

King Javan's Year Short Guide

King Javan's Year by Katherine Kurtz

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Characters

King Javan's court is crowded with courtiers and other worthies, but only a handful are truly significant. The unctuous Archbishop Hubert and Lord Rhun the Ruthless are united only in their disdain for Javan's rule, but that leads to the plot that ultimately brings him down. Some major characters from the previous books appear only briefly here: Joram, Jesse MacGregor, Queron, Revan. At the story's end the latter two appear to have been killed at the baptismal lake. Joram and Jesse are among the few left as a saving remnant.

The most fully-explored character is Javan. He is a very sober sixteen-yearold, aware that any lapse in duty or demeanor can be dangerous. Although he has a crippled foot, he has learned to walk with scarcely a limp. Under his monastic disguise he kept the heart and bearing of a king. He shows this early on, when the Custodes abbot tries to stop him from going to the bedside of the dying Alroy. Javan first reminds the monk that he is defying their king's express order, then says if he wants to argue further, he can do so with the escort of armed knights waiting in the courtyard. Throughout the book Javan acts with this mixture of assurance and wit. To keep fit — and to allay any hint of weakness — he hunts and practices swordplay like any other vigorous young man. He has few chances to do so, however, as most of his time is taken up by politics and statecraft.

The three brothers have been close, and the youngest, Rhys Michael, is another focus of attention in the book.

Rhys sometimes acts as Javan's friend and confidante. Since he shares royal blood, Javan can entrust him with missions and secrets he cannot share with his aides. Yet unlike Javan, Rhys sees no reason he cannot enjoy the normal pursuits of a young noble, including dalliance and small lapses in responsibility. Javan worries about Rhys, but Rhys matures even as the novel goes on. At book's end, he is ready to cope with the tragic trap the plotters have set for him.

Social Concerns

Among the darkest of Kurtz's works, *King Javan's Year* tells of the brief reign of the second of King Cinhil's surviving sons. In Gwynedd's history it occurs just after the events of *The Harrowing of Gwynedd*, as reactionary forces are consolidating their power. Fear and hatred of Deryni have driven most members of the race into hiding. When Javan's sickly twin, Alroy, dies, Javan inherits the crown.

Although Javan is only sixteen years old and has spent the past three years in a monastery, he does not intend to be a puppet king like his brother. Surrounded by treacherous nobles, he has to move carefully. But he has been tutored in statecraft and magic by members of Camber's inner circle, including Joram MacRorie, the saint's son. He believes that with caution and the help of open and hidden supporters, he can hold onto his throne and stem the tide of anti-Deryni persecutions.

His reign lasts just one year. Despite all his efforts, Javan and his bravest knights are lured into a trap and cut down. This is followed by a massacre of pilgrims at Revan's baptismal lake and the simultaneous murder of most loyal Haldane retainers. Only Javan's brother Rhys Michael and his young bride Michaela survive, and Rhys is drugged for weeks to make him biddable and frightened.

King Javan's Year takes the somber messages of the previous four "Camber" and "Heirs of Saint Camber" novels even further. The hysteria of anti-Deryni campaigns crosses the line into genocide. The king himself is not sacrosanct; Javan is betrayed by supposedly loyal councilors using the slightest of ruses. Worse, the men who lead the plot are not even motivated by true fear of Deryni magic. They are willing enough to employ tame Deryni to serve their own plans. Their primary goal is to keep the unquestioned power they wielded as regents for Alroy. To do so they are willing to defy the principles of both church and state and to keep the land in turmoil.

Again, the parallels with the twentieth century's many tragic wars and repressive regimes are striking. The misuse of power by those in high places, with flimsy excuses as coverups, speaks to the American experience in the wake of Watergate and the Vietnam war. What is even more poignant in Javan's story, and permeates Rhys's reign in *The Bastard Prince* (1993) as well, is the knowledge that their task is impossible. Facing an overwhelming tide of events, sometimes even the best can only hang on and hope for history's vindication.



Techniques

As in her other Deryni novels, Kurtz uses rituals and intricate visual effects in unfolding the story of King Javan's Year. There is a state funeral, a coronation, a reception and dinner for visiting dignitaries, and a duel. There are also rituals of Deryni magic performed for Javan by Joram and his other mentors.

There is a subtle contrast between these last episodes and those set in Javan's beleaguered court. Events at court seem shrouded in gray. Alroy dies on a sweltering summer day, and drizzle and muggy weather continue until Javan's coronation. The Custodes Fidei habit is black, in keeping with the grim outlook of this order. When Javan goes through a portal to meet Joram and Bishop Niallan Trey after being out of touch for long months, he almost cries to see the bright blue of their Michaeline robes. Other bright and cheerful touches, like birds, mark other scenes with Joram and the fledgling Servants of Saint Camber. Even while the resistance operates in hiding and in underground chapels, their inner spirit remains bright.

Although the book uses several points of view, the bulk of it is told from that of Javan. This technique reveals that beneath his determined and calm facade, even the young king has moments of doubt and despair.



Themes

The great lords who plot against Javan have accumulated more power than the young king has and are less accountable for it. Accordingly, the theme of King Javan's Year seems to be "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Or even more dismally, it might be "Age and treachery will always triumph over youth and idealism."

The overall plan of the Gwynedd novels requires this type of ending. As one of Kurtz's admirers reminds us, two hundred years is not actually a long time as "dark ages" of repression go. Compared with the centuries of Christian suspicion of the Jews, or the millennia of male bias against women, a turnaround after a mere two centuries seems magical itself. Nonetheless few humans have that long a perspective. In having hopes that go beyond their own vulnerability, some characters project a more positive theme.

Javan himself finds solace from his political problems through his spiritual resources. Despite his years with the Custodes being arranged mostly for his own protection — and notwithstanding this order's leading role in ferreting out Derynis — he can separate the church's truths from its guardians' errors. Father Faelan, the Custodes priest whom he calls to court as his chaplain, shows this quality also. Even under torture he does not lose his faith. Javan's aide Charlan volunteers for mind-blanking sleep while the king meets with his Deryni mentors. Charlan does not understand its magic, but he knows that he cannot betray his king by what he does not know, and that is enough for him. Such acts of trust and faith continue through the direst events. At the book's end, when Revan's group, organized to be an underground, is wiped out, this point of hope is doubly important.

Finally, even an intelligent young king can have his blind spots. Javan repeatedly warns Rhys against romantic ties, fearing that for either of them to marry and father an heir would be signing their own death sentences.

Headstrong Rhys pays little heed, and is soon manipulated into a marriage with Michaela Drummond. Javan did not read the political factors wrong; he merely underestimated his enemies' ruthlessness. As it turns out, Rhys's marriage to Michaela is the only means by which the Haldane legacy lives on.

When survival is at stake, passion and fate sometimes trump logic.



Key Questions

King Javan's Year would fit well into a larger discussion of Kurtz's work. As the middle book of a trilogy, much is lost without background knowledge from the Camber of Culdi novels (1976-1981) and The Harrowing of Gwynedd. As indicated above, a discussion comparing Javan's story to that of Kelson in The Quest for Saint Camber would also be lively and provocative.

Another approach might be to discuss the book along with accounts of life during religious, political, or racial persecutions in our own era.

1. Is there anything Javan might have done differently to increase the chances for him and Rhys to prevail?

Or was their fate sealed no matter what they did?

2. In the preceding novel, The Harrowing of Gwynedd, Evaine's spiritual and magical pursuits make up at least half the book. Javan's story, in this novel, stays firmly in the mundane world. Is this simply because they are two different books with different plots? Do the two protagonists' gender, ways of life, or inheritances help account for the difference?

3. Javan, at sixteen, shares no jokes or lighthearted pursuits with other young men, and hardly notices young women. Kelson, at eighteen and with equal responsibilities, can enjoy both.

Is this from a difference in their personalities? Their situations? Or both?

4. By the end of King Javan's Year, many of the safeguards set up for Deryni protection under the pogroms have failed. What tactics and institutions might still help provide safety?

5. What do you think Joram MacRorie and the surviving Michaelines are going to do to save his father's legacy in the years to come? According to The Quest for Saint Camber, the isolated Servants of Saint Camber are this group's likely descendants. How did they get "from here to there"?

Literary Precedents

As an individual novel, *King Javan's Year* is almost unique in modern fantasy. There are other novels which end with the death of a brave protagonist, but few in which the death is seemingly so meaningless. In some ways, the work most similar in tone to this novel is *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1952).

Like Anne, Javan is trapped by monstrous events which he lacks the power to stop. And in spite of these, he too retains the belief that most people are basically good.



Related Titles

King Javan's Year is the middle book of The Heirs of Saint Camber, the second trilogy set in early Gwynedd. In chronology it follows The Harrowing of Gwynedd (1989) and comes before The Bastard Prince (1994).

Many similarities of motif and character also link it to the Kelson novels, especially The Quest for Saint Camber (1986). Like Javan, Kelson is a young king who inherits a realm in turmoil.

Unlike Javan, Kelson survives and succeeds. Readers of the whole series may well wonder at the many parallels.

What makes the difference between Kelson's success and Javan's early demise? It is not a matter of character.

Both young men are worthy and trained for their high offices from an early age. Both have experienced older men to aid and advise them.

Kelson's closest advisors can help him openly, of course. Javan's have to stay hidden, like Joram who lives at the last Michaeline stronghold, or at least to mask their Deryni powers, as Etienne de Courcy and his son Guiscard do. On the other hand, Javan's brother Rhys makes mistakes through naivete and high spirits, but he is always loyal to Javan. Kelson has to face multiple betrayals from his younger cousin Conall. The fact that Kelson's worst enemies are external, while Javan's are within his court, may also make a difference. Ultimately, the largest influence may be the tides of history. Javan simply had too many forces ranged against him.



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