

# **Here Lies Arthur Study Guide**

## **Here Lies Arthur by Philip Reeve**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Here Lies Arthur Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters I - VI.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters VII - XIV.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XV - XXII.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XXIII - XXXV.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XXXVI - XLIV.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XLV - LI.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>



## Plot Summary

Gwyna is a young orphan girl who survives a devastating raid on her community by Arthur. Because she can swim, the bard Myrdden enlists her aid in a piece of charlatantry by having her deliver a sword to Arthur in a manner that leaves Arthur and the other onlookers believing she was the mythical Pagan goddess, Lady of the Lake. Myrdden then adopts her as his own and spends several years teaching her his craft. In order to take her along in a war band of men, Myrdden disguises the adolescent girl as the boy Gwyn. When Gwyna reaches puberty, Myrdden takes her away on a long and solitary trip—when they return, she is presented as Gwyna, the half-sister of Gwyn. Her appearance as a young woman is accepted by all and she spends the next few years as a lady-in-waiting to Arthur's wife Gwenhwyfar. During this time Gwyna develops an attraction for Peredur, a well-meaning but completely incompetent warrior who follows Arthur. Ironically, Peredur had been raised as a girl by his over-protective mother who feared he would follow in his father's and brothers' footsteps by becoming a warrior. When Arthur discovers the love-affair between Gwenhwyfar and one of his young warriors he flies into a rage and kills both of them. The warrior's brother, Medrawt, flees the city and raises an army in opposition to Arthur who has become something of a boorish tyrant. Meanwhile, Arthur fears his brother Cei as a potential rival and arranges to have Cei ambushed and killed. Arthur sends with Cei all his less-devoted men in a grand scheme of cleaning house. When Gwyna discovers one of the ill-fated warriors is Peredur she sets off in pursuit and eventually rescues him from the ambush and death. She then returns to Myrdden's house and finds him stricken and near death; after sitting with him until he passes she learns that Arthur and Medrawt have met on the field of battle and slain each other. Having had enough of the life of a woman, Gwyna again cuts her hair and shifts her clothes, taking to the road with her now boyfriend Peredur and trusting to her own storytelling abilities to feed them on their further adventures.



# Chapters I - VI

## Chapters I - VI Summary

Lord Arthur has demanded tribute and subservience from Lord Ban. Lord Ban, however, has already sworn his loyalty to King Maelwas. To resolve the dispute, Arthur mounts a surprise attack on Lord Ban, captures his keep, kills the inhabitants, and loots and destroys the surrounding community. In the confusion, the narrator, a young orphan girl named Gwyna, escapes from the burning village and seeks refuge in the countryside. She encounters Medrawt, a young warrior of Arthur, who tries to kill her—she escapes by leaping into a nearby river and swimming away. In Chapter II, Gwyna realizes that her swimming skill, developed over the years by setting and retrieving underwater fish traps, has saved her life. She swims in the cold water as long as she can and then crawls onto the shore. In Chapter III Gwyna is found by an older man who picks her up and carries her into an old and peculiar building. He sets her by the fire and feeds her. The man introduces himself as Myrdden; when Gwyna confesses she does not know her own age, Myrdden estimates it at nine or ten years. Myrdden is quite interested in Gwyna's swimming ability and questions her closely on that account. He then explains he serves Arthur who, he hopes, will reunite Britain and drive out the invading Saxons. In Chapter IV Myrdden continues talking about the need for a uniting figure in Britain. In Chapter V Myrdden works with Cei, Arthur's brother, to set up a piece of staged theater in a nearby lake. Myrdden has a sword named Caliburn that he wants to present to Arthur in a simulation of a Pagan divine event. In Chapter VI Gwyna follows Myrdden's instructions. She takes Caliburn into a tiny cave behind a waterfall that feeds a fair-sized pond or lake. Cei brings Arthur's followers to one shore, Myrdden takes Arthur to the other shore. Arthur then walks out to the middle of the lake on top of a rocky prominence that Myrdden has scouted. On cue, Gwyna swims underwater through the waterfall and thrusts Excalibur up through the surface in front of a startled Arthur. He grasps the sword and Gwyna swims away, back under the waterfall and into the little cave. The onlookers—and even Arthur himself—are utterly convinced that Arthur has received a magical blade from the pagan goddess the Lady of the Lake.

## Chapters I - VI Analysis

These chapters introduce four of the principle characters of the novel—Gwyna, Myrdden, Arthur, and Cei. Gwyna is presented as a young girl of about ten years of age; known locally as Gwyna the Mouse, she is an orphaned girl working as a servant in a town protected by Lord Ban. Gwyna's only surprising ability is that she is an excellent swimmer. Not only is she a good swimmer, but she can hold her breath for a long time and can easily swim through the cold local waters—skills developed over several years of routinely setting and retrieving deep water fish traps for her master. This peculiar ability saves Gwyna's life and makes Myrdden interested in her because she can do him a great service. Myrdden is a bard, a storyteller, who follows Arthur and promotes Arthur's career. Myrdden is intelligent, educated in history, and a good practitioner of



stage magic and sleight of hand. Myrdden's overriding passion is to promote Arthur as the reuniting agent of Britain who will gain sufficient influence to raise an army that can expel the Saxons—violent foreign colonizers of the eastern regions of what is today England. Arthur and Cei, brothers, head a large group of heavy cavalry that operates as a sort of mercenary band. Cei is loyal to Arthur; Arthur's overriding goal appears to be plunder and acquisition. Throughout the novel, Arthur hardly is heroic in thought or action—indeed, he is little more than a petty tyrant with violent tendencies. Myrdden has not selected him for his virtues; he has selected him because he believes Arthur is the most likely man to forge a new empire. In the narrative, this introductory segment establishes the background story of Gwyna, provides substantial characterization of Myrdden, Arthur, and Cei, and establishes the basic plot premise. It also inserts Gwyna into one of the fundamental events of the Arthurian mythology as she is, quite literally, the Lady of the Lake. Some editions of the novel picture Gwyna's hand holding Caliburn up out of the water as the front cover image.



# Chapters VII - XIV

## Chapters VII - XIV Summary

In Chapter VII Myrdden retrieves Gwyna from the waterfall and takes her as a servant. Gwyna looks into a mirror and sees a flat, round face with a stubby nose surrounded by tangled dark brown hair. Myrdden and Cei consult; Cei favors getting rid of Gwyna but Myrdden wants to keep her. As a compromise, Myrdden shears off her hair and dresses her as a boy and changes her name to Gwyn. In Chapter VIII, Gwyna finds the boys' clothing strange and uncomfortable. Gwyna is introduced to Bedwyr, Medrawt's little brother and squire. Bedwyr teaches Gwyna how to care for horses. Gwyna listens to all the men brag about their martial prowess in the late fight against Lord Ban's men. In Chapter IX Gwyna adapts to life as a boy and finds she prefers it to life as a girl. Myrdden gives Gwyna a pony named Dewi that becomes Gwyna's close companion throughout the novel. Meanwhile the war band travels and engages in occasional skirmishes. Gwyna learns about the gradual transition of religion occurring in Britain—the old Pagan gods are being suppressed by the new Christianity. Arthur is nominally Christian but nearly all of his followers retain some elements of the Pagan belief. Myrdden finds all gods and religion to be foolish. Finally the band of warriors returns to the old Roman legion fortress that serves as Arthur's base of operations. Gwyna meets the beautiful Celemon, Cei's daughter, and marvels at the size of the structures in the fortress. In Chapter X Myrdden and Gwyna travel alone for several months, spinning tales of Arthur's greatness and fame. Gwyna has difficulty reconciling her personal experiences with Arthur to the heroic version of Arthur that Myrdden promotes. In Chapter XI Myrdden tells the story of Arthur and the Green Knight. In Chapter XII Arthur and his men canvass the country in search of men and money. They come upon a crumbling beachside castle under the protection of some Christian monks led by the self-proclaimed Saint Porroc. The Lord of the castle is dead and his widow and her child remain nearly in isolation. The party stays there for a few days of hunting. While the warriors are away Gwyna befriends Peredur, the child of the dead lord. Gwyna learns that Porroc has essentially raided all wealth from the community and stores it in the church. Gwyna determines to investigate. In Chapter XIII Gwyna costumes Peredur as an angel and sneaks him into the church with the sun at his back; the drunk Porroc believes he has seen an angel who, in Gwyna's voice, commands him to repent and bathe in the ocean. The children abscond to the castle and laugh; the drunken Porroc, convinced he has received an angelic vision, runs into the tumbling surf. As the children shift into their normal clothes Gwyna realizes Peredur is actually a male—a male raised as a female and unaware of his own gender. In Chapter XIV Myrdden and Gwyna discuss Peredur and Arthur departs the region with his men.

## Chapters VII - XIV Analysis

These chapters feature the seminal components of the novel's dominant theme—that of transgender identity. First, Myrdden conceives to make Gwyna into the boy Gwyn.



Because of her age and plain appearance this proves fairly easy. A backstory of having been a noble scion provides cover for Gwyna's ignorance of basic boys' tasks such as taking care of horses. The other boys her own age accept her quickly though she remains fairly shy and reserved, and necessarily private. Gwyna thus proceeds through her first transgender identity shift. Later, she meets Peredur, a boy, who has been raised as a girl. While Gwyna knows she is really a girl passing for a boy, Peredur is ignorant of his true sex and really thinks he is a girl. His mother, having lost a husband and several sons to warfare, has raised Peredur as a girl to keep him safe from warfare. Myrdden sees through the disguise, and Gwyna learns the truth, but everyone else appears to have been fooled. Thus, Peredur is living a transgendered identity. They make an odd couple, the boy-girl and the girl-boy, and forge an unlikely but committed friendship. Their deception of Saint Porroc is humorous and gives them a bond of trust that persists over the years. It does some good, too, for Porroc gives up drinking and grafting and begins preaching—at least for a few months. The next time Peredur and Gwyna meet their genders will have both inverted.



# Chapters XV - XXII

## Chapters XV - XXII Summary

Arthur's band travels to the ancient Roman-built city of Aquae Sulis. The city is cited near a river and a hot-water spring. The spring is enclosed in an ancient Roman-style bath that crumbles in decay—the Christians have determined the ancient bathhouses are Pagan worship centers and therefore forbidden. The city is large—larger than anything Arthur holds—and Gwyna is amazed at the number of people. The city also has a wall surrounding the central portions of the town. Arthur meets Valerius, the warrior in command of defense of the city. They both realize their forces are roughly equivalent. The town fathers, dressed in Roman togas, welcome Arthur because they can't reasonably refuse him entrance. Arthur also meets Gwenhwyfar, the wife of Valerius, but he dismisses her because "[s]he's not his sort" (p. 102). In Chapter XVI, some days later, Bedwyr and Gwyna explore the old bathhouse ruins. In Chapter XVII a band of Saxon raiders approaches Aquae Sulis. Valerius and Arthur decide to fight together to defend the city. Arthur arms all his squires, including Bedwyr and Gwyna, to provide a feinting diversion. Battle is joined at Badon, famous for previous combats, and Gwyna charges, loses her seating, and crashes into a drainage ditch where she hides. After the battle ends she emerges and finds Bedwyr who has killed his first man. In Chapter XVIII the men swap stories about the battle. In Chapter XIX Myrddan returns to Aquae Sulis, declares victory, but notes that Valerius had died in combat. He claims the town in Arthur's name and demands tribute and arranges for Arthur to marry Gwenhwyfar. In Chapter XX Arthur returns to Aquae Sulis. Gwenhwyfar examines Valerius' body and notes that he was killed by a spear thrust to the back. In Chapter XXI Arthur settles down for the winter. Myrddan teaches Gwyna how to read and write. One cold day Gwyna sneaks down to the hot water baths to bathe—after stripping and entering the water she discovers that Gwenhwyfar also is there; Gwenhwyfar gives no indication that she knows Gwyna is a girl and not a boy. In Chapter XXII Gwyna contemplates Gwenhwyfar's life of duty and feels sorry for her.

## Chapters XV - XXII Analysis

These chapters transition Arthur from an essentially nomadic raider to the Lord of a sizeable walled city with considerable influence. The dramatic turning point comes during a raid by Saxons when Arthur's men join with Valerius' men to defeat the Saxons. To bolster his forces, Arthur uses his squires in a feint; Bedwyr thus becomes a warrior and Gwyna experiences her first taste of combat—and doesn't like it. Valerius is killed—by a spear thrust to the back; the implication being he was a victim of fratricide, probably on Arthur's orders. This leaves a power vacuum in the town that Arthur gladly fills, taking it under his protection and moving his permanent base of operations there. Arthur further consolidates his hold by marrying Valerius' wife Gwenhwyfar. This puts Arthur into a position superior to that of numerous other warlords roaming the countryside looking for loot. Arthur's victory over the Saxons also reinforced Myrddan's





many claims of Arthur's singular ability to destroy the Saxons. That the battle occurred at a historic site where previous heroes defeated previous Saxons is so much the better. These chapters also find Gwyna no longer able to pass, fully, as a boy. She is not strong enough for combat and she is growing apart—while Bedwyr becomes a warrior she becomes literate. The time when the disguise will no longer work—the time forecast by Cei—is nearly upon her. Another major development finds Gwyna and Gwenhwyfar bathing together by accident. Gwyna believes her gender secret is preserved, but as will shortly become plain Gwenhwyfar has in fact seen that Gwyna is female. Gwyna also sneaks a look at Gwenhwyfar's naked body and finds her thin, tall, bony, and very white—a far cry from the modern presentation of Guinevere as a ravishing beauty.



# Chapters XXIII - XXXV

## Chapters XXIII - XXXV Summary

Arthur marries Gwenhwyfar, and afterward Myrdden takes Gwyna on a month's-long journey through Britain. They first meet Maelwas and discuss politics—Myrdden's offer is rebuked and he is angered. As the meeting ends, Maelwas asks why Gwyna is dressed as a boy. Later, Myrdden asserts that Gwyna must now revert to her normal gender of female—she can no longer pass as a boy because of her maturation. Gwyna is flummoxed and does not want to be a girl again. In Chapter XXIV Myrdden travels to the old fortress of Ban and Gwynna hardly recognizes the place. She is received as a girl and spends the summer there; she gets her period. As fall comes on Myrdden and Gwyna, they return to Aquae Sulis. There, the walls have been repaired and a great round feast hall with a central round table has been constructed—shoddily. Gwenhwyfar is not pregnant; Arthur has sent her to live in separate chambers and he has retrieved Cunaide as his companion. Myrdden presents Gwyna and asks that she be made a lady-in-waiting to Gwenhwyfar; Arthur agrees. In Chapter XXV Gwyna makes the difficult transition from being a boy to being a young lady—two years run by and she settles into her new role. At the end of that time the great feast hall with the round table collapses during heavy rain. In Chapter XXVI, meanwhile, Peredur's mother grows old and dies of natural causes. Her castle has continued to fall into disrepair. When Saint Porroc comes to perform the last rites he rebukes Peredur and tells him he is not a woman—Peredur, confused, comes to the realization that has been slowly dawning on him for the past years: he is a male. He changes into men's clothing, uses a pot as a helmet, cuts some sticks into spears, and goes in search of Arthur. In Chapter XXVII Peredur finds Aquae Sulis and is recognized by Gwyna—he, however, appears not to recognize her. In Chapter XXVIII a raid on Aquae Sulis gains surprise. One raider chases after the ladies-in-waiting who are out enjoying an afternoon by the river. Bedwyr attempts to intervene but receives a grievous wound to his leg and his horse then rolls on him, breaking the wounded leg. Peredur attempts to stop the raider but is thrown and knocked out. The raider chases a girl to the river and Gwyna reacts, shoving him into the river as he dismounts—he drowns in the current; there are no witnesses. When Peredur comes to Gwyna tells him that he has vanquished the enemy and she presents him with the enemy's sword. In Chapter XXIX Myrdden cares for Bedwyr's wound and doubts he will survive. In Chapter XXX Bedwyr's leg heals as Arthur pursues various skirmishes with the enemy. Peredur accompanies Arthur but generally is ridiculed by the other men—he seems oblivious. Gwenhwyfar requests that the crippled Bedwyr be allowed to act as her personal bodyguard and Arthur, distant, distracted, and brooding, agrees. In Chapter XXXI the men from Ban's old fortress request aid from Arthur but he cannot provide it; Arthur continues raiding. Gwenhwyfar nurses Bedwyr back to health and they fall in love and begin a sexual affair, seeking privacy and secrecy in the Pagan bathhouses. Gwenhwyfar takes Gwyna to act as a lookout—Gwyna knows what is going on and attempts to discuss the issue with Gwenhwyfar at which point Gwenhwyfar discloses that she knows Gwyna's secret—her girl-to-boy-to-girl-transformation—and proposes that they keep each other's secrets. In Chapters



XXXII and XXXIII the affair continues; Gwyna often sneaks into the shadows to watch the lovers. In Chapter XXXIV Myrdden discovers the affair and sends word to Arthur. In Chapter XXXV Arthur returns and discovers Bedwyr and Gwenhwyfar in the act of adultery. He kills Bedwyr and severs his head and throws it into the Pagan bath water while Gwenhwyfar and Gwyna flee.

## Chapters XXIII - XXXV Analysis

These chapters present a transition for Gwyna and the development of the crisis of the narrative plot. Much of the discussion in the early chapters of this segment is introspective wondering of the narrator about the nature and process of gender—she is a girl but doesn't want to become a woman; she wants to become a man. Gwyna feels that women's lives are empty and devoid of excitement, adventure, and even meaning. Not only does she not want to be a girl, she doesn't know how to act like a girl. Myrdden is correct, however, that with Gwyna's sexual maturity hiding her gender will become increasingly difficult—and, so he thinks, not only pointless but wrong. Gwyna views Myrdden simply as her master, to be obeyed. Myrdden, however, holds Gwyna in high esteem and views her as a surrogate daughter. He genuinely desires a good future for her with stability and safety. To this end, he eventually places her as a lady-in-waiting to Gwenhwyfar. At this point, Myrdden would have no way of knowing that Gwenhwyfar's actions will place everyone in potential danger from Arthur. Much of the narrative describes a wandering voyage around the periphery of Arthur's sphere of influence while Gwyna grows her hair and learns how to wear women's clothing. Several intermediate stops provide for Gwyna to spend considerable time with girls of various social statuses, learning how to move, speak, act, and even think like a young woman. Finally, after months on the road and years at court, Gwyna grows into a typical young woman. The novel strongly proffers the theory that gender behavior is learned and not genetic; it is almost all nurture and almost no nature. Also, the novel proposes that the vast bulk of people accept gender in another as a presentation of clothing and hairstyles. Gwyna claims to be able to pass because she is plain-looking and nondescript—several scenes position her as being more or less invisible to men because she is no great beauty. Whether this is credible depends nearly entirely on the reader's experience and interpretation.

The crisis of the narrative plot is the same crisis found in virtually all Arthurian mythology—the rift between Arthur and Gwenhwyfar caused by an extramarital affair. Modern Arthurian stories find Lancelot sneaking off with Gwenhwyfar, but in this novel it is Bedwyr, the young crippled warrior. Their affair becomes generally known over the weeks and months until Myrdden learns of it and sends word to Arthur, telling him how and when to catch the lovers in the act. Note that Arthur beheads Bedwyr and flings his head—apparently in anger. However, the head plops into the Pagan bath water and is seen by many, perhaps most, as a sort of Pagan ritualistic offering to the Pagan gods. This event, in the following chapters, starts the end of Arthur's reign and life; in modern Arthurian stories this event is sometimes called the breaking of the round table.



# Chapters XXXVI - XLIV

## Chapters XXXVI - XLIV Summary

Fleeing Arthur with Gwenhwyfar, Gwyna encounters Peredur and sends him to warn Medrawt of Bedwyr's murder. Medrawt and his household flee Aquae Sulis. Gwyna and Gwenhwyfar flee into the countryside where Gwenhwyfar collapses in despair. In the morning, Gwyna discovers that Gwenhwyfar has drowned herself. Returning to town, Gwyna finds that two factions have formed—one loyal to Arthur, one loyal to Cei. In Chapter XXXVII Gwyna tells Myrdden Gwenhwyfar is dead; she learns that Medrawt has fled to Maelwas's territory. Myrdden then creates a grant plot to rid Arthur of disloyal men—Arthur sends Cei and all his men of dubious loyalty to help the men defending Ban's castle; Myrdden tells Gwyna this will allow time to heal the rift. Gwyna learns that Peredur has been sent with Cei. That night she decides to go and intercept Peredur so she sneaks out of Myrdden's house and rides in pursuit of Cei's band. In Chapter XXXVIII Gwyna cuts her hair and again transforms herself into a boy and then finds Cei's band on the road. In Chapter XXXIX the band rides through the autumn countryside. One night Gwyna spins a tale about the Lady of the Lake bringing healing waters to a wounded young warrior. The next morning, in Chapter XL, the band is ambushed by the very soldiers they had thought they were coming to assist. Peredur is shot in the shoulder with an arrow before Gwyna finds him and drags him off into the brush and safety. The battle quickly is over—Cei and all his men are slain. Gwyna bandages Peredur but he despairs that he is a coward. The next day in Chapter XLI Peredur appears to have lost the will to live as Gwyna hatches a plot. In Chapter XLII Gwyna steals a small wooden mug from a nearby farm. In Chapter XLIII she strips naked, get soaking wet, and awakens Peredur; he perceives her as the Lady of the Lake—and believes she is giving him magical healing waters from her cup. Gwyna then jumps into a nearby creek and swims away. In Chapter XLIV Peredur absolutely is convinced he has had a supernatural experience and has been healed; he quickly recovers. The two survivors return to near Aquae Sulis where she learns that Arthur had intentionally betrayed Cei and his men to rid himself of a rival power faction. Gwyna leaves Peredur in a small outlying town and travels on.

## Chapters XXXVI - XLIV Analysis

Medrawt and Bedwyr are brothers—Arthur's killing of Bedwyr will necessitate revenge by Medrawt. To forestall that problem, Arthur moves quickly to surprise and kill Medrawt—but Gwyna's intervention saves him. Medrawt flees to Maelwas for help; Gwenhwyfar was Maelwas' kinswoman and the relationship between Maelwas and Arthur has long been unstable at best. In order to understand the rapid and several developments during these chapters it is necessary to understand the various familial relationships described in the novel to this point; it is also necessary to understand the processes of thought and honor that work in Arthur and the men around him. Gwenhwyfar's death by suicide is caused by her realization that Arthur will kill her if he finds her—she chooses



to die rather than flee in fear. Her method of suicide symbolically links her to Gwyna—Gwyna, the swimmer like a fish and the Lady of the Lake—and Gwenhwyfar, drowning in the river. Myrdden's plot is somewhat more complex than revealed to Gwyna in Chapter XXXVI because Myrdden and Arthur have already planned Cei's betrayal and the murder of the entire band. Myrdden thus knows that anyone with Cei will be killed, though he withholds that knowledge from Gwyna. This is a critical narrative point to hold in mind during the next chapters that describe Myrdden's shocked reaction to Gwyna's action. Note again the conflation between the transgendered characters Peredur and Gwyna—here, she calls him "[m]y mirror boy" (p. 259). When Gwyna catches up with the men, Cei, of course, recognizes her. The band of warriors continues on and about the time they are expecting to meet the men they are putatively reinforcing, those same men ambush them and kill them all—excepting Gwyna and Peredur. Peredur is injured and essentially gives up the will to live, falling into a fever and wishing he had died in combat. To save him Gwyna executes some performance magic to convince him he has been visited by the Lady of the Lake. Peredur doesn't look at her face because he's too busy staring at her wet naked body; the scene has definitive sexual overtones, especially the kiss on the mouth. She leaves behind the cup for Peredur to find, thus mimicking the typical Arthurian mythology of Sir Percival's quest for the Holy Grail of Christendom. Peredur takes the event as a supernatural apparition. He recovers rapidly thereafter. Peredur's acceptance of the event strains credulity because he has participated personally in a similar deception only a few years prior: Peredur is not characterized as very intelligent, however. Notice also how Gwyna starts to act in Myrdden's role during this period—telling tall tales to inspire the men to bravery.



# Chapters XLV - LI

## Chapters XLV - LI Summary

Gwyna returns to Myrddan's home as a girl, and finds that he has suffered a stroke and is only hours away from death. When Myrddan discovered Gwyna had gone after Cei's band he assumed she, too, would be killed and collapsed. He has lingered on for days hoping for her return. He confesses his hand in various plots but again claims they were all for the good of Britain. In Chapter XLVI Myrddan recalls how the Saxons had slaughtered his family and burned his village when he was just a boy. He was taken as a slave and lived several years among the Saxons, learning to hate them utterly. When he was old enough he ran away and thereafter spent his life trying to eradicate the Saxons. He again affirms his belief that Arthur had been the best chance of it but concludes that it has all been for naught. He then tells Gwyna that she was the child he had always wanted but never had: "[y]ou've been a good daughter to me. And a good son, too" (p. 313). In Chapter XLVII Myrddan dies. In the morning Gwyna buries him inside of a hollow oak tree and returns to his home. Later, Arthur comes by looking for Myrddan. When told he is dead he mentions that Medrawt is coming back with a large group of warriors. Arthur and his men are riding to Camlann to face Medrawt. Gwyna watches them leave and then follows them. In Chapter XLIX Gwyna comes upon the battleground where all have been slain. Grievously injured, Arthur mistakes Gwyna for Myrddan because she wears his cape. Arthur asks Myrddan to return Caliburn to the Lady of the Lake. Gwyna takes Caliburn and flings it into the nearby river, and Arthur dies. Gwyna robs his corpse. In Chapter L Gwyna returns to the town where Peredur has been recuperating. The family he has stayed with has disguised him as a woman to avoid suspicion. Gwyna then tells Peredur that she is both Gwyn and Gwyna and he accepts it; she also tells him she was the Lady of the Lake and, after an argument, he also accepts this. Gwyna then decides to travel as a man thereafter and becomes again Gwyn. Peredur accompanies Gwyn and, as a couple, they travel the countryside telling stories and singing songs about the great King Arthur. In the very brief Chapter LI Gwyna dreams about the impact of the Arthurian myth.

## Chapters XLV - LI Analysis

These chapters conclude the novel and wrap up several narrative threads. They position Gwyna as an adult who takes charge of her future rather than awaiting direction from a master or an external event. In this sense, the novel can be viewed as a sort of bildungsroman though in most respects the emphasis is more about the Arthurian myth cycle than the character development of Gwyna. These chapters do see Gwyna make her final transgender process, however, switching rapidly between the male and female roles and ending up as a male. Ironically, as Gwyna is flipping between genders it occurs that Peredur also flips between genders, spending several days disguised, again, as a woman. Only Gwyna's final inversion is not (apparently) mirrored by Peredur; the novel suggests, without definitively stating it, that Gwyna as Gwyn and



Peredur as a man seek their future together in a sort of homosexualized relationship. Gwyna has learned enough of Myrdden's craft to make a living at telling tales and her embellishments are worthy of her master. Rather than tell the Arthurian tale as reality—Arthur a brutal man, and so forth—Gwyna tells is as mythology—Arthur the noble lord and Bedwyr his best companion until the end. The novel focuses here on the theme of storytelling—how first Myrdden, then Gwyna, then many others have told the tale of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table for thousands of years. The novel concludes that the power of the Arthurian mythology lies in its ability to inspire hope. The storytelling theme is evident even in the narrative construction where, for example, Myrdden's early life is related as a story, not as a series of events. Gwyna has thus moved from the early chapters' blow-by-blow 'this happened and then this' to the latter chapters' scenes of 'this caused this because of this'.





# Characters

## Gwyna

Gwyna is the narrator and protagonist of "Here Lles Arthur"; she is present in most scenes of the novel and narrates from a first-person, limited point of view. As a narrator, Gwyna is reliable but does not always intuit the significance of the things that she narrates, opening a large space for interpretation by the reader. Gwyna narrates the novel in the past tense with the opening scenes being at least five or more years in the past; this narrative distance is not noticeable in the novel, though, because the narration is offered in the present-tense. Gwyna begins the novel as a pre-teen orphan girl used to hard work with no rewards; she appears to be a general worker but does have considerable skill in swimming because of her routine task of retrieving fish traps and then setting them again. After her childhood community is destroyed by Arthur, Gwyna is nominally adopted by Myrdden who takes her as a servant. His first task for her involves swimming underwater to deliver a special sword to Arthur in a piece of fictional showmanship that fools even Arthur into believing he has received a magical sword from the pagan deity the Lady of the Lake; the many witnesses also are fooled. Myrdden then shears off Gwyna's hair, dirties her up a bit, puts her in boys clothing, and transforms her into Gwyn the servant boy. He does this so she will be able to travel with Arthur and his war band without undue attention or difficulty. This deception works for several years and during this time Gwyn becomes a good squire, caring for horses, tending camp, and learning various other aspects of woodcraft and life on the trail. She also develops a close friendship with Bedwyr a boy of about her age. While Bedwyr views Gwyn as a good friend, Gwyna secretly harbors a sort of crush on Bedwyr that leads to some strained moments. Later, as a boy, Gwyn meets Peredur who himself is being raised as a girl—Gwyn sees that Peredur is male while Peredur appears ignorant of Gwyn's true sex. As Gwyna enters puberty, Myrdden realizes that his deception must come to an end. So he takes Gwyna on a months-long voyage away from everyone they know to let Gwyna's hair grow long. He then changes her back into women's clothes, cleans her up a bit, tells her to act like a lady, and takes her back to Arthur's court where he installs her as a lady-in-waiting to Gwenhwyfar. No one notices she is the same person as Gwyn though Bedwyr seems to recognize something in her face—she explains this away by claiming to be Gwyn's half-sister Gwyna. Gwyna spends the next years as a lady in waiting, learning women's skills such as making small-talk, doing needlework, and other domestic chores. She finds the woman's life extremely boring and misses her adventures as a boy. Meanwhile Bedwyr and the other boys become warriors. After Arthur murders Bedwyr and sends Cei away to his death, Gwyna rides after Cei to rescue the hapless Peredur, now a warrior of basically no skill in Arthur's troops. Myrdden, fearing Gwyna dead to the traitorous plot, suffers a stroke. Gwyna does rescue Peredur, returns to comfort Arthur during his final days, and then decides once again to become a man. She cuts her hair, dirties her face, puts on men's clothing, and takes Peredur—now her boyfriend—along on a future of telling Myrdden's old stories in exchange for coin and food.





## Myrdden

Myrdden is a bard from the eastern region of England. He is described as a thin man of indeterminate age with a hawkish nose and a piercing stare. He is given to long bouts of introspection followed by loquacious periods. He is a bard, or storyteller, of considerable skill. As a child, Myrdden's family was slaughtered by the invading Saxons and Myrdden was taken as a slave. Over the next several years Myrdden develops a world view wherein the Saxons are unremittingly evil and the native peoples are good. Myrdden is an amoral pragmatist when it comes to destroying the Saxons and in the novel he often demonstrates a complete lack of morality in pursuit of building an army that can destroy the Saxons. For example, he decides that he must help foster a national unifying figure of a king that will re-unite Britain under one political rule that will be strong enough to destroy the Saxons. Because he finds only warring factions he selects the strongest warlord—Arthur—to back and thereafter tries to make Arthur into a man that can unite Britain. He uses a variety of trickery and lies to foist off Arthur as a man destined by the Pagan gods to become king, beginning with the showmanship that delivers Caliburn from the putative Lady of the Lake. Myrdden takes any tales of any hero he encounters and re-works it into a tale about Arthur. Thus, Arthur becomes the hero in many ways, from being the greatest warrior to being the greatest hunger to being the perfect leader of men. To Myrdden the truth does not matter as long as the result is what he wants—the ends justify the means. Unfortunately for Myrdden, Arthur never becomes the man he might. Instead of pursuing Myrdden's nationalizing dream, Arthur prefers small-scale border skirmishes that have relatively little danger and promise relatively large monetary rewards. Instead of being a hero, Arthur prefers sexual encounters with women, heavy bouts of drinking, good food, and loud and rude company. By the time Myrdden comes to realize that perhaps another man would have been a better choice he feels he has cast his lot too much with Arthur; Myrdden is too old and too heavily invested in promoting Arthur to change. He thus dies knowing that Arthur will never succeed in driving out the Saxons. The only deviation from Myrdden's usually focused outlook is his adoption of Gwyna in whom he seems a younger self as well as an opportunity to have the family that he has never made time for.

## Arthur

Arthur is the son of Uthr, the brother of Cei, and the uncle of Bedwyr and Medrawt. His first wife is Cunaide and his second wife, married in a Christian ceremony, is Gwenhwyfar—making her his legal wife, though he maintains a close, sexual relationship with Cunaide throughout the novel and holds only a distant relationship with Gwenhwyfar. Arthur's genesis comes about when the kingdom, briefly united under his successor, begins to fall apart into fiefdoms. Arthur maintains control of a large unit of heavy cavalry that forms the nucleus of his power. Arthur attracts the attention of the bard Myrdden who believes that Arthur is the strongest of the fighting warlords and thus has the greatest chance of reuniting Britain arms to drive out the Saxon invaders. To this end, Myrdden becomes the brains of the operation while Arthur provides the brawn. In the novel, Arthur is presented as an avaricious and jealous man, driven by the urge to



conquer and possess rather than any noble desires. He often takes lovers from conquered peoples—if they are not willing lovers he is not above rape. Through the novel Arthur engages in many acts of minor conquest, capturing small towns or communities and thereafter demanding tribute in exchange for protection. He is not particularly successful at uniting British arms—by the end of the novel he appears to have fewer men than he had at the beginning of the novel. Instead of engaging in Myrdden's great cause, Arthur is content to continually provoke border skirmishes with a neighboring king; these skirmishes yield horses, women and wealth. Even so, Arthur appears to enjoy an opulent lifestyle, given the times, and is respected and feared by most of his subjects. His personal ability in combat is significant and he leaves most political matters to Myrdden or Cei. When in town, Arthur frequently is presented as wenching, drinking, or loudly bragging. Arthur's downfall comes about because he discovers a sexual affair between one of his warriors and his Christian wife. He murders them both, provoking the warrior's brother, Medrawt, to flee to the neighboring kingdom and raise a punitive army. Meanwhile the men of his command begin to view him as something of a tyrant rather than a hero and this disaffected faction gravitates toward Cei as an alternative to Arthur. On Myrdden's suggestion, Arthur betrays Cei and his faction by sending them into an ambush where they are all killed. Shortly thereafter Arthur and his men meet Medrawt and his men on the field of battle. The combat appears fairly inconclusive as both Arthur and Medrawt are slain, along with nearly all of their men. Arthur's reality soon is eclipsed by his legend, long told in embellished form by Myrdden.

## Peredur Long-Knife

Peredur is a boy, later a young man, who follows Arthur for a time. Peredur is named after his father, the warrior lord Peredur Long-Knife. After his father and brothers are killed in combat, his mother becomes somewhat overprotective and Peredur, nearly from birth, is raised as a girl. His mother repeatedly cautions him against allowing anyone to see him naked. It is thus only when Peredur begins to enter puberty that many appear to question his identity as a young woman. Myrddin spots the deception quickly but appears to be the only one to see through the presentation. Later, Gwyna (as a boy) and Peredur execute a sort of trick show together, convincing a Christian priest that he has seen an angelic vision. During the trick Gwyna sneaks a quick look at Peredur as he changes clothing and realizes he is a male—and asks him a question about his dress; this becomes a major turning point in the characterization of Peredur who realizes he is in fact a young man. Sometime after Arthur departs, Peredur discards his women's clothing, finds a horse, fashions relatively ridiculous weapons and armor, and, dressed as a man, rides across Britain in search of Arthur. When he finds Arthur, Gwyna is again portraying herself as a female. She watches Peredur from afar and develops a crush on him though for his own part Peredur only has eyes for the beautiful Celemon. As a young warrior, Peredur is singularly incompetent. On the two occasions that he enters combat he is soundly defeated—though Gwyna convinces him on one occasion that he has indeed been victorious. Peredur rides with Cei on the ill-fated expedition that ends in Cei's treacherous death. In this instance Peredur is rescued by Gwyna; though he lives he begins to question his self-worth because he believes that



running away to survive is an example of cowardice. Later still, Gwyna recruits Peredur as her sidekick. By this time Gwyna is again passing as a man but confesses her transgendered past to Peredur; he also realizes she knows about his peculiar upbringing. The novel ends with Gwyna as a man and Peredur traveling together in a strangely homoerotic pairing.

## Bedwyr

Bedwyr is a boy, later a young man, who follows Arthur. At the novel's opening, Bedwyr serves his older brother Medrawt as a squire. When he turns about sixteen years old he becomes a warrior in his own right and begins to ride with Arthur and the other men. Gwyna describes Bedwyr as handsome, insightful, and intelligent—but also as a typical man. Though the narrative does not directly state it, it becomes obvious that Gwyna develops a sort of crush on Bedwyr. Gwyna, at this time dressing and being accepted as a boy, becomes Bedwyr's good friend and confidant. At this point in the narrative their relationship is presented in slightly homoerotic terms, though Bedwyr urinates with the other boys and Gwyna always sneaks away for it. As a warrior, Bedwyr demonstrates great bravery and considerable skill. He rides well and fights from horseback. Bedwyr distinguishes himself on several occasions before taking a spear thrust through the leg—pinned to his horse, he suffers further injuries when the horse rolls on him. Against all odds, Bedwyr survives his injury though he is severely crippled. At this point, Gwenhwyfar requests Bedwyr for her personal guard—an amused Arthur agrees. Bedwyr finds purpose again in his life and struggles to regain some use of his leg. As he heals and recuperates he begins a love affair with Gwenhwyfar that soon leads to illicit sexual encounters at the pagan baths near the town. When Arthur discovers their activities he attacks and murders Bedwyr, severing his head and flinging it into the water. Bedwyr's death not only horrifies Gwyna but also causes a rupture in Arthur's command as Bedwyr's brother, Medrawt, turns against him. In the modern Arthurian mythology, Bedwyr generally is known as Sir Bedivere though aspects of his character have been transferred to the relatively modern invention of the character of Sir Lancelot.

## Cei

Cei is Arthur's brother; Cei is devoted and loyal and even when provoked does not think of betraying Arthur. Cei is described as an enormous and strong man; a warrior through and through. He appears to place his warrior duty above any personal life. Cei also values the lives of his subordinates and attempts to provide for them and protect them as far as is realistic for their lifestyle. Because of this, Cei is respected as a man and a leader and his opinion carries great weight with the men. On several occasions, Gwyna and Myrddin discuss the relative merits of Cei versus Arthur—Gwyna favors Cei; Myrddin explains that Cei is not nearly aggressive and grasping enough to actively conquer new lands. In the end, Cei's loyalty does not save him from Arthur's avarice. Fearing a rupture in the command of Arthur, Myrddin convinces Arthur to betray Cei. Cei leads a small band of warriors on a mission to reinforce a distant ally. In fact, Arthur has



sent instructions ahead to have Cei and his men murdered by the ally. Cei thus dies, stabbed repeatedly by a spear, not even knowing who is attacking him or why.

## Cunaide

Cunaide is the wife of Arthur's youth. She is described as beautiful and desirable and apparently she enjoys drinking, carousing, and sexual exploits with Arthur. When Arthur goes to war, Cunaide remains at home. When Arthur conquers Aquae Sulis and marries Gwenhwyfar, Cunaide remains at her distant home. Myrddin explains that Arthur and Cunaide, married under Pagan law, are not legal spouses and therefore need no divorce prior to his subsequent Christian (and therefore legal) marriage to Gwenhwyfar. Cunaide accepts this, though of course she has little recourse. As soon as Arthur and Gwenhwyfar have passed into separate lives, he summons Cunaide to Aquae Sulis and there they live openly as lovers. Cunaide is symbolic of the role of women within the narrative though she remains essentially a minor character.

## Gwenhwyfar

Gwenhwyfar is related to Maelwas and is said to be descended from or related to Ambrosius Aurelianus, a renowned war leader. When she is introduced in the novel she is married to Valerius the magistrate and protector of Aquae Sulis; as such, she is akin to the first lady of the city. When Valerius dies in combat Arthur claims not only his position as protector and magistrate, but also claims Gwenhwyfar as his wife. She is described as pale, very thin, and tall—features that gain her the nickname of Heron. Gwenhwyfar is reserved and finds Arthur repulsive. However, the marriage is a political arrangement and after a brief but transient approach by Arthur, Gwenhwyfar retires to a private life with her ladies in waiting—one of whom is Gwyna, carefully placed by Myrddin. At some point in the ensuing months Gwenhwyfar becomes attracted to Bedwyr and, when he is wounded, nurses him back to health. Their relationship quickly becomes sexual and they pursue a fairly lengthy affair by meeting in the Pagan baths when Arthur is away. The affair is eventually discovered by Myrddin who in course tells Arthur. Arthur catches Gwenhwyfar and Bedwyr in flagrante delicto and murders them both. Arthur kills Bedwyr on the spot and absently tosses his severed head into the watery pools of the hot water baths—an act that is interpreted by those present as a deliberate sacrifice to the Pagan gods. Gwenhwyfar's affair and subsequent death is the beginning of the end of Arthur's influence.

## Maelwas

Maelwas is a King of Dumnonia though the extent of his influence only is hinted at. He is described as old and weak of body. Gwyna describes him as slow to action and condemns him as almost ploddingly incompetent. Arthur's early successes nearly all come at the expense of Maelwas though the exact relationship between the two is open to interpretation because later in the novel Arthur acknowledges that he owes Maelwas



tribute. In the narrative it is possible to interpret Maelwas as a canny politician who decides to outwit Arthur rather than attack him directly. Maelwas probably funds and mans the army that Medrawt leads to overthrow Arthur—thus, when Arthur is dead Maelwas still is king.

## Medrawt

Medrawt is Arthur's nephew and the older brother of Bedwyr. Early in the novel he is a young warrior and chases Gwyna for a moment before she escapes. From that point forward, Gwyna dislikes Medrawt. Through most of the narrative Medrawt is devoted to Arthur. He also is something of a braggart though his skill at arms equals his opinion of himself. After Arthur murders Bedwyr, Medrawt, warned by Peredur, flees Aquae Sulis with his wife and household. At this point Medrawt gathers an army in opposition to Arthur and then meets him on the field of Camlan where a bloody battle ensues. In the battle Medrawt is killed, though so is Arthur. In modern Arthurian mythology, Medrawt, known as Mordred, is said to have personally killed Arthur. While Medrawt plays a significant role in the narrative plot he remains essentially a minor character in the novel.



# Objects/Places

## Ban's Fortress

The novel opens at a locale surrounding a fortress ruled by a lord named Ban. Ban does not appear in the novel because he is killed by Arthur. The locale is a farming and herding community where Gwyna grows up as an orphan. A river runs through the area and at least one large pool, or lake, with a waterfall is present not many miles from the area. Later in the novel, Gwyna returns, briefly, to the area.

## The Lake

Gwyna's initial act of theater with Myrddin occurs in a cold lake. The lake is fed by a waterfall and empties by a stream. The lake appears to be something like ten feet deep and is small enough that visibility from the shores to the middle of the lake is quite good. The waterfall plunges into a deep area of the lake but just beyond a ridge of stone runs across a part of the lake from one shore. Behind the waterfall is a small cave. Gwyna hides in the cave with a sword then swims out under the waterfall and holds the sword up, out of the water, to Artur—inadvertently becoming the pagan Lade of the Lake.

## The Lade of the Lake

In the pagan mythology of the pre-Christian era, the Lady of the Lake was held to be a powerful spirit or deity protecting the waterways of Britain. In the period described by the novel, Christian worship is becoming dominant though nearly everyone retains some measure of respect for the pagan religions. Thus, when the putative Lady of the Lake gives a sword to Arthur the onlookers (and Arthur) all understand the symbol and actually believe they have witnessed a supernatural manifestation.

## Gwyna's Clothing

At several points in the novel Gwyna alternates her clothing to that appropriate for a member of the opposite gender. She begins dressed as a girl, then dresses as a boy, then dresses as a young woman, then dresses as a man. Her appearance apparently is androgynous enough that throughout the novel no one ever questions her actual gender. In this sense, the narrative suggests that gender is defined by clothing and presentation rather than by biology.

## Caliburn

Caliburn is the name of a sword that Myrddin purchases. The sword is well-made and portions are covered in gold leaf. Myrddin uses a ruse to cause the sword to appear to



Arthur as if it had been presented by the Lade of the Lake; the sword thereafter has great significance as a symbol to Arthur and his followers. In modern versions of the Arthurian myth, Caliburn usually is known as Excalibur.

## Dewi

Dewi is a pony that is given to Gwyna by Myrddin. The pony grows into a smallish horse that is sturdy and dependable, if not fast or fierce. Gwyna finds Dewi to be her most reliable friend and comfort during many years of the novel.

## Twrch Trwyth

Twrch Trwyth is the name Myrddin gives to a legendary boar. In many tales of Arthur, Myrddin has Arthur hunting and killing the mighty Twrch Trwyth to prove his prowess at arms.

## Aquae Sulis

Aquae Sulis is a town, or city, founded by the Romans but persisting into the time of the novel. It is described as a large town or small city, with walls and a keep. Nearby are ancient water baths dedicated to Pagan gods and rites. Aquae Sulis is the principle setting of the novel after Arthur becomes its Lord Protector. The city is described as "...in a loop of silvery river, at the bottom of a green bowl of downs" (p. 97).

## Tribute

Tribute is used in the narrative to signify willful subjugation to a lord. When Arthur takes a place under his protection—that is, when he conquers it—he thereafter demands tribute to signify his continuing leadership. Likewise, Arthur pays tribute to King Maelwas. Although Tribute is governed by a formal protocol in practice it appears rarely to be paid.

## Camlan

Camlan is the name of a field that slopes gently and has a river or stream nearby. It is significant only because it is the place where Arthur has his final battle with Medrawt—both Arthur and Medrawt are killed as are most of their men. In the narrative, the only two characters that are known to escape are Gwyna and Peredur.





# Themes

## Transgender Identity

The dominant theme of the novel, and certainly its most-unique theme, concerns the trans-gender identity of the narrator. Born a girl the narrator is raised as an orphaned girl until the early teen years. Thereafter she is transformed into a boy—socially—by Myrddin her new master. The transition is accomplished by cutting her hair short, dirtying her face, and putting her into boys' clothing. Presented as a boy, she is accepted as a boy and spends the next few years being a boy. In the novel, there are no complications to this and she is never discovered or even suspected. During this time the narrator develops a sort of homo-erotic attraction for another boy which is not reciprocated but simultaneously is not rebuffed. After this period, the narrator is again transformed by Myrddin into a girl. This is accomplished by growing out her hair, washing up properly, and dressing in girls' clothing. At about fifteen, then, the narrator is presented as a lady-in-waiting to King Arthur's court. The narrator returns as the half-sister of her previous incarnation as a boy and in a Superman-Clark Kent moment, apparently nobody recognizes her. She then lives as a young woman for a few years until striking out on her own at which time she resumes living like a man. At this point she takes as her companion Peredur, a man raised as a girl, and the two somewhat effeminate men travel the countryside in a decidedly peculiar, and slightly homosexual, method.

## Storytelling

The narrative itself is meta-fictionally aware that it is a story, being told by the narrator for the amusement of the reader. Within this story are other stories in a complex layering that examines the act and meaning of narration. Often, events occur and are described in factual terms only later to be told and re-told in slightly more fictional terms. Some stories evolve so much that they become only tenuously moored to fact, but by that point nobody much remembers, or cares, about the facts and they view the stories as real—or at least as historically accurate. This theme strongly is reinforced by Myrddin's lifestyle as a bard, or wandering storyteller, and the narrator's eventual adoption of this lifestyle as well. Given this, the narrator is perhaps not entirely reliable because often she notes that telling stories that are crafted is very much more satisfying than telling stories that are factual. This entire process of narrative storytelling is layered upon the historical process of the Arthurian myth cycle; here we have a novel purporting to tell the truth about the genesis of Arthur and craftily explaining why Myrddin did what he did and examining how he did it. The novel thus presents the theme of storytelling in a complex and multi-layered methodology.





## Family

The theme of family runs throughout the narrative. The narrator is an orphan; the narrator's adopted father, Myrddin, likewise was an orphan. Both characters are alone in life and forge a sort of peculiar family. Myrddin takes great risks to ensure that Gwyna is positioned well for a successful life. When Myrddin dies, Gwyna replaces the father-daughter relationship with a husband-wife relationship by taking Peredur as her lover. With the peculiar gender inversion running throughout the novel, it is Gwyna as a male that actively claims the retiring Peredur. The couple then becomes a woman passing as a man with a man raised as a woman traveling together as companions, not lovers, and engaged in a homosexual relationship that is biologically heterosexual. Clearly, the family unit here is presented as transcending genetic relatedness or even sexual identity. This theme is also mirrored by the brotherly bond between Bedwyr and Medrawt—they are not particularly close but Medrawt cannot abide a betrayal of his brother. Again, Arthur kills Bedwyr not because he has stolen away Gwenhwyfar his love, but because he has trifled with Arthur's public family. The theme also is mirrored by the relationship between Arthur and Cei; when Arthur chooses to betray his brother Cei it signals the end of his rule as Medrawt returns and destroys Arthur.

# Style

## Point of View

"Here Lies Arthur" is related from the first-person, limited perspective. The narrator is the central protagonist in the novel and is present in nearly every scene in the novel. Sometimes the narrator will relate events second-hand; sometimes the narrator will imagine what events probably were like. In general, however, the narrator is reliable if somewhat unobservant. The narrative point of view is complicated somewhat by the narrator's strange transition from female to male to female to male during the course of several years. This transition is of course social only but the perception of the narrator by others and, especially, by the narrator her- or himself is a complex and subtle process. This component of the point of view is strongly reinforced by the advent of the character of Peredur—a male raised as a female—and the subsequent relationship between the narrator and Peredur. In general, the point of view is accessible and appropriate to the type of plot-driven novel presented. It lends an immediacy and an intimacy to the story that generally is not found in third-person narratives.

## Setting

The novel features a diffuse setting of indeterminate historical location. The frontispiece (page 1) indicates the time and place are "South-West Britain, around A.D. 500" (p. 1) and that is as specific as the ties to the real-world are. The first third of the novel is presented in a variety of rural settings as the narrator is moved from place to place along with Arthur's group of mercenaries. In general, these places are small farming and herding communities carved out of forest and wilderness. The last two-thirds of the novel are set, generally, in a town or city called Aquae Sulis. This town is said to be fortified with a wall and is built near the site of a hot spring that, once, was the site of pagan worship. Since the advent of Christianity the hot springs have been abandoned. The town is said to have been constructed by the Romans and has much Roman architecture and culture—the town government still dresses in Roman togas, for example. Historically, Aquae Sulis was in fact a Roman city in the province of Britannia and is today known as the city of Bath. It is quite likely, based on the Author's Note and the description of the layout of Aquae Sulis, that the author intended the fictional city to be a representation of the historical city.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is related in standard English. Most character names and place names are fairly unfamiliar, or at least unfamiliar-sounding, to modern readers. The novel's Note on Pronunciation, pp. 338 - 339, greatly helps modern readers with pronunciation of the old English and Welsh names presented. Phonetically, most of the names are closely aligned with modern Arthurian legend counterparts—thus, Gwenhwyfar, pronounced,



grooennhooeevarr, is discerned as Guinevere and Cei, pronounced kay, is discerned as Sir Kay. Other characters, for example Peredur, use ancient forms of the modern equivalents—in this case Sir Percival. In any case, these names are not cause for difficulty in reading the narrative and add a certain amount of texture to the narrative setting. Occasionally an unusual sentence structure or word selection is used to break the narrative flow and focus the reader on certain events. Modern readers may find the narrator's focus on clothing, horses, and food slightly unusual—but these things were certainly of critical importance during the time period described. Meaning within the novel is derived from traditional fictional elements and comprehension of the narrative plot should pose no special barrier to a typical reader.

## Structure

The 339-page novel is divided into fifty-one enumerated chapters; chapters are labeled with Roman numerals. The end materials include an author's note that briefly examines the relationship between history and fiction and explains the author's interest in Arthur; and a Note on Pronunciation that is particularly useful. Chapter lengths are uneven running from less than a page to several pages. Chapters cover essentially topical events developing in the novel's timeline. Most chapters focus on plot events; some chapters focus on internal development of the narrator and principle character. The novel's chronology covers a few years and the pacing is chronologically uneven, as is typical for fiction—some lengthy passages focus on the significant events of only a few moments; other short passages cover perhaps a year of time. This allows the narrative to stay interesting and the plot pace to appear even and consistent. In general, the novel's construction is quite traditional and typical of the genre and poses no special barrier to understanding or meaning. Indeed, the familiar structure of the novel and the narrative allows for a ready suspension of disbelief and engages the reader in the fictional world of Arthur.



## Quotes

Even the woods are burning. I plunge past the torched cow barn and hard into the shoulder-deep growth of brambles between the trees, but there's fire ahead of me as well as behind. The hall on the hill's top where I thought I'd find shelter is already blazing. I can hear men's voices baying like hounds on a scent, the hooves of horses on the winter earth like drums. (p. 3)

I found my clothes and crawled into them and felt no warmer. I lay down on the damp stone behind the waterfall and hugged myself and shuddered, and my teeth rattled, rattled, rattled. (p. 33)

Here's a story Myrddin told that year, while we sat around the hall fires, me and Bedwyr reunited, and the other boys and men of Arthur's band. He'd been talking to the Irishman's kin, and he'd got from them a tale their grandfathers had brought across the sea from Leinster. It was all about some old Irish god, but Myrddin took the god out and put Arthur in his place, and when he told it by the harvest fire, even the Irishmen listened rapt, as if they'd never heard of it before. (p. 63)

Down on the shore where the gray waves broke, Saint Porroc was tumbling like driftwood in the cold white surf. His monks stood on the sand, calling out prayers and praising God for this new sign of their master's holiness. (p. 92)

Before dawn, my master's toe prodded me awake. I scrambled up quick and followed him between the turf ramparts to the horse lines. There was a line of light like a tidemark along the bottom of the eastern sky. I could see the curve of the river shining below us, and on the dark land beyond it I could dimly make out the heap of dead enemies we had left there for the crows and foxes. (p. 122)

My skull was filled up with a moil of thoughts. While the horses drank from the shallows, I knelt down and stared at my reflection in the water and tried to see something girlish in my sunburned face. "Gwyna," I tried saying. And it was like I was calling her back from the dead. (p. 153)

He'd known it always, really. A long time, at least. He thought back to the angel day and the strange thing that boy Gwyn had asked of him, "Why do you dress like that?" he'd wondered sometimes what Gwyn had meant by that. Now he understood. (p. 184)

His hill country was so remote he hadn't heard of Arthur's quarrel with Calchvynydd. When he was told, his face fell. He knew he'd little hope of Arthur's help. Truth was, Arthur had all but forgotten him. And anyway, it was years since he'd sent Arthur tribute. (p. 213)

His man came back, the sword hilt flaring as lightning spiked in through the shutter cracks. Medrawt ignored him, ran to the room where his wife was. "Dress," was all he said. "Bring the girls and your women. We're leaving." (p. 243)



That night around the fire, the others wanted tales of battles won and enemies cast down. They wanted to hear again about the treasure that would be waiting for them in Cunomorus's stronghold. I wasn't sure what to tell them. If I promised them gold drinking cups or a jeweled throne, what would they say when they looted Cunomorus's hall and didn't find such things? Then the stories I'd spun might twist around like snakes to bite me. (p. 273)

Out east somewhere. Out in the round green downs behind Noviomagus. So many years back, the Saxons hadn't quite settled there yet. But this summer night, one of their war keels slid out of its shelter in the coves of Vectis and come to drop its crew of fighters in the riverside woods. They come fast up the white roads in the moonlight. Flames leap from kindled villas. (p. 307)

So I'll end my story the way stories of Arthur always end. A little ship is setting out on the evening tide. (p. 333)



## Topics for Discussion

After reading the various accounts of Arthur's raids and behavior, do you conclude that Arthur was a heroic king? How does the fictional portrayal of Arthur vary from most legends that present Arthur as a wise, nearly deific, king of Britain?

In most modern Arthurian mythology, Sir Percival—presented in the novel as Peredur—is a heroic knight who quests after the Christian Holy Grail. In the novel, Peredur is a barely-capable young man who believes he finds a sacred cup belonging to the pagan Lady of the Lake. Which version of the character—Peredur or Sir Percival—do you prefer? Why?

In most modern Arthurian mythology, Sir Kay—presented in the novel as Cei—is presented as a fierce warrior but a social lout; usually he is not a blood-relative of Arthur but acts as his Seneschal. In the novel, Cei is a superb fighter, a genuine leader of men, and a devoted brother of Arthur. Which version of the character—Cei or Sir Kay—do you prefer? Why?

In most modern Arthurian mythology, Sir Bedivere—presented in the novel as Bedwyr—is presented as a loyal warrior who is the Marshall of Arthur. In some relatively modern writing, Bedivere also is seen as the genesis for the character of Lancelot. In the novel, Bedwyr's affair with Gwenhwyfar is responsible for the couple's death and the later betrayal of Cei and, ultimately, the death of Arthur. Which version of the character—Bedwyr or Sir Bedivere—do you prefer? Why?

Why do you think Bedwyr and Gwenhwyfar fall in love? Do you think their relationship is based on a permanent attraction? Is their relationship mostly physical lust? Do you think that, in an alternative scenario, they could have remained a happy couple over many years?

Consider the characters of Gwenhwyfar and Cunaide. How are women treated in the narrative? Do you think that the social position of women has changed significantly from the time described by the narrative?

Myrddin wanted to make Arthur the uniting king of Britain—in this he appears to have failed entirely. However, today Myrddin—as Merlin—is known nearly universally as the greatest wizard of all time. How do you think Myrddin succeeded in his quest to make Arthur great?

The narrative presents the kingdom of Calchvynydd as an opponent, or antagonist, to Arthur. Maelwas' kingdom, however, has a more complex relationship that finds Arthur as a sort of subordinate to Maelwas. The narrator frequently notes that Maelwas is old, physically weak, and seemingly slow to action. However, judging from the final narrative outcomes, which person gains the final ascendance—Arthur or Maelwas? Discuss.



The narrative presents a complex economy where most individuals eke out a near-starvation existence by performing subsistence farming or herding. Some individuals in towns live better lives through commerce. Arthur, however, appears to live quite well by constant raiding and plundering. Do you think that Arthur's lifestyle is sustainable over the long term? Can a warlord persist indefinitely by raiding and plundering? Why or why not?

Which guise of the narrator more interests you—Gwyn or Gwyna? Why?