

The High King Short Guide

The High King by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The Newbery-Award winning *The High King* is the final, and most complex, novel of the Prydain Chronicles, a series which follows the life of Taran, an assistant pig-keeper. A climactic battle between good and evil is fought, and Taran's identity as heir to the throne is finally revealed. For readers who have followed the rest of Taran's adventures, the book is a fitting conclusion, for it brings together all of the characters from the Chronicles in a final attempt to destroy the evil forces of Arawn. For those who have not read the other books, it is a rousing fantasy adventure in its own right. With *The High King*, the age of magic has come to an end, and Taran must assume his position as king.

About the Author

Lloyd Alexander was born January 30, 1924, in Philadelphia, where he lived until graduating from high school.

As a student, Alexander wanted to be a poet and devoted so much time to his poetry that the rest of his studies suffered.

His father disapproved of his ambition and refused to fund his college education.

Nevertheless, Alexander attended West Chester State Teacher's College in 1942 and Lafayette College in 1943, before leaving school to serve in the military. He was trained in military intelligence and sent to France. At the end of World War II, he stayed in Paris to attend the Sorbonne and there married Janine Denni.

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

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

Setting

The High King takes place in the mythical world of Prydain. Although there are many strange creatures that live in this kingdom, this mythical land seems parallel to our world in many ways. In an "Author's Note" Alexander comments: "While it grew from Welsh legend, it has broadened into my attempt to make a land of fantasy relevant to a world of reality."

The time of the story is irrelevant because it is fantasy, but it is important to note that there are no motorized vehicles. All transportation is by foot or on horseback. Communications are either by human or animal messengers.

Social Sensitivity

The High King is a book about war, and handles its subject very well. Its action entails gathering an army, engaging in battles, and fighting to the death. However, the choices that the characters make are thoughtful and well explained and they grieve for the dead in a natural manner.



Literary Qualities

Alexander's style is simple and clear, and his characters are easily identified by their characteristic ways of speaking.

Alexander drew on the myths and legends of *The Mabinogion*, a medieval work which includes one of the earliest allusions to the legend of King Arthur.

Although he drew many of his characters from this work, *The Prydain Chronicles* do not follow its story. He used the characters and places as a base from which to create the world of Prydain.

Taran's story has many things in common with Arthurian legend. Like Arthur, he is hidden as an infant, becomes the high king, and uses a sword that no one else can draw. While many aspects of Taran's story parallel the story of Arthur, however, Prydain is primarily a creation of Alexander.



Themes and Characters

Most of the many characters in *The High King* are stereotypes that represent different types of human behavior.

There are extreme differences in the characterizations of the good and evil figures.

Taran is the protagonist in the *Prydain Chronicles*, and he has the most universal appeal. An ordinary boy who works as an assistant pig-keeper, Taran is on a quest for his identity throughout the series. In *The High King* he appears to have accepted that his identity is unknown and will remain that way. He is no longer as concerned with who he is and what he should do. In part, this is the result of his adventures in *Taran Wanderer*; he has also accepted the fact that his needs are not as important as Prydain's need to overthrow the forces of evil.

Eilonwy, the princess whom Taran loves, does not change much throughout the series. At the end of *The High King*, she renounces her claim to her family and her inherited powers in order to remain with Taran. Although it was always evident that she liked Taran and did not especially like having to be a princess, her reasons for giving up her powers and choosing to live a mortal life, rather than an everlasting one, are not made clear. Nevertheless, the reader will applaud the fact that Taran and Eilonwy are not separated at the end of the story.

Gurgi, a long-haired timid creature, and Fflewddur, a bard, are two of Taran's companions. They are important to the story because of their support for Taran, which allows him to change and grow in self confidence. Both must make hard choices to help the companions to survive.

Glew, the whining giant, and Doli, the helpful grumbling dwarf, are also important characters. Glew is a complainer and a bungler, who causes problems to befall the companions. Because of his greed and lack of consideration for others, he causes an entire tunnel to cave in. Although he is not an attractive character, he demonstrates the tolerance of the companions. Doli, on the other hand, grumbles about what he is asked to do but always does his duty.

His grumbling is not always serious and he really wants to help as much as he is able.

Dallben and Coll are the stable adult figures in the story. Dallben, who has long been responsible for Taran's welfare, is seen relinquishing that role in *The High King*. Taran is in the process of taking on the responsibility for his own welfare. However, Dallben is still the person whom the companions gather around after the last battle is fought, because he is the character with the greatest magical powers and the most wisdom. Coll, the representative of humankind, is mainly involved with his garden, a symbol that he is in touch with the earth. When he is killed in an early battle in *The High King*, all of the companions grieve the death of such a kind person.



King Rhun gives up his life in one of the first battles of the book in order to save the rest of the companions. Pryderi, a king from the west, should really be on the side of good, but has been tricked into serving the side of evil. He is further tricked by his evil masters into putting himself into a situation from which he cannot escape.

The evil characters are less fully drawn. Arawn, the death lord, is only characterized by the horror with which others view him. There is no sympathy for his character and no regret at his death. The Cauldron Born, a race of warriors that work for Arawn and cannot be killed, and the gwythaints, giant birds under Arawn's power, have no individual personalities of their own. They are objects of pity because they had no freedom of choice. Achren, an evil enchantress who had lost her powers, helps capture the evil Arawn. She too is pitied by the companions upon her death.

The main theme in *The High King* is the struggle between good and evil for control of the world. All of the characters serve either good or evil, and some change sides in the course of the story.

Good triumphs, but with a cost of lives that is difficult for the characters to accept. Another theme is the difficulty of the choices that must be made by people struggling to overcome evil. Many of Taran's friends choose to surrender their lives in order to help. Many people make the choice to follow Taran into battle, knowing that they might never return. Still, they follow willingly and give all they have to offer in order to make Prydain free of evil.

The theme of one's search for identity is also important in *The High King*.

Taran has struggled to discover his identity during the first four books of the series, but now seems resigned to never finding out. When he does find out his parentage at the end of the story, it does not matter to him, because he has already accepted himself the way he is. He has proven himself to be a good person even though he has no family and no knowledge of his family.

The final important theme in the story is the question raised at the end of the book—whether to choose an endless life with no problems or a mortal life that is uncertain. This is Taran's last test. Until this point, Dallben would not reveal what had been written at the end of *The Book of Three*, which chronicled Prydain's past, present, and future, or what Taran's parentage had really been.

When Taran chooses to remain in Prydain, Dallben knows that he can tell him what he had long been seeking.



Topics for Discussion

1. In the beginning why does Hen Wen refuse to make the prophecy? What do you expect to happen as a result?
2. Why do the Commot folk follow Taran? Why is it important that Taran is the one to lead them?
3. Why does the gwythaint choose to help Taran when they are at the gates of Annuvin?
4. Why does Pryderi make the choice to follow Arawn? When does he realize that he has made the wrong choice?
5. What aspects of Taran's life are similar to the life of King Arthur?
6. Why was Dallben uncertain of the end of The Book of Three? Why could he not understand what the ending had meant?
7. What was the job of the Sons of Don?
Why was their job complete at the end of the book?
8. What is Medwyn's job? How does he help Prydain?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What sacrifices do each of the characters make in order to save others?

Why was each sacrifice a hard thing for the character to do?

2. Why does Taran's choice at the end of the book make sense? What things do you think he will try to accomplish? How will he do these things?

3. How does The High King compare with other books of fantasy? How does Alexander compare with other authors?

4. Why is Glew important to the story?

Can you think of other characters like him in other stories? What purpose do they serve?

5. Why is The High King a good way to end the Prydain Chronicles?

For Further Reference

The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales, translated by Patrick K. Ford.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. These tales are Alexander's sources for his characters.

Weber, Rosemary. "Alexander, Lloyd (Chudley)." In Twentieth Century Children's Writers, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick. New York: St. Martin's, 1978.

Contains basic information about the author's life and works.

Related Titles/Adaptations

The High King is the final book in the Prydain Chronicles series. In 1985, the second book in the series, *The Black Cauldron*, was made into an animated film by the Walt Disney Studios. Although the film was generally well received by audiences, some critics complained that none of the rich themes of Alexander's books are to be found in it.



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