

The Riddle-Master of Hed Short Guide

The Riddle-Master of Hed by Patricia A. McKillip

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Contents

The Riddle-Master of Hed Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Key Questions.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	12



Characters

Morgon is a convincing and appealing protagonist. Born to a destiny he does not understand, he tries to ignore the three stars on his forehead. He wants merely to stay home on his farm, raise pigs, and marry his fiancée Raederle. He does not want to be the hero that he is seemingly forced to be. An interesting character is Deth, the harpist. Enigmatic, curiously gentle and loyal, he has lived for centuries and hints at a deeper wisdom than he actually reveals. Several of the minor roles are effective, such as the Wolf King Har, who communicates with the wild wolves, and Tristan, Morgon's spunky kid sister.

Social Concerns/Themes

The main social concerns in this novel and throughout the trilogy are the ambiguity of power and the futility of war. The protagonist, Morgon, is a man trying to avoid the responsibility of power which is his destiny. He must assume it, however, because he is a man of peace, and the survival of his world is endangered if he does not take on the burden of power.

In this complex and highly imaginative work several themes are explored.

One is the nature of identity. Morgon is a studious young man and an expert in riddle-solving in a society where the riddle is the principal intellectual exercise as well as medium of moral instruction. The riddle which eludes him, however, is that of his own identity, for he was born with three stars on his forehead which he does not understand. The riddle of his existence is compounded by the sudden appearance of a harpist named Deth, who becomes his companion. Literally and figuratively the role of death also becomes a major theme. Since Morgon is also a student at the college of riddle mastery, the nature of education also becomes a theme as he ponders whether all knowledge is in locked books to be opened only by a magic spell or whether it is intuitive, like that of the shapeshifters who become the things they understand.

Techniques

McKillip uses several conventional fantasy devices to good effect in this novel. The device of shape-shifting, for example, is thematically related to Morgon's identity problem. This device concerns the sympathetic relationship between humans and the animal and plant world as well. Names with double-meanings are incorporated, most strikingly in the case of Deth, the harpist, but also in place names such as Hed and Hel and in characters such as Raith, Suth, and Yrth. Symbolism is a further technique used in a variety of ways. Several objects take on symbolic meaning, such as the harp, and features of landscape, such as the Wind Tower and the mountains.



Key Questions

for The Riddle-Master of Hed The Riddle-Master of Hed combines many of the elements of high fantasy.

McKillip has created a well-developed, believable secondary world; the hero is on a quest and must decide if he will accept his fate; the book deals with the issues of good versus evil but the book is itself is a riddle: Nothing is ever what it seems to be. There are many shape-shifters who could lead the hero astray. This is a dense book with many different layers of meaning.

1. This has a highly developed legal system, particularly in the area of "land-law." Why is this so important and why do the different countries seem to have different forms of "landlaw"?
2. How does Morgon know that his parents have disappeared if their bodies have never been recovered?
3. Does it seem reasonable that Morgon, who was able to solve the riddle and win the crown, did not know that the winner of the crown also won the hand of Raederle?
4. Why did Morgon's father let him go to study at the College of the Riddle-Masters in Caithnard when he knew that Morgon was his heir and would not be able to use his skills?
5. Who are the shape-shifters? Why are they an important device in the story?
6. Why does Morgon learn to shape shift? What does Danan teach him and why?
7. It seems that Deth is a catalyst for all of the action. He is the one who tells Morgon about Raederle, he is with Morgon when the shapeshifters try to kill him, and he is the one to take Morgon to the High One. What kind of man is Deth? What details does McKillip use to establish his character?
8. What is the riddle of Ohm? Who is he and what does he represent?
9. Morgon struggles against a hundred year old prophecy involving himself. How is he finally manipulated into accepting his fate?
10. Morgon has stars on his forehead and later finds a harp with stars which only he can play. When he finds the sword which he does not want emblazoned with stars what do you think it means? How can he solve the riddles about the stars?
11. Morgon is told about five riddles.



Locate these riddles; how many do you think that Morgon really encounters?

Ideas for Group Discussions for *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* has been called a fantasy and also a romance or a Bildungsroman. It deals with Sybel's growth and discovery of self. It also deals with the grand themes of love and revenge. Sybel must learn about herself, the world, and others in her quest to find and call the last legendary beast of Eld, the Liralen. This is a complex story with many layers of meaning. In order to understand McKillip, look beneath the surface of her imagery.

1. Early in the first chapter, Sybel reads a book and calls the Liralen for the first time. What happens when she calls the Liralen? How many other times does she call the bird and what happens each time?

2. When Coren brings Sybel the baby Tamlorn, she says that "It will go nicely ... in the collection." Coren tells her it is not an animal. And Sybel continues that she does "not know what to do with a baby." Coren however states that because she is a girl, she should know such things. What is McKillip saying about the roles of men and women in society? About Sybel's reaction to the baby and her ability to love it?

3. Who are the forgotten beasts of Eld and where do they come from? What is the significance of the six animals Sybel has inherited from her father and what purpose(s) do they serve?

4. Names are very important in this novel. The knowledge of names or ability to use names for things/people is also powerful. Sybel calls the beasts by using their names — the names that have been forgotten by men. How is it that Coren knows their names? How does he know Sybel's name?

5. The color of eyes seems to be important. The author details the eye color of the beasts, Sybel, Coren, and other characters. Why? What do the colors signify?

6. When Coren initially tells Sybel that he wants Drede's death, she states that "your hate is not my business" and yet later she plots against Drede.

Why is she so adamant and steadfast in her own desire for revenge? Why did she talk Coren out of his plans and yet continue on with her own? Why does she lie to him and manipulate him? Is all fair in love and hate?

7. Why does Sybel allow herself to be talked into calling King Drede to see Tarn in the first place? Would you have done it? Why or why not?

8. Fear plays an important role in this novel. Why is Sybel so afraid of Drede?

Why is Drede afraid of her? Why does Drede die?

9. Why can Corne name the Blammor? Why does it appear as a shadow?

What exactly does that signify?



10. Coren sees Sybel as a white bird and she later describes her self as a white-winged falcon. Why does the author choose this description? What is it that Sybel learns about the Liralen and about herself at the end of the novel that has a message for all humans?

Literary Precedents

The most pervasive literary influence on this work is Welsh mythology. Not only are several place names evident, e.g., Annwn, but also objects, like the sacred harp, and episodes, like the search for the High One. A more immediate influence, not just on this novel but on the trilogy as a whole, is Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea quartet, which is also a coming-of-age narrative in an imaginary world.

Susan Cooper's Dark Is Rising series intertwines Celtic, Welsh and Arthurian legends in the story of Will Stanton who discovers he is the last of the "old Ones" and he must recover the crystal sword so that the Dark Rider can be vanquished. (*Over Sea, Under Stone* [1965]; *The Dark Is Rising* [1973]; *Greenwich* [1975]; *The Grey King* [1975]; *Silver on the Tree* [1977].)

The allegorical fantasy also has elements of Arthur Edward Waite's *The Quest of the Golden Stairs: A Mystery of Kinghood in Faerie Land* (1927) in which Starbeam, the young prince, must seek his fortune and eventually winds up finding himself.

See also Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* series (1964-1968), with its Welsh flavor, which is the story of a young pig keeper named Taran who fights against the Lord of the Land of Death. The series includes: *The Book of Three* (1964); *The Black Cauldron* (1965); *The Castle of Llyr* (1966); *Taran Wanderer* (1967); and *The High King* (1968).



Related Titles

The Heir of Sea and Fire (1977), the middle work of McKillip's trilogy about the Riddle-master focuses on a female figure. The protagonist is Raederle, Morgon's fiancée, a strong, capable, independent woman. The title refers specifically to her ability to manipulate both water and fire as elements, even as Morgon is a master of earth and air. When Morgon disappears on his journey to find the High One, Raederle sets out to find him, accompanied by his young sister, Tristan, and Lyra, daughter of the woman ruler of a neighboring realm. The women prove themselves capable in terms of courage and pragmatic skills, and they are all effective characterizations. Raederle is vividly drawn, with an appealing blend of diffidence and assertiveness, doubt and determination. Lyra, a professional bodyguard, wants to solve all problems by throwing a spear at them. Her mother, a political ruler, is at once maternal and masterful, authoritative, and sympathetic.

The final volume, Harpist in the Wind (1977), fulfills the major themes of the trilogy, the ambiguity of power, the futility of war, and the nature of identity. In addition McKillip adds thematic satire on university learning.

Through Morgon, the wizards come to realize that their knowledge so artfully locked in their books does not save them or their world. History resides more in the broken shards of a ship's wreckage than in the sealed volumes.

Deth the harpist also takes on a more complex personality in this novel. His affection for Morgon, his physical suffering and blindness, and his moving account of his own past make him a memorable character.

The techniques of symbolism are much in evidence in this work. Morgon's ascent of the Wind Tower serves to symbolize the culmination of all three major themes. The union of the four primal elements — earth, air, fire, and water — symbolically represents the union of masculine and feminine in the love of Morgon and Raederle. On the whole, Harpist in the Wind is the most complex and sophisticated novel in this highly original fantasy trilogy.

Although The Forgotten Beasts of Eld (1974) is primarily a novel about a young sorceress growing up in virtual isolation, social concerns enter the narrative when she enters human society. There the protagonist, Sybel, encounters the age-old problems of war and politics as threats to individual happiness. She marries into a family divided by political rivalry, and she is almost destroyed by an ambitious tyrant. These concerns are worked out partly by Sybel, and partly by her mythological menagerie (the "forgotten beasts of Eld") who deal with factionalism in their own inspired way.

Of more interest than the other human characters are the seven "forgotten beasts," summoned out of the primeval forest of Eld. They are the greenwinged dragon Gyld, the wise boar Cyrin, the fierce falcon Ter, the black swan of Tirlith, the black cat Moriah, and the golden lion Gules. The most individualized is the riddling Boar, whose sardonic



wisdom makes him an unforgettable personality. The seventh, the Liralen, remains a mystery until the end.

The central theme of the novel is growing-up. Sybel, a young woman endowed with magical powers, is left alone from childhood on a mountain where she lives with several mythological animals, with whom she can communicate telepathically. When she reaches adulthood, she finds herself suddenly with an infant placed in her care by a stranger, and at this point love enters her solitary existence.

When she eventually decides to marry the stranger and send her now adolescent adopted son to join society, her problems move from the psychological to the social realm of experience. Further themes that are developed involve conflict: between love and fear, intimacy and privacy, independence and mutuality.

The most important literary technique in this fantasy novel is the use of symbolism. Since the focus is on the development of Sybel, the beasts to a certain extent symbolize facets of her own personality. Central to her story is her search for the fabulous bird, the Liralen, which she associates with her inner being. When she dreams that the Liralen is dead, her own identity is threatened. Her search for the Liralen is paralleled by the recurring appearance of a dangerous monster, the Rommalb or Blammor, which frightens its victims to death. The relationship between the Liralen and the Rommalb is used to symbolize Sybel's divided self.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994