

The Iron Ring Short Guide

The Iron Ring by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The Iron Ring has superbly developed characters who are fun to spend time with, wondrous events, fearful dangers, and a complex exploration of what one of the characters calls the "twilight" between right and wrong.

The premise on which the story is built seems simple but becomes ever more challenging as the tale advances. King Tamar of Sundari is visited by Jaya, ruler of Mahapura, a land in a valley in the Snow Mountains of the far north. In a game of chance, Jaya wins Tamar's life and commands Tamar to come to him in Mahapura. This would be a dull quest if there were not complications, and there are many, involving cantankerous birds, a kingdom of snakes, the king of the monkeys, and many other wonderful beings and places. The novel has romance, drama, action, and suspense, all set in a richly detailed context that exemplifies the essence of the ancient Indian culture, with the cultural standards and expectations presented fluidly as coherent parts of the plot.



About the Author

Lloyd Alexander is a towering figure in young adult literature with his fiction earning awards, critical praise, and a large audience. He did not come by his fame and popularity easily; he labored for many years and endured frequent rejections before achieving renown. The tremendous success of his second novel for young adults, *The Book of Three* (1964; see separate entry, Vol. 5), made him almost overnight one of the foremost writers for young people. The book's lyrical prose, complex characters, and well-structured plot justifiably garnered critical acclaim and great acceptance from the book-buying public.

He was born in Philadelphia on January 30, 1924 to Edna Chudley Alexander and Alan Audley Alexander, a stockbroker. As a youngster, he was an avid reader of mythology and folk tales. These early readings may have inspired *The Arkadians* (1995; see separate entry, Vol. 9) and his other recent writings for young adults and younger children that focus on African and Asian cultures as well as that of Ancient Greece.

Alexander worked as a teenager to earn money for college but only attended a semester at West Chester State Teacher's College before joining the army in 1942, where he worked as an intelligence agent. While stationed for a time in Wales, he developed a passion for Celtic folklore and culture that inspired his *Prydain Chronicles*.

He was later stationed in Paris as a counterintelligence agent. After being discharged from the army, he attended Sorbonne University in Paris, where he not only received a college degree but met and married his wife, Janine Denni.

Alexander bounced from one job to another for years, working as a cartoonist, artist, advertising writer, and editor, while writing novels in his spare time. Unable to find a publisher for his first three novels, all for adults, Alexander struggled to support his family. He turned his frustration into humor and wrote a book *And Let the Credit Go* (1955), about the travails of writing for publication. In the early 1960s, he turned his attention to young audiences and wrote *Time Cat*, which was published in 1963 (republished in 1996). While writing this book he came across Welsh folklore, which rekindled his youthful interest in Celtic mythology and culture, thus inspiring *The Book of Three*, the first of the *Prydain Chronicles*, a series of daring yet humorous adventures set in a land of mysterious magic.

Since then, Alexander's reputation has climbed not only among critics, but among a large audience that includes adult readers as well as young ones. C. S. Lewis once wrote that a way to tell whether a book for young readers is good is to read and enjoy it as a youngster and then read it again years later—if one still liked the book as an adult, then it is probably good literature.

Nearly all of Alexander's books meet this criterion, with graceful prose, interesting characters, sharp wit, and complex plots, all appealing to young and old readers. He has proven himself to be a master craftsman in several types of novels; sword-and-



sorcery fantasies like the Prydain Chronicles; adventures set in ancient cultures and mythological worlds like The Arkadians; and a series of fine melodramatic mysteries featuring the courageous and versatile Vesper Holly. He has also written a more realistic group of novels about war and its effects—the Westmark Trilogy. Alexander's recent writing seems to chiefly focus on the mythologies, folklore, and cultures of the world. In addition to The Arkadians, *The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen* 4702 *The Iron Ring* (1991) tells of adventure and magic in a land much like ancient China, and a book for younger readers, *The Fortune Tellers* (1992), focuses on Cameroon in west central Africa. In literature for young adults whose fiction has earned awards, elicited critical praise, and attracted a large audience. He did not come by his present fame and popularity easily; despite frequent rejections he persevered over many years before *The Book of Three*, his second novel for young adults, achieved great success on the strength of its lyrical prose, complex characters, and well-structured plot. He became, seemingly overnight to the public, one of the foremost writers for young people.

He was born in Philadelphia on January 30, 1924 to Edna Chudley Alexander and Alan Audley Alexander, a stockbroker. He was an avid reader when young of mythology and folk tales; these readings early in life may be the inspiration for *The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen* and his other recent writings for young adults and younger children that focus on the cultures of Africa, Ancient Greece, and China. During his teenage years he worked to earn money for college but only attended a semester at West Chester State Teacher's College before joining the army in 1942. An intelligence agent in the army, he was stationed for a time in Wales where he developed the passion for Celtic folklore and culture that inspired his *Prydain Chronicles*. He was later stationed in Paris and worked there in counterintelligence. After being discharged from the army, he attended Sorbonne University, where he not only received a college degree but met and won his wife, Janine Denni.

Alexander bounced from one job to another for years, working as a cartoonist, artist, advertising writer, editor, and in similar jobs while writing novels in his spare time. His first three novels, all for adults, went unpublished while Alexander struggled to support his family. He turned his frustration into humor and wrote a book *And Let the Credit Go* about the travails of writing for publication.

This book was published in 1955 and was followed by others for adults. In the early 1960s, he turned his attention to young audiences and wrote *Time Cat*, which was published in 1963 (republished in 1996). While writing this book, he had the good fortune to again encounter Welsh folklore which not only rekindled his youthful interest in Celtic culture and mythology but inspired his initial great success *The Book of Three* (1964), the first of the *Prydain Chronicles*, a series of daring yet humorous adventures set in a land of mysterious magic.

Alexander's reputation since then has climbed not only among critics but among a large audience that includes adult readers as well as young ones. C. S. Lewis once wrote that a way to tell whether a book for young readers is good is to read and enjoy it as a youngster and then read it again years later—if one still liked the book as an adult then it is probably good literature. Nearly every book Alexander has written meets Lewis's



criterion, with graceful prose, interesting characters, sharp wit, and complex plots appealing to young and old readers. He has proven himself to be a master craftsman in sword-and-sorcery fantasies like those of the Prydain Chronicles, adventures set in mythological worlds and ancient cultures like *The Iron Ring*, a series of fine melodramatic mysteries featuring the courageous and versatile Vesper Holly, and a more realistic series of novels about war and its effects called the Westmark Trilogy.

As of the present writing, Alexander seems to be focusing on the mythologies, folklore, and cultures of the antique world. His most recent works have included not only *The Iron Ring*, but *The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen* that tells of ancient China, *The Arkadians* that tells of adventure and magic in the era when the Ancient Greek culture was forming, and *The Fortune Tellers* (1992), a book for younger readers, that focuses on Cameroon.



Setting

The events take place in an imaginary land based on the societies of ancient India. This fictional world features some of the topography of the real India such as rivers, forests, grasslands, and a northern mountain range. The Danda-Vana forest is especially important because it still has remnants of the early days of the world when animals could talk. It is in and near this forest that Tamar meets the woman he shall love, the king of 4704 The Iron Ring the monkeys, the Naga-loka, and a talking bird. Talking animals would seem to be very strange, but Tamar takes the wonders he experiences in stride.



Social Sensitivity

The Iron Ring is a triumph of exploration of the customs and values of an ancient culture that is likely to be remote to most of its western readers.

It explores the complexity of dharma, a code of honorable conduct that varies for each caste and for each kind of animal. For instance, a member of the kshatriya—the warrior caste—is expected to conduct himself according to the virtues of forthrightness and courage, whereas a member of the brahmana—the scholarly, priestly caste—is expected to conduct himself according to the virtues of peace and learned study; on the other hand, the monkeys have their own dharma, which is basically that if something is not nailed down then it is free for the taking.

What all dharma has in common is, as Alexander puts it, "a deep and driving sense of obligation to do what is right."

The caste structure of society is also presented in the novel. At the apex of the caste system are brahmanas, followed by the kshatriyas. Next comes the merchant and farm owner caste, the vaishyas, then the "peasants and unskilled laborers," the shudras. Beneath these are those who are to be shunned by the higher castes, the panchamas, who do most of the most unpleasant work, and at the very bottom are the chandalas, who are virtual nonpeople whose very touch is supposed to degrade any member of any other caste to the level of chandala.

One's caste dictates whom one should marry, whom one should socialize with, and what job one should have.

Of the castes, the brahmanas, kshatriyas, and chandalas receive the most coverage as kshatriya Tamar learns lessons not only about honor and dishonor, but of the merits of others different from himself.

Literary Qualities

The Iron Ring follows an epic structure. Epics were originally poems that told stories; they would follow at length the fortunes of war or the fabulous adventures of people caught in events much larger than themselves.

The central characters nearly always grow in some significant way. In Homer's Iliad, Achilles grows from a pouting, spoiled, and childish man into a warrior with the stature to make the moral choice between a lifetime of honor and a premature death that will save the lives of many Greek warriors; in Homer's Odyssey, Odysseus endures many travails, as Tamar does, before arriving at his goal. The Iron Ring features an epic journey, many obstacles that must be overcome, a goal to be reached, and like the Iliad and Odyssey, a concern with the issues of leadership and moral behavior.



Themes and Characters

The underlying idea for the novel is to use its plot and characters to illustrate fundamental characteristics of Indian culture. A good example is the caste system which is an essential aspect of Indian society; in *The Iron Ring*, the characters represent different castes and how they respond to each other shows how the castes are related. Tamar is a kshatriya and is supposed to marry only within his warrior caste or with a brahmana—a member of the other elite caste. His love of Mirri, a cow-tender and thus a member of the shudra caste, is forbidden by caste rules because her caste is far below his. Their relationship epitomizes some of the unfairness of a system in which one's birth into a caste is supposed to determine what one does with one's life. To emphasize this point, Alexander has Tamar's mentor Rajaswami explain that the chandalas are the lowest of the low. If a chandala's shadow falls on what one is eating then the food is polluted and must be thrown out. If a member of any other caste is touched by a chandala then that person loses his caste status and instantly becomes a chandala. It is characteristic of Alexander's sympathy with ordinary people that he would have Tamar be forced to work for a chandala and in so doing learn the injustice of how chandalas are treated and understand the nobility of the work that they do. It is at the chandalas' hands that society's poorest and most miserable people at least receive reverential treatment after death, as respect is at last shown for their spirits.

Natnaste, the showing of respect for the spirit in someone, is very important to the characters in the novel. It is symbolized by pressing one's hands together toward someone; it is more than a greeting, it is symbolic of one of the most important sources of motivation for the characters. A good person respects the spirit of others, and the characters live in persistent awareness that their physical lives are only part of their total lives—all creatures are spiritual beings. This helps explain one of the mysteries of Mahapura, where people can be heard but not seen. This symbolizes the spirituality of people; their physical lives are what is heard, but their spiritual lives remain unseen until a person can fully perceive the truth behind the truth.

For Tamar and most of the members of his warrior caste—the kshatriya—dharma is of paramount importance. A kshatriya is supposed to live by a warrior's code and to follow the rules of war. Alexander describes dharma as "goodness, virtue, righteousness, conscience; a code of proper conduct, a deep and driving sense of obligation to do what is right." It may be the most remarkable aspect of this remarkable novel that the concept of dharma is well worked out in the story and displayed from many angles. Two aspects of dharma are vital to the plot. One is that someone's dharma varies according to caste and animal species, and the other is that the people of India are human beings and not archetypes and that some do not follow their dharma as well as they should.

The Iron Ring 4705 In *The Iron Ring* those who defy their dharma are usually evil. This amount of complexity for the novel's presentation of dharma would be exceptionable in itself, but Alexander has a fine understanding of human nature, and his characters in *The Iron Ring* are too multifaceted to be easily separated into groups of good dharma followers and bad dharma followers. Fallibility is a trait in even the best of people, and



Tamar and his friends sometimes fail to live up to their dharma. Even more important, fanatical following of dharma can be foolish and even lead to evil, thus good sense should rule. Tamar spends much of the novel nearly getting himself and others killed by obeying the warrior caste's dharma rigidly; Mirri has to work hard to teach him to use common sense. Tamar eventually learns that there are higher ethics than dharma, although dharma is very important. Compassion, for instance, is a high virtue that transcends everyday dharma. This does not mean that dharma is arbitrary; the rules of dharma emphasize virtue, and the practice of dharma encourages one to understand and appreciate the ways of others.

Tamar understands that monkey dharma allows for monkeys to take objects that do not belong to them; it is part of monkey nature. This sort of understanding helps him keep his equilibrium when meeting with the snake people, scholarly bears, and other unusual folk: they have their dharma as he has his and he respects them for it.

The growth in Tamar is important.

Most of the aspects of Indian culture that Alexander explores are embodied in him, but they have their importance primarily because he is a very human character. A young man who has been strictly educated in the dharma of his caste, he is too rigid in his following of his dharma and in his expectations of how others should follow their dharma.

This is a common characteristic of young people who have not had the rules they have learned tested by the realities of life. His rigidity makes him somewhat annoying; it also helps to round out his characterization and make him a fully human figure. That strong and clever Mirri sees something in him to love is a good sign; that she does so before she learns his caste and that he is a king suggests that he can be related to on a human level, in spite of his bombastic declarations of dharma.

The Iron Ring has an epic structure and, as in most epics, the main character must endure much disappointment and suffering before he becomes the man he ought to be. Tamar's recognition of the validity of the dharma of others encourages him to be patient with them, to understand them, and to be merciful to them. For instance, he does not punish Hashkat, king of the monkeys, for taking something that does not belong to him. He is merciful because he recognizes the monkey's dharma.

Tamar's maturation occurs at a credible pace, with no one event transforming him into a great man.

Through love of Mirri he learns to appreciate a member of a low caste.

Through shared hardships he learns to recognize that people should not be judged only by their membership in a particular caste or animal species and that stereotypes do not do justice to individual spirits. The demands of namaste require that he learn to see the value of each individual spirit. This may explain why the young man who was willing to fight to the death at any provocation eventually spares an old man's life during a battle and why he wants to spare the life of Nahusha, a very evil man who has caused great



suffering. His desire to capture Nahusha and turn him over to the chandalas as Nahusha had done to him is in no way a desire for revenge. He has learned that revenge would make him no better than Nahusha. Instead he is motivated by what he learned while serving a chandala, humility and a reverence for the spirits of others, and he hopes to give Nahusha the same enlightening, ennobling experience.

The other characters of the novel are developed to a lesser degree than Tamar, but are nonetheless finely drawn.

Hashkat, the man who was changed into a monkey by a wandering rishi, shows the most growth of the remaining characters. Attracted by bright objects, he is first seen being squeezed to death by a snake angry that Hashkat was trying to take a gem from the snake's forehead. He is a lesson in defying stereotypes; although true to the monkey dharma that if something is not nailed down then it must be free to be taken, he shows courage, intelligence, and fortitude as he fulfills his obligations to Tamar, who saved his life. That he prefers to remain a monkey rather than be changed back to a man is consistent with his characterization; even though a courageous human warrior—he was born a kshatriya—and a trustworthy friend, he still prefers the chaotic dharma of the monkeys.

Rajaswami is a gentle man who has nonetheless taught Tamar to follow dharma rigidly and believe that the caste system is an unalterable absolute. His affection for Tamar eventually causes him to grow enough to recognize that his rigid teachings are contrary to namaste; after Tamar has become a chandala, Rajaswami embraces him without concern for his own caste. He has learned of higher virtues than dharma, and to his credit he chooses to follow them.

Mirri is the catalyst for the growth of the other characters. She presents a problem in terms of character development since she does not seem to change much during the narrative.

Once she commits herself to Tamar, she sticks with him—even when he tells her to go away. She is from the start intelligent, courageous, clever, and understanding. Even though she seems to exhibit little growth she is a very important figure. Not only is she Tamar's lady love, but her insistence on common sense behavior affects all of her companions. Even old Garuda, a battered old eagle who looks like a worn-out buzzard, perceives Mirri's important ability to help others grow.

He takes to her quickly, and with her recovers some of his lost courage and much of his health. Without her influence he would not have been able to transcend his querulousness and fear and achieve those acts of courage that are essential to saving Tamar and defeating Nahusha. Her active nobility helps Rajaswami grow, not only by showing him the merits of someone of a low caste, but by impelling him to acts of courage and cleverness, as when he helps her fake her death. She is for Tamar the battering ram that knocks down his barriers to other people; she helps him change from a stubborn young man to a compassionate, loving, and conscientious leader.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why is Tamar surprised at the lies and deceit of other members of his caste?
2. What is the significance of personal obligation in *The Iron Ring*? What different kinds of obligation are to be found in the novel?
3. Is the list that identifies the different characters in the tale necessary?
4. Is a social system based on dharma a good one? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Would American society benefit from dharma? What social problems might it help to fix?
5. What does the iron ring symbolize?
6. Why does Mirri want Tamar to go to Mahapura? Does her explanation make sense?
7. Why is Rajaswami horrified by the sight of chandalas? Why does he later change his mind?
8. What makes Nahusha a bad man? 9. Will Tamar be a good king? 10. Can Tamar, after the defeat of Nahusha, trust the kings who promise to have their kingdoms live peacefully with each other and his?
11. Is Ashwara a fool for not fighting to defend himself? Is his refusal a betrayal of his followers?
12. Why cannot Tamar and his companions see the people they hear in Mahapura?
13. In what ways does Tamar grow and mature during the novel?
14. Which of the characters other than Tamar is best drawn? Do any of them grow and become more than what they were when they were first introduced?
15. What are Jaya's limitations?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the origins of dharma?

Who practiced it in the past? Who practices it now?

2. Characters often bow to the spirit within other characters. What is the origin of this custom? What is its religious and philosophical foundation?

3. The society of The Iron Ring has elaborate obligations incurred by characters for kindnesses and services performed for them by other characters. How important a concern was this system of obligations in ancient India? How important is it in modern Indian culture?

4. What is the origin of the Indian caste system? What are the castes and what are the duties of each? How strong is the caste system in presentday India?

5. What role have elephants played in Indian culture? Do they have any religious standing? What tasks have they been set to? How have they been captured? How have they been trained?

6. Monkeys have a long and complex history in Indian culture. What roles have they played in the past?

What roles do they play now?

7. The Naga-loka are a mysterious folk. Who are they in Indian folklore?

What are Indian attitudes toward snakes.

8. Why are people very afraid of Indian tigers? How have tigers played an important role in any aspect of Indian society? What is their status in India today?

9. What is a durbar? Does Alexander portray it accurately in The Iron Ring?

10. What are ashramas? What is life like in one?

11. What are rakshasas? Where do they appear in Indian folklore or literature? What do they represent?

12. What are the powers of rishis? Do they play a distinctive role in Indian literature?

13. Why would a king have a suta?

How important was a suta's job?

14. Were there women kshatriyas? If so, what was their dharma?



15. What different castes were allowed to intermarry?

16. What are the limits of dharma in The Iron Ring? Are these limits reflected in real-life Indian society?



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10-18. A brief biographical account of Alexander with an emphasis on the sources for his fiction.

Related Titles

Alexander's focus presently seems to be on exploring cultures ancient and modern in different parts of the world. *The Iron Ring* focuses on ancient India, *The Arkadians* focuses on the roots of Ancient Greek culture, and *The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen* focuses on ancient China. This novel shares with *The Iron Ring* a quest structure and features a Prince (instead of a king) journeying north to a fabled kingdom. It also features a low-born young woman who becomes the bride of the prince, eccentric companions including wise men, and fabulous animals. Although this may make *The Iron Ring* seem to be a repeat of *The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen* in a different setting, the two books are otherwise distinct: the characterizations are different, the interactions with animals are much more extensive in *The Iron Ring*, and the cultures portrayed are markedly dissimilar. *The Fortune Tellers*, a book for younger readers, takes place in Cameroon and tells of how a carpenter consults a disreputable fortune teller and how the carpenter then seems to prosper.



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