

The Illyrian Adventure Short Guide

The Illyrian Adventure by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The Illyrian Adventure is the first of a series of five books about the adventures of sixteen-year-old Vesper Holly.

It is a fast-paced, exciting story with a suspenseful plot and a delightfully enterprising protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, the recently orphaned Vesper persuades her guardian to join her in a dangerous mission in the tiny country of Illyria on the seacoast of the Adriatic. Her purpose is to redeem the reputation of her historian father, who in his work about Illyria referred to a "magical army" that no one believes could possibly have existed. The lively characterization of Vesper enhances the engrossing plot, with its focus on an archaeological mystery.

About the Author

Lloyd Alexander was born January 30, 1924, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he lived until graduating from high school. As a high school student, Alexander wanted to be a poet and devoted so much of his time to writing poetry that the rest of his studies suffered. His father disapproved of his ambition and refused to fund his college education, and he was unable to get a scholarship. Nevertheless, Alexander attended West Chester State Teacher's College in 1942 and Lafayette College in 1943. When World War II broke out, Alexander left school for the military, which trained him in military intelligence and sent him to France. At the end of World War II, Alexander stayed in Paris to attend the Sorbonne, and he later married Janine Denni.

After receiving his degree from the Sorbonne, Alexander returned to Philadelphia with his wife and daughter and continued to write, first attempting young adult fantasy in 1963. Thirteen years later, while conducting research for *The Time Cat*, he stumbled across Welsh legends that he had read and liked as a boy and became obsessed with them. This newfound obsession resulted in the *Prydain Chronicles*, a five-novel series that became his most popular work.

In 1959, Alexander received the Isaac Siegal 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* cycle.

Subsequently, he received 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 novels were for young adults. In 1986, Alexander received a Parents Choice Award for his novel *The Illyrian Adventure*.

Setting

The narrative takes place in 1872, beginning at the family estate near Philadelphia but quickly moving to the imaginary country of Illyria, a name that Alexander borrowed from William Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*. Alexander provides the reader with a map complete with sketches of the major locations of the action, including architectural as well as topographical features of the landscape. Such plot devices as this are effective in making Illyria seem real, as does his creation of the *Illyriad*, an epic poem that traces the history and legends of the mythical country. Its population consists of two opposing ethnic groups, the original Illyrians and the now-dominant Zentans, descendants of ancient invaders.

There are many actual modern parallels, especially in Eastern Europe.

Some of the details in the setting are the result of the late nineteenth-century time frame of the action. Horsedrawn carriages are the main mode of transportation, and Alexander provides specific details of local color, including descriptions of Illyrian festivals and dances. There are also several passages that describe architectural ruins. In addition to physical setting, the author effectively communicates the sense of intense animosity between the warring factions of Illyrians and Zentans. The sense of honor, of ethnic identity, and respect for past tradition that characterizes both groups also serve to create their enmity. Ultimately, it is Vesper's discovery of an ancient artifact that *The Illyrian Adventure* brings the two groups together.

In *The Prydain Chronicles*, Alexander effectively recreated an ancient civilization, and in *The Illyrian Adventure*, he successfully creates a new and original country and its cultures.



Social Sensitivity

Under the comic and adventurous surface of the novel are many significant social themes: the role of the adolescent female in our society; the nature of grief and mourning; family loyalty; cultural diversity; and the conflict between appearance and reality. Vesper is a delightful and admirable adolescent female protagonist, something like Pippi Longstocking in her independence but faced with much more mature circumstances.

Her attitude after her father's death is not to indulge in grief but to actively help restore his scholarly reputation.

When her guardian first sees her, he is startled to find her dressed in a red caftan and purple slippers, but she explains that these garments were a gift from her father and that he would have preferred seeing her in them than in a black veil, looking like a "walking obituary." She proposes the journey to Illyria and sees the project through at the risk of her own life in her total determination to prove her father's accuracy in referring to a magical army.

She not only succeeds in her mission but also stops a civil war. The ancient enmity between the Illyrians and the Zentans reminds the reader of both current political hatreds in the world and of cultural antagonism at home and abroad. The feuding ethnic groups are not at all stereotyped. Several individuals are portrayed from both, and both cultures are described respectfully. Vesper's own friendly and exuberant reactions to cultures other than her own make her a very model of multicultural understanding.



Literary Qualities

Alexander has a gift for creating the atmosphere of an imaginary foreign culture. One effective device is his choice of words and names. The reader comes to think of the protagonists as farenki, or foreigners. Nilo's position as all-around assistant is that of dragoman, and the document that permits the pair to travel through Illyria is a firman.

Brinnie explains that the Illyrian language has Latin roots and that Zentan is closely related to Turkish.

The device of first-person narration works well. The guardian of the newly orphaned girl is at once a keen observer and an eager participant in the adventures. He frequently misjudges people, however, but so does everyone in the story. Brinnie is naive, but he is not an unreliable narrator. His professorial style of language contrasts nicely with Vesper's adolescent effervescence.

The book is rich in dialogue. Vesper can discuss "everything from electromagnetism to a whimsical book by an English clergyman." She has a sparkling phrase for all situations: Angry at the tactics of the menacing Colonel Zalik, she fumes "that blubberous lump."

Several scenes of breathtaking danger are described in vigorous, concrete prose. On one occasion, Vesper, Nilo, and Brinnie are trapped in a cave when explosions are set off at the entrance.

On another occasion, villains actually aim their guns at what they consider interfering intruders. In each case, the deft prose captures the excitement of the close escape.

The plot is highly suspenseful, and the complex resolution has significant thematic implications. The archaeological discovery made by Vesper confers meaning on the preceding events, merging history, politics, and human nature. Not only does Vesper redeem her father's reputation but also she serves to reconcile feuding factions within Illyria. Her discovery leads to peace on the national level and to the establishment of abiding friendships on the personal.

Alexander also uses the comic mode in the novel. Vesper's own metaphorical language is often comic, and some of the situations in which she finds herself have a major comic dimension, even when the dangers are seriously real. Her own sense of comic potential in threatening situations adds a dimension of heroism to her adventures, and the comic tone is a wholesome corrective to the exaggerated seriousness of determined villains.

Themes and Characters

Although several vividly drawn characters are featured in the novel, the dominating figure is that of its remarkable heroine, Vesper Holly. The opening paragraph of the book gives the reader an intimation of this unusual personality. "Miss Vesper Holly has the digestive talents of a goat and the mind of a chess master. She is familiar with a half dozen languages and can swear fluently in all of them. She understands the use of a slide rule but prefers doing calculus in her head."

She is extremely courageous and totally loyal to family and friends; at once charming and intelligent, she displays considerable initiative and inventiveness as well. With the rational powers of a great detective, she also solves the centuries-old mystery of the so-called magical army. One is not likely to find a more likeable and lively character.

The narrator is Professor Brinton Garrett, or Brinnie, as Vesper calls him.

He is at first overwhelmed by this orphan whose guardian he has become, but he quickly joins her in the adventures and plays a major role. His voice as narrator adds a note of caution and reason to the sometimes wild events.

Several characters enter the story after the two arrive in Illyria. One impressive figure is King Osman, a man with the dignified bearing one expects of royalty but with individualized touches that distinguish him. His pride and anger flair at the slightest offense to his honor as a descendant of the legendary Ahmad. The somewhat disheveled character Nilo enters as a minor figure but develops into a major one, becoming the personal guide and servant of Vesper and Brinnie. At first, Brinnie finds him a feckless individual who does not earn his keep, but with his knowledge of both Illyrian languages and the local customs, he proves an invaluable companion, even before his real identity is revealed late in the novel. Indeed, most of the people whom Vesper and Brinnie meet turn out to be quite different from what they appear to be, whether for better or worse.



Topics for Discussion

1. Does Vesper Holly change during the course of the narrative? Does she mature or develop in any way?
2. Vesper is occasionally close to tears, but she does not actually cry until near the end of the novel, when she bids farewell to Nilo. Is she a cold person? Why does she cry on this occasion?
3. Why does Brinnie, after all of the harrowing adventures and narrow escapes, say at the end that he wants to join Vesper on her next adventure?
4. At the end of the novel, King Osman and Nilo finally shake hands, symbolically ending the long feud between their peoples. Explain whether you think that peace will immediately ensue or that time will be needed to make the new accord work.
5. There are several villains in the story, some obvious and some not.

Who do you think is the single greatest villain? Why?

6. What features of the narrative remind the reader that the action is taking place in the nineteenth, and not the twentieth, century?
7. How does Alexander create believable differences and causes for dispute between the two Illyrian cultures?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In this novel, appearances are often misleading, as Vesper and Brinnie soon discover. Discuss the conflict between appearance and reality as it is experienced by the protagonists during their adventures.
2. Read another of Alexander's books about the adventures of Vesper Holly and compare it with this one.
3. Some of Vesper's adventures involve violence, and a few are even lifethreatening. Does this give the reader a bad impression of the dangers involved in undertaking a challenge, or is it simply a realistic consideration?
4. Although there was an ancient country of Illyria, it no longer exists and its language is extinct. How does the author go about authenticating his imagined nineteenth-century Illyria?

Cite details of clothing customs, speech, etc.
5. Throughout the novel, there are scenes in which the hero Vartan is present or referred to but not identified. Discuss these scenes with the aim of noting clues as to his real identity.



For Further Reference

Burns, Mary M. Review. *Horn Book* 62 (July/August 1986): 447. Burns praises Alexander's ability to create a believable country, admiring the author's ability to combine the real and the imaginary into a plausible reality.

Chamberlain, Leslie. Review. *Voice of Youth Advocates* 9 (December 1986): 232. The use of dialogue is the focus of this review, in which the author takes particular notice of the contrast between Brinnie's formal speech and Vesper's colloquial directness.

Clark, Hattie. Review. *Christian Science Monitor* (July 3, 1986): 36. Clark praises the novel for its fine language, which is never patronizing in its vocabulary, and for giving the reader not merely an exciting adventure but also much to reflect on.

Related Titles

The Illyrian Adventure is the first of a series of novels featuring Vesper Holly.

Subsequent titles are The El Dorado Adventure (1987), which takes Vesper to Central America; The Drackenberg Adventure (1988), which finds her attending a diamond jubilee celebration for the Grand Duchess of Drackenberg; The Jedera Adventure (1989), in which she returns an ancient book, borrowed by her father, to a library in North Africa; and The Philadelphia Adventure (1990), in which the now twenty-year-old Vesper meets again with Dr. Helvetius of Illyria.



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