

# **Prentice Alvin Study Guide**

## **Prentice Alvin by Orson Scott Card**

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## Plot Summary

Prentice Alvin, by Orson Scott Card, takes place in an alternate America, in a world in which each race has its own type of magic. In the early 1800s, young Alvin apprentices to be a blacksmith, while trying to learn how to become a fabled Maker, who has godlike powers.

Cavil Planter is a slave owner whose wife is too sick to bear children. Cavil receives a vision of a man whom he thinks is Jesus Christ. The visitor tells Cavil to have children with his slave women, and send them out into the world. From that day on, Cavil rapes all of his female slaves, fathering as many children with them as possible. His first son is born to a young African princess, who uses her voodoo magic to turn into a blackbird and fly away with the baby. The enchantment nearly kills her, but she is determined to get her baby out of slavery.

Peggy Guester is a torch, or psychic, and she has mentally watched over Alvin ever since the day he was born in her parents' inn. Now Peggy worries that she will end up unhappily married to Alvin, without him loving her back. Peggy's family rescues the helpless slave girl, who dies shortly afterward. Peggy's parents adopt the boy, making up a story about his parentage. Peggy goes to live with Mistress Modesty. After Peggy has learned how to truly value her own inner beauty, she goes to university, so that she can teach Alvin everything he needs to become a Maker. This is a challenge, because Makers are the stuff of legend, and have not been seen in a thousand years.

The Guesters name the slave's baby Arthur Stuart, after the king of America in this fictional reality. As Arthur grows, he becomes close friends with Alvin, and the child is very smart. When he is seven years old, and Alvin's apprenticeship is nearly over, a teacher arrives to teach them. It is Peggy, in disguise, so that the town will not constantly pester her for psychic advice. Peggy teaches Alvin about the world and scientific theory, and he begins to understand how to be a Maker. He has a dream of building a utopian Crystal City. Eventually Cavil Planter tracks down Arthur, who is legally his property as a slave. The slave Finders use magic to track the boy's genetic signature, so Alvin comes after them and takes Arthur, then magically changes Arthur's genes so that he will not be recognizable to the Finders. When they come looking for him, Alvin kills one of them, so he must flee with Arthur to his hometown of Vigor Church. There, he teaches his brother the magic that allows him to create a living plow made of gold. Alvin dreams of the day when he will marry Peggy and build the Crystal City.



# Chapter 1, The Overseer

## Chapter 1, The Overseer Summary

In this alternate-universe novel, Alvin is a young man beginning an apprenticeship in the Appalachian region of the United States. At the same time, a man named Cavil Planter begins to serve a new lord, whom he thinks is Jesus Christ.

It is the year 1810, in an alternate American frontier, where each race is gifted with a different kind of magic. Cavil Planter is a God-fearing man who owns a plantation in the northern region of Appalachia. Cavil always tries to obey God, and each time he buys slaves from Africa, he makes sure they are baptized immediately. He considers this necessary because, like his white contemporaries, he believes that black people are children of the devil who practice dangerous, evil witchcraft. Cavil's wife, Dolores, suffers from debilitating arthritis and is unable to bear children. This is a bitter disappointment for Cavil, because he needs to have children to inherit his plantation.

Cavil remembers the Bible story of Abraham, whose wife could not bear children. Abraham solved the problem by taking a slave girl, Hagar, as a concubine and had children with her. Cavil wishes it were possible for him to do the same thing, but he knows that a child of mixed race could never inherit his land. In addition, he has been taught to believe that even the idea of interracial sex is abhorrent, and essentially on the same level as bestiality.

Cavil is visited by a powerful man, and instantly concludes from the man's domineering demeanor that he is an overseer, who could make his slaves work as hard as possible. The man laughs, having read Cavil's thoughts, and confirms that he is, indeed, called the Overseer. When the Overseer says that he is known by many names, Cavil assumes that he is actually Jesus Christ. The Overseer recoils and tells Cavil not to call him by that name, and Cavil interprets the comment to mean that he is unworthy to use the holy name.

The Overseer says that Cavil has been chosen to be his instrument and bring his message to the world. Cavil is overjoyed when he learns that the Overseer wants him to have as many children as possible with all of his female slaves. He happily agrees to become the Overseer's servant on earth. The Overseer promises that they will meet again someday, and that Cavil can then see the Overseer's true face and know him for what he is.

From that day on, Cavil rapes his slaves every night. Not one of the women escapes him, and he severely punishes anyone who complains. Cavil realizes that to spread his mixed blood as far as possible, he needs to sell his infants as slaves, sending them to as many southern cities as possible to ensure that the Overseer's people will be scattered over a wide territory..



## Chapter 1, The Overseer Analysis

This chapter is a classic example of the "Faustus" legend, in which a person, usually a man, sells his soul to the devil, without understanding the consequences. Often the devil takes a deceptive or beautiful form, speaking seductively of power or whatever his victim desires most. The devil usually drops hints as to his true nature, and always shows up at the end to collect the unlucky person's soul. Other well-known stories in this format include "Faustus" from an ancient German legend, "The Picture of Dorian Gray" by Oscar Wilde, "The Devil and Tom Walker" by Washington Irving, and its "Simpsons" parody, "The Devil and Homer Simpson." The main character is often able to escape at the last minute from the devil's clutches, and he feels appropriately regretful for his excesses. Faust stories can be seen as allegories about temptation.

The narrator only mentions Alvin, who is the book's main character, at the beginning and end of the first chapter, instead focusing on the lives of people who appear to have no connection to him. Both times Alvin is mentioned, the narrator foreshadows that terrible things will come of Cavil's choices, leading Alvin to commit murder. The narrator also indicates that many people have behaved in a sinful manner, and refers to a far-off future in which he is telling the tale. This lets the reader know that Alvin will be around for quite a while, despite the narrator's dire warnings. By introducing a cruel villain early in the book, the author opens the door for a hero to appear and save the day.



# Chapter 2, Runaway

## Chapter 2, Runaway Summary

Peggy Guester is a sixteen-year-old girl with a powerful psychic ability to see the future and read other people's thoughts. Peggy is known as a "torch," and few people can guess just how pervasive her power, or "knack," is. Peggy constantly remembers attending the birth of Alvin when she was five years old. People often request that Peggy attend births, because she can see the child's future, and warn parents of any pitfalls ahead. When Alvin is born, his birth is very special, because he is the seventh living son of a seventh son. Such a birth is very rare, and people assume that such a child will be a sort of messiah, with the knack of "Maker." Powerful forces desire the death of Alvin, and his family almost drowns at the event of his birth, victims of an enchanted river. When Peggy pulls the birth caul, a thin flap of skin, off of Alvin's newborn face so that he can breathe, she instantly knows that he is a very important person, and that he will be a Maker, and that evil ones will try to kill him at any opportunity. In fact, Peggy sees that the only way Alvin can possibly live to adulthood is if she keeps his birth caul, and constantly watches over him from afar, intervening any time danger threatens. Peggy uses the caul to draw on Alvin's own power and save his life.

Peggy is tortured by thoughts of her own future with Alvin, who is now eleven years old. She sees a path where she is in love with Alvin, but he does not love her, and he ends up marrying her out of obligation and gratitude. Most of the time, her attention is on Alvin, protecting him, so that she constantly feels weary and distracted. She also can see so clearly into the thoughts and memories of anyone around her, that she knows that they would all be terrified if she were ever honest about knowing their darkest secrets and shames. Even as a child, she has the knowledge of a sexually mature adult.

A day before Alvin is bound to arrive in the village of Hatrack River, where Peggy's parents have an inn, Peggy becomes aware of the intense pain and terror of the young slave girl whom Cavil Planter calls Hagar. Peggy tells her father that the girl is alone and helpless, and they secretly set out in the night to go rescue her. It is against the law to help runaway slaves escape to Canada where they will be free, but Peggy's father, Horace, often helps them when he can. Peggy looks into Hagar's thoughts and sees that the young slave has used powerful African magic to create a voodoo doll of herself. Hagar, knowing that Cavil plans to sell her baby boy soon, decides to run away, and she throws the doll decorated with blackbird feathers into the fire. This creates a magic spell that allows her to fly away with the wings of a blackbird, but it uses up all her strength, and she comes down too soon. Hagar finds herself unable to cross a river, and waits, having no strength to go on, but not wanting her son to grow up as a slave.

Hagar is astounded when Peggy reaches out of the darkness and takes her to a rowboat. They bring Hagar back to the inn, and they see that she is no more than



twelve years old, and just skin and bones, burning with fever. Peggy knows the girl will die before morning, and Peggy's parents decide to raise the baby as their own son. They ask a neighboring black family, the Berrys, to claim that the baby is theirs, and that they have given him to the Guesters because they are too poor to take care of him. The Berrys agree, and Peggy's mother names the baby Arthur, after the king. Young Hagar dies, knowing that her baby will be raised as a freeman. Peggy suddenly realizes that if Hagar, a helpless child-slave, could find the strength and resources to escape her master, then surely Peggy can change her own fate. Peggy decides that when Alvin gets to town that afternoon, she will not be there, so that she will not find herself married to a man who does not love her. She runs away to the town of Dekane.

## Chapter 2, Runaway Analysis

Peggy's intensely strong knack for seeing the unseen is a blessing and a curse to her. She is able to do incredible things, and she can easily understand many points of view, but she has a very unhappy life as a consequence. Her intimate knowledge of everyone around her actually creates distance, because she can never let on that she knows. She is constantly tortured by seeing all of the dangers in Alvin's path, yet she alone is able to keep him from harm. Through her experience with Hagar, whose mind is as foreign as any Peggy has come across, Peggy realizes that she has more control over her life, and if the path she is on is leading to despair, she can go down a different path. Hagar uses secret magic that she knows only because she is an African princess, and with this magic, she saves the freedom of her son, although she gives her own life. Peggy has always seen so much of everyone around her that she has been unable to really look at herself, so she has never realized that she is the master of her own fate, and that she does not just have to take whatever life sends her.



## Chapter 3, Lies & Chapter 4, Modesty

### Chapter 3, Lies & Chapter 4, Modesty Summary

Alvin is on his way, traveling the four hundred miles from Vigor Church to Hatrack River. After a few miles, he has given away his food, boots, and possessions to poor travelers that he meets on the road, and then he leaves the road to run through the woods. A year ago, Alvin's entire village massacred an Indian tribe in the war, and they are all under a curse now, so that if they do not tell every visitor the story of what they have done, the blood will be on their hands. Having spent time with Indians, learning their green magic, Alvin can run through the woods at amazing speeds, never tiring, losing his sense of self in a dream of the landscape. In this way, he makes the trip in less than two days, walking the final few miles to Hatrack River.

Alvin seeks out the roadhouse where he was born, and meets Peggy's mother, Old Peg, there. Old Peg is angry that Peggy has run away, but she directs Alvin to the family burial plot out back, where his brother Vigor is buried. Alvin finds Vigor's grave, and tries to imagine the man he has never met. Alvin's knack allows him to look under the earth, and he sees the new, unmarked grave of a young girl. Alvin is startled by Horace Guester, who asks him what he is doing there. Alvin explains that he is visiting his brother's grave, then asks about the recently buried girl. Horace admits that she is a runaway slave, and that they are adopting her baby, and begs Alvin not to tell anyone that he is an emancipationist. Alvin agrees, and asks Horace to please not tell anyone that he is a seventh son, so that people will accept Alvin as himself, and not as his lineage. Horace agrees.

Alvin continues to the blacksmith shop, where Makepeace Smith is working a piece of iron on the anvil. Alvin introduces himself and tells Makepeace that he is there to apprentice as a blacksmith, and Makepeace tries to send him away. The smith is disappointed because Alvin is a whole year late in fulfilling his contract, but Alvin explains that he was captured by Indians. The smith does not believe him, and when Alvin tells Makepeace that he ran the entire way, Makepeace tells him that he has no interest in an apprentice who is a liar. Alvin pretends that he was only joking, and when the smith sees how strong the eleven-year-old is, he agrees to take him on as an apprentice, with provisional status. Alvin begins his training, making himself do things in a slow, clumsy way, so that Makepeace will not guess how easily such things come to the boy. Alvin wants to become a Maker, but he does not know precisely what a Maker does, because there has not been one in the land for a thousand years. On the day Alvin was born, Peggy prophesied that he would be a Maker, so Alvin is disappointed that she is not there to teach him more about what that means. Alvin knows that blacksmithing is in the same category as being a Maker, so he knows that his apprenticeship will teach him valuable skills.

Peggy arrives in the town of Dekane at a nice house. A maid lets Peggy in, and soon she meets a sweet woman named Modesty, who is an old flame of Horace's. Peggy





introduces herself by telling Modesty who her father is, and Modesty wonders if Peggy has come to get revenge. Peggy admits to Modesty that she is such a strong torch, that she can read all the thoughts of anyone around her. Although most people react to such a statement by immediately thinking of all the secrets they want to hide, Modesty instead feels sorry for Peggy, having to carry painful adult knowledge around inside her from early childhood. Instead of finding Peggy's serious, withdrawn face off-putting, Modesty thinks to herself that this is the face of a child who has known pain. Peggy tells Modesty that she wants to stay there and be Modesty's disciple, so that Peggy can become the kind of person Modesty is. Modesty agrees, but insists that Peggy must stay as a guest and a friend.

## **Chapter 3, Lies & Chapter 4, Modesty Analysis**

Both Peggy and Alvin are carrying the guilt of adults, each in their own way. When Alvin leaves the village, he is happy to be leaving behind the mournful, guilt-ravaged people. Peggy also carries around the sins of her parents, because all her life, she has been aware of every guilty secret and sinful thought that they have ever had. She is especially familiar with the guilt her father feels about having had an affair. Peggy and Alvin are both finding a way to escape from the guilt of the past. Although they can not undo what has been done, they can make the decision that they will not become the person that they do not want to be. Alvin is finally trying to push past his reputation as a seventh son, and go somewhere where people do not think every day of their own guilt as murderers, so he can become a man with his own strengths. Peggy has rejected her own miserable future as Alvin's unloved wife, and instead sought out the source of her father's guilt. Peggy knows that Horace wishes that he could still be with Modesty, so Peggy has had years to see Modesty as the ideal woman, through Horace's eyes. Peggy has spent so much of her life feeling unloved, that she has finally decided to become like a person who is loved from afar.



# Chapter 5, Dowser & Chapter 6, Masquerade

## Chapter 5, Dowser & Chapter 6, Masquerade Summary

Three years have passed, and Alvin is fourteen years old, three years into his apprenticeship with Makepeace. Alvin is well-known for his skill in shoeing horses, and never hurting them. Makepeace claims that Alvin still needs training in forgework, but Alvin suspects that Makepeace is jealous of his apprentice's growing talent. Also, as long as Alvin is still training there, he brings in business, since farmers have heard about his skill at shoeing. One day, Hank Dowser brings in his nag to be shoed, and he is shocked when Alvin corrects Makepeace about how to nail the shoe in place. To Hank's surprise, Makepeace allows the interruption, and even allows Alvin to put the shoe on all by himself. Alvin does a great job. While Alvin works, he is watched by little Arthur Stuart, the little boy adopted by the Guester family.

To pay Makepeace for the shoeing, Hank offers to dowse for a well. His knack is dowsing, or finding water, so that people can dig wells. Hank takes pride in his work, and can find well-positioned wells of whatever type of water someone needs. Hank uses a willow wand to find a new location for a well. Hank is bothered by unexpected feelings of loathing and anger that he feels toward Alvin, and the thought crosses his mind that it is the water, which he serves, that hates Alvin and wants him dead. Alvin mutters that it will not do any good to dig there, and Hank hears him. When Hank angrily confronts the boy, Alvin backs down and apologizes for his impertinence, but Hank is already enraged. When Makepeace hears that Alvin has been smarting off to a customer, he tells Alvin that he can dig the entire well all by himself, and that he will have nothing to eat or drink until there is water drawn from the well. As Hank rides away, he feels hatred with each clod of dirt he hears hitting the earth, and his hatred does not fade until he is far away.

Meanwhile, Peggy has been training to be a lady with Mistress Modesty. Mistress Modesty has taught Peggy that she does not need to look into the "heartfire," or inner soul, of each person she meets, and with a lot of patience, Peggy has learned to close her mind to the thoughts of the people around her. Peggy need not keep silent, because she no longer knows all the secrets of others. Now that she is free to be herself and converse with people, she finds delight in social interaction. Modesty carefully introduces Peggy only to the correct people, who will value her for who she is, and Peggy is a huge success when she goes to the Governor's Ball. Modesty carefully teaches Peggy that there is no point to the artful, grasping devices that other women rely upon for beauty, and shows her that she does not need to try to compete with the other girls for popularity. Despite Peggy's openness and friendliness, many young women are jealous of the attention she gets from high-status men, and decide that she must be using some deceptive magic spell to enchant them. In fact, Peggy's only adornment is honesty and a genuine joy to be at a party.



Peggy still checks in on Alvin, although she does not keep constant vigil anymore. While dancing with a young man, Peggy happens to mentally glance at Alvin to see how he is doing, and she is shocked by the feelings she observes in him. Alvin is in the middle of digging a well, but he is seething with anger. Alvin feels that Makepeace is treating him unfairly, biased by jealousy over Alvin's skill. Peggy is very worried, because she thinks that working in such a negative, angry mood will turn the well-digging into an act of destruction. Peggy thinks that he is inviting the Unmaker to come to him, because acts of destruction are the domain of the godlike Unmaker. Peggy is so upset over this turn of events that she stops dancing and asks her partner to give her some time alone. She wishes she had never indulged in this ball, when she could have been keeping Alvin from harm instead.

## **Chapter 5, Dowser & Chapter 6, Masquerade Analysis**

Masks are a common metaphor in literature and art, representing the false self that we tend to wear in certain situations, in order to appear to be different than we really are. One of Peggy's biggest problems has always been that she can see people for exactly who and what they are, even if they wear a "mask" for society. In order to keep other people's secrets, she has always had to wear a mask of her own, which keeps her from ever connecting with the people whom she knows so intimately. Now that she has learned not to look past the "masks" of others, she can finally be herself. The other young women are so determined to be whoever they have to be in order to get the attention of the men, and can not understand that it is the natural, carefree exuberance of a healthy young woman that the men find more stimulating than corseted, bejeweled ladies wearing magic spells to appear more beautiful. Symbolically, the first ball that Peggy goes to is a masquerade, and she is the only one not in a costume. Other women see her plain outfit as its own type of costume, calculated to stand out against their finery. They are correct, except that she only wants to stand out as genuine and happy against all of their fake posing.



# Chapter 7, Wells, Chapter 8, Unmaker, & Chapter 9, Redbird

## Chapter 7, Wells, Chapter 8, Unmaker, & Chapter 9, Redbird Summary

Alvin has often observed the presence of the Unmaker, an entity which represents all the forces of destruction. Because of the prophecies that Alvin will become a Maker, who is the Unmaker's nemesis, the Unmaker has been trying to kill Alvin since Alvin's mother was pregnant with him. The Unmaker sometimes uses a person to try to kill Alvin, but often water is involved, because the Unmaker has power over water, using it for destruction. In the past, Alvin has always found that when he sees the Unmaker hovering at the edges of his vision, he can make it go away by making something with his hands, even if it is just a little basket made of grass. As Alvin angrily digs the well, he can feel that the Unmaker is quite close, but he does not worry, because the act of making a well should force the Unmaker to retreat. Alvin does not want to dig here, because he knows that there is a rock ledge four feet down. When he gets down to the rock, he cleans away every particle of dirt, so that it is obvious that no one could make a functional well here, just to stick it to Hank Dowser.

Then Alvin scouts out a place where there are some cracks in the rock ledge, so he starts digging a second well there. The only witness to all this is little Arthur Stuart, who seems to have a knack for hearing and repeating any communication around him, even Makepeace's fight with his wife, Gertie, over whether Alvin's punishment is too harsh. Because Arthur is still a baby, Alvin goes ahead and uses his knack to dig faster and better than any normal human could. He even lines the well with stones. Still, the Unmaker seems closer than ever, and tries to suck Arthur down into the muck at the bottom of the well. Arthur manages to climb out, and he falls asleep at the top of the well.

Peggy, watching from afar, is worried, and tries to wake Alvin up. She knows that he has invited the Unmaker in by digging the wells with a spiteful purpose, and Peggy uses a piece of Alvin's caul to try to send someone nearby to wake him up. Modesty tries to console her and help her think of something, and Modesty comments that she herself has no knack. Peggy is surprised, and tells Modesty that her knack is the ability to see the potential for beauty in something, and to allow that beauty to flourish. Modesty laughs, disbelieving.

Alvin wakes up, but is unable to see or hear anything. He feels as though the Unmaker has completely invaded his body, and is under his skin, in his mouth, and in his lungs. Alvin struggles to open his eyes or move, but he can not wake up properly until Gertie drops a bucket down into the well. She feels sorry for him, and offers him a drink from the bucket, which he gratefully accepts, even though the first drink is normally reserved for the owner of the well. Although he is tired, Alvin goes and fills up the first well-hole



with dirt, so that it will not destroy Hank's professional reputation. Then Alvin goes into the woods, but he can not find any of the green magic that normally fills the woods. Suddenly, he is surrounded by a summer blizzard, and he can not seem to get away from the driving snow. He knows that it is the work of the Unmaker, and he manages to think fondly enough about warm summer, that the snowstorm dissipates.

Alvin hears beautiful birdsong, which he follows until he finds Arthur, sitting rapt in front of a redbird. Alvin realizes that it is not just a redbird, but the spirit of Redbird, and it is singing the story of the Indians. Alvin can not understand the music, but Arthur clearly can. Alvin realizes that when he thinks of a question for the bird, Arthur gives the bird's answer. Alvin wants to know what he needs to do to become a Maker, and Arthur tells him that a Maker is a part of what he makes. Arthur seems to come out of a trance, and tells Alvin that he has flown, carried by a big blackbird. Alvin laughs at the toddler's story, and promises not to tell anyone that Arthur can understand birds, if Arthur will not tell others that Alvin is a Maker. Alvin thinks hard, trying to figure out what that means, and how he can do it.

## **Chapter 7, Wells, Chapter 8, Unmaker, & Chapter 9, Redbird Analysis**

There are certain elements that are common in myths and legend from cultures all over the world, and mythic heroes often have a very specific set of characteristics, which can be seen in little Arthur Stuart Guester, the little boy adopted by Peggy's parents. Often, a hero who is destined to redeem his people, or to forge peace between two warring groups, is born somehow representing both groups. The most extreme example, which appears in a surprising number of legends, is the hero who is somehow both a slave, and the child of royalty. Moses in the Bible is a good example of this, since he represents a people who were enslaved, but he was also raised in Pharaoh's palace, as the son of the princess. Arthur Stuart is the name of the king in the America of this book, and Peggy's parents name him this so that no one will be willing to disrespect his name. Peggy knows that the name is appropriate, because he is in fact the grandson of a king in Africa, who was killed when his daughter was taken as a slave. So Arthur is both royalty and an escaped slave, as well as the son of the master. In addition to this, he is half-white and half-black, so he can potentially represent either group. Only Alvin seems to see that Arthur is much more than meets the eye, and that he has great powers. Arthur can also relate to birds, because of the powerful magic his mother performed to escape. It seems that birds understand that he is part bird too, and watch over him. Such a character can relate to people of many different backgrounds, and represents a harmony or union between the opposing groups.



# Chapter 10, Goodwife, Chapter 11, Wand, Chapter 12, School Board, & Chapter 13, Springhouse

## Chapter 10, Goodwife, Chapter 11, Wand, Chapter 12, School Board, & Chapter 13, Springhouse Summary

After Alvin has won his battle with the Unmaker, Peggy thinks about her role in his life. She realizes that Alvin has important work to do as a Maker, and that someday he must build a utopian Crystal City of enlightenment. Peggy understands that Alvin can never do his work unless he knows what he needs to do, but he has no teacher. She decides to go up north, to Philadelphia, where the best universities are. Peggy tells Mistress Modesty that she is going to train to be a teacher, and Modesty offers to get letters of recommendation for Peggy. Modesty worries that Peggy is throwing her life away for a man who is not worthy of it, and Peggy explains to her that, as much as she loves Alvin, she loves his life's work even more, and that she is really doing it for his work. Modesty sends Peggy on her way, with her blessing.

Hank Dowser comes back by Makepeace Smith's property, and Gertie gives him some well water from the new well. When Hank goes out and sees the well, Makepeace pretends that the well is exactly where Hank told him to dig, because Makepeace does not want to ruin Hank's reputation. Afterward, when Hank realizes the deception, he is outraged, and imagines that Makepeace's whole family is laughing at him behind his back.

Several years have now passed. Arthur is now old enough to go to school, and Old Peg Guester, Peggy's mother, is determined that he should get an education. Members of the school board come visit her, and she knows before they tell her that they are not going to allow Arthur to attend the school, because he is part black. Old Peg offers to let the schoolteacher stay at her inn for free, if Arthur can attend the school, but the school board does not accept. Old Peg realizes that even Horace, her husband, does not really care about Arthur's fate, and they all think that he has to grow up to do menial labor anyway. It does not matter to them that Arthur is incredibly smart. Old Peg and Horace have a big fight, and she insists that he should fix up the old springhouse on their property, so the teacher can stay there. She is hoping that the teacher will privately teach Arthur in the springhouse. Horace protests, but he backs down when his wife suggests that he might want to sleep with the teacher.

Alvin overhears part of their fight, standing outside. Alvin thinks to himself that if that is what marriage is, he wants no part of it, although he is eighteen now, and basically a man. Horace does not want to relinquish the springhouse, because Peggy liked to go there. Horace comes out and tells Alvin that he will be needing a few things for the springhouse, so that it will be nice enough for the teacher to stay in. Alvin does not



bother to tell Makepeace about the project. As Alvin gets better and better at smith work, Makepeace resents and insults his skill, and the master smith is away drinking a lot, leaving Alvin to do most of the work. Alvin knows that by now, an honorable master would have let him go, but since Makepeace still has a few months on his contract, Alvin has to stay and work like a slave. Just as Alvin has practically taken over the smithy, so also Arthur has, without ever saying anything, become a sort of apprentice to Alvin, helping him at the smithy.

Alvin starts fixing up the springhouse, with Arthur helping him. Both of them want the place to be perfect for the teacher coming to stay there, and they continue working when it gets dark. They get a little carried away renovating the place, and Alvin even uses his knack to make the place nice, because Arthur promises not to tell anyone. Without having a reason, Alvin makes a strong, magic lock, that no evil intent can go through. When Horace and Makepeace go with Alvin to see the job he has done, Horace tricks Makepeace into agreeing to allow Alvin some free time, when he can do his own work and get paid for it. Makepeace is floored when he sees that some of the work Alvin has done is just impossible without a knack. Suddenly, Makepeace remembers that Alvin is the seventh son of a seventh son, and realizes that Alvin has a powerful knack. Makepeace laughs and says that he knew that there was no way Alvin was that good at smithing.

Alvin is filled with rage at Makepeace's remark, because his master has never complimented him, or in any way acknowledged that he does good work. In fact, Alvin never uses his knack at smithing, but really is that skilled. Alvin feels like killing Makepeace right then, but instead, he goes into a trance, the way the Indians have taught him. He stays that way for a while, and Makepeace leaves him alone. Alvin thinks about how he is still just a boy in the eyes of the law, until he finishes his apprenticeship. He thinks that he does not count as a man because he has no property and no children. He desperately hopes that the teacher who is on the way will be able to help him become a Maker.

## **Chapter 10, Goodwife, Chapter 11, Wand, Chapter 12, School Board, & Chapter 13, Springhouse Analysis**

Different cultures have different standards for judging when someone is a child or an adult. Sometimes these standards are different for boys and girls. In Alvin's culture, adulthood seems to be a matter of job status, represented by completing job training, or by earning enough money to buy freedom as a journeyman. Alvin seems to think that what would make him count as a man would be to have property or children. Cavil Planter seemed to think that twelve-year-old Hagar was enough of an adult to be forced into motherhood, and Peggy has been a sort of adult all her life, because of her knowledge of adult subjects. In a way, slavery is a system that treats certain people, regardless of their ages, as though they were the children of the master. Alvin sees his apprenticeship as a sort of slavery, but he knows the difference, because he can look forward to the day that he will be free, which slaves can not do.



## Chapter 14, River Rat, Chapter 15, Teacher, & Chapter 16, Property

### Chapter 14, River Rat, Chapter 15, Teacher, & Chapter 16, Property Summary

Alvin travels to the nearby town of Hatrack Mouth to get a wagon load of iron from the docks. As he is loading the iron, he notices that a group of vagrants, called river rats, are teasing an elderly lady, saying crass things to her. Seeing how prissy and proper the woman is, Alvin decides to come to her rescue, and tells the river rats to speak more politely to the lady. Although the lady tells Alvin that she does not need his protection, he ends up fighting one of them, Mike Fink, for her honor. Alvin quickly realizes that Mike has a powerful hex tattooed on his butt, which protects him from any harm in a fight. Using his knack, Alvin manages to make the tattoo's ink run, and then easily wins the fight by breaking Mike's nose, and then shattering the bones in both of his legs. Alvin recognizes that the wounds will heal badly, possibly crippling Mike for life, and he quickly knits the bones together, pretending that they were never broken in the first place. The lady is offended at the display of Alvin's brutality, but as more river rats attack their wagon, she is grateful to Alvin for his protection. He offers to give her a ride to Hatrack River.

Alvin guesses that this is the new teacher from Philadelphia. As they ride together, he notices that she is wearing many deceptive hexes, which make her seem to be something other than what she is. It seems strange to him that she is making herself into a bitter old maid, rather than trying to be prettier. Alvin drops the teacher off with the school board members. Right away, they try to keep Miss Lerner, the teacher, from living in the little spring house, but she insists. They are all intimidated by her educated manner of speech and snooty demeanor. Old Peg comes into the springhouse to introduce herself, and to ask Miss Lerner to tutor Arthur Stuart secretly. Miss Lerner agrees to teach the boy, but insists that she will do it openly, because there is nothing wrong with teaching students of any color. Old Peg gratefully agrees to let Miss Lerner host a weekly poetry reading in her inn, in exchange for Arthur's schooling.

As Old Peg goes to fetch a bathtub, Miss Lerner looks after her longingly. It is really Peggy in disguise, having come back in order to teach Alvin all that he needs to know to be a Maker. Peggy does not want anyone in Hatrack River to know who she is, because then everyone in the town will start bringing her all their problems again, expecting her to tell them what they need to do to be happy. Peggy feels that her former intimate knowledge of the lives of all the people in this town, was a huge burden for a child to bear, and she has no desire to take up her former role in the town. Peggy goes to drink water from the well, and she encounters Alvin. He asks about whether she will be teaching Arthur, and then he asks if she would be willing to tutor him, Alvin. "Miss Lerner" agrees to tutor him at the same time she is teaching Arthur.





Back at the plantation of Cavil Planter, the slaves wake Cavil because someone has died. One of his favorite slaves, Salamandy, has hanged herself with a bedsheet. She was eight months pregnant with her sixth child by him, and Cavil is very disappointed at the loss of both mother and baby. That afternoon, a traveling preacher by the name of Reverend Philadelphia Thrower arrives, and so Cavil has Thrower perform a funeral service for Salamandy, who can not be buried in the slaves' graveyard, because it is against his religion for a suicide to be buried in consecrated ground. That evening, after supper, Cavil and Thrower discuss how they do God's work, and they realize that they have both been visited by the same supernatural Visitor. Cavil tells his story to Thrower, revealing his mission to father children with his slaves and spread them throughout the Crown Colonies to the south. Thrower is in awe, and asks how many children Cavil has fathered. Cavil answers that he has fathered twenty-six living children, which fulfills a prophecy that Thrower has been waiting for. Thrower has been sent to join Cavil in his work.

The two wicked men talk about the best way for Thrower to help serve God, and they decide that he should try raping a slave, with Cavil first demonstrating and giving pointers. Together they ravish a slave girl named Roach, and later congratulate themselves on a job well done. Then next morning, they visit the new grave of Salamandy, and they see that it has been strewn with fresh entrails, because the other slaves have performed some African ritual over her grave, to keep her from haunting and killing them. To discourage what he considers to be the devil's religion, Cavil has each of his slaves, even the pregnant ones, whipped over Salamandy's grave, so that their blood runs down onto the grave. He and Thrower agree that the Lord's work is sometimes hard to stomach, and Cavil dreams of the day when he will be rewarded with a white child. The two men conspire to start a business that will efficiently track runaway slaves in the north, and return them to their masters.

## **Chapter 14, River Rat, Chapter 15, Teacher, & Chapter 16, Property Analysis**

Peggy and Mistress Modesty form an interesting foil for the diabolical duo of Cavil Planter and Reverend Philadelphia Thrower. All of them are well aware of the roles of honesty and deception, but they use them in different ways, and derive different types of power from them. Mistress Modesty is somewhat like a typical virtue character from an allegory such as "The Pilgrim's Progress" or a medieval morality play. Mistress Modesty is the personification of the virtue of modesty, and she embodies the beauty and appeal that come from honestly appreciating the real beauty that is in a person, instead of vainly trying to project a false, attractive image. Peggy tries to also live out this honest style of living, which is why she is bothered by the use of her hexes to pretend to be an old, bitter schoolmarm. However, she reminds herself that this image is no more false than if she were to openly state that she is the same person as the young girl who left town all those years ago.

Thrower and Cavil have a much wickeder attitude toward deception. Whereas Peggy and Modesty try to see things as beautiful by looking for the truth in them, Cavil and

Throver try to ignore the truth so that they can see ugly things as beautiful. Both men are greedy, cruel, and lustful enough to see their villainy as God's work, and to imagine that they are helping the black people whom they seek to keep enslaved. They are so proud that it never occurs to them that an angel who tells them to rape and beat people, might be sent by someone other than God.



# Chapter 17, Spelling Bee

## Chapter 17, Spelling Bee Summary

On a snowy day, Alvin needs to go around town delivering iron products to Makepeace's customers. He goes to the Guesters' inn to borrow their sleigh, and Old Peg Guester says that he must take Arthur with him, since the boy is underfoot. Alvin and Arthur play in the snow and head down the road in the sleigh. On the way there, they pick up Mock Berry, the free black man who lives near the Guesters, whom they claim is the biological father of Arthur. When Mock realizes that Arthur is with them, he does not want to be seen with the boy, since the child is obvious evidence that Mock's wife has been unfaithful. Not only does this humiliate Mock, but he also knows that it will look suspicious if he is willing to ride with little Arthur, since most people think that Mock refuses to allow Arthur to stay in his house. Alvin drops off Mock when they get to town, but they all end up in the general store at the same time.

Several of the local young men are loitering in the store by the stove, and they start teasing Arthur, making jokes about how useless it is to educate something that is an animal. They get him to start spelling words for them, and joke that he should compete in the spelling bee the next month. Alvin tries to change the subject when the young men start in on Mock, laughing at him and calling him a cuckold. The storekeeper tries to cheat Mock, but Alvin steps in, standing up for Mock, and gets the storekeeper to give him a fair deal.

Alvin and Arthur go back to the spring house and wait for Miss Larnin to come give them their lesson. Alvin has been learning about atoms, and he has been trying to imagine something so small that it can not be divided. Sometimes he gets frustrated in his lessons, because it seems to him that the things that Miss Larnin teaches him have nothing to do with what it takes to be a Maker. She points out to him that neither of them really know precisely what a Maker does, except that they have a few examples, such as turning lead into gold, or turning water into wine. Alvin thinks to himself that it would be much easier to turn lead into gold than water into wine.

Arthur is such a good speller than Miss Larnin enters him in the county spelling bee, and sure enough, he wins! She takes him out of the competition at this level, allowing another child to go on in his place, but nonetheless, he receives a small mention in the newspaper. Sheriff Pauley Wiseman, who is always trying to find ways to use his authority for his own gain, mails a clipping of the spelling bee article to Reverend Thrower, who in turn notifies Cavil Planter. Cavil sets out with a professional slave Finder in search of Arthur and his mother, Hagar.



## Chapter 17, Spelling Bee Analysis

If Arthur had never competed in the spelling bee, he would not have won, and he would not have been mentioned in the paper, and thus would not be in danger from Cavil Planter coming to reclaim him. In this way, it might seem like the best course of action, for Arthur to grow up to be a free man, would be for him to stay out of things like school and spelling bees, and to lie low and not arouse suspicion. However, this would be a sort of slavery in itself, because his actions would be dictated by fear, and his life would still be dominated by his slavery.

Even for free black families like the Berry family, life is hard, and the Berrys have to face racism every day, even though they are surrounded by many friends who want to see people of all colors have equal rights. "Miss Larnin" openly admits to having emancipationist feelings, and says that she has been influenced by living among the Quakers. Although most people think of Quakers as being very old-fashioned and conservative, in reality they are among the most liberal Christians. The Guesters want to fight slavery, but since they help escaped slaves get to safety, they pretend to support slavery, so as not to arouse suspicion. Perhaps the Berrys' situation is the hardest, because many racist white people in the town already assume that marriage and fidelity mean nothing to black people. By supporting the Guesters' story about Arthur's birth, the Berrys are implying that these stereotypes are true, sacrificing their own reputations for Arthur's safety and freedom.



# Chapter 18, Manacles

## Chapter 18, Manacles Summary

It is customary for an apprentice to make a final project to show that he is ready to be a journeyman. Alvin decides to make a plow, and then he also decides that he wants to turn his plow into gold. He starts to make a plow, but is interrupted because some slave Finders come with the sheriff to take Arthur back to his master. They decide to hold Arthur in the jail overnight, and Old Peg insists on spending the night in jail with him, so he will not have to be alone. Alvin stays up all night, finishing his plow, not using his knack, but just relying on his blacksmith skills. When Makepeace sees the high-quality plow, he acts like it is nothing special, like it might be good enough for Alvin to be a journeyman. The Finders and sheriff arrive, wanting Makepeace to forge a set of manacles for little Arthur. Makepeace refuses, disgusted that they would ask him to make chains for a seven-year-old child. The Finders point out that it is either manacles, or Arthur can wear a heavy metal-and-wood collar used for runaway slaves. Alvin volunteers to make the manacles, which angers Makepeace. Alvin uses his knack to make the manacles as lightweight and painless as possible. He also studies how the Finders locate runaway slaves, and discovers that they use magical knowledge of Arthur's genetic signature to track him. Makepeace suggests that the manacles can be Alvin's journeyman project, and Alvin angrily answers him as a man, not as his apprentice.

The men take Arthur with them, and Alvin meets up with Horace and Po Doggly, following the Finders in a rowboat. Alvin imagines a thin thread connecting himself to Arthur, and it comes into being. This is his first Making. Alvin uses his knack to make the Finders fall asleep, and they find Arthur wide awake with his sleeping guards. Alvin makes the manacles fall off of Arthur's wrists, and the boy runs to him. In the river, Alvin clasps Arthur to himself, and uses his knack to subtly change the genetic structure of all of Arthur's cells. Afterward, Arthur is a slightly different person, as evidenced by the fact that he no longer mimics people perfectly. He has taken some of Alvin's power too.

Alvin and Horace take Arthur to the springhouse, knowing that Alvin's hexes will protect them as long as the door is locked. Hopefully, the Finders will no longer be able to recognize Arthur. Peggy enjoys looking at Arthur's possible futures, and she sees that now, instead of slavery and beatings awaiting Arthur, he will be very close to Alvin in Alvin's work.

## Chapter 18, Manacles Analysis

When Peggy understands what Alvin has done, in changing Arthur's DNA, she has trouble deciding if it is a good thing or a bad thing. She is happy that Arthur's possible futures have changed from dark and painful to hopeful and powerful, all because of what Alvin has done to him. Yet she understands that part of the little boy who is Arthur



no longer exists. It seems that Alvin is acting like a god, or a slave master, in deciding that he has the moral authority to just change Arthur into a different person. Peggy notes to herself that a person is never exactly the same from one day to the next, and over the years, we all become completely different persons than before. The tiny changes in Arthur have prevented the monstrous changes that a life of slavery would bring.



# Chapter 19, The Plow, Chapter 20, Cavil's Deed, & Chapter 21, Alvin Journeyman

## Chapter 19, The Plow, Chapter 20, Cavil's Deed, & Chapter 21, Alvin Journeyman Summary

Alvin is determined to figure out how to turn his plow into gold. He manages to change it to gold by using his knack, but he wants it to be alive, so that it knows how to be a good plow. Alvin climbs all the way into the forge, wrapping his body around the plow, and works for hours to make it come to life. He saves his own life by healing himself from the burns all over his body. "Miss Lerner" comes into the smithy, and when Alvin shows her his living plow, she is astonished, because now he is truly a Maker. Alvin asks her to come with him to help him build his Crystal City, and tells her that he loves her. Before she can answer, they hear a shot. The slave Finders have come back to Hatrack River, frustrated because they can not find Arthur. The Finders break into the Guesters' inn, and Old Peg shoots one of them with a shotgun. His partner shoots her, and by the time Peggy gets to the inn, her mother is already dead. By now, she has shed her disguise, so that Horace can see that it is his daughter who ran away years ago. Alvin runs into the second Finder, who shoots Alvin, but Alvin easily heals himself. Alvin attacks the man, beating him to a bloody pulp. The sheriff gives Alvin some time to get out of town, but warns Alvin that this is considered murder in the eyes of the law.

Cavil Planter is disappointed that Alvin has made off with Arthur, and when he arrives home, there is obvious evidence that one of his male slaves has been in the house with Dolores, Cavil's wife. Cavil discovers that Dolores knows all about his plan and the Overseer, and that she has gotten revenge by sleeping with Fat Fox, one of the slaves. She is pregnant, and Cavil knows of only one way to conceal his shame. Cavil gets his gun and kills her, and then forces Fat Fox to pose on the bed with her, and kills him. When Cavil shows the sheriff the scene of the crime, the sheriff assures Cavil that he will not be charged with murder. However, the sheriff is disgusted that Cavil is willing to allow someone else to see his wife like that. Soon after, while Cavil is drowning his sorrows in a drunken stupor, the sheriff brings him a check for \$25,000, and tells him that his neighbors are buying him out. They will divide up his farm and his slaves, and he must leave and never come back to the area, on pain of death. They do not want a neighbor who fathers children with his slaves, and who would show an outsider his wife in what they consider to be such a shameful position.

Alvin and Arthur escape to Vigor Church, Alvin's hometown. Alvin's brother Measure adopts Arthur, and Alvin begins to slowly teach the art of Making to Measure. Alvin tries to keep his golden plow a secret, but Makepeace spreads around a story about Alvin stealing his family heirloom golden plow.



## Chapter 19, The Plow, Chapter 20, Cavil's Deed, & Chapter 21, Alvin Journeyman Analysis

The ending makes it obvious that there will be more books in the series. The title, in fact, implies an early step on a journey, since apprenticeship is one of the first steps in training for a profession. In addition to that, there are plenty of loose ends which are left hanging, so that major plotlines can carry over to the next novel. Alvin has finally learned something of the secret art of Making, but he still does not know how he can create his dream of the Crystal City. He has only begun to teach his first pupil, Measure, about Making, even while Measure teaches the nineteen-year-old how to be a man. Alvin now knows that he loves Peggy, or Margaret, meaning that Peggy has escaped her possible future of Alvin marrying her out of obligation rather than love. However, Alvin does not see any way that he and Peggy will find one another again, which will certainly happen in another book. Cavil Planter sets out in the end to hunt down and kill Alvin, so that he can take back his son, Arthur. Of course, he does not want Arthur so that he can love him as a father, but so that he will still have one slave left, one piece of property that means that he is superior to someone.

The downfall of Cavil Planter is not unexpected, since he is a villain who made a pact with the devil, but the way in which the events play out is quite a surprise, with convoluted moral implications. Cavil's wife makes a slave sleep with her in order to hurt Cavil for raping his slaves, but she never makes it clear exactly why. It could be that she is so angered to know what a cruel rapist he is. However, it could be that she finds the act of interracial sex to be abominable, so that her pride is wounded, since her husband has been unfaithful to her so many times with women whom Dolores considers beneath her. This white supremacist attitude is exhibited by Cavil's neighbors, who are offended to know that Cavil's family has slept with their slaves. The neighbors say that he is no gentleman, not because he has abused his slaves, but because he has had too much contact with them, and had children with them. This is a warped picture of justice, but it leaves a villain for Alvin to continue fighting in subsequent books.





# Characters

## Alvin Smith

Since last names in this book tend to reflect the profession of the person, it makes sense that Alvin's name changes several times throughout the story, reflecting his change in life position. At first, he is Alvin, Jr., the seventh son of a seventh son. His unusual birth is marked by a prophecy that he will grow up to be a Maker, which is a savior with godlike powers. Alvin has great power even from a young age, and he is able to make materials behave the way he wants them to. When Alvin becomes an apprentice, he is sometimes called Alvin Miller, after his father, and sometimes called Prentice Alvin, which emphasizes the stage of training he is in. Alvin conceals some of his power so that the people around him will not pester him constantly to fix things for them. Alvin becomes a skilled blacksmith, using only the mundane skill of a forge, rather than using his magic. People start calling him Alvin Smith. Alvin hates when people treat black people or Indians as though they are not human, and he is the only white person he knows who is capable of using the magic of the Indians. Alvin has a dream of creating a magical Crystal City where all will live in harmony. He uses his knack to turn iron into living gold. Alvin has to be careful, because his nemesis, the Unmaker, is always trying to kill him using water.

## Peggy Guester

Peggy, whose real name is Margaret, is a very strong torch, which means that she can psychically see the future, as well as see what is going on in other people's minds. Because of this, she has the knowledge of an adult even when she is a small child. When Peggy prophesies that Alvin will be a Maker, she also sees that she must always watch over him, protecting him with the flap of skin left over from his birth. Peggy is a quiet, sullen child, because she is terrified of spilling the secrets of the people around her. She has made a promise that she will never tell a lie. Peggy feels tied to a future of misery, until the day she realizes that she has the power to change her own destiny. Peggy trains with Mistress Modesty, who teaches her to value herself for her own inner beauty, and also trains her to shut out the thoughts of others, so that Peggy finally learns to interact normally with other people. When Peggy disguises herself as an old lady, she calls herself Miss Lerner. Even more than she wants to marry Alvin, Peggy wants to help create his dream of the Crystal City.

## Cavil Planter

Cavil is a southern plantation owner who thinks that he is a righteous, godly man. He rapes his slaves so that he can have children with them, so that he can serve the Overseer.



## **The Overseer**

The Overseer is the form that the Unmaker takes when appearing to Cavil Planter. The Unmaker is the nemesis of the Maker, and in this story, he is basically synonymous with the devil.

## **Reverend Philadelphia Thrower**

Reverend Thrower is a servant of the Unmaker, who tries to kill Alvin. He also helps Cavil in his plan to get back his runaway slaves.

## **Hagar**

The first slave raped by Cavil is young Hagar, who gives birth to Arthur Stuart. She escapes with her baby by using magic to turn into a bird.

## **Arthur Stuart**

Arthur Stuart is the child of Cavil Planter and his slave girl Hagar. He is named after the king of America, so that no one will disrespect his name.

## **Old Peg Guester**

Old Peg is Peggy's mother, who runs the inn. She adopts Arthur Stuart as her son, and dies trying to protect him.

## **Horace Guester**

Horace is Peggy's father. He is secretly an emancipationist, and he helps runaway slaves get to Canada.

## **Mistress Modesty**

Mistress Modesty is a former lover of Horace's. Peggy goes to Modesty's house to learn how to be graceful and happy.

## **Po Doggly**

Po Doggly is a man who helps Horace rescue escaped slaves. He ends up being mayor of Hatrack Falls.



## **Sheriff Pauley Wiseman**

Sheriff Wiseman will do anything to exercise his authority, even persecuting innocent people.

## **Makepeace Smith**

Makepeace is a mean, greedy blacksmith, who takes Alvin as an apprentice. After Alvin leaves, Makepeace tells everyone that Alvin stole from him.



# Objects/Places

## Hatrack River

Hatrack River is the town where Alvin comes to do his apprenticeship. It is also the town where he was born.

## Vigor Church

Alvin's hometown is Vigor Church. Because of an Indian massacre by the white citizens, they are under a curse, and must tell their story to anyone they meet.

## The Crystal City

Alvin has had a vision in which he creates a utopian Crystal City where everyone will be fulfilled and enlightened. He is determined to build it someday.

## The Guesters' Roadhouse

Alvin was born in the Guesters' roadhouse, and his brother Vigor is buried there. Arthur Stuart is raised in this inn.

## The Springhouse

When the schoolteacher comes from Philadelphia, Alvin fixes up the Guesters' old springhouse as lodgings for the new teacher. He magically puts a protective lock on the door, so that no harmful person can force their way in.

## Cavil Planter's Plantation

Cavil Planter is sad that he has no children with his wife to inherit his plantation. When he has twenty-six children with his slave women, his neighbors buy his land and force him to leave.

## America, in an Alternate History

In this alternate history, America is a land teeming with magic, which the different races use in different ways. The Crown Colonies, in the south, are ruled by a king, and there are various other regions to what is now the United States, such as Appalachia and Wobbish.



## **Alvin's Golden Plow**

For Alvin's final project of his apprenticeship, he creates a plow and magically turns it to gold. Then he uses even more magic to make a plow that is living, and wants to plow the earth and help living things grow.

## **Knacks**

Most people are born with a knack, or magical talent. These vary from person to person, and could be compared with personal strengths.

## **The Greensong**

The Indians use magic by tapping into the Greensong, which is a magic energy force that lives in the forest. As white settlers cultivate more of the land, the Greensong gets weaker and weaker.

## **Alvin's Birth Caul**

When Alvin is born, Peggy peels a membrane of skin, called a caul, off of his face. Throughout his life, Peggy uses what is left of the caul to magically protect Alvin.



# Themes

## Personal Growth and Transformation

The title of "Prentice Alvin" implies a desire to learn and grow, and a commitment to becoming a different person. This theme can be seen in the lives of many of the characters, both physically and spiritually. Alvin, of course, goes from being a boy with great potential to a muscle-bound blacksmith. His greater transformation occurs when he finally learns how to do Making, and this transformation is symbolized both by the changing of the iron plow to living gold, and by Alvin's new skin, once his original skin has burned away in the fire. Young Arthur is also transformed by Alvin's knack, when Alvin actually alters Arthur's DNA so that the slave Finders can not catch the boy. "And what wasn't connected, what didn't change, that was washed away and gone." (Chapter 18, Manacles, p. 291) Although it is only intended to be a physical transformation, Arthur's mind is also changed, and he takes on some of Alvin's power, even while losing a little of his own. Arthur's mother, the slave girl Hagar, undergoes a literal physical transformation, changing herself into a blackbird to escape slavery.

Peggy is keenly aware of her own transformation, and uses this awareness to reassure herself about wearing a disguise that seems to transform her physically. As far as anyone other than Alvin can tell, "Miss Larner" is an uptight old lady, not a young, beautiful frontier woman. She feels dishonest, pretending to be someone else, but she rationalizes it, thinking, "If she claimed to be Little Peggy, that would be a deeper lie than her disguise, for they would suppose that she was the girl they once knew, and treat her accordingly." (Chapter 15, Teacher, p. 211) Peggy realizes that, even if someone does not go on a transforming journey and come back looking different, everyone changes throughout their lives. This makes it easier for her to accept Alvin's transformation of Arthur, because she knows that Arthur would change day by day no matter what his path in life, and this way he will not become broken by slavery.

## The Fight Against Slavery

One of the major conflicts in this book is caused by slavery, which is legal in most of the southern states. Along the border, it is considered shameful to be an emancipationist, and it is illegal to help escaped slaves, instead of returning them to their masters. The slave masters profit richly from the slaves, as the first page so poetically says, "They calculated a way of turning each bead of a Black man's sweat into gold and each moan of despair from a Black woman's throat into the sweet clear sound of a silver coin ringing on the money-changer's table." (Chapter 1, The Overseer, p. 1) This emphasizes the way in which slavery strips people of their humanity: the slaves are made out to be beasts of burden, while the masters betray their own humanity by buying and selling their own species. Cavil Planter takes this a step further, even selling his own sons and daughters.



All of the protagonists in the story try to fight slavery, often by running a secret network to help runaway slaves get to safety. When Horace Guester meets Alvin, he wants to make sure the boy understands how evil slavery is, and he says, "Think about how slavery lets a White man steal a girl's virtue and still go to church on Sunday while she groans in shame and bears his bastard child." (Chapter 3, Lies, p. 63) He is pointing out the severe hypocrisy practiced by men like Cavil Planter, who believe that they can treat black people any way they want, and it does not count. When the slave Finders come to get Arthur Stuart, his family and friends show that they will do anything, even kill, to protect him and keep him free.

## Good versus Evil

The series "The Tales of Alvin Maker" is essentially the story of forces of good versus forces of evil. Alvin represents the legendary hero, the man who has the power to oppose the forces of evil and let good triumph. In keeping with many legends about such a hero, Alvin has a nemesis, an evil being called the Unmaker, who is like the devil. The Unmaker is always trying to use water and wicked people to kill Alvin, and he can appear to be beautiful and helpful to those whose hearts already bend toward evil. In fact, the night after the Unmaker appears to Cavil in the form of the Overseer, Cavil's wife tells him, "The devil can give false visions, you know, but only the wicked are deceived." (Chapter 1, The Overseer, p. 11) Cavil still does not recognize that he has just pledged himself as a slave to the devil.

In this story, the forces of good are aligned with forces of life, harmony, and building things up, while acts of destruction, strife, and death are acts of evil. Alvin already knows that he can keep the Unmaker at bay by creating something, but he discovers that his own motivations make a big difference in how effective this is. Alvin realizes that "When he dug this false well, it was a work of evil, to unmake an honest man for no reason better than spite." (Chapter 9, Redbird, p. 127) Because he digs the well with evil intent, his creation actually invites the Unmaker. The lesson here is that good actions reap positive consequences, and bad actions read negative consequences.

# Style

## Point of View

The story is told by an unnamed narrator, who seems to be a contemporary of the main characters, Alvin and Peggy. This narrator seems to be a storyteller intent on spinning an entertaining yarn, and clearing up a story that has been told at fireplaces all around. This narrator seems to live in the 1800's in the alternate America which is the setting of the story, and he or she often refers to geographical or historical details as though most people are familiar with them. The narrator often uses foreshadowing to hint at what will happen later in the book, and in fact reveals on the first page that Alvin will be seen as a murderer at the end of the book. The point of view is somewhat complicated by the fact that the narrator is rather omniscient, and in fact, so are several of the characters. Peggy especially has knowledge of the past, the future, and the deepest secrets of all the people around her. Nothing is hidden from her, to a painful extent, showing that an omniscient point of view can be a trial. Alvin also has knowledge of the world around him, sending out an imaginary "bug" to see things which are hidden, including what is under the ground. Since the book takes place when slavery is legal, and many whites in the story believe that black people are inferior, some characters have the point of view that slavery is a God-sanctioned practice. However, most of the characters believe that slavery is wrong, and try to overthrow it.

## Setting

"Prentice Alvin" and the other books in the series all take place in an alternate American history, in the early nineteenth century. In this America, magic is everywhere, and each race has its own kind of magic, although not everyone wants to acknowledge that magic is real, calling it the work of the devil. Some of the states are ruled by a king, while other groups of states are governed by various European nations. Most of the action takes place along the Hio River, around the border of Appalachee. The Indians have been driven out, to the other side of the Mizzippy River, and some of the white settlers in the town of Hatrack River do what they can to help runaway slaves get to Canada. Although much of the setting is a fantasy, there are real historical events and characters, like William Henry Harrison, and Henry David Thoreau. The forces of magic are strong, though, and many times, the evil Unmaker uses water or wicked-minded people to try to destroy Alvin, who is something of a messiah. Alvin is determined to build a majestic, utopian Crystal City, where all people will happily work together in harmony. He and Arthur flee to his hometown of Vigor Church, a town cursed because of a massacre of Indians, years back.





## Language and Meaning

The language in "Prentice Alvin" is fun and colorful, and evocative in its colloquial tone. The narrator, despite having an impressive vocabulary, and using complex sentence structures, uses the vernacular to discuss the characters, as though telling stories by the fire. The narrator's easy, relaxed manner of speech can be felt in sentences like, "Anybody whose head don't leak knows that riling the smith who's shoeing your horse is about as smart as provoking the bees on your way in for the honey." (Chapter 5, Dowser, p. 79) Similes like this make the reader laugh, while getting the point across by using objects and images that go along with the old-timey, frontier mood of the book. Most of the characters talk in this same way, showing that they are laid-back, and often uneducated. Old Peg thinks about talking like a lady when the school board wants to reject Arthur, but goes ahead and swears. As the narrator points out, "But Old Peg figured if you can't cuss at a lying hypocrite, then what was cussing invented for?" (Chapter 12, School Board, p. 149) In contrast to this common mode of speech, Peggy enunciates and speaks with perfect grammar when she comes back in disguise as Miss Larner. She is both looked-up-to, and disdained for her extensive vocabulary. Earlier, when Peggy reads the thoughts of Hagar, she has trouble understanding the slave's thoughts in English. Peggy is telepathic, but because she is not bilingual, she receives Hagar's story in a strangely poetic, broken English, which only communicates the most important ideas.

## Structure

"Prentice Alvin" is the third of seven books in the series "The Tales of Alvin Maker." As such, the big story is still building, since Alvin is just a teenager in this book. "Prentice Alvin" is divided into twenty-one chapters of varying lengths. Sometimes, the point of view jumps around from chapter to chapter, going back and forth between the three main storylines of Alvin, Cavil Planter, and Peggy Guester. The scene is set in the first two chapters, which hint from the beginning that the story might end in tragedy. These chapters show Cavil pledging his service to the devil, and establish how both Peggy and Hagar take control of their own fates, even as Alvin hurries to begin his apprenticeship. In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, Alvin and Peggy both begin their transformation, Alvin learning to be a blacksmith, and Peggy learning to be a graceful woman. In Chapters 5 through 9, Alvin battles the Unmaker while digging a well, and Peggy watches, powerless to help him. Chapters 10 through 15 show Peggy training to be a teacher, and then going back to Hatrack River, so that she can teach Alvin how to be a Maker. In Chapters 16 through 18, Cavil Planter does what he can to track down Arthur, until Alvin rescues the boy. Chapter 19 is the climax of the book, and Alvin learns the secret of turning iron into living gold, and kills a slave Finder, right after that man kills Peggy's mother. Chapters 20 and 21 wrap up the story, illustrating Cavil's downfall, and Alvin and Arthur's safe escape to Vigor Church and Alvin's family.



## Quotes

A man might have plenty of help finding the short path to hell, but no one else can make him set foot upon it. (Chapter 1, The Overseer, p. 12)

Peggy could see so much in other people's heartfires that she hardly was acquainted with her own. (Chapter 2, Runaway, p. 18)

After you fly, make you sad to walk, hurt you bad to walk, like a slave with chains, that dirt under your feet. (Chapter 2, Runaway, p. 24)

"Alvin, you just remember how you seen me crying all unmanlike, and you remember that's how fathers feel about their children when they're gone." (Chapter 3, Lies, p. 66)

But since there hadn't been a Maker in the world in a thousand years or more, or so folks said, who was he going to prentice himself to in order to learn that trade? (Chapter 3, Lies, p. 72)

If they brought him the sick and lame to heal, how would he ever have time to be aught but a physicker? (Chapter 7, Wells, p. 102)

You can be sorry, and you can be forgiven, but you can't call back the futures that your bad decisions lost. (Chapter 9, Redbird, p. 128)

That's what I want from you, Lady, to help me find my way to the root of the world or the root of myself or the throne of God or the Unmaker's heart, wherever the secret of Making lies, so that I can build against the snow of winter, or make a light to shine against the fall of night. (Chapter 13, Springhouse, p. 176)

"If I don't like the bend of a river, I grab ahold of the end of it and give it a shake to straighten it out!" (Chapter 14, River Rat, p. 183)

"A young New Englander named Thoreau has made quite a nuisance of himself, preaching that a bad law must be defied, that good citizens must be prepared to go to jail themselves rather than submit to it." (Chapter 15, Teacher, pp. 209-210)

No one is the same person today that he was yesterday. (Chapter 18, Manacles, p. 296)



## Topics for Discussion

What are the different types of magic in the story? Which do you think is the most valuable?

In what ways is the America of this book different from the real, historical U.S.A.? How are they the same?

Discuss how various characters grow and change throughout the book.

Sometimes authors give their characters symbolic names that describe their role in the story. What are some examples of this in "Prentice Alvin"? What do their names imply about the characters?

How do the different characters view the issue of slavery and racism? If you could talk to them, what would you say about the subject?

Many stories refer to a long-awaited hero, who will display miraculous powers, and change the established order of things. Besides Alvin, can you think of any other examples?

Reverend Thrower and Cavil Planter think that they are doing God's work. Why are they so easily fooled? Can you think of other situations where people commit hideous crimes, while thinking that they are doing the right thing? How can a person really know what is right or wrong?

When Alvin goes back to Vigor Church, his brother Cally does not want to learn from him. Why does Cally resent Alvin's presence?

If you could choose any "knack," what sort of magic would you do?