

# **The Light Beyond the Forest Short Guide**

## **The Light Beyond the Forest by Rosemary Sutcliff**

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## Overview

The *Light Beyond the Forest* provides an excellent introduction to the Arthurian legends, particularly the stories that relate to the quest for the Holy Grail.

The Holy Grail was believed to be the sacred cup used by Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper and then used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch drops of Christ's blood at the crucifixion.

Joseph was thought to have left the Holy Land to settle in England, bringing the sacred relic with him. Sutcliff bases her narrative primarily on Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1485), which is itself drawn from a thirteenth-century text by a Cistercian monk. Sutcliff strips away the repetitiousness of these medieval romances and focuses on the essentials of the quest, carefully balancing the tales of the four major characters who seek the Grail—Sir Lancelot, Sir Galahad, Sir Percival, and Sir Bors.

## About the Author

Rosemary Sutcliff was born in West Clanden, Surrey, England, on December 14, 1920, the only child of Nessie Lawton Sutcliff and George Sutcliff, an officer in the Royal Navy.

Physically handicapped, Rosemary learned early from her parents to approach life stoically. Her earliest reading consisted of the works of Rudyard Kipling. She received a private formal education and studied at the Bideford Art School in Devonshire.

Sutcliff began her writing career early and was submitting manuscripts for publication by the time she was a young adult. The success of *The Chronicles of Robin Hood* in 1950 earned her a reputation as a commanding storyteller. Her hobbies—archaeology and cultural anthropology—have provided ready materials for her books. For four decades, she has combined a flair for exciting fictional narrative with an appreciation of her country's past to produce numerous books for young adults. She is best known for historical novels of Roman Britain and of the King Arthur legends, most notably *Sword at Sunset* (1963), an Arthurian novel for adults.

Sutcliff was awarded the Carnegie Medal in 1960 for her young adult novel *The Lantern Bearers*. *Dawn Wind* was chosen for a New York Times Book Festival Prize in 1962, and the American Library Association has selected several of her works as Notable Books for children. A number of her novels have been translated into foreign languages.

## Setting

The quest for the Holy Grail is set in the England of King Arthur's time. This pseudo-historical period has been placed variously as early as the sixth or as late as the thirteenth century, although in Sutcliff's novel, the knights dress and behave as warriors of the twelfth or thirteenth century. In truth, Arthur's realm of Camelot partakes as much of myth as of history.

## Social Sensitivity

The medieval story of the quest for the Holy Grail is laden with traditional Roman Catholic theology and conventional, patriarchal morality. The knights' heavy reliance on priests and monks as counselors suggests that these religious figures are endowed with special insight and have a special gift from God to interpret events of the visible world. While Sutcliff makes no special case for Catholicism as a privileged religion, some readers may come away from this novel with that impression. It should be kept in mind that during the Middle Ages, the Catholic church dominated life in England.

Sexual transgression is a major theme of the Grail story. It is the primary sin that prevents knights such as Lancelot from achieving their quest. Sutcliff does not brush aside this subject, but neither does she glamorize illicit behavior. In keeping with the medieval sources, she treats many of the women characters as temptresses who work actively to drag the knights into sin and divert them from their quest.

## Literary Qualities

Because Sutcliff follows her medieval sources so closely, *The Light Beyond the Forest* is imbued with the atmosphere of medieval romance. Although the narrative moves from an initial incident whereby the knights learn that the Grail has appeared again in England to a final climax in which the three heroes visit the land of the Grail, the tale is told episodically, with frequent shifts of focus among the four major characters.

Sutcliff provides sufficient background throughout her story to introduce readers to the major characters of the Arthurian legends, yet her narrative moves quickly, with little authorial intrusion. Sutcliff adopts many trappings of the literary tradition of the medieval romance, including magic forests and ships, demons and angels who interact freely with human protagonists, spells and witchcraft, and a sense of the faraway in both place and time.



# Themes and Characters

The quest for the Holy Grail is part of a long literary tradition, and Sutcliff depends heavily on her sources for themes and for characterization. Following Malory's lead, she focuses on the moral dimension of the tale. Sir Lancelot, Sir Galahad, Sir Percival, and Sir Bors—each searches for the Grail for his own reasons, and each comes to know something about himself through the quest.

For a knight to achieve the object of his quest, he must put aside all temptations and pleasures of the flesh and commit himself wholly to spiritual perfection. In *The Light Beyond the Forest*, Sutcliff shows how the path toward perfection is strewn with temptations in many guises. Many try to find the Grail, but only the most perfect knight will succeed.

Sutcliff depicts the dangers that lurk in wait for the questing knights. Even these four, who are considered the most valiant and revered of Arthur's circle, may not be able to make the tremendous sacrifices required for spiritual perfection. Nowhere is this theme more apparent than in the character of Lancelot.

King Arthur has long regarded Lancelot as his greatest knight, but Lancelot has betrayed his king by a secret romantic relationship with Queen Guenever.

After many trials, he finally arrives at the castle where the Grail is kept, but he is unable to enter. He is stricken and lies paralyzed outside, while more worthy knights are permitted to see the holy vessel or drink from it. Because he cannot abandon his love for Guenever, Lancelot finds himself incapable of rising to the spiritual heights necessary to partake in the blessings of the Grail. At the end of the tale, however, he confesses his errors, revokes earthly attachments, and vows to dedicate himself only to God.

Percival and Bors are permitted to see the Grail, but it is Galahad the Pure who finally becomes king in the supernatural realm where the Grail resides. All three undergo serious challenges in their quests. Galahad fights valiantly to overcome knights and ogres who represent various forms of sin. Percival must overcome the temptation of sensual pleasure. He is often feasted with beautiful maidens in sumptuous surroundings, and he finds that keeping the Grail foremost in his mind is a continual struggle. Bors, on the other hand, faces even more complex temptations. In one instance, he is forced to choose between helping his brother escape from robbers or aiding a maiden under attack from a band of vicious knights bent on ravaging her.

The spiritual significance of the knights' adventures is revealed to them at various points throughout the text by hermits or other religious figures who understand how God uses the visible world as an emblem of the invisible, moral realm. Eventually they arrive at the seacoast, where a magic ship takes them to the land of the Grail.





## Topics for Discussion

1. Only the superior knight is worthy of finding the Grail. Why does Lancelot, who is considered Arthur's greatest knight, fail and Galahad succeed?
2. Sutcliff makes no attempt to provide complex motives for her characters' actions. Why do you think this is so? What does her method of characterization suggest?
3. While on his quest, Sir Bors is forced to make a difficult decision—to aid his brother, who has been captured by bandits, or to aid a maiden who is attacked by knights. Do you agree with his choice? What would have happened if Bors had chosen differently?
4. Sutcliff, following her medieval sources closely, allows her knights to take no women with them on their quest; they meet many along the way, however, and not always with pleasant consequences. How does Sutcliff characterize the women in her work?
5. Why do you think the lady who meets Sir Percival on the island is able to persuade him to serve her?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The presence of magic, spells, demons, and the like suggests that *The Light Beyond the Forest* may be read as a fantasy. Do you agree? Why, or why not?
2. Each knight—Bors, Percival, Galahad, and Lancelot—undergoes quite different adventures. Choose one knight, and discuss his strengths and weaknesses. How do his adventures relate to these character traits?
3. *The Light Beyond the Forest*, based as it is on medieval stories, is filled with religious imagery. Do you think Sutcliff's use of such imagery is successful today? What kind of problems does the use of such imagery pose for modern readers?
4. Sutcliff's novel owes much to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Read one of the versions of Malory aimed at a young adult audience. Compare Sutcliff's treatment of the theme and her handling of one of the major characters with Malory's.
5. Compare Sutcliff's treatment of Arthurian material in this novel with her version of the death of King Arthur in *The Road to Camlann*.
6. Sutcliff was strongly influenced by the works of Rudyard Kipling. In Kipling's short story "The Man Who Would Be King" (1889), the protagonists undertake a quest of their own. They succeed but are overthrown by flaws of character. Compare these protagonists with the knights in *The Light Beyond the Forest*.

## For Further Reference

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Chicago: American Library Association, 1981. Discusses Sutcliff's work in relation to other historical novels written for young adults.

Egoff, Sheila A., G. T. Stubbs, and L. F. Ashley. "The Search for Selfhood: The Historical Novels of Rosemary Sutcliff." In *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969. A perceptive review of Sutcliff's work as a historical novelist, providing a critical assessment of her ability to weave real-life materials into plausible fictions.

Marder, Joan V. "The Historical Novels of Rosemary Sutcliff." In *Good Writers for Young Readers*. London: HartDavis Educational, 1977. A brief summary of Sutcliff's work, targeted for use by those interested in selecting books for young adults.

Meek, Margaret. *Rosemary Sutcliff*. London: Bodley Head, 1962. A monograph detailing Sutcliff's accomplishments during her first decade as a publishing novelist. Contains excellent plot summaries and some insights into characterization and literary technique.

Wright, Hilary. "Shadows on the Downs: Some Influences of Rudyard Kipling on Rosemary Sutcliff." *Children's Literature in Education* 12 (Summer 1981): 90-102. A good discussion of Sutcliff's debt to Kipling, whom she admired as a youth; offers a good model for those wishing to explore other influences on Sutcliff.

## Related Titles

Sutcliff has dealt directly with Arthurian materials in her adult novel, *Sword at Sunset*, and in three other books for young adults: *Tristan and Iseult*, *The Sword and the Circle*, and *The Road to Camlann*. She has also written several novels dealing with ancient Britain, some of which touch on the historical figure of Arthur. Her first important trilogy (*The Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch*, and *The Lantern Bearers*) culminates in the battle led by Ambrosius, the real-life figure most often identified by historians as the model for King Arthur. Sutcliff has also written about knighthood and chivalric virtues in *Knight's Fee*.



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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