The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen Short Guide

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen is a harrowing adventure in which Young Lord Prince Jen learns through personal experience about the injustices of his kingdom of T'ang. The mysterious Master Wu sets in motion Jen's journey to the kingdom of T'ien-kuo, where the great Yuan-ming rules justly and laws are seldom enforced because the people follow the rule of doing to others what they would like others to do to them. Jen is sent to this ideal land to learn from Yuan-ming how to rule justly so that the T'ang people will prosper and be happy, but he never reaches the great northern kingdom, which may well be mythical. This does not matter in the end since Jen fulfils his quest by finding what he seeks in his own kingdom, learning what he must do when he is king to make his rule wise and compassionate.

About the Author

Lloyd Alexander is a towering figure in young adult literature. His fiction has won awards, garnered critical praise, and earned a large audience, but he did not come by his fame and popularity easily. He labored for many years and endured frequent rejections before achieving success in 1964 with The Book of Three, his second novel for young adults; on the strength of its lyrical prose, complex characters, and well-structured plot, Alexander became almost overnight one of the foremost writers for young people.

Alexander was born in Philadelphia on January 30, 1924, to Edna Chudley Alexander and Alan Audley Alexander, a stockbroker. His early and avid reading of mythology and folktales may have inspired such noted books as The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen (1991) and The Arkadians (1995; see separate entry), novels that derive their plots, philosophy, intellectual content, and poetic imaginings from the ancient cultures of China and Greece.

As a teenager, Alexander worked to earn money for college but attended for only one semester at West Chester State Teachers' College before joining the Army in 1942, for which he worked as an intelligence agent.

While stationed for a time in Wales, he developed the passion for Celtic folklore and culture that inspired his Prydain Chronicles twenty years later. He was later stationed in Paris as a counterintelligence agent.

After being discharged from the Army, he attended the Sorbonne, where he not only received a college degree but met and married Janine Denni.

Alexander bounced from one job to another for years, working as a cartoonist, artist, advertising writer, and editor while writing novels in his spare time. Unable to find a publisher for his first three novels, all for adults, Alexander struggled to support his family. He turned his frustration into humor and wrote And Let the Credit Go (1955), about the travails of writing for publication. In the early 1960s, he turned his attention to young audiences and wrote Time Cat, which was published in 1963 (and republished in 1996). His discovery of Welsh folklore while writing this book rekindled his youthful interest in Celtic mythology and culture, inspiring The Book of Three (1964), the first of the seven volumes of the Prydain Chronicles. This fantasy saga relates a series of daring yet humorous adventures set in a land of mysterious magic.

Since then, Alexander's reputation has soared among both critics and his increasingly large audience of adult and younger readers. C. S. Lewis wrote that a book enjoyed as a youngster and then reread and still enjoyed years later as a grownup is probably good literature. Nearly all of Alexander's books meet this criterion: their graceful prose, interesting characters, sharp wit, and complex plots appeal to young and old readers alike. He has proven himself to be a master craftsman in several genres of fiction: sword-and-sorcery fantasies like the Prydain Chronicles; adventures set in ancient

cultures and mythological worlds like The Arkadians; melodramatic mysteries such as the fine series featuring the courageous and versatile Vesper Holly; and more realistic fiction, such as the series of novels about war and its effects called the Westmark Trilogy. Alexander's recent writing seems to focus on the mythologies, folklore, and cultures of the world. In addition to The Arkadians, The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen (1991) tells of adventure and magic in a land much like ancient China, and a book for younger readers, The Fortune Tellers (1992), focuses on Cameroon in west central Africa.

Setting

The events of the novel take place in the kingdom of T'ang, where the royal family lives in remote splendor far above the grueling daily lives of their subjects. Jen senses problems almost as soon as he leaves the royal grounds. He is profoundly shocked by the poverty, filth, and poorly made homes that he sees all around him in the capital city Ch'ang. The kingdom itself is a place where injustice is mixed with enchantment.

A girl can fly like an eagle once she has mastered her kite, but corrupt public officials steal farms, and judges issue rulings that favor those who give them the biggest bribes. Wonders and mysteries abound: animals may talk, magical transformations may occur anytime, professional robbers may be the soul of honesty, and mysterious figures may appear in the most unlikely places to guide travelers to their destinations. The reader should pay close attention to the social world of T'ang as the story unfolds, noting the rules of conduct that people often cite. The traditions passed on in these rules are essential to how the kingdom's inhabitants, whatever their station, view the world and their place in it. Jen, a prince, knows the rules for his own conduct, but it is through his interaction with the rest of society that he learns how those rules apply to living. The novel is primarily a tale of the transformation of Jen's interior landscape.

He changes into the man his kingdom needs through his relations with the land and the people who live on it.

Social Sensitivity

In The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen, Alexander offers a taste of ancient Chinese culture in the form and tone of traditional Chinese fiction. A reader may occasionally require some explanation of terms, such as "string of cash" (Chinese coins had holes in them, allowing them to be strung together), but everything important to the story is made clear, and images are sharply drawn and resonant. The culture of ancient Chinese society is presented with dignity, its folklore incorporated into a colorful adventure. From the poorest of the poor to the monarch, each character speaks for the social conventions and relationships of a rich culture.

Alexander is noted for his efforts to create male-female relationships of equals, and he does a good job of creating one in The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen without violating the spirit of the society he depicts. It is dangerous to force modern American ideas on past cultures; doing so may please those who value politics more than truth but can result in a distorted, even insulting, depiction of cultures with a worldview different from our own. Alexander here faces the challenge of adhering to his own philosophical views while portraying a society governed by sharply etched rules about what people did and how they related to one another. In the world of the novel, everybody of all social distinctions had to know these rules in order to survive. For instance, people do not help an anguished person in the cangue, no matter how much they may wish to, because they know that the cangue is a form of legal punishment and that they risk severe punishment themselves if they interfere with the law. Only Jen, because he is royalty and therefore may remake the law as he sees fit, dares to interfere in the law of the cangue and in the customary social relationships between classes and between the sexes.

Alexander manages to stay within the cultural context of ancient China and still portray a healthy relationship between genders through the device of the flute. With this instrument the peasant girl Voyaging Moon is able to earn money as a retainer; when she and Jen finally come together, she brings to the relationship wealth, a social position earned through hard work, a good heart, and courage that is the proven equal of Jen's own. It is not beauty that wins Jen's love—Voyaging Moon has facial features that are not at all fashionable—but her passion for life, her keen intelligence, and her determination that bond him firmly to her.

There is a great deal of violence in the novel as heads are chopped off, limbs are hewn from trunks, and corpses are scattered about in callous disarray. Natha leads his followers into sensationally gory battles. It was his belief that an unjust society had taken from him what he rightfully owned, leaving him no options for survival save begging and banditry, that originally motivated him to embark on a career marked by brutality. This is a disturbing catalyst for the corruption of one man: it is quite easy to sympathize with the desperation that prompts his depredations upon others, even though he becomes so cruel. In spite of his harsh behavior in the cave with Jen and Jen's companions, Natha begins with a strong sense of honor. He tries to deal with everyone fairly when he succeeds in capturing the city Chai-sang—except for the city

leaders, who flee, swear fealty to Natha, or are executed. When one of his followers extorts goods from the city people, Natha lops his head off. The punishment is severe, but its point is clear: the common folk are to be treated honestly and are not to be exploited. Natha's best intentions, however, even go astray when his sword demands to drink. The life of Natha is a moralistic tale: his use of violence to support himself, even if his motive is not intrinsically evil, leads to his addiction to violence. The killing eventually rules Natha, he does not rule it.

Literary Qualities

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen is an ambitious book that tries to capture the essence of an ancient and highly cultured civilization and, in so doing, to re-create the art of ancient Chinese fiction. This attempt may put off some readers because of a key difference in approaches to storytelling. In Chinese literature, context has generally been more important than plot. Thus, a story may go on at length about place, situation, and people, including details about how and why the people came to be where they are and some of the history of the place they find themselves in, just to show how their actions fit into a larger historical picture.

The discursiveness of the Chinese tradition may be annoying, even tiresome, for readers familiar only with Western literature, which more often focuses on plot.

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen is built of and around divagations—wandering from one adventure to another seemingly unrelated tale, with only a thin central plot to serve as an anchor. Each tale is itself interesting: one may be full of adventure, another full of heroic battle, another is a tale of just deserts, and another an animal fable.

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen is a good book for reading aloud because each chapter is a story in itself. Alexander, in a triumphant conclusion, draws together all of the disparate story lines and shows how they are all related. Each set of events and experiences that Jen has undergone is essential to his survival in the climax of the novel, as well as to his understanding of how to create a just and happy society once he is king.

Themes and Characters

The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen is a quest-novel built around many exotic and memorable characters, and it is as much a sharing of the fascinating experiences and views of good and bad individuals as it is a tale of adventure. Even minor characters are strikingly portrayed. For instance, Hong, the innkeeper of the Golden Grasshopper, makes the most of his brief appearance. He is someone who "gave nothing without getting more in return." When people take refuge in his inn to escape a terrible storm, he doubles his prices. When the lowly peasant girl Voyaging Moon turns out to be a moneymaker for him, he treats her well; when she chooses to leave him, he sells her into slavery. Like Honorable General Li Kwang, Honorable Fat-choy, and other lesser characters, Hong is a notable figure. His impact on the story far exceeds the space devoted to him; when Hong receives his just deserts at the hands of Jen's friends, the reader is well satisfied long after this character has departed from the narrative.

The main character of the novel is Prince Jen, who, as a naive young man, begins a journey to T'ien-kuo to learn how to create a just society. He never makes it to T'ienkuo because his journey is as much of the mind as it is over the earth; through his adventures he learns about himself, the people he will one day rule, and the injustice and cruelty that tragically plague his future kingdom. He discovers in himself a good heart and a desire to right wrongs and do better by his people than earlier rulers did. Social injustice is found almost everywhere: women are sold into servitude; petty criminals are subjected to the torture of the cangue (a heavy wooden collar bolted on the neck); the rich steal from the poor; magistrates find justice for those who give the biggest bribes; people are afraid to help each other. This theme of pervasive social inequity is further developed in the bandit leader Natha, who became a bandit after Fat-choy forged records in order to steal his land. Natha perfectly represents one of the cruelest qualities of injustice: injustice engenders more injustice.

Jen's journey acquaints him directly with the full range of social evils. When stripped of his identification papers, he becomes just another young man in the eyes of others, and he is deemed crazy or a liar when he declares himself to be the kingdom's prince.

The people he finds most helpful are usually at the bottom levels of society: bondmaids, beggars, and peasants. Those who should help him do not; Jen truly learns this lesson in the flesh when Fat-choy gives orders that he be beaten. Wealthy government officials such as Fat-choy are cruel, selfish, and indifferent to the suffering of others. Jen learns firsthand what is wrong with his kingdom's society, but such knowledge would be useless and lead only to sorrow if he did not also learn how to right these wrongs.

This insight makes the episode at Pingerh especially important. Jen has already realized by this time that his failure to act in the face of cruelty has led to the suffering of others; at Ping-erh he takes action to help the set-upon. Natha and his followers, the Yellow Scarves, are advancing on the town when Jen reaches it. The townspeople are already fleeing, but Jen manages, with some help from others, to rally those who are left and to figure out, with some clever and insightful thinking, how to save the town.

He realizes that it is not necessary to defeat Natha; it is only necessary to make seizing Ping-erh more trouble than the prize would be worth. Jen therefore leads the defenders in building barriers along the routes into the town. By firing some barriers at appropriate moments, the townspeople block the way of Natha's followers, and Natha eventually turns away because the town is no longer worth the hazard of taking it. Jen learns during this episode that he can be a leader if he so chooses, and that he can think creatively to solve problems. This episode illustrates another important theme of the novel, one that offers a potent corrective to social iniquity: though injustice breeds injustice, hope breeds hope. Hopelessness means being helpless in the face of oppression, but hopefulness is the beginning of a strong defense. Other towns imitate Pingerh's ingenious defense and thwart the advance of Natha and the Yellow Scarves.

Jen knows that if he is to be a good ruler he must care about people. Although he is concerned at the beginning of the novel about the poverty he sees when he leaves on his quest, it is the people who most need help who also serve to bring him to a full realization of the depth of compassion a would-be ruler must have.

Voyaging Moon is probably the most important of these people. She is a bondmaid, condemned to do whatever her master demands of her, including sleeping with him. When Jen stops at the master's home, she shows uncommon intelligence by seizing an opportunity to escape with him. She quickly proves valuable in Jen's efforts to journey to T'ien-kuo and persuades him to let her journey with him. Yet, as a bondmaid, she belongs to another man.

Is Jen breaking the law, or is he doing what is right? It turns out that he is doing both, as well as learning about at least one law that should be changed.

When Master Shu leads Jen and his companions through a long, dry, rocky gorge, Jen learns to trust and admire his companions—he even falls in love with one—because of the hard work and cooperation required for the group to make it to T'ung Pass. Thus, a royal prince learns to value the ideas, loyalty, hard work, and companionship of people far below his station in life—a bondmaid, a philosophical thief, a servant, and a poet. This new self-knowledge and worldly wisdom make the ending credible: Jen greets Mafoo and Moxa as equals when they come to his aid, having enriched themselves through clever trading.

Alexander offers a poem by Master Shu before the narrative begins: You must know nothing before you can learn something, and be empty before you can be filled.

This refers to the novel's predominant theme: learning from experience. Jen begins as a person who is ignorant of the world outside his palace; Master Hu has taught him rules for moral conduct, but Jen has not had to apply them to real life. Thus, his journey is a matter of learning, and Master Shu's words reassuringly imply that ignorance is shameful only if it is a permanent condition, that replacing ignorance with knowledge is the process that one must go through to reach an enlightened state of wisdom. Jen is not the only one who gains self-knowledge and discerns the state of the world through trial by experience.

Voyaging Moon acquires a sense of selfworth, and Mafoo learns that he can be a successful, independent man rather than a fearful servant. The theme of learning from experience is further enriched by the characters who do not learn. Natha is so obsessed with seeking revenge and acquiring power that he loses his ability to learn from what he undergoes. If he were able to look beyond his obsessions he would see where his talking sword is taking him.

The magistrate Fat-choy is another figure blinded by obsessive pursuit of a goal, in his case a greedy desire to acquire wealth and possess rare and valuable things such as Jen's bronze bowl. His covetousness so blinds him that he does not even realize that the gold coins that show up in his bowl could have come from anywhere. He believes that greed is the highest morality and that justice belongs to whoever offers the biggest bribe. He is therefore shocked when he discovers that the missing government gold matches the gold his bowl has produced. His greed does eventually give him the chance, though a devastatingly ironic one, to learn from experience: we last see him as a beggar, and he needs to learn to beg well if he is to survive.

One might think that having characters who do not learn from experience would weaken the theme that is so well expressed in Jen, Voyaging Moon, Mafoo, and Moxa, but the reason for Natha's and Fat-choy's inability to learn from experience is important to the novel's exploration of that theme.

Revenge, lust for power, and greed leave these characters empty and ignorant, whereas openmindedness enables Jen to better know his heart, to humanize his reason with compassion, to achieve a more finely balanced moral compass, and to learn about the true conditions of those who live in the world, from the humblest to the richest.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Alexander not just come out and say that The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen takes place in ancient China?

2. Jen begins by heading to the kingdom of T'ien-kuo to learn how to rule wisely. Does he succeed in his quest?

3. Why does Natha's sword say, "Give me no more to drink!" when Natha is about to strike Jen?

4. What are Natha's motives for becoming a bandit? Are they good ones?

5. All the various digressions of The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen come together at the novel's climax. Why would Alexander pull them together like that? What purpose is served?

6. When Li Kwang asks the Lady of Fearful Awakenings, "Where have I come?" she says, "Where you have often wished to be." What does she mean by this? Why would Li Kwang have ever wished to be there?

7. Why does Jen continually run into old men like Master Chu who remind him of other old men? Are they all the same person?

8. Is Fat-choy's fate appropriate, given what he has done?

9. What does Prince Jen learn in the course of the narrative?

10. Why do characters often refer to memorized rules of conduct during their adventures?

11. Why do Jen and Voyaging Moon not complete their journey to T'ien-kuo at the novel's end?

12. How important is learning from experience? What does it provide that book learning does not?

13. Why would Prince Jen, a member of a prosperous monarchy, wish to change how his kingdom's society is run?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the role of the tiger in Chinese literature? Does Alexander come close to capturing the traditional Chinese literary view of the tiger?

2. The literature of China has a long history. What role has it played in Chinese culture? How did the ancient Chinese regard it?

3. How does Alexander evoke the feel and tone of ancient Chinese fiction? How well does he succeed? (You may need to cite ancient Chinese works to support your ideas.)

4. Jen gives Fragrance of Orchid a kite shaped like a bird. What is Chinese kite-making like? Are there Chinese kites shaped like birds? What role have kites played in the Chinese culture?

5. Voyaging Moon plays a flute. What are traditional Chinese flutes like? What role do they have in Chinese music? How are they made?

6. The magical bowl is a significant symbol in Chinese and Southeast Asian literature and folklore. In what forms does the magical bowl appear in folktales? What does it usually symbolize? What appears in magical bowls besides gold coins?

7. Were there bondmaids in ancient China? If so, what were they expected to do? What would be the expectations for Voyaging Moon?

8. How would it be possible for Jen to have spent his entire life within his father's palace? What were ancient Chinese palaces like? Was it possible for a prince to reach manhood in such a palace without having ventured outside the palace grounds?

9. The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen digresses often from the main plot. Is this typical of Chinese literature? What forms or styles of Chinese literature have the qualities of The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen?

10. Did the ancient Chinese have a philosophy for the moral conduct of government? Does it share anything in common with the views expressed in The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen?

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Related Titles

Alexander's current focus is on exploring ancient and modern cultures from different parts of the world. The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen focuses on ancient China, whereas The Arkadians (1995; see separate entry) focuses on the roots of ancient Greek culture. This novel shares with The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen a quest structure, featuring many diversions from the goal of the quest as well as several separate tales woven into the narrative structure.

The Fortune Tellers, an Alexander book for younger readers, takes place in Cameroon and tells of how a carpenter first consults a disreputable fortune-teller, then seems to prosper.

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