

The Lost Years Of Merlin Short Guide

The Lost Years Of Merlin by T. A. Barron

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Overview

The Lost Years of Merlin is an adventure quest built on the premise that as a boy, the great wizard Merlin spent several years in an enchanted land. Drawn there by his need to discover his forgotten origins, he finds the countryside dying from a blight and curse. The tree-girl Rhia persuades him to help her reverse it. They go off on an almost-impossible mission to confront the evil being Rhita Gawr and his puppet, King Stangmar, in their shrouded castle. Traveling through many miles and dangers, they meet good, wicked, illusory, and undassifiable beings that help or hinder them along their way. Rhia is kidnapped and taken separately to the castle, and Merlin, in the company of a miniature giant and riding the hawk Trouble, manages to traverse the last barrier, a spooky darkened landscape, and enter the castle.

There, he and Trouble defeat Rhita Gawr—at least temporarily—and young Merlin faces the king. Stangmar says he turned to the evil being as the price for saving his wife's life. This was supposed to entail the sacrifice of his son by the age of seven, but the mother and child fled, and blight descended on his land. By this time it comes as no surprise that young Merlin is the son. In a strange see-saw of conscience, Stangmar alternately rejoices to have again found the boy, and tries to kill him. Merlin must fight him before the land can be freed of its curse.

Fincayra's hidden giants then come to life, and bring down the Shrouded Castle in a grand finale.

There are echoes of many mythic themes in this tale. The father-son motif echoes stories as old as Abraham and Isaac in the Old Testament, and as recent as Luke and Anakin Skywalker in the Star Wars movies.

The quest journey draws many of its elements from the old Welsh story cycle, the Mabinogion. The first third of the book takes place in "real life" fifth- or sixth-century Wales, a place recently under Roman influence and not yet under siege from Saxon or Viking invaders. The story ends with the boy taking the name "Merlin" in memory of his hawk, and poised for further adventures.

While young Merlin (called Emrys for most of the book) does learn much and develop a sense of responsibility to others during his quest, he obviously has much more to master before he can become the Merlin of myth. For one, he has only begun exploring his awesome magical powers.

Nor is he wise in the ways of the world.

Legend shows Merlin as responsible for the birth of Arthur, by casting a spell so that Igraine sees King Uther Pendragon as her husband, Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. Not only does the young Merlin of this series lack the magical strength for such feats, he would not be capable of the amount of guile required. Showing the wizard developing these

traits would probably take another series, focusing on his life in early middle age—a focus which goes beyond that of these books.

But *The Lost Years of Merlin*—and its sequels—do provide a magical wonder tour of a vividly imagined fantasy land, many exciting adventures, and a fair amount of character development.

The book also portrays moral dilemmas.

How firmly must one keep a promise made in the depths of despair? What if someone else makes it for you? How much should children be told about the bad circumstances of their birth? Is it right to enlist others for a dangerous journey, even if they can help you? How can one know what is real, in a place where illusion is everywhere? These subtle questions, along with young Merlin's awareness of the natural world and its wisdom, turn the book into a fantasy quest which is richer than its parts.

About the Author

Thomas A. Barron was born on March 26, 1952; he grew up on a ranch in Colorado. From an early age, he was drawn both to writing and to a close connection with nature. In grade school, he created a magazine, *The Idiot's Odyssey*. He was an Eagle Scout, and his achievement in a Scout essay contest won him a trip to Washington, D.C., to meet the President. Barron graduated from Princeton University, where he won the Pyne Prize for service to the university.

His life as a young man was full of adventures and accomplishments. He went to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar; while there he wrote his first novel. Afterwards he backpacked through Asia and Africa, ran the Boston Marathon, and became president of a venture capital firm, building new businesses. But in 1989 he resigned from his management duties and moved back to Colorado, to become a fulltime writer.

His first book for young adults, *Heartlight*, was issued in 1990. Since that time, seven more young adult fantasy novels by Barron have been published. The last five, in the Merlin series, have come out once a year.

Along with the fantasy tales Barron also has written the text for nonfiction books which reflect his interest in wilderness and nature themes: *To Walk in Wilderness* (1993) and *Rocky Mountain National Park: A One Hundred Year Perspective* (1995). His children's picture book, *Where Is Grandpa?* (2000), portrays family relationships and loss.

In his leisure time Barron often explores the Colorado mountains. His wife, Currie, and their five children join him on hikes near their home in Boulder, Colorado. A dedicated environmentalist, he has received an award from The Wilderness Society for his efforts on behalf of wilderness preservation.

Setting

The first part of *The Lost Years of Merlin* is set in the coastal regions of Wales, known in the book by its Celtic name, Gwynedd.

Approximately the last two-thirds of the book takes place in the mythical land Fincayra, which has some tenuous connections to the human world but is not a part of it. Young Emrys's passage between the two is by sea.

Perhaps because of Fincayra's betweenworlds status, both his voyage from Fincayra as a small boy and his return some years later end with a shipwreck which leaves him stranded on the shore, unconscious.

Gwynedd is a land of forests and small villages, where ancient sacred sites and beliefs still exist in harmony with newer Christian elements. There is a city, *Caer Myrddin*, with a church and convent where young Emrys and his foster mother seek shelter after Emrys's emerging powers create a firestorm which blinds him and kills another boy. The time period is shortly after Roman forces left Britain. The technology and commercial ties they brought are still largely intact, with roads fanning out from *Caer Myrddin* to distant places, and barge traffic along the rivers.

Significantly, although Branwen speaks darkly about invasions and other portents of trouble, daily life in Gwynedd seems quite peaceful. The two meet no bandits or warriors along the roads. Emrys's problems in the village stem mostly from a bully boy who resents Emrys and his independence in defending a ragged Jewish vagrant. Nor is a political or military force visible which might keep the peace and protect against invaders. While small boys' horizons usually do not encompass political matters in normal times, most are fascinated by soldiers, and if they were more than an occasional presence Emrys would probably notice. Their relative absence is a contrast to the situation that will emerge a couple of generations later, when a Britain endangered by raiders and a power vacuum turns to Arthur and his knights.

Fincayra too has countryside and roads, but it is a much gloomier land. What villages existed have become dark and deserted by the time Emrys arrives there. In the past the land produced a wonderful variety of fruits and flowers, but this is true now only of the enchanted *Druma Wood*, and even it is shrinking. All this, the girl Rhia explains to Emrys soon after she finds him, results from the baleful acts of King Stangmar and his evil genius Rhita Gawr.

Fincayra is also a land where magic operates. As an outsider, Emrys is never quite sure how magic will operate in a situation; he is often taken by surprise. The inhabitants do not always know what to expect, either. Shim, the little giant, and even Domnu, the ageless being whose name means Dark Fate, run up against limits to their knowledge of this mysterious place.

There are relatively few humans in Fincayra. Those who appear human still show some subtle differences. For example, Rhia dwells in the Druma, wears leaves as clothes, and regards a huge tree as her foster mother. Fincayra has many other beings, though, some friendly to Emrys, others dubiously so. There are talking trees, goblins, and near the Shrouded Castle, ghouliants, the walking dead who cannot be injured by ordinary means. Some of the beings can change form, as does the Grand Elusa. She is a spider when Emrys meets her, but assures him that "image and reality are rarely the same."

So it is throughout Fincayra. Everything in the realm follows this first rule of magic.

It is an ideal testing ground for a boy who has not yet discovered how far his powers can stretch.

Social Sensitivity

The setting and the characters' concerns in *The Lost Years of Merlin* are so far removed from twentieth century reality that it is hard to imagine adults or young readers finding them morally or socially offensive. Only those very few who are opposed to fantasy on principle are likely to object for such reasons.

There are, however, a few questions which might be raised from a mixture of ethical and/or literary concerns.

A few admirers of Arthurian lore do not like treatments which alter the stories found in its earliest historical or literary sources.

This could apply to inventing a whole series of adventures for young Merlin, rather than letting his youthful years stay shrouded in mystery.

More significant, perhaps, is the role played by others in bringing about Rhita Gawr's downfall. Trouble steals the key which lets Emrys free Rhia from the dungeon. Shim is the one to shatter the Cauldron of Death, when Stangmar is about to throw Emrys into it. Trouble dispatches the demon into another world, paying for it with his life. And it is the roused giants who finally bring down the castle. Yet Emrys is the one given credit for the victory of good over evil. Is his moral leadership enough to validate this? The question should lead to some interesting discussions, at least.

Finally, although it is necessary for the plot, Branwen's refusal to talk to Emrys about his father or their early years raises some other questions. These are not wholly foreign to contemporary young people.

What of children whose fathers are imprisoned or have deserted the family? What about children whose mother does not know for sure who their father is? A mother, and/or a foster parent, with the best of intentions may choose to say nothing, or to make up a story that puts the missing father in a better light. In either case there may be a lesson in young Emrys's story. Most children want to know about their parentage and background. If they get evasive answers, or have the feeling they are being lied to, it can come out in strange ways.

Emrys's refusal to believe the things Branwen does tell him illustrates this point.

Literary Qualities

Arthurian sources hold little material on Merlin's childhood and youth. Barron has drawn on Celtic mythology for many of the colorful details about the "halfway-between" land of Fincayra. Of these, the two most likely to be familiar to readers are probably the spinning castle (also called the Shrouded Castle) and the Cauldron of Death.

The inaugural issue of a leading fantasy magazine (Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine*, 1989) featured a story about a spinning castle. The Cauldron of Death which takes people into the Otherworld is a presence in Celtic religion. It is a darker parallel to the cauldron of plenty; both have connections with the witch's cauldron of popular folklore.

In structure *The Lost Years of Merlin* is a classic hero's quest, although Emrys is younger than the usual protagonist of such tales. Those familiar with the work of Joseph Campbell or Christopher Vogler will recognize stages and personages all along the way. For example, young Emrys's reluctance to help Rhia represents his initial "refusal of the call." Because the book was written as the first of a trilogy (later expanded to become at least five novels), some stages of the quest do not occur. Emrys does not return home with his newly won knowledge and powers, nor is it clear whether Rhia will be his one companion on later adventures.

The author tells Emrys's story from his point of view, albeit in third-person narration. The style is smooth, with enough background details and description to build vivid pictures in a reader's mind, but with good pacing of events. The most unusual stylistic feature is the way some characters speak. Cwen, who is as much tree as human, speaks in hisses. Shim fractures the language by adding syllables to his words: "We find the place where goblinses camp."

The dialect speech found in fiction of the mid-twentieth and earlier has fallen out of favor, both because it was often used only for socially or ethnically "lower-class" characters, and because it was hard to follow. However, Barron's usages have neither of these flaws. Since Cwen and Shim are not human they cannot be labelled by class, and the printed dialogue is quite understandable.

The author uses paired events to create resonance and a mythic tone. Some of these are: the two appearances of a stag, the two shipwrecks which leave Emrys on an "alien" shore, and the two underground dwellings, the first holding the Grand Elusa's web, and the second, Cairdre's cozy trove of books.

Like many long fantasy novels written for adults, at times *The Lost Years of Merlin* seems to just take its hero from one danger or wonder to another, without much connection between them. In part this is a valid criticism. Yet in traversing a magical landscape, is this not how things might happen?

Many elements that seem random when they happen are revealed in the end to be part of the puzzle. Most notably, Stangmar reveals himself to be Emrys's father in the climactic scene, as they fight. This is reminiscent of a similar scene, the light-sabre fight, in the Star Wars movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Darth Vader reveals himself to his son Luke Skywalker.

Themes and Characters

The Lost Years of Merlin is almost entirely Emrys's—the young Merlin's—story. Like most classic quest fantasies, it encompasses two interwoven major themes: good versus evil, and personal growth and self-discovery as the protagonist seeks his goal.

For Emrys, his own goal—to learn who he is and where he is from—comes much earlier. As the book opens, he awakens upon a strange seacoast with a terrible headache and no memory of his past life. Although a woman castaway on the same shore takes him in and insists she is his mother, Emrys does not believe her. She will not reveal much about her own, or his, past. She does teach him herb lore, and tells him marvelous stories about the gods and heroes of many different pantheons. But she refuses to talk about his father, saying Emrys is better off not knowing. Nor will she say anything about the earlier life they presumably shared elsewhere. Branwen claims that Emrys's memory loss is a blessing, not a curse.

Little wonder, then, that finding the answers to these questions becomes an obsession to the boy. When he discovers that he has some magical talents, it adds urgency to his need to know. Village bullies eventually capture Branwen, who is suspect both for being this unusual boy's guardian and for her healing powers. They start to burn her alive. Emrys, already the target of the same boys' cruelty, wishes for help and inadvertently makes a tree branch fall, setting the ringleader afire. He dies, but Emrys rushes into the fire trying to save him, and is himself badly burned and blinded.

From that time on, Emrys is afraid of trying to use his magical powers. Branwen prays that his sight be restored, saying that "if that is what it takes," he will never use these powers again. While the two are living in sanctuary at Saint Peter's convent, Emrys begins to see again, dimly, with Second Sight. As soon as he learns how to use it, he decides to set out and solve the puzzle of his origins.

Emrys is in many ways a normal twelve-year-old. He is good-hearted, vulnerable, and stubborn; he has to find out things for himself. Both his blindness and his unexplored magical powers mark him as different, however, and Branwen is more than slightly fearful for him when he leaves.

After almost drowning in a storm, he wakes up on a sandy beach in an unfamiliar land. In short order he first meets and saves Trouble, a merlin hawk who is being attacked by rats, and then meets Rhia, a strange girl who demands to know who is trespassing in Druma Wood. Up to this point, nearly halfway through the book, Emrys is still preoccupied with his origin quest. He goes with Rhia to her home in the giant oak tree, thinking only to enjoy her hospitality a few days, while he gets his bearings so he can set off again. Already since his landing he has recognized—more from intuition than from solid clues—that this land holds answers to his questions.

Rhia shows him many wonders. She also tells him about the curse that has descended on Fincayra, which is now reaching even the enchanted Wood. At first when she asks



him to help her find a way to save the Druma, he refuses. They argue. Rhia says his idea that he can accomplish his goals alone is a delusion. Emrys accuses her of not caring about him; that she only wants to be able to use the Galator, the powerful amulet which Branwen gave him. While they are at a standoff, a stag bounds out in front of them. Emrys remembers how a stag saved him from an attacking wild boar years ago. Knowing that stag may have been a deity in disguise, he takes this one as an omen, and agrees to go with Rhia, "but only for a little while."

This agreement takes Emrys into the struggle against the evil forces besieging Fincayra. He is a reluctant hero for a while yet, however. On their way to meet and question the Grand Elusa, Emrys and Rhia see animals fleeing, but Emrys stays preoccupied with his personal search and worries about his own safety. They also discover the small giant Shim who has become stuck robbing a honeycomb. After this little fellow joins them, they encounter the Elusa in the guise of a hungry spider. The Grand Elusa speaks in riddles, giving them some good information and at the same time threatening to eat them. This makes Emrys realize his responsibilities to the others in his group.

Not until warrior goblins kidnap Rhia does Emrys's focus change. He knows the goblins will take her to the Shrouded Castle, the center of the evil, where King Stangmar and his demon Rhita Gawr dwell.

Whether from a sense of obligation (because Rhia deceived the goblins into taking her in place of Emrys) or a genuine shift in his priorities, Emrys now puts his own quest aside until he can rescue Rhia.

The dangers he will meet along the way are great, and the likelihood of even breaching the Shrouded Castle's defenses is small.

He will have to face down the evil, supernatural forces that are blighting the land.

But he presses on, with Trouble and Shim in tow, because he has to.

Strangely—but in keeping with fantasyquest structure—only when he puts Rhia's rescue first does Emrys start to get some real leads for his own quest. Until then he had only received vague déjà vu feelings.

Now, when he visits the scholar Cairpre's underground house, he learns that his own mother once sat there too, studying the ancient books. Cairpre also tells him how blight crept over the land gradually, because of some bad decisions made by Stangmar in a time of need.

The two stories Cairpre tells are not brought together until the very end of the novel. But these revelations set the stage for the later denouement. Because Emrys has received this solid piece of evidence about his mother (forcing him to admit Branwen was telling the truth), he is able to give up the Galator she gave him when Domnu demands it. In exchange, this entity makes Trouble able to carry him and Shim to the castle.

During his travels through Fincayra, Emrys changes from a rather self-centered, obstinate young man into a fairly responsible leader and strategist.

His comrades on the journey—Rhia, Trouble, and Shim—are interesting for their traits and situations, even if somewhat two-dimensional. Thematically, they each function to evoke certain virtues in the boy. Rhia is his first "native informant." She tells him many facts he needs to know about that world and its crisis. She shows him that he needs allies. She also advises him that he need not keep his promise (actually, Branwen's promise) to never use his magical powers again. If they were given to him, she says quite logically, it was so he could use them when he needs to. This makes Emrys realize that he is avoiding magic as much because of fear as from a pledge.

Without changing his attitude about his powers, he would never have become the awesome wizard of legend!

Trouble, because he stays with Emrys despite the boy's annoyance with the bird, shows Emrys the value of loyalty. Shim, who is full of fears and very vocal about them, forces Emrys to push down his own fears, because somebody has to be brave.

At the book's end, the immediate evil has been defeated, and Emrys knows much more about his origins and talents. Still, he has more to learn. The quest and struggle have made him grow, and set him on the path to more adventures and mighty deeds.

Topics for Discussion

1. When six-year-old Emrys awakens on the coast of Gwynedd, his memories of his past have been wiped out. Yet Branwen, who made the same passage, remembers. Is it just because she is an adult, or are there other reasons?
2. Why does Emrys not believe Branwen when she says she is his mother?
3. Branwen tells young Emrys stories from many different traditions, including Greek mythology, the Druids, and the Christian gospels. Does a wizard-in-training need to know as many of these as possible? Do they prepare him in any way for the challenges he will meet in Fincayra?
4. It was Branwen, not Emrys, who vowed that he would never use his magic powers again if he recovered his sight. Why did she say this? Should he be bound by a vow made for him by someone else?
5. If not, why is he so reluctant to use magic again?
6. Although Rhia appears to be a normal girl, she dresses in vines or leaves and has some magic of her own. What are some examples of her magic? Is there a mythical creature she reminds you of?
7. Why does Emrys let the hawk stay with him, even though he seems nasty-tempered and at first fully deserves his name Trouble? Can we learn anything from this episode?
8. In Celtic legend, below-ground places are often gates to the Otherworld. Do Emrys and his friends find such places as they travel across Fincayra?
9. In Fincayra, many things are not what they appear to be. How can Emrys tell what is real and what is an illusion?
10. Both Cairpre and Stangmar explain how the king turned to Rhita Gawr and brought ruin to his kingdom. No reason is given for Rhita Gawr being evil; he just is. Does there need to be a reason for a character being so bad? Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Before the land was blighted, Fincayra seems to have been a place much like Gwynedd, except with fantastic creatures and more magic. If you were creating a mythological world parallel to our own, what would you put in it?

How would it "work"?

2. If Branwen had told Emrys the truth about his father and his early years, would things have gone differently in the story? Explain.

3. Emrys's confrontation with King Stangmar resembles the showdown between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back*. View the movie and explain how the two situations are similar, and how they are different.

4. T. A. Barron uses some striking images in this book. Pick one or two, like "shafts of darkness" or the circle of cedars whose bodies looked like ancient men, and try to portray them visually, or in some other medium.

5. The King Arthur stories have always been a rich source for writers and other artists. Pick another character from Arthurian lore, and write your own story about his or her childhood, or an adventure that does not show up elsewhere.

6. At the end of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, the boy takes the name Merlin, in memory of Trouble. Rhia thinks it may be his real name. He is doubtful, but decides to try it anyway. Do some reading about name magic, and write about why it may be the right name for him after all.

7. The era after Roman armies left Britain was troubled and dangerous, but as in the novel, much of their civilization remained. Research this era and write a report on why the land needed a leader like Arthur at this time.

For Further Reference

Estes, Sally. Review of The Lost Years of Merlin Series. Booklist 96 (April 15, 2000): 1544. Briefly summarizes each published book of the series. Commends the series for growing "steadily richer in background and characterization," and describes it as full of surprises and action adventure.

Review of The Lost Years of Merlin. Publishers Weekly 243 (August 12, 1996): 84.

Ambivalent review emphasizing the Welsh mythic sources for the novel. Compares it to Lloyd Alexander's Prydain Chronicles, and questions the logic of the story's ending.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Later novels in this series take young Emrys/Merlin into further adventures.

In the second book, *The Seven Songs of Merlin*, he is charged with healing Fincayra's ruined lands. To do so, he must stay there and use the flowering harp, one of the magical treasures that Stangmar had hoarded in the castle. Lonely, he transports his mother to Fincayra, but almost immediately she is attacked by a deathshadow. Merlin must master the seven wizard's songs within a month to save her.

The Fires of Merlin, still set in Fincayra, features a reawakened dragon, Valdearg, whom Merlin must fight. In *The Mirror of Merlin*, losing a sword takes Merlin into a haunted marsh. He travels through the Mists of Time to meet an older version of himself.

This novel also introduces other characters from the Arthurian saga: the young Arthur, an equally young Ector, and Nimue, shown here in her traditional role as Merlin's enemy.

The Wings of Merlin, planned to be the last book of the series, concerns an ancient mystery of lost wings. It also involves Merlin coming to terms with his father Stangmar.

One book in Barron's contemporary fantasy series, *The Merlin Effect*, has the protagonist, Kate Gordon, going back in time to meet Merlin, and explore the awesome power contained in an artifact called the Horn of Merlin.

Related Web Sites

Dodds, Georges T. Online review of The Lost Years of Merlin, [http://www.cyberus.ca/sfsite/I Oa/merl42.htm](http://www.cyberus.ca/sfsite/I%20Oa/merl42.htm). Connects the existing material on Merlin's origins, in Geoffrey of Monmouth and other medieval works, with Barron's ideas. A thoughtful review, which praises the series' entertainment value and character portrayals, but also notes some problematic areas.

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