him "sire," and the third figure is a representative of the Dark. Arthur in the old Welsh myths was depicted not merely as an equal to the gods, but their superior, and that is his status here. He is grey bearded, but his sad face still seems young. Again, according to the myths, he never died, but was taken off to a paradise, Avalon, from which it was predicted he would return again to rule his kingdom. He is also seen at the end of the book watching the destruction of the Grey King and his forces.

The theme of good versus evil, as it is presented in *The Grey King*, is ancient.



It is the basis of all dualistic religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Although she acknowledges the idea of a Christian God, Cooper believes that there are other abstract forces which influence human affairs. For Cooper there is no foreseeable end to the war against evil. Even though King Arthur is very much the product of the medieval Christian imagination, her Arthurian characters are those of the older Celtic tradition before it took on Christian trappings. She does seem to believe, however, that the Light can triumph over the Dark briefly, although other battles will come.



Topics for Discussion

1. In your opinion, is Cooper more successful in her scenes depicting the daily life of her characters or those involving mythological characters?
2. What is the role of the Welsh countryside in this book?
3. John Rowlands is not an Old One, but he is different from the other workers. How?
4. Is Caradog Pritchard a villain in the usual sense? Why or why not?
5. Queen Guinevere, Gwen in this book, was known in later Arthurian legend for her affair with the greatest knight of the Round Table, Lancelot.

Does Gwen in this story seem to possess the capability of deep romantic love? Of betrayal?

6. Would you like to be a pupil of Merriman (Merlin)? Why or why not?
7. In which role is Will Stanton most convincing, as an average twelve-yearold boy, or as an Old One?
8. If you had Will's special powers, what would you do with them?
9. Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, cites albinos as examples of how an unnatural whiteness tends to appall people. Why did Cooper make Bran an albino?
10. How effective is Cooper's use of colorless features in *The Grey King*: Cafall, Bran, the silver-grey foxes, the silver-grey Sleepers on their similarly colored horses, and the Grey King himself?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the situation of other people of Celtic heritage today, the peoples of Ireland, the Scottish Highlands, Cornwall, and Brittany (France)?

To what extent are their languages still in use?

2. Merlin is quite possibly the most famous wizard in Western folklore. What was his origin and story?

3. Arthur was not originally a king, but a *dux bellorum* (battle leader) who was a hero in twelve great battles between the original people of Britain and the invading Saxons. How did he develop into the great king whose conquests take him as far as Rome?

4. Despite the fact that their country was conquered by Edward I, who ruled from 1272-1307, and that it has been independent for only brief periods since, the Welsh remain a different people.

How have they retained their identity?

5. Compare The Dark Is Rising series with other fantasy cycles, such as Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.



For Further Reference

Babbitt, Natalie. Review of *The Grey King*. *The New York Times* (September 28, 1975): 10. Babbitt believes *The Grey King* to be the best of the series published up to that time. She praises Cooper's ability "to draw then and now to a plane where both exist with considerable fluidity."

Commire, Anne, ed. "Susan Cooper." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 4.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1973. Written after *The Dark Is Rising* was published, this work cites Cooper's objectives in the series and gives a prospective on the books to follow.

Evory, Ann, ed. "Susan Cooper." In *Contemporary Authors*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1978. This is a biographical sketch, plus a list of writings, and provides some sidelights on the nature of Cooper's writings.

Levin, Betty. "A Journey Through Mountain and Mist: *The Grey King*." *Horn Book* (August 1976): 443-445. This review explains how in *The Grey King* "each event . . . is colored and shaped by the absence of color, the shifting of shape."

Morris, Jan. *Wales: The First Place*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1982. Jan Morris's essay on her native country gives some of its history and is very insightful on the Welsh people of today. Included are beautiful photographs by Paul Wakefield and a selection of Welsh poems.

Redfern, Roger A. *Rambles in North Wales*. London: Robert Hale, 1968. Intended as a guide for walking tours of the region this book has a chapter, "Interlude: King Arthur in Snowdon," naming sites associated with Arthurian legends. Chapter 4 covers Cader Idris.

Roose-Evans, James. "Susan Cooper."

In *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick.

New York: St. Martin's, 1978. RooseEvans says that "The characterization of the isolated Welsh farming community in *The Grey King* is amazingly accurate. It is perhaps the most haunting and gravely beautiful of her books."

"Susan Cooper." In *Children's Literature Review*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981.

This is a collection of excerpts from reviews on Cooper's books, but it also has a brief "General Commentary" on her beliefs and methods.

Whitaker, Muriel. *Arthur's Kingdom of Adventure: The World of Malory's Morte D'Arthur*. Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 1984. This book, while mostly on Malory's versions of Arthurian stories, contains much of value on Arthurian legends generally.

Related Titles

Under Sea, Under Stone is the first book in *The Dark Is Rising* series. It features the three Drew children—Barney, Jane, and Simon—who, while on vacation in Cornwall, discover an old map in an attic. Their Great Uncle Merry, or Merriman, helps them decipher the map and aids their search for the Holy Grail, famous in Arthurian legend. This relic is the source of a secret power in the eternal conflict between good and evil. Will Stanton, who does not appear in the first novel, is introduced in *The Dark Is Rising*. He discovers his identity as an Old One, and his first quest is to find six signs that will help in the struggle against the Dark whose power rises during the twelve days of Christmas. Will's birthday is on Midwinter's Day which falls within this period. On Twelfth Night, after the signs are united, Herne the Hunter and the Wild Hunt ride for the first time in a thousand years to repel the Dark, scattering its forces to the far corners of the universe. *Greenwitch*, the third book in the series, has Jane Drew as its principal character. Will Stanton and Merriman are present as well, but it is Jane who is instrumental in finding a small lead case that contains a manuscript, telling how to unravel the secret of the Grail. The setting is Cornwall again, where Jane joins the local women in weaving the *Greenwitch*, a fertility symbol that ensures not only good crops, but plentiful fish as well.

In the concluding book, *Silver on the Tree*, Will, the Drew children, and Bran join forces to find the crystal sword that alone can triumph over the mighty forces of the Dark. All the mythological forces introduced in the series convene for the final battle in which Bran, now elevated to the position of Pendragon, wields the crystal sword that conquers evil. The longest battle is still ahead, however, the one which man must wage against the Dark in himself. The series as a whole should satisfy any lover of fantasy. It offers adventure, fine writing, and characters with which young adults and grown-up readers may identify.



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