

Over Sea, Under Stone Short Guide

Over Sea, Under Stone by Susan Cooper

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Overview

Over Sea, Under Stone is a fast-paced adventure story, full of exciting incident and perilous situations. The action is believable because it is firmly rooted in the ordinary people, customs, and landscape of Trewissick, Cornwall. Margery Gill's realistic pen and ink illustrations contribute to the strong feeling of place drawn by the novel. Cooper and Gill know this setting well; they lay out the story authoritatively and confidently.

The novel, however, is more than an adventure story; it is a modern fantasy, original but firmly rooted in the King Arthur stories. Merriman Lyon, who helps the children through their adventures, is Merlin, Arthur's magician, who is now living in the twentieth century.

Knowing the Arthurian legends enriches the reading of the novel, but is not necessary. The legendary and allegorical overtones emerge clearly from the story itself.

In the novel the physical action parallels the conflict of ideas. The abstract and impersonal forces of myth and religion intersect with the precise details of the action and setting. Having grown up during World War II, and having seen what for her was such a clear struggle between good and evil, Cooper is able to convincingly show in her novel how ordinary people are caught up in this struggle and forced to take sides.

In *Over Sea, Under Stone*, as in the other novels, evil is insidious and deceptive. Often on first sight it appears attractive and only later is seen as horrible. Cooper wants her readers to see the need for choosing between the good and evil in themselves, as well as in the world. She believes that choosing good is often difficult and involves overcoming obstacles, but it is only by choosing good that people can grow and can be happy and free. The novel is particularly powerful for young adults because Cooper stresses how important the Drew children's decisions are.



About the Author

Susan Mary Cooper was born on May 23, 1935, in Bumham, Buckinghamshire, England. She spent the first eighteen years of her life in this industrial town twenty miles from London.

In 1953 she enrolled in Oxford University, where she earned her master's degree in English in 1956.

Cooper began writing early in her life.

In her autobiography she relates that the busiest time of her writing life was when she turned ten years old, when she wrote three plays for a puppet theatre, collaborated on a weekly newspaper, and wrote and illustrated her own small book. In high school she edited the school magazine, and was the first woman to edit the undergraduate newspaper at Oxford.

Many of Cooper's subjects and themes derive from her childhood experiences during World War II. The Nazi bombings of London furnished her with material for *Dawn of Fear*, an autobiographical novel about the air raids. She believes the war furnished her with a concrete experience of the conflict between good and evil. For her the "something" that might be lurking in the shadow behind the bedroom door at night was not a vague bogeyman but a German soldier.

Cooper sees this potential for evil in all humans, and has addressed the duality of human nature in many of her books.

Cooper learned the folk tales, myths, and legends of Buckinghamshire, Cornwall, and North Wales while growing up, and they have a prominent place in many of her books for young adults.

Stories of King Arthur, the story of the greenwitch, and the great oak tree of Heine the hunter form a background for *The Dark Is Rising* and its sequels.

Her youthful writing anticipated her subsequent career as a journalist, novelist, and most recently, playwright.

Cooper worked for the *London Sunday Times* from 1956 until 1963, when she married Nicholas J. Grant, an American scientist and college professor. She moved from England to join him and his three children in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Following her marriage, which ended in divorce in 1982, she shifted most of her attention from journalism to writing books, but continued with a weekly newspaper column until 1972.

Mandrake, a science fiction novel for adults, was published in 1964, and *Over Sea, Under Stone* in 1965.

After writing *Dawn of Fear* and several factual books for adults, Cooper returned to *The Dark Is Rising* series, which she finished in 1977. During the next ten years she wrote other books for children and plays for television and the theater.

Cooper has won a number of awards for her writing. *The Dark Is Rising* was the Newbery Honor Book in 1974, and it received the Boston Globe-Horn Book award for 1973. *The Grey King* won the 1976 Newbery Medal and Tir na y-Og Award of Wales.

Setting

After the Drew family arrives in Cornwall for a vacation, Jane, Barney, and Simon explore the village of Trewissick and the Grey House, where the family is staying with Great-Uncle Merry. The children soon discover a hidden door that leads to an attic, where they find a crumbling map. Soon after they are wrenched from their ordinary world into a strange and perilous world that exists parallel to the ordinary world, where the struggle between good and evil is more clearly evident. This map supplies the clues necessary for their quest to find the grail, an Arthurian relic that is a powerful weapon in the fight between the forces of good and evil, the Light and the Dark. Their quest is hazardous; the characters fighting for the Dark also want the grail, and the children mistake some of these characters for friends.

Great-Uncle Merry, a friend of the Drew family, a famous scholar of antiquities, and a fighter for the Light helps them succeed in their quest.

Social Sensitivity

Some readers and parents at times object to legends promoted as a coherent system of beliefs; in this novel and others in the series the references are subordinate to the story itself. Cooper has imaginatively adapted all of the myths and legends she uses for her own artistic purposes.

The novel contains no graphic violence. The Drew children are threatened in certain scenes but are never physically harmed, and the threats come only from those people who are of the Dark.

Evil is real, tangible, and often not immediately recognizable in Cooper's world, and good must constantly struggle to keep it in check. Cooper is realistic about the difficulties, but optimistic about the outcome. She never develops the concepts of good and evil in any theological way, so readers of all religious persuasions should have no problems with this fundamental conflict in the story.



Literary Qualities

Over Sea, Under Stone, which introduces The Dark Is Rising series, is primarily a fantasy based on the legends of King Arthur. The writing is impeccable, from words and sentences to the general structure of the book. Cooper's prose is specific, detailed, clear, and exact. It is simple, but never condescending. For her, "the rain fell with grey insistence," Great-Uncle Merry returns to "the dusty peace of the university where he taught," and after the children explore the attic, little could be done "about Barney's hair, now khaki." One of her favorite stylistic patterns is to combine an adjective with an abstract noun, as in "grey insistence." Cooper relies most frequently on sight in her novel, but she at times uses other senses. Her ear for dialect is good, as when Bill Hoover speaks, and she relies on hearing and touch when Barney is kidnapped: "The car swayed and growled as if it were alive. Barney lay wrapped up like a parcel in the robe which Mr. Withers had slipped from his own shoulders as he dropped him in the car. He decided that it must be a sheet; the smell of it under the nose was like clean laundry on the beds at home."

The numerous repetitions, foreshadowings, and parallel scenes make for a rich and complex reading experience.

Mrs. Palk sings hymns and Mr. Hastings lives in the vicarage. Both seem religious, yet both are evil. This theme of the difference between appearance and reality occurs frequently in the novel.

Mr. Hastings makes a "strange, archaic gesture that reminded Jane of Mr. Withers," and she later discovers they are both people of the Dark. Even the exploration of the attic parallels the children's later exploration of the cave.

Cooper returns to actions, characters, and ideas from Over Sea, Under Stone in the later books. She has said that Over Sea, Under Stone "turned out to be the first movement in a symphonic pattern of five books." The series becomes unified, like the movements of a symphony, through repetition of and variations on the actions, characters, and ideas; these aspects of the novels serve as motifs.

Over Sea, Under Stone has many elements of good adventure and detective stories. The plot is based on action, the characters decipher and follow a strange map to find the grail, and, as in most detective stories, they must struggle to identify the villains. But the novel is fantasy, and is firmly rooted in a particular fantasy tradition. Events occur in it that do not occur in real life; some of the laws of physical reality do not apply.

In the novel different periods of time exist simultaneously, and King Arthur's magician, Merlin, lives in the twentieth century. By following their lead, Cooper places Over Sea, Under Stone and the entire The Dark Is Rising series into a rich tradition that includes such writers as Malory, Tennyson, and T. H. White.

This helps to make reading *Over Sea, Under Stone* a rich experience for readers who know these other works, though young adults will find the novel perfectly clear without seeing it in this broader context.



Themes and Characters

Over Sea, Under Stone tells the story of one of the skirmishes between good (Light) and evil (Dark) that culminates in the cosmic battle recorded in the last novel of the series, *Silver on the Tree*. All of the main characters in the novel fight on one of these two sides, although their allegiances are not always immediately clear. Some of the characters working for the Dark initially seem to be on the side of the Light. As they are drawn into the conflict Jane, Barney, and Simon elect to fight for the Light. Because they must decide which side to support and then must prove their commitment through action, the Drew children are the major characters in the book. They grow the most because of the choices they must make. Great-Uncle Merry, the most powerful representative of the forces of Light, and Mr. Hastings, the most powerful representative of the forces of Dark, are important as well.

Jane is intuitive, sensitive, perceptive, and at times almost seems to have a psychic connection with other characters. She sees how the standing rocks match the map, she "feels her warning instincts mutter," then realizes the owl wails at the beach are really the sounds of their enemies. When she wishes for Great-Uncle Merry to come to the cave, he arrives at the door almost immediately. But she is not as perceptive a judge of character as Barney. Neither she nor Simon believes Barney when he claims Mrs. Palk is one of the enemy.

Barney, the youngest of the children, knows the most about King Arthur. This knowledge and his natural bravery make him the logical character to find the map, debate good and evil with Mr. Hastings, and find the grail. He refuses to give the grail to Mr. Hastings, even when threatened with death. Barney is the most important character in the novel because he is most involved in the struggle.

Simon is the oldest, so he feels obligated to protect his younger brother and sister. As a result, he is more cautious than Barney. He keeps the map from Miss Wither and Bill Hoover, and he wants to retreat when he and Barney are in the cave. Only Barney's persistence allows them to find the grail.

The children are guided in their fight against the Dark by Great-Uncle Merry, Merriman Lyon, or, as Barney realizes at the end of the novel, the magician Merlin. Great-Uncle Merry can guide and protect the children in their fight, but he must leave important decisions up to them. As a result, although he is a powerful and mysterious presence in the novel, he is one-dimensional.

Mr. Hastings is Great-Uncle Merry's evil counterpart, and also is one-dimensional. He lives in the vicarage, but he is the exact opposite of a vicar; he is not what he seems. Mr. Hastings epitomizes the sinister presence, the evil existing in seemingly ordinary people in the novel.

All of the other Dark characters in the novel obey him.



Mrs. Palk figures most frequently in the actions of the Dark characters, and she is the most developed. She keeps house and cooks at the Grey House. The employment is a cover she breaks only near the end of the novel. Mr. Withers and Miss Withers sail a yacht, the *Lady Mary*, as an excuse to be near the hunt for the grail. They employ Bill Hoover, a hulking young bully. He, more than any of the other Dark characters, shows the price for his allegiance. He does what Mr. Hastings, Mr. Withers, and Miss Withers say; he is their slave. The Drew children make their own decisions.

Mr. and Mrs. Drew, the children's parents, are uninvolved in the action.

They complete the Drew family and they illustrate the shallowness, the emptiness of people's lives if they ignore the fight between good and evil. The parents are not people of the Dark, but they are too caught up in their own lives to be of the Light. Instead, they exist in Limbo in between. Cooper shows that only by totally working for the Light can a person be alive and free.



Topics for Discussion

1. Susan Cooper wrote *Over Sea, Under Stone* as a single novel; she did not see it as the first in a series of five novels until years later. Yet in the last sentence of the book, Barney predicts Jane, Simon, Great-Uncle Merry, and he will "know one day" what the words engraved on the grail mean. Are possible future novels anticipated elsewhere in the novel? How?

2. Near the end of *Over Sea, Under Stone* Barney realizes that Great-Uncle Merry is actually Merlin. " 'Merriman Lyon,' he said softly to himself. 'Merry Lyon. . . Merlion. . . Merlin. . .'" Which other names in the novel are important?

Why and how?

3. Jane, Barney, and Simon's parents leave them alone much of the time.

Would you like to live in this sort of family?

4. Do you like or dislike the illustrations? Do they help you imagine what the characters and scenes look like, or would you rather imagine what happens without having it drawn out for you? Do they capture the novel's mood and style?

5. Mrs. Palk sings hymns and Mr. Hastings lives in the vicarage, but both are evil. Do any of the other evil characters mislead by their actions?

6. Simon says "everything seems terribly big" when he, Jane, and GreatUncle Merry approach the stones at night. What else in the novel is overwhelmingly big to Jane, Barney, and Simon?

7. Before they explore the house and find the manuscript in the attic, Mrs. Palk gives Jane, Barney, and Simon "a stack of freshly-baked scones cut in half, thickly buttered and put together again; a packet of squashed-fly biscuits, three apples, and a great slab of dark yellow-orange cake, thick and crumbling with fruit." This writing is specific and sensory—we can clearly see the lunch. Which other passages in the book are this visual? Do any passages emphasize other senses, like hearing?

8. We learn, in the first chapter, that "Barney's greatest heroes had been King Arthur and his knights." What other interests, knowledge, and abilities are uniquely Jane's, Barney's, and Simon's?

9. Jane, Barney, and Simon immediately accept and like Great-Uncle Merry.

Would you react similarly if you were one of them?

10. After she and Mr. Withers kidnap Barney, Polly Withers "slipped out of the driving seat, moving like a snake."



Where else are evil people compared with animals, birds, or snakes? Are good people ever compared with creatures?

How do these comparisons make you feel?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. *The Dark Is Rising* was the Newbery Honor book in 1974, and *The Grey King* won the Newbery Medal in 1976. Each book received other awards as well. *Over Sea, Under Stone* received excellent reviews, but won no major awards. Do you think *Over Sea, Under Stone* is a prize-deserving novel? Why or why not?

2. In chapter six, Barney tells what he knows about King Arthur. What could Barney add to his telling to help us better understand *Over Sea, Under Stone* and the other novels in *The Dark Is Rising* series?

3. Simon and Jane are near the standing stones when they hear what they think is an owl, "a friendless, inhuman, Oversea, Under Stone desolate sound," in chapter eight. Then, in chapter thirteen, they and Barney again hear this sound from near the beach. In both cases, the cry is not one of an owl, but of the enemy. Where else in *Over Sea, Under Stone* do people, events, or objects seem to be different than they actually are?

4. Bill Hoover reacts rudely and angrily after he has driven his bicycle into Jane.

His reaction gives Jane, Barney, and Simon a negative first impression of him, and he later turns out to be evil. What other foreshadowings are there in the novel? What other first impressions are accurate?

5. While looking for a door to the attic, Jane says "perhaps there's another door, I mean cave, that we haven't noticed." She and her brothers then find the door, explore the attic, and find the map. Later, they discover the opening to the real cave and find the grail. How do these two stories within the novel echo and complement each other? Are there other parallel stories within the novel?

Are there other repetitions?

6. What is the Holy Grail? Why is it so important for the forces of Light to find the grail?

7. Thomas Malory in *Morte Darthur* (1485), Richard Wagner in *Parsifal* (1882), and other authors and composers have based works on the quest for the grail. Is the quest in *Over Sea, Under Stone* like or unlike the quest in one of these other works?

8. Near the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis, the children enter a wardrobe and discover Narnia; near the beginning of *Over Sea, Under Stone* Jane, Barney, and Simon move the wardrobe to find the passage to the attic. Are the two novels similar in other ways? (C. S. Lewis was one of Susan Cooper's teachers when she studied at Oxford.)

9. In chapter six, Great-Uncle Merry says that "underneath all the bits that people have added, the magic swords and lamps, [fairy tales] are all about one thing—the good hero fighting the giant, or the witch, or the wicked uncle. Good against bad. Good against evil." Then Jane, Simon, and Barney mention several examples: Cinderella, Aladdin,



and Jack the Giant-Killer. Does the conflict between good and evil in *Over Sea, Under Stone* remind you of the conflict in these stories? In other fairy tales?

How? Why?

10. *Over Sea, Under Stone* is set in Cornwall. Research this area of England. Does the novel accurately show Cornwall's customs, legends, and landscape?

11. Margery Gill illustrated *Over Sea, Under Stone*, but no other books in the series. Do you think she should have illustrated the other books as well?

Would her illustrations have improved the other books, or not?

For Further Reference

Cooper, Susan. "Newbery Award Acceptance." *Horn Book* 52 (August 1976): 361-367. In a witty and profound speech, Cooper discusses the writing of *The Dark Is Rising* series and its historic, thematic, literary, and personal significance.

"Susan Cooper." New York: Atheneum, 1985. Cooper discusses her life and work in this brief autobiography.

McElderry, Margaret K. "Susan Cooper."

HornBook 52 (August 1976): 367-372.

Margaret K. McElderry, Susan Cooper's editor and friend, has written a warm, perceptive, and highly readable portrait.

Related Titles

Over Sea, Under Stone is the first of five books in The Dark Is Rising series.

Susan Cooper initially wrote it as a single novel, although she left the story open-ended because she had grown fond of the characters. The last sentence of the novel predicts that questions raised in the novel will be answered.

Jane, Barney and Simon are important in the third and fifth novels in the series, Greenwich and Silver on the Tree; Will Stanton figures most prominently in all of the last four novels. Great-Uncle Merry represents the Light in each of the novels.

The Dark Is Rising, the second novel in the series, records Will Stanton's initiation into the eternal conflict between the Light and the Dark. He learns on his eleventh birthday that, like Merriman Lyon, he has the responsibilities of one of the Old Ones, and he is called on to develop his powers by fighting the Dark.

The forces of the Dark steal the grail in Greenwich, and Jane, Barney, and Simon join Will to search for it. They arrive in Trewissick, Cornwall, on the night the women make the Greenwich, a figure made of leaves and branches each spring and thrown into the sea to bring luck in fishing and harvesting.

Jane pities the Greenwich, and, with its help, recovers the grail.

In the fourth novel of the series Will Stanton confronts the Grey King, one of the major powers of the Dark. He must find the golden harp, then play it to awaken the Sleepers so they will help in the fight against the Dark. At every stage the Grey King attempts to thwart this plan. Silver on the Tree, the final novel, records the universal struggle between good and evil, Light and Dark, and the specific battles Will, Jane, Barney, and Simon must fight and win.



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