

Lady of Avalon Short Guide

Lady of Avalon by Marion Zimmer Bradley

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Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Lady of Avalon Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Characters..... | 3 |
| Social Concerns/Themes..... | 6 |
| Techniques..... | 8 |
| Adaptations..... | 10 |
| Key Questions..... | 11 |
| Literary Precedents..... | 13 |
| Related Titles..... | 14 |
| Copyright Information..... | 15 |

Characters

The interplay between the High Priestesses Caillean, Teleri, Dierna, Ana, and Viviane enact the ancient trilogy of maiden, mother, and crone, or Wise Woman, each in its turn, as history passes from one to another. In their turn, each chooses her priestess role and the preservation of the community over the more homely bonds of friendship and motherhood. Caillean, the first High Priestess, has followed her destiny by leaving the Forest House and Eilan, whom she loved as a sister, to death, in order to bring her flock to Avalon. After initiating Eilan's child Gawen to fulfill his destiny as Pendragon, she presides over the magic which costs his life in the songs whose power separates Avalon from the mainland, hiding it completely from sight between Earth and Faerie. Perhaps the most spiritual of the High Priestesses, Caillean is a Wise Woman, "moving beyond male and female to a wisdom that was both and neither," who with the guidance of the Faerie Queen, performs the high magic which moves Avalon completely into the mists between the two worlds. Her foster daughter, the fairy child Sianna, Beltane bride of Gawen, becomes Lady of Avalon in her turn, to mother a daughter also sworn to the Goddess.

If Caillean is the most mystical of the Ladies, Dierna, who served as priestess A.D. 285-293 and was a descendent of that same Sianna, is the most politically astute. Bringing Avalon once again into the flow of mainland history, Dierna matches the girl Teleri, daughter of a Durotrigian prince who has come to train as a priestess, to the Roman admiral Carausius, to further the cause of Britannia's independence from Rome. If Caillean's magic was made with powerful song, Dierna's power lies in shape-shifting, as she becomes a flame to save Teleri from rape and a cloud woman to guide Carausius's ship to harbor. Both she and Teleri, who becomes the Lady after her, have the Sight in abundance, which is part of the reason they are drawn into conflict on the mainland. The maneuver is star-crossed, however, since Teleri, who had wished to stay a priestess, leaves her loveless marriage to conspire with Carausius's Briton financial adviser, Allectus, who, with the other princes, overthrow and eventually assassinate the Emperor in the marshes outside Avalon.

The relationship between Dierna and Teleri, the Maiden, is itself fraught with conflict, since Dierna has decided to forgo Teleri's own wishes, and then to take the doomed Carausius himself as her lover and later, dead, to Avalon itself.

Speaking of the double-bind in which all High Priestesses find themselves, Dierna says "When they chose me as high priestess, I tried to run away. ... I mourned for the simple happiness I would not be allowed to enjoy, but still more I feared the guilt, . . . that would weight me if I denied this duty."

Ana is perhaps the most fully human and sensual of the High Priestesses, a throwback to the small, wizened wise women of the past, able to appear as the powerful Mother as well. Ana calls her daughter Viviane, being fostered by a farmer on the mainland, back to Avalon for training when it is least expected. She and Viviane, locked in a love-hate relationship which is paradigmatic of the feelings between the Mother and the Maiden,



create a power sufficient to bring about the cast of characters we know from the Arthurian legends and, with the help of Taliesin, later Merlin, bring the epic into fruition. The mother and daughter, opposites in spirit, although one in temperament, are locked in a cycle of change which will make the one a Lady and the other a Crone. Ana's intense emotional life provides the energy necessary for her daughter, Viviane, to become the most fully historical of all the High Priestesses, driven unlike any other not simply by a desire to influence, but a fullblown sense of destiny as the founder of a new Briton nation, fully involved with life on the mainland, where traditional sureties have dissolved under the Saxon onslaught.

Viviane herself, nervous and intense, is the most passionate and principled of all the High Priestesses. Intelligent and luminous, she is an incarnation of Isarma, the ancient mother, who although denied the mother role herself, is to become the parent of a great movement in defense of the Mother herself. Her alliance with Vortimer, the historical warrior-hero whose victory over the Saxons at Rutupiae costs his life, unites her with the mainland in a way no other high priestess has been. Viviane, successively tested by her demanding mother, by the demands of powerful magic, and by great events, ventures into battle disguised as a camp follower, saves Vortimer's life, and uses the power of the Grail itself to turn back the Saxons at Avalon's shore. She is in some ways, however, the most tragic of the High Priestesses, deprived first of her mother's wholehearted love and support, and then of her own child, Vortimer's daughter, lost so that Ana's daughters may assume their role in history. The most complex and tormented of all the High Priestesses, Viviane is also the most determined to make her vision a reality by reincarnating Britannia as a Celtic nation on the mainland.

The men of Avalon are warriors or priests. The warriors, consorts of the Lady, are the Sons of a Hundred Kings, reincarnations always of the Pendragon, the mythical Year-King, whose sacrifice is demanded for the life of his people, again and again throughout history. Gawen, Carausius, and Vortimer are all in their turn identified by the Lady and brought to Avalon to be initiated into the Druid rites and the warrior's vision, where their destiny as High Kings and sacrificial offerings is made known, along with their heritage, traced back to the sunken island of Atlantis, from when their rites originated. Joined in both magical and marital rites to the land and to the Lady by marriage to the Maiden—first Sianna, the fairy princess, then Teleri, and then Viviane herself, the Kings go from battle to their death, after which they are brought back to Avalon for burial—and for reincarnation.

Others are priests, like Joseph or Fortunatus, or bards, like Taliesin, whose Druidic powers are matched to those of the High Priestess Ana to bring about the force which will initiate the Arthurian saga. Both Druids and Christians are facets of the same spiritual powers, joined together at the edge of the world, the monks of Inis Witrin still visible to men, the Druids of Avalon already hidden.

Taliesin (a fictional character, not the sixth-century poet), Viviane's putative father and Ana's lover in the Druid rites, transforms himself after the birth of Morgause into a Merlin, a spiritual guardian who initiates Viviane as the Lady of Avalon and will be a

guide for the Defender— "the Sacred King who shall place the Saxons under his heel and rule forever from Avalon."

Social Concerns/Themes

This second novel in Marion Zimmer Bradley's line of precursors to the Arthurian saga of *The Mists of Avalon* is set in the Romanized Britain of the first until the fifth centuries A.D., ending with the birth of Igraine, mother of Morgaine of the Faeries and of Arthur. Poised at the end of the narrative to become the next High Priestess of Avalon, their older sibling Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, becomes guardian to the infant Morgause, her sister, after the deaths of her own child and her mother, Ana.

Viviane and Merlin, the transformed Taliesin, have as their mission to preserve the Goddess-lore, including keepership of the Holy Grail, on Avalon until the advent of the Sacred King, Arthur, who will, supposedly, route the Saxons and restore the old ways. Throughout these centuries a succession of Arthur's precursors, from Pendragons such as Gawen, Eilan's child brought from the forest house, who is initiated into the Dragon Path, wounded in battle against the Romans, and sacrificed to create the magic necessary to shield Avalon from the invaders, to historical heroes such as Viviane's lover Vortimer, whose death in the Battle of Rutupiae drove the Saxons temporarily from Britain, creating a path for the coming of Arthur.

Since the fall of the Forest House, when Avalon was hidden behind a wall of mist to protect it from the Roman overlords, the High Priestesses of Avalon had pursued a double path—simultaneously protecting Avalon in its hiddenness, and venturing forth into the world of men in recurring attempts to help steer the fortunes of Roman Britain back to the old ways. The three Priestesses whose regimes are chronicled in the novel—Cailleán, Dierna, Ana—carefully negotiate dual allegiance and powers both seen and unseen.

The theme of power—its sources, uses, and misuse—is central to the Arthurian tales and all of Bradley's writing. The powers gathered on Avalon belong to the old way of life, centered in the High Priestess and epitomized in the sacred spring, the silver bowl, and the visions they offer. Drawing their power from the unseen world of Faerie and sunken Atlantis, the Druids are in contact with the Christian community of father Josephus (Joseph of Arimathea, who brought the Grail to Britain) and with Britons still on the mainland. The sacred rites of Samhain and Beltane affirm the unity of the old ways and the natural world, and the rebirth of each spirit again and again in recurring historical times ties the present to the past, as ancient patterns are reenacted.

The doctrine of the immortality and transmigration of souls connects the generations, as Druids see their avatars and acquaintances reappear at different stages of history, and regard death as merely a brief crossing into an Otherworld which is always closely connected to ours. One old Druidess says: "The world turns like this spindle. . . . That good and ill shall follow one another is our only certainty.

. . . When the old patterns are repeated, it is in a new way— the face of the Lady changes, but Her power endures; the King who gives his life to the land is reborn to make the sacrifice anew."



In opposition to this cyclical, integrated world view in which all belief and experience is ultimately a facet of One Truth are the more monolithic, linear structures brought into play by current history—the Roman world surely, but also the Christianity in vogue after the death of Josephus, who had embraced other religions as alternative paths to truth, and the constant thirst for power displayed not only by the Romans and the hordes of invaders, including the Saxons, but also by the Briton princes themselves, with their constant intrigues and betrayals, the most famous perhaps being the invitation to the Saxons Hengest and Horsa, brought in by Vortigern to help repel barbarian invasions when the southern tribes and their leader, Ambrosius, refuse to help.

The tension between these opposites creates the interplay between bonding and betrayal which is the cornerstone of Bradley's historical fiction.

The idea of Druidism itself, part of the long history of popularizing Celtic lore in fact and fiction, is an organizing principle of Bradley's novel. Druids, with their crystal eggs, sacred trees, magic cauldrons, and other accouterments of Celtic lore, embody the ideas of hiddenness and its accompanying ritual and illusion. The female Priests and their male counterparts continue to school the children of the Briton's ruling class as well as the future priests and priestesses of the Goddess, connecting the hidden world of Avalon with the real world on the mainland. The Druids, with their songs, ritual fires, and sacred festivals of Beltane and Midsummer, have power over the natural world, which they manifest in storms and mists, a power which is ritually connected with the power of sexuality and sacrifice. The priestess also sees into the future, a fatal power which can tempt them to manipulate as well as simply prophesy, since they can see themselves not only as participating in, but also creating, destiny itself, a power which creates tragedy in the lives of those who wield it.

The entire history not only of the Ladies and their consorts, but of Britannia itself, is one of complicated personal and political interactions. Although Avalon is still the spiritual center of the realm, Britannia itself is no longer Celtic, since succeeding Briton tribes, as well as the Romans after, have driven Avalon into the mists, and the Britannia which appears in historical form is divided and frayed, a mixture of Briton and Roman.

The first avatar of Avalon, Gawen, is himself of mixed heritage, child of the Forest House priestess Eilan and the Roman Gaius Macellius. Briton tribes war against each other, and invasions from outside, not only by Saxons, but by other Celts themselves, force Britannia into alliances first with the Romans, whom Gawen fought, and then with the Saxons, whose conquest under Hengest and Horsa provide the backdrop to the middle years.

During all this time, the division between Vortigern and his sons and Aurelianus Ambrosius prevents the Britons from uniting to drive the invaders out. Allegiances are never clear in Bradley's work, and during Dierna's time, a Roman, Carausius, is a more true Dragon-prince than any Briton.

Techniques

Bradley's narrative mixes mythic, historical, and fictive characters and settings to create an atmosphere in which the imaginative and the factual worlds meet, like the seen and unseen world which provide her background. The Ladies and their warriors are chiefly Bradley's own—except for Viviane, who appears in the Arthurian legends, and Marcus Aurelius Musaeus Carausius, a historical character who did become Emperor, as well as Allectus and the other Briton chieftains, like Ambrosius Aurelianus and his rival Vortigern. The Druids are of course fictional, but certain of the Christians, like Bishop Germanus, are historical. Behind the chief players and places during the years of the novel, A.D. 96, when Cailleán established Avalon, and the ascendance of Viviane, Daughter of Avalon, said to occur in A.D. 45, stand the ancestors, both mythic and historical, whose spirits are reborn as destiny calls them in—Boudicca of the Iceni, who led the Great Rebellion in A.D. 61, Calgacus, and Caracatus, as well as the Celtic goddesses Arianrhod, goddess of the moon and sea.

Briga, the Divine Midwife, and goddess of healing, poetry, and smithcraft, Cathubodva, the war goddess and Lady of Ravens, and Ceridwen, the "terrible mother" who possesses the cauldron of wisdom, sought by each successive maiden. Male deities are those of warriors and the sons of mothers, the young gods who come to rejuvenate the land. The novel is framed at the beginning and the end by the Faerie Queen herself, who first brings Sianna to Avalon to establish the line of maidens, and recognizes Viviane's ascendancy and the coming of Arthur at the end, tying the cycles of Ladies and warriors on earth with the unseen world of Faerie, always present behind the changing scenes.

Along with the technique of mythic characters—maidens, mothers, crones, and warriors—goes the Bradleian structure of duality, in which everything is connected to its mirror images. The entire setting of Romanized Britain, the seen and unseen worlds joined by the misted Avalon, is a duality of Romans and Britons, just as Druid Avalon is mirrored in the Christian island of Inis Wittrin on its edge. The characters themselves embody this duality, allegiances and loyalties split between the Roman and Briton, the tribe and the nation. Characters themselves have two faces, two contrasting images—the benevolent and the terrible mother, the rebellious and the dutiful daughter, and the crone who is wise yet frightening.

The trappings of Druid religion and its rituals provide the decoration for Bradley's novel, creating a symbolic setting for recurring initiations and rites—the Tor, the maze of the labyrinth, the chalices and sacred wells where visions occur.

Historical events are woven together with the interspersed meditations of the Ladies themselves and the Faerie queen into a tapestry, and the ancient crafts of spinning, weaving, and dying practiced on Avalon are metaphors for the working of life and fate woven by the priestesses, as the warriors' arms and Taliesin's harp and songs signify their powers. Bradley's trappings are not all straight from Druid lore, however; psychedelic mushrooms are the medium of choice for vision quests, and the quality of

Sight the priestesses cultivate is often much the same as the psi powers of shared consciousness that enlightened science fiction characters possess.

Adaptations

An audiotape version of *Lady of Avalon* was released in June 1997.

Key Questions

The great popularity of Celtic themes makes Bradley's work a good choice for bookclubs with eclectic tastes. Readers of *The Mists of Avalon* and *The Forest House* will enjoy discussing this middle link in the trilogy, as will fans of Arthurian legend in general.

1. How does Bradley use the two traditional images of the Druid—the bloodthirsty pagan and the mystical poet? How does she adapt the image of the Druid priestess to fit modern tastes? How does contemporary interest in the Great Mother and Goddess lore fit this pattern?
2. How do the priestesses of Avalon fit the Maiden, Mother, and Crone archetypes?
3. How does Bradley depict the mother-daughter relationship through the reign of the three Ladies? How does the conflict between duty and feeling complicate this relationship?
4. What is the image of men presented in the Warrior Hero and the Prophetic Bard? How do these archetypes fit with the female images mentioned above?
5. What does the contrast between the two worlds—Avalon and the mainland—tell us about the ideal and the real worlds? How is this reflected in religion, politics, and personal relationships?
6. What is the significance of rituals and sacred objects? How does Bradley use them to create a special atmosphere?
7. Celtic lore in general, and Druidism in particular, have great popular appeal.

What is the source of this appeal? What does it show about our culture in this particular era?

8. Explain the possible influence of the following on Bradley's ideas.

Cahill, Thomas. *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Condren, Mary. *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1990.

Ellis, Peter Berresford. *The Druids*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994.

Celt and Saxon: *The Struggle for the Supremacy of Britain AD 410-937*. London: Constable, 1993.

Fry, Carrol L. "The goddess ascending: feminist neo-pagan witchcraft in MZB's novels."
Journal of Popular Culture 27 (Summer 1993): 67-80.

Literary Precedents

Celtic lore has long been a staple of history and fantasy, for classical writers as well as for those to follow them. Classical writers such as Ausonius were themselves Celtic, and possibly of Druid background, as were many of the Christian writers, including the Celtic Christian theologian Pelagius, whom Father Fortunatus followed. Hecateus of Miletus and Herodotus of Halicarnassus recorded the existence of the Celts in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., and Polybius, Pliny, Julius Caesar, and Tacitus all spoke of them, creating an image which has been perpetuated through the centuries of military prowess, magical power, and frequently bloody rites. Historical chronicles, saints' lives, and the sagas of mythic heroes like Conchobar and Cuchulain, along with those of faery, the Tuatha de Danaan, continued this lore. The archaeological record, such as that contained in the Gundestrup Cauldron, a first-century silver bowl such as those associated with Druid rites, mother goddess figures such as the Sheela-na-gig, labyrinths, mazes, and sophisticated calendars, is also rich, and even such discoveries as that in 1984 of Lindow Man, thought a Druid priest ritually slaughtered 2000 years ago, have added to the Druid legend. In "The Spoils of Annwyn Gwydion," son of Don, goes to the Otherworld for the ritual initiation which made him a prophetic poet and the best bard in the world, just as Bradley's Taliesin does.

Giraldus Cambrensis described the twelfth-century conquest of Ireland in his *Expurgatio Hibernica*, but a new romantic image began to form near the end of the sixteenth century, when many classical sources were translated. John Fletcher wrote a play on the life of Boudicca in 1618, and Druids appear in Michael Drayton's *Polyolbion* (1612-1622), as they do in Milton, John Aubrey, and Henry Rowlands. John Toland wrote a history of the Druids in the eighteenth century, and Stonehenge became an important destination for antiquarians. William Blake was fascinated by Druids, "Sons of the mighty Albion," whom Thomas Gray honored in "The Bard" (1757). The Celtic Revival at the end of nineteenth century inspired many poets and writers, such as Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats, and both Bradley and Peter Berresford Ellis acknowledge Vincenzo Bellini's (1801-1835) nineteenth-century opera *Norma* as inspiration for their work. At the time of the publication of *Lady of Avalon* and for many marketing seasons before readers and music lovers could easily find such books like Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (1995), Nigel Pennick's *The Sacred World of the Celts* (1997), or *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom*, groups and artist groups like Clannad, Celtic Twilight, the Chieftains, Altan, and Fiona Kennedy, and the stepdancers of Riverdance.

A new Disney Studios animated feature *The Quest for Camelot* appeared in time for holiday stockings in 1997.

Related Titles

Lady of Avalon, the sequel to *The Forest House* (1993; see separate entry), and the prequel to *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) traces the continuum of the Druid line from its removal to Avalon in the first century A.D. to the death of Arthur at the end of *Mists*.

Currently, Celtic lore continues to enjoy popularity in popular literature and in New Age philosophy. With its revived interest in nature and goddess religions, magic, and witchcraft, Bradley's Druid trilogy of *The Forest House*, *Lady of Avalon*, and *Mists of Avalon* draw upon and continue to fashion this interest. Peter Berresford Ellis's well-known work *The Druids* made the case for Druids in 1994, and Celtic music of the mystical variety was popular throughout the decade. Morgan Llywelyn's historical novel *Druids* (1991) and Donna Gillespie's *The Light Bearer* (1994) dramatized the conflict between Celtic Gauls and Romans, while Patricia Kennealy-Morrison's *Keltiad* series, *The Tales of Arthur*, sets the Graal quest in a future millennium with a female protagonist. Since Bradley's Druid priestesses and warriors descend and draw their wisdom from their ancestors on the lost continent of Atlantis, Bradley's *Fall of Atlantis* (1991) might also be considered related.

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