

# Hobby Short Guide

## Hobby by Jane Yolen

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## Overview

At the end of *Passager*, Merlin seemed to have found a family. Master Robin, Mag, and Nell took him in and he learned the ways of farming and falconry. *Hobby* begins with the shocking end of his life on the farm. He leaves the farm with some social skills and a little experience with the outside world, but his travels in *Hobby* are a learning process, as he discovers the evil people can do and the harshness with which even sympathetic people can treat an unconventional person such as he. In the process, he meets a spy, a mage, a bard, and Duke Vortigern, and he moves closer to becoming a mature falcon, to becoming Merlin.

## About the Author

Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while continuing to write. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned Hobby 155 to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

## Setting

In *Hobby*, Merlin travels from the New Forest through an area of ancient ruins to a medieval trading center. There, he joins the company of Ambrosius and Viviane. Yolen takes care to depict an authentic May fair and to depict the people and buildings as they would have appeared in Merlin's day.

The problem of a tower collapsing because of leaking Roman plumbing underneath is a nice touch, because the people of the era would have had to work with Roman plumbing and buildings in most cities of Romanized Britain. The Romans would have abandoned Britain less than a generation before the events in the novella.

## Social Sensitivity

Part of the appeal of *Hobby* is that it is a wish-fulfillment fantasy typical of multitudes of books written for young adults. In Merlin's day, children were usually helpless in a world of grownups. Merlin's own experiences, as Yolen points out, were common—children were often abandoned as he was, and they were often left on their own to cope with the likes of Fowler (as in foul). Finding food and shelter would have been difficult, much as it may be for youngsters abandoned and on their own in our own day.

158 *Hobby* In a grownup world of lies, abuse, and abandonment, Merlin has special powers. In these powers lies his appeal to young readers. When he likens himself to a hawk among princes, he expresses his ability to rise above the evils around him, to be somebody special in a world that wants him to behave like other young people and to do as grownups tell him to do.

In *Passager*, the novella before *Hobby*, the echoing of the modern problem of abandoned and runaway children is much stronger than in *Hobby*. Even so, without the intervention of Ambrosius and Viviane, Merlin could become a child of the streets, his body for sale by the likes of Fowler. Instead of being the soaring, majestic bird of prey that many would like to be, he could become the tamed bird serving Fowler (or "birder," a tamer of birds). Without his supernatural power, he could be just another anonymous victim whose true name of Merlin would remain unknown.



## Literary Qualities

The metaphor of falconry unites the three books *Passager*, *Hobby*, and *Merlin*. In *Hobby*, Merlin makes the transition from passager, a young falcon or hawk, to hobby, a young adult bird that may become a full-grown falcon or hawk. His growth involves coping with birders, as represented by Fowler (a birder), who would tame him and make him do their bidding for their personal profit. When Fowler proposes renting Merlin out as a servant, to bring in money, it sounds as if Merlin is a falcon trained to make a kill and bring the carcass to its master for his dinner. In *Hobby*, Merlin manages to evade those who would enslave him, and as he implies when he calls himself "a hawk among princes," he is close to mastering his gifts by the novella's end.

The characters of Ambrosius, Viviane, and Vortigern are all taken from the most ancient of Arthurian chronicles such as that by Nennius. In some ancient texts, Ambrosius, not Arthur, is the great leader of the Romanized Britons against the invasion of the Germanic barbarians, and he is credited with masterful strategies that bring victories in battles. For *Hobby*, Yolen borrows the name but makes him a minor figure, a traveling magician who puts on shows involving skill rather than supernatural powers. In later tales of King Arthur, Viviane appears as a mage with powers almost equal to those of Merlin. Much younger than Merlin, she seduces the old man into revealing much of his magic to her, and then she betrays him. The nature of the betrayal varies from author to author, by usually she uses a spell Merlin taught her to trap him inside a stone, a tree, or a cave. In *Hobby*, she is beautiful but not really possessed of supernatural powers, although her singing may be said to be somewhat seductive in the way it charms her listeners.

Vortigern appears only in very ancient chronicles, primarily in the chronicles of Nennius. In these accounts, he is the British king who gives the Angles and Saxons a foothold in his realm, by inviting them to come and settle if they use their military might to support him. The white dragon versus red dragon dream is actually a prophesy of how Vortigern's actions will destroy not only him but all of Roman Britain as the dragon of the Angles and Saxons eats the dragon of the Britons. In these early stories, Merlin is a young man who is not yet famous but whose powers are known well enough that he is asked to interpret the dragon dream. He interprets correctly and fearlessly. In *Hobby* and its sequel, *Merlin*, Vortigern has been made a rival of Uther Pendragon, usually portrayed in Arthurian literature as the last rightful leader of the Britons before the coming of Arthur, and often credited with being Arthur's biological father.



# Themes and Characters

The focus in *Hobby* is on the development of the character Merlin, on the events he experiences as a young adult that will shape what he becomes when he is the grownup wizard of the Arthurian tales.

Usually a secondary figure in literature, a supporting player to King Arthur, who is the usual center of attention, in *Hobby* Merlin is shown to be an interesting and important figure in his own right.

We live in an era in which the experiences of childhood are viewed as important in shaping the adult. In the case of Merlin, Yolen has a mysterious magical figure who in the Arthurian tales can be cold, remote, almost inhuman, and who is even so a father-figure for King Arthur, who relies on him for guidance. Merlin had to have been a child at one time, and Yolen builds for him a childhood that could explain how the adult Merlin came to be what he was.

Merlin's childhood is one of abandonment, loss, and abuse. *Hobby* opens with the death of the family that took him in after he was abandoned in the forest by his mother.

As the sole survivor of the fire that killed everyone else, he has feelings similar to those of many survivors of catastrophes: "The guilt of all their deaths, of the fact that he was still alive, was almost too great to bear." His guilt is deepened by his having dreamed ahead of time about the fire and not interpreted the dream in a way that could have saved the others.

This underlying guilt increases his frustrations at not being able to figure out the meanings of his prophetic dreams until it is too late to do anything about them, and it becomes part of the foundation of a personality that trusts no one, not even himself.

156 *Hobby* *Hobby* is also a tale of abuse and betrayal.

Fowler sees Merlin as a walking victim, capturing him for sale as a slave. Nicer than Fowler, Ambrosius and Viviane see Merlin as a means to making a profit. Although Merlin sees himself as destined to join them, they are to become his new family; when his dreams become worrisome, they abandon him.

These aspects of his experiences contribute to Merlin's distrust of his own emotions and his reluctance to communicate what he knows to people. He is not on his way to becoming a sociopath, but he is becoming someone who distrusts intimacy, a withdrawn, unhappy person whose experiences make him an observer of people and a bit remote from their feelings, like a bird of prey circling overhead and watching the movements of those below.

In *Hobby*, Merlin learns more about his powers: "My dreams come true. But on the slant." It is the "slant" part that gives him trouble; he is too uncertain of exactly what his





dreams portend to be able confidently to take action on what they tell him. He also learns about secrets and their importance.

"It is never good to let others in on one's secrets," Ambrosius tells him. This lesson is driven home by what happens when Merlin tells him what his dreams really mean; Ambrosius and Viviane abandon him. If he had kept his thoughts to himself, he might well have been able to travel with them.

Now twelve years old, he develops an ironic, adolescent sense of humor that he uses as much to guard himself from his own emotions as to amuse himself and others.

To Vortigern: "I am a hawk," he said, humor hidden in his answer. "A hawk among princes." Vortigern gets the joke, the play on the name "Hobby" that Merlin has been using instead of his real name. But the joke has a deeper meaning; Merlin believes that names are very important, that they can shape people, and he sees himself as a hobby, a small hawk. Perhaps Vortigern and other people are his potential prey.

Although important in ancient Arthurian literature, Vortigern does not play a big role in *Hobby*. More important are Fowler, Ambrosius, and Viviane. Fowler is an annoying oaf, ready to abuse and betray anyone; only his bumbling gives him a redeeming human quality. Otherwise, he is a dark villain who reminds Merlin of the evil that is part of the human condition.

Ambrosius and Viviane take in Merlin for awhile. They travel from place to place earning money with magic shows and singing. Ambrosius is a skilled magician who teaches Merlin about the secrets of the tongue—speaking sotto voce—and of the hand, as when he performs a sleight-of-hand trick: So, Hobby thought, there are secrets of the hand as well as the tongue. Sotto voce, indeed.

Ambrosius and Viviane travel in a notable wagon: "Parked under a chestnut tree, the wagon was as green as a fairy's gown.

And it was indeed a castle on wheels, for the top of the wagon was vaulted over and an entire outline of a tower and keep was painted on the side." At this wagon he meets Viviane: "Her long dark hair, unbound, fell to her waist. She wore a dress of scarlet wool, and jewels in her ears that made a pleasant jangling, like a hawk's jesses. A yellow purse hung from a braided belt and it, too, jangled whenever she moved." She is a bard, a singer, and she says, "Bards know everything . . . Everything about magic." This is not entirely true, but she and Ambrosius prove to be remarkable observers of people, discovering their secrets by paying attention to them.

Viviane seems to have little trouble identifying Merlin as a lost boy. Yet, neither Viviane nor Ambrosius really knows magic—not Merlin's kind of magic. Merlin learns from them some rules for behaving discreetly and about some of the ways secrets may be kept—and revealed—and he learns that even sympathetic nonconformists such as they will fear his supernatural powers.

The lesson is a tough one, coming as it does from friendly, basically honorable people.



## Topics for Discussion

1. "A lie, if done well, becomes truth," says Viviane. What does she mean? Is there an example of a lie being told that turns out to be true?
2. What makes Merlin a hobby in Hobby?
3. What does the word "hobby" imply about what Merlin will become?
4. What are the different ways lies can be told in Hobby? Who tells the lies? What are the most important lies?
5. Why does Merlin feel compelled to tell the truth about his magical powers no matter what situation he is in?
6. Ambrosius says, "The greatest wisdom of any dreamer is to live to dream again." What does he mean? How does it apply to Merlin?
7. What are some instances of the metaphor of falconry being used in Hobby? What do these instances reveal about Merlin?
8. Why does Merlin choose to be called "Hobby" rather than his real name? Why are names important to him?
9. What are signs of Merlin maturing in the narrative?
10. Merlin proves to be good for bringing in money, especially with his winning smile. What, then, would make Ambrosius and Viviane so afraid that they would run away from Merlin?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What other accounts of Merlin's childhood are there? How do they compare to Hobby?
2. Yolen has written about Merlin in other books, but these other portraits of Merlin such as found in "The Dragon's Boy" are different from that in Passager, Hobby, and Merlin. How do they differ from the Merlin of Hobby? How are they similar? Are their themes similar to those of Hobby? What does Yolen seem to be trying to achieve with her depictions of Merlin?
3. What is the dream of two dragons about in the original stories about Merlin? How does Yolen alter it in Hobby and Merlin?
4. The name "Ambrosius" is borrowed from ancient chronicles of the era when Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic peoples were invading Britain—the late 400s and early to mid 500s. Who is he in the ancient chronicles? What are the achievements credited to him? What is his relationship to the King Arthur legends? Did he really exist?  
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5. In the ancient histories of Britain, who was Vortigern? What did he do? Was he similar to Yolen's portrayal? How has Yolen modified him? Did he actually exist?
7. Are any traits of the Viviane of earlier Arthurian stories preserved in the character in Hobby?
8. Merlin's increasingly strong supernatural abilities are wish fulfillment in Hobby. That is, young people are supposed to see themselves as Merlin, soaring above conformity to stand out from their peers and having the power to defy social rules. Why is wish fulfillment in fiction for young adults attractive to adolescent readers? What does it give them, if anything?



## For Further Reference

"Jane (Hyatt) Yolen." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Volume 29.

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1990, pp. 463-69.

A summary of Yolen's publications, with a brief interview of Yolen.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-29. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 219. Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retellings.

———. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

*Locus* 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

———. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-38. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

———. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales." *Locus* 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

———. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

———. *The Writer* (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style, and discusses why she enjoys writing.

———. *Writing Books for Children*. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.

## Related Titles

Yolen says that she is interested in the father-son relationship between Merlin and King Arthur, and she cites "The Dragon's Boy" (1993) as an effort to depict that relationship. In that story, Merlin is called Linn, and he is much older than Artos (a play on the Celtic for "bear"; in an early chronicle, the leader of the Britons in their war against the Saxons was referred to as "bear" or "the bear," without being given a name).

In *Passager, Hobby, and Merlin*, Merlin is barely a young adult when he befriends the young Cub (whom Merlin renames "Artus").

*Hobby*, the second novella in the *Young Merlin Trilogy*, opens with Merlin at twelve years of age, about four years after the end of *Passager*. In *Passager*, Merlin is abandoned in the New Forest when he is seven years old. He learns about survival in the woods and learns to view experience from an animal-eye view. When Master Robin takes him in, Merlin is like a wild bird and needs to be tamed, although like the birds of prey kept by Master Robin, Merlin will always remain somewhat wild.

In both *Hobby* and *Merlin*, Merlin learns some harsh lessons about humanity and about his relationship to human beings.

Wanting to find a place where he will be accepted and can have something resembling a family life, he discovers that his supernatural gifts frighten away some people and provoke exploitation and abuse from others. He also gets a graphic look at the evil that people do. He ends up with an unusual amount of wisdom, the companionship of a boy much younger than himself, and the ability and willingness to take on significant responsibilities.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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