

Passager Short Guide

Passager by Jane Yolen

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Overview

For *Passager* and its sequels, *Hobby and Merlin*, Yolen provides an unusual and interesting perspective on the figure Merlin, a literary character so potent that he has appeared in the literatures of many nations in many languages, although his origin is in Britain. King Arthur, with whom Merlin is closely associated, has had his childhood told and retold from many perspectives, usually with Merlin playing a part in his becoming King of the Britons. Yolen says that it was Merlin's fatherlike relationship with Arthur that inspired *Passager*, although she first depicted Merlin as Arthur's mentor in the short story "The Dragon's Boy" (1993). In *Passager*, Yolen tells of the child Merlin and some of the experiences, that shape the odd, mysterious, and menacing yet vulnerable figure that he will ultimately become.

A fearful pair of women abandon a seven-year-old boy in the woods, leaving him with only the clothes he is wearing and whatever he has been taught about gathering food. Will he be found by the people of the woods and given sanctuary by them?

Will he become an incoherent boy of the woods, uttering animal sounds and knowing nothing about human companionship?

Given that *Passager* is the first book of *The Young Merlin Trilogy*, one realizes that the boy must be Merlin. Yet, how does the dirty, naked boy who remembers few words and seems lost to human companionship become the great wizard of the tales of King Arthur? Therein lies the tale.

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 likely 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 continuing to write. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, and she eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has managed to marry David Stemple, a college professor, and have three children, a daughter and two sons. Her experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies.

Setting

The events of *Passager* take place in a forest in Britain in the late fifth or early sixth century, the era when the Romanized Britons were being pushed out of their lands by the Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic peoples. The focus in *Passager* is very much on the life of a small boy abandoned in the woods, with the larger issues only hinted at in Merlin's prophetic dreams.

The action first takes place among the oak trees of the forest, with the boy encountering meadows and streams and having to beware of predators, especially wild dogs that hunt him and sometimes force him to flee into the upper branches of trees. His experiences make him an expert at holding so still that he seems to become invisible, thus confusing predators, and his need for food has led to his discovering what the forest has to offer in berries and other edible plants.

Eventually, the action focuses on a small farm in the woods, where Master Robin trains birds of prey to obey his commands.

There, too, are Mag and Nell, who accept the boy as a new member of the household.

Master Robin baptizes the boy as Merlin and he undertakes the training of the wild boy into a civilized young man who participates in the farm work.



Social Sensitivity

Part of the premise for *Passager* is taken from history. Yolen explains: In the Middle Ages, because of wars of famine or plague, many children were actually abandoned in the woods. There they were left to—in the Latin ecclesiastical phrase—*aliena misericordia*—the kindness of strangers. Historically, until the eighteenth century, the rate of known abandonments in some parts of Europe was as high as one in four children, an astonishing and appalling figure.

Although the opening passages of *Passager* only hint at why Merlin is abandoned, Yolen seems to play on the varying stories of his birth. One common myth is that he was the product of a rape, which would make him an outcast at birth in medieval Christian Europe. Sometimes the rapist is a demon or Satan himself and the victim a chaste woman, in at least one version a nun (Yolen mentions "women in comforting black robes"), but when the child is born he is immediately baptized, putting him beyond the reach of his evil father but leaving him with supernatural power. Yolen leaves out the demon-rape, but the cryptic conversation of those, including his mother, who abandon him suggests some kind of shame or taint associated with Merlin, coupled with fear. He may be abandoned because he was born out of wedlock—no father seems to be present— or because his supernatural talents are becoming evident. The people who abandon him are definitely afraid that he will get them in trouble in their community.

The topic of the abandoned child is a troubling one, and although the practice of dumping unwanted children in the woods during medieval times is dreadful, the modern world is not so far removed from the practice that even young children can fail to recognize a fear in their own lives. The fear of abandonment is common to youngsters; learning to separate from one's parents even for an afternoon can be very hard for toddlers. Even so, the depiction of Merlin's abandonment goes beyond normal childhood fears; as Yolen asserts, it was a social problem of large proportions in medieval Europe. It is also a significant social problem in the present. It is hard to stroll downtown streets in any large city and not see the children who are either runaways or who have been abandoned; the problem seems to transcend any particular society. *Passager* is the story of a child's abandonment to the wilds with only a vague hope that some homeless adults in the woods will find him and help him before he dies. This may strike a deep emotional chord with children who were abandoned, who lack secure homes, or who know of such children; grownups, too, may recognize the deep emotional power of Merlin's situation and of Yolen's account of how the boy's experiences shape his emotional and spiritual growth.

Yolen treats Merlin's emotional life as consisting of universals. It is not that the boy's specific experiences are common ones, it is that his emotions, regardless of what evokes them, are universal. His abandonment evokes a powerful, latent fear, but his responses to being chased by wild dogs, to the food he finds, and to the animals he encounters also touch on the pleasures and confusions common to growing up. In *Passager*, Merlin gains an important understanding of the natural world, one that he may put to effective use when he is older, but his lack of human relationships also slows



his growth in important ways. He loses much of his ability to speak a language; he relates to people as an animal would, without empathy and without understanding of the structure of even a small family. He seems to retain some of his detached, animal-eye view of people and their affairs throughout Yolen's account of him. In *Hobby and Merlin*, he seems aware that he lost something significant in his growing up by being separated from human beings.



Literary Qualities

Any scholar of Arthurian literature will recognize the novella's allusions to ancient Arthurian lore and probably will note the changes Yolen makes in her source material. For instance, the dream of two dragons, one white and one red, is taken directly from ancient accounts of King Arthur and Merlin. In the ancient accounts, one dragon devours the other, symbolizing the defeat of the Britons by the invading Saxons and other Germanic tribes. This dream will show up again in *Hobby and Merlin*, with a twist unique to Yolen.

The dream of "a circle of great stones" recalls the legend that Merlin cast a magic spell that transported huge stones from Ireland to Britain, forming Stonehenge. This dream has little bearing on the story and may well mystify anyone unfamiliar with Arthurian literature. The dream "of a man and a sword" is of Arthur and Excalibur and is alluded to in *Merlin*.

The figure of Merlin is tangled with other figures in early medieval lore, and Yolen plays on this. In part, she uses it as an excuse for her own inventions—Merlin has always been modified by storytellers to suit their own purposes. She also uses these variations in more direct ways. For instance, in one ancient story, Merlin is associated with a wild man of the woods who lived with a pig; from this Yolen borrows the woods and depicts Merlin as a wild child of the woods, although she leaves out the pig.

(On the other hand, he does make the wild pig's cry of alarm.)

In *Passager* and its sequels, Yolen plays with folklore figures of the Middle Ages and with the figures of the stories of King Arthur. For instance, in *Passager* appears Master Robin, a play partly on Robin Hood but also on an older figure, Robin of the Wood, a magical figure and trickster who was a guardian spirit of the woods. For *Passager*, it is primarily the name that is borrowed, but Master Robin does live in the woods, and he is a master of some of its wildlife, most significantly of birds of prey.

This special relationship to the woods probably helps him tame the wild boy who sees himself as more animal than human.

The narrative of *Passager* is held together by a central metaphor, that of trained birds of prey. Yolen explains at the novella's beginning: *Passager*: A falcon caught in the wild and trained by the falconer, but not yet a mature bird.

The boy is plainly a passager, an immature wild bird. This central image is worked out in Merlin's experiences as a wild child and in his taming by Master Robin. Robin knows how to make wild birds of prey behave and serve; he recognizes in Merlin a wild creature that needs taming so that he may learn to behave well in human company. The central metaphor runs even deeper than this; Merlin is closely associated with birds of prey in the narrative, and he is made a passager, a young falcon, something dangerous that may kill other birds.



Master Robin points out that a falcon is never fully tamed, that it retains its wildness. This is the case with Merlin; his wildness will not leave him; he will always carry part of the forest with him. Further, he is destined to mature into a grown bird of prey, a Merlin, which means that he will always be dangerous, always somewhat detached from others, regarding them as a falcon might regard potential prey.



Themes and Characters

Passager is a character study; that is, development of a character is the core of the story, making it more important than other elements such as plot and theme. It is also a fine example of wish fulfillment, because Merlin is a seemingly helpless child whose woodland skills and magical abilities give 260 Passager him an unusual degree of power over the adults in his life.

At the start of Passager, Yolen notes: Passager: A falcon caught in the wild and trained by the falconer, but not yet a mature bird.

In Passager, Merlin is a passager, a small, wild bird yet to be tamed. It is strong image, probably inspired by the name Merlin, which is a term for a mature but small falcon. With this central idea of the small falcon Yolen builds the character of Merlin. Abandoned in the woods at age seven, he survives like a wild animal, and his concerns are wild concerns: where the best food is, where the best trees for climbing and hiding are, what sounds mean danger. He even makes animal sounds such as the songs of birds or the grunts of pigs. Wild though he is, Merlin is also intensely human, constantly trying to make sense out of his environment and very curious about what he sees.

A major step in his development comes when he sees Master Robin training a small bird of prey in the woods. His curiosity about a man drives him to follow Master Robin, who eventually captures and then cages him in a room. While in this room, Merlin's wild animal and human sides contest one another. For instance, he marks his bed the way a wolf would, declaring it his territory in wild animal terms, but he likes the fire and as well as the comforts of the bed. His adjustments are sometimes humorous as when he tries to poke his head through an open space in the wall: "Hard air, he thought at first before his mind recalled the word window." This makes him an appealingly innocent figure, rediscovering the ways of humans.

As though Merlin were a passager, Master Robin feeds him, speaks to him in a "cozening" voice, and sets limits on his behavior. When he sees Master Robin's birds, Merlin himself realizes that he is like the birds, a step in self-recognition that separates him from animals and begins the process of maturation that may turn him into a man.

The boy that Master Robin discovers has been long in the woods: He [the boy] was very thin, with knobs for knees and elbows like arrowpoints, and scratches all over his body, which was brown everywhere from the sun. His thatch of straight, dark hair fell across his face, often obscuring his eyes, which were as green as the woodland, with gold highlights, like rays of the sun showing through.

Master Robin is smart man. He recognizes that Merlin's responses are those of an animal and he therefore uses the techniques he uses to train wild birds on Merlin.

He is also a compassionate man, remarking that "a poor man's son in these harsh times is oft left in the altar of the woods." Master Robin's methods are effective, although even



at the novella's end Merlin still perceives events from a wild point of view, as when he first makes sure the mother dog is alive: "When he saw this, the boy relaxed and nuzzled against the man as a young pup will do with its own." Master Robin has the wits to realize what Merlin means when he stands by the merlin in the mews and declares "name" and the compassion to make the name a given one: "I baptize thee Merlin, my child. Somehow your name is the bird's."



Topics for Discussion

1. What makes Merlin a passager in Passager?
2. In what ways are birds of prey used as symbols in Passager?
3. Why does Master Robin treat Merlin like one of his birds?
4. Why was Merlin abandoned in the woods?

Passager 263 5. What are the noises Merlin makes in the woods? Why does he make these noises rather than use words?

6. How do Merlin's experiences in the wild shape his personality? Is it still possible for him to adjust to normal life among people?

7. Why does Master Robin baptize Merlin?

What is the baptism's importance to Merlin's development?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What other accounts of Merlin's childhood are there? How do they compare to Passager?

2. Yolen has written about Merlin in other books, but these other portraits of Merlin such as found in "The Dragon's Boy" are different from that in Passager, Hobby, and Merlin. How do they differ from the Merlin of Passager? How are they similar? Are their themes similar to those of Passager? What does Yolen seem to be trying to achieve with her depictions of Merlin?

3. Yolen explains that she chose to have Merlin abandoned in the woods because such abandonments were common.

How did Europeans dispose of unwanted children in the early Middle Ages?

What were the alternatives to leaving the youngsters alone in the woods? Is Yolen correct in saying that child abandonment was common?

4. There are other tales of children left to fend for themselves in the woods. For instance, there are Rudyard Kipling's stories of Mowgli, the boy who is raised by wolves in an Indian forest, and there is Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan, about a boy raised by apes. What does Passager have in common with these and other similar stories? What makes them popular?

5. What is falconry? Does anyone still practice it? What birds are used in falconry? How are they trained? What do they do? Is the depiction of falconry in Passager accurate?

6. What is the dream of two dragons about in the original stories about Merlin?

How does Yolen alter it in her sequels to Passager?

7. By the end of Passager, what is the mix of human and animal characteristics in Merlin? What does the combination of these traits suggest about his future?

8. Merlin survives for about a year alone in the woods, without clothing for much of the time and without anyone's help.

How would someone survive alone in the woods? What foods would he or she be able to find? What dangers would need to be overcome? How would he or she be able to avoid dying from exposure?

9. Who is the folklore figure Robin in the Wood? What are the tales about him?

What does Yolen borrow from the folklore for her depiction of Master Robin?

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Detroit: Gale Research, 1990, pp. 463-69.

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

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In *her Something about the Author*. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-229. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 21-9.

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 why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

———. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults*. 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*. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.

Related Titles

Yolen says that she is interested in the father-son relationship between Merlin and King Arthur, and she cites "The Dragon's Boy" 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 was referred to as "bear" or "the bear," without being given a name). In *Passager*, *Hobby*, and *Merlin*, Merlin is barely a young adult when he befriends the young Cub (whom Merlin renames "Artus").

264 *Passager* *Passager* ends with Merlin at eight years of age, but *Hobby*, the second novella in the Young Merlin Trilogy, opens with him at twelve years of age and on his own, again.

In both *Hobby* and *Merlin*, Merlin learns some harsh lessons about humanity and about his relationship to human beings.

Wanting to find a place where he will be accepted and can have something resembling a family life, he discovers that his supernatural gifts frighten away some people and provoke exploitation and abuse from others. He also gets a graphic look at the evil that people do. He ends up with an unusual amount of wisdom, the companionship of a boy much younger than himself, and the ability and willingness to take on significant responsibilities.



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