

Merlin Short Guide

Merlin by Jane Yolen

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Overview

Yolen opens *Merlin* with this definition: Merlin: The smallest British falcon or hawk, its wingbeats are powerful and, despite its size, it seldom fails of its prey.

Merlin takes significant steps toward manhood in *Merlin*, and when he becomes a Maker as well as a Dreamer, he begins to become the bird of prey for which he is named; though still small at age twelve, he is potentially deadly. In *Merlin*, he begins to understand the extent of his supernatural power and to put it to use, saving not only his own life but that of Cub, the future king.

About the Author

"Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was probably the source for her first published book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers while still writing. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school; she earned a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts and eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become one of AmeriMerlin 257 ca's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Yolen is married to David Stemple, a college professor, and has three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.



Setting

Most of the events of *Merlin* take place in a forest where Merlin has fled. Afraid of what might happen to him if he remains in the city, he instinctively runs toward the sanctuary he knew as a smaller child in *Passager*—the New Forest, where he can fend for himself and hide among the trees.

He eventually finds himself in the camp of wodeose, the word for the wild people of the forest. This is an irony; when he was abandoned in the woods in *Passager*, the hope of those who abandoned him was that he would be found and taken in by the wodeose, but in a year of living wild in the forest the only human being Merlin saw was Master Robin, a falconer. In *Merlin*, he finally meets some of the wodeose, and it seems fortunate for him that he did not meet them earlier. Like almost everyone else, they have their own plans for Merlin's supernatural abilities and imprison him in a cage while demanding that he dream his prophetic dreams for them. He dreams that their camp of tents is flooded in blood.



Social Sensitivity

Though Merlin must have had a childhood, Arthurian tales include little of it beyond his precociousness as a prophet and interpreter of dreams. His parentage varies from story to story: sometimes he was born of a rape, sometimes not; sometimes his father was a demon or even the devil, but sometimes not. What Yolen does in her Young Merlin trilogy—*Passager*, *Hobby*, and *Merlin*—is to offer an account of his psychological development. Her "slant" on Merlin's youth (much as Merlin dreams on the slant) is a modern one: she analyzes the impact of emotional deprivation on the views and actions of someone who is going to be very powerful someday. In *Passager*, Merlin is abandoned in the woods by his mother and others who are afraid to keep him with them. Thus, one source of isolation for Merlin is fear; the fear of others will keep him apart from everyone except Master Robin and his family and Cub. When, in *Hobby*, Master Robin's family dies in a fire, Merlin feels double guilt for their deaths: psychologically, he is a survivor who feels guilty for having survived a disaster that others did not survive; and more straightforwardly, he had dreamed of the fire but failed to recognize its meaning until it was too late to save anyone besides himself. It is important to note that he did not choose to abandon Master Robin's family but tried to save them.

A boy who lived in the forest, naked to the elements, on his own for about a year, may well have a different slant on human affairs than others who have not been so isolated from humanity. The loss of his adoptive family, his friendship then abandonment by Ambrosius and Viviane in *Hobby*, and his discovery that he has no family place among the wild folk all serve to impress on him that he has only himself to rely on.

What Yolen does is work her way backward from the Merlin of the Arthurian tales to explore the sort of childhood that might have made him what he became. Her answers are that Merlin was deprived of human companionship—most importantly of love—and that he compensated by becoming emotionally remote, a merlin soaring above human affairs. The affection of Cub at the end of *Merlin* is an encouraging note.

It suggests that Merlin retains the capacity to care about someone else and that he may form a relationship with Cub that will help him understand human beings even as his supernatural powers tend to make him increasingly different from most people.

Not only does this portrayal offer an explanation for the man Merlin will become, but it probably accounts for the novella's appeal to young readers. It is a cliché that young adults feel at odds with society and may feel powerless, and that they must struggle with their strong desire to conform and their desire to be individuals, to stand out from the crowd. This cliché bears some truth, and many young adult books feature characters with special abilities that give them power over others and their own lives. Yolen's psychological portrait of Merlin probably appeals to young readers to the extent that it captures the reality of their emotional needs and offers them a vicarious escape into Merlin's ability to take charge of his own life.



Literary Qualities

Merlin declares, "But if you are a bear, Cub, then we shall call you Artus, for that means bear-man." This one of several allusions to Arthurian lore in Merlin. In this case it refers to an ancient text that calls the leader of the Romanized Britons of the late 400s and early to mid 500s a "bear." The word in Celtic is artos; in Merlin, it is Artus.

It is an easy leap to Arthur from there. The name Arthur probably comes from Latin (maybe Artorius), but the ancient chronicler may have used the Celtic word for bear as an alternative to using the name of Arthur, someone he apparently disliked.

Merlin's dream of the bear in chapter 1 is a fine bit of foreshadowing: He dreamed about a bear in the forest. A bear with a gold coronet on its head. A bear that walked upright, like a man.

Merlin views the dream as a portent of danger; bears are dangerous animals. He is still learning to interpret his dreams on the slant and thus does not realize that it means he is to meet Cub, boy of the wodevole. For the novella's audience, it foreshadows even more—the advent of King Arthur.

Yolen uses such prophetic dreams as reminders for her audience of the literary heritage on which she draws. For instance, Merlin has more such dreams while caged and drugged: He dreamed of a table round as a wheel that rolled across the land leaving great wide ruts. He dreamed of huge stones walking across the ocean. He dreamed of a giant, green as May, who threw his head in the air like a child with a ball. He dreamed of a man and a woman asleep in one bed, a sword between them sharper than any desire.

These dreams are misinterpreted by the wodevole, but Merlin is certain that they foretell his own future. In fact, each dream is an allusion to Arthurian literature. The table is an easy one, foretelling King Arthur's Round Table. The second dream alludes to a tradition that says Stonehenge was created by Merlin, who commanded great stones in Ireland to cross the sea to Britain. The third dream refers to a medieval poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"; the wodevole think the dream foretells the coming of the Green Man to protect them from the invading Saxons. In the poem, the tradition of the Green Man, a magical being who symbolizes nature, is worked into Arthurian lore: it is the Green Knight who tempts the knights of King Arthur's court and then teaches Sir Gawain a lesson in honor. The Green Knight's head can be severed from his body without ill effect.

The last dream portends the doom of King Arthur's rule over Britain. It represents the infidelity of his queen; the sword between her and her lover is Arthur's, symbolizing his discovery of their affair. These and other such references to Arthurian lore keep the narrative of Merlin in perspective as a telling of the development of the figures important to Arthurian tales.



Themes and Characters

Merlin has a strong desire to belong to a family or at least to a group of people, but "Everything, he thought wildly, everything conspires to keep me on my lone." Even when he finds the wodewose, outcasts like himself, he does not find a home. The moment his ability to dream of the future is discovered, he is imprisoned by the wodewose and told to serve them. He becomes a bird in a cage, and he must sing (relate his dreams) on command. The cage symbolizes his isolation, an isolation from humanity made complete by the fact that it was forced on him by people who are themselves outcasts from society. It seems that Merlin can go nowhere without being someone set apart from the rest of humanity.

His abuse at the hands of the wodewose tells Merlin more about himself than that he is doomed to be isolated from most people.

While in the cage he realizes that "he was, himself, the doll; a toy in the wrong hands, a magic creature in the right. With his breath he could work magic. Magic more powerful than the spilling of blood." Perhaps most important of all, he finds within himself some compassion for those who torment him. It is somewhat limited; he can look upon dead people clinically, as if they were dead animals in the woods. Yet he accepts the responsibility of caring for Cub; he is barely into young adulthood, and he accepts the role of father to the little boy of the wodewose. Further, when Cub asks him to, he tries to bring a man back to life the way he did with the bird; that he fails is not as important as that he tried. He shows that he is willing to do good deeds, even for someone who has mistreated him. Further, the experience reveals his willingness to act on the words of Cub, soon to be Artos—and in other Arthurian tales, someday to be the goodhearted King Arthur.

Merlin, like *Passager* and *Hobby* before it, is primarily a study in character. The events, dramatic though they are, are significant for how they shape Merlin into the man he is to become. Most of the narrative is concerned with his growing understanding of his powers. He begins to realize that he can interpret his own dreams on the slant, but that he must be asked to do so before he can explain. This leaves his interpretive powers somewhat at the mercy of others, but he learns to act on what he dreams even if he cannot explain to others what he sees.

One important power is his ability to dream while awake. For instance, he envisions a fish talking to him, saying, "Do not rise to the lure, lad": "That was not exactly a dream," he whispered to himself. But he knew it was not exactly real either.

He later acts on the fish's advice, avoiding dangerous temptation. He also learns to take action in others ways. In one way he becomes a Maker; he can bring the dead to life. This power foreshadows other powers in which he is not at the mercy of his magic—as when he must always tell the truth about his dreams—but instead is in control of it. In his dreams he is not the initiator; the dreams come to him at their own will. On the other hand, as a Maker, he initiates his magic, calling it forth when he wants it. Of all that



occurs in Merlin, the most important event in the development of Merlin's character may be his relationship with Cub. Merlin becomes a mature Maker when he undertakes an adult responsibility, the care of a child. This particular choice speaks of his maturity.

For Merlin, the most important person he meets in Merlin is Cub, a small boy living among the wild folk, the wodewose. Those familiar with Arthurian literature will quickly recognize who he is. In one of the oldest chronicles of the era of the Germanic invasion of Britain, the military leader who defends the Britons is not named but called simply "bear" or "the bear." A cub is a young bear. In Celtic, the leader would be artos; Yolen Latinizes the word in Merlin by having Merlin rename Cub Artus. This is Yolen's unique take on the origins of King Arthur, the mighty defender of civilization and the rule of law. In Merlin, he is a discarded boy, as alone as Merlin is. His attachment is partly admiration and partly a need for family as strong as Merlin's.

Cub comes across as a good kid, eager to be helpful. He is too young to fully comprehend the consequences of his actions; he does not seem to have foreseen that Merlin would be imprisoned when he announced that Merlin is a Dreamer. In fact, he helps Merlin to escape. Throughout the Young Merlin Trilogy names are important. Merlin's protection of his own name is a significant part of his persona. Cub's name is important too. Not only does it suggest that Cub is the child version of King Arthur, but it inspires in Merlin the name Artus and what it implies—that Cub is to become a bearman, a commanding presence among men, the way Merlin's own name suggests that the wizard will spend most of his life high and away from people.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why are the people of the woods killed by the soldiers?
2. In what ways is Merlin a full-fledged hawk by the end of Merlin ?
3. What are some instances of the metaphor of falconry in Merlin? What do these instances reveal about Merlin?
4. What are signs of Merlin maturing in the narrative?
5. Why does Merlin choose to take responsibility for Cub's care? What does this reveal about his personality? What does it reveal about his growth during the novella?
6. Why is it significant when Merlin brings a dead bird back to life? Why can he not do the same for the wodevose? What does Cub mean by calling Merlin a "Maker"?
7. Why does Merlin choose to be known by names that are not his real one?
8. Why is it necessary for someone to ask Merlin what his dreams mean before he can tell them?
9. Yolen makes references to Arthurian literature without explaining them. How does this affect your experience of the narrative?
10. At the end of Merlin, what more do you want to know about Merlin?
11. Is Merlin's account of how Merlin met Arthur satisfying? Should it be more dramatic? Why would Yolen choose to have the two meet among the wild folk?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What other accounts do we have of Merlin's childhood? How do they compare to Merlin?
2. Yolen has written about Merlin in other books, but her other portraits of Merlin, such as that found in *The Dragon's Boy* (1993), are different from that in *Passager*, *Hobby*, and *Merlin*. How do they differ from the Merlin of *Merlin*? How are they similar? Are their themes similar to those of *Merlin*? What does Yolen seem to be trying to achieve with her depictions of Merlin?
3. In the medieval Arthurian tales, who was Uther Pendragon? How does he compare in those tales with the figure in Yolen's *Merlin*? Would he have allowed the slaughter of the forest people, as he seems to do in *Merlin*?
4. Merlin's increasingly strong supernatural abilities are wish fulfillment in *Merlin*.

That is, young people are supposed to see themselves as Merlin, soaring above conformity to stand out from their peers and having the power to defy social rules. Why is wish fulfillment in fiction for young adults attractive to adolescent readers? What does it give them, if anything?

5. The wodeose mention the invasion of Britain by the Saxons. When did this occur? How long did it take? What happened to the Britons?
6. Who were the wodeose of medieval Europe? Where did they come from?
How did they live?
7. What are some other accounts of how Merlin and Arthur became connected?
How does the account in *Merlin* compare?



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A summary of Yolen's publications, including a brief interview with her.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-29. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 21-29. Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retellings.

———. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

Locus 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses the challenge of writing for children and the important elements in her fiction.

———. "Jane Yolen." In *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults* by Jim Roginski. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-38. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

———. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales." *Locus* 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

———. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie, and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters; noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

———. *The Writer* (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style and discusses why she enjoys writing.

———. *Writing Books for Children*. Revised ed. Boston: The Writer, 1983. A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Yolen says that she is interested in the father-son relationship between Merlin and King Arthur, and she cites *The Dragon's Boy* (1993) as an effort to depict that relationship. In that story Merlin is called Linn, and he is much older than Artos (a play on the Celtic for bear; in an early chronicle, the leader of the Britons in their war against the Saxons had no name and was referred to as "bear" or "the bear"). In *Merlin*, Merlin is barely a young adult when he befriends the young Cub (whom Merlin renames "Artus").

Hobby, the second novella in the *Young Merlin Trilogy*, opens with Merlin at twelve years of age, about four years after the end of *Passager*. In *Passager*, Merlin is abandoned in the New Forest when he is seven years old. He learns about survival in the woods and learns to view experience from an animal's-eye view. When Master Robin takes him in, Merlin is like a wild bird and needs to be tamed, although, like the birds of prey kept by Master Robin, Merlin will always remain somewhat wild.

In *Hobby*, Merlin begins to learn how to cope with people outside of his adoptive family of Master Robin, Meg, and Nell. He will very much want to be part of a family again after his family is killed in a fire.

Merlin foresaw the fire in one of his prophetic dreams but did not know what the dream meant; his dreams have meanings "on a slant," he realizes. He feels a great deal of guilt for not saving his family and for being the sole survivor of the fire. Already set apart from humanity by his experiences as a wild boy in *Passager*, he is further separated in *Hobby* by his feeling of guilt and by his supernatural gifts, which sometimes seem to control him. He learns from Ambrosius and Viviane about speaking sotto voce the secrets of the tongue and the secrets of the hand. He also discovers that people are afraid of him—even Ambrosius and Viviane, who, in spite of their sympathy toward him, abandon Merlin, further deepening his feeling of isolation from normal society. This feeling may be what motivates him to take Cub under his wing. As someone who not only does not fear Merlin but even admires him, Cub is the only sort of family Merlin has.

By the end of *Hobby*, Merlin is well on his way to becoming the mysterious and aloof wizard of Arthurian tales; in *Merlin*, he develops the detachment and cynicism of the man he is to be, and he takes Cub into his care. Cub, renamed Artus, is the young King Arthur.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

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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