

Robin of Sherwood Short Guide

Robin of Sherwood by Michael Morpurgo

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Overview

Robin of Sherwood retells legends of Robin Hood in a format and approach especially suitable for the younger reader. It appeals to this audience with crisp prose, short chapters, evocative and plentiful illustrations, and a few unique twists to the standard material. The inclusion of a modern boy whose discovery of the outlaw's relics draws him into the main narrative through a timetravel or -vision device is the most intriguing of these.

Once the focus turns to Sherwood Forest, exciting scenes are painted with both words and pictures. The reader can easily visualize Robin's panicked flight into the forest, Friar Tuck's challenge to carry him across the bridge, and the Sheriff's archery contest. There is also a glimpse into what makes Robin the band's leader even when he is quite young. He is daring, but he also ponders the best way to keep the Outcasts safe in the forest, and to prepare for further dangers in the future. Marion evaluates his ideas, and she also helps him find ways of handling the sometimes contradictory demands of leadership.

About the Author

Michael Morpurgo was born in 1943 in St. Albans, England, a town just north of London. He grew up in a Britain that was recovering from wartime destruction and shortages. He has drawn on this experience several times for book backgrounds, such as the scarred urban scenery in his *Mr. Nobody's Eyes*. At age seven he was sent away to boarding school. He sang in the choir at King's School at Canterbury, which traces its founding back to around 600 A.D.

As a boy he was not an enthusiastic reader, he says, except for the works of Robert Louis Stevenson. He was more interested in playing rugby, and in fact had a reputation for being slightly stupid.

After attending King's College, London, Morpurgo became a teacher in a primary school. He taught schoolchildren for a number of years, and his turn toward writing came when a story he was reading to them failed to hold their attention. "I can do better," he thought. The next day he read them a story he had made up for his own children; it fascinated the students. He apparently had quite a few stories already made up in his mind because after this scene was repeated many times, he wrote them down at the urging of a publisher and they became his first published book.

After ten years of teaching, Morpurgo left the profession but still wanted to be involved with children and their activities.

In addition to writing more stories and books for young people, he and his wife founded Farms for City Kids, a program which brings city children to his farm in Devon for a week. While there, they take care of farm animals, help plant crops, and have other experiences unique to living in the country. The program has grown, with other farms now in Wales, Gloucestershire, and Vermont, but Morpurgo has stayed personally involved. He has used ideas drawn from watching the children interact with each other, and with the farm animals, in some of his books.

Michael Morpurgo has had over sixty books published in Britain. They encompass a wide range of different types, from picture books to ghost stories and historical novels. Many of his books have been winners of or short-listed for awards, and he himself was instrumental in setting up the Children's Laureate, a celebration of writers and illustrators of children's books. Only some of his books have been published in the United States, starting in the mid-1980s.

His other interests include music and mountains and, he says, "daydreaming."

Setting

Most of the novel is set in Sherwood Forest and the nearby city of Nottingham, England, the traditional haunts of Robin Hood and his nemesis, the Sheriff. The time is during King Richard II's reign, the years 1189 to 1199 A.D.

Sherwood, like the other great forest parks which dotted medieval England, was the property of the crown. It was also a multiple-use nature preserve. These facts led to frequent clashes of interests.

Medieval peasants lived close to the land.

The forest was a rich resource for them, with its wood for fuel, building and weapon making, game for food, and herbs and plants for healing. For those willing to learn the forest's paths and signs it was also a place of refuge. From the Sheriff's perspective, however, these were outrageous uses of Sherwood Forest. Even if the Sheriff had not been corrupt and cruel, he was sworn to enforce the law on the king's land. It is true that the deer were protected largely so the king and his nobles could hunt them. If every peasant in England felt free to take them as a food source, the deer could eventually die out. A distant echo of this controversy surfaces today when poor people's need for jobs and food are said to conflict with environmental laws.

To Robin and the Outcasts, Sherwood represents light, spaciousness, and freedom, as well as community and cooperation. The book's illustrations of forest scenes project the "feel" of these qualities superbly. The strong community spirit is evident in the way the Outcasts take in society's refugees, and find ways for everyone to contribute.

Robin's followers are shown as individuals with their own eccentricities, while the Sheriff's men seem little more than robots.

In contrast, Nottingham is a place of danger, especially for Robin Hood. It is the Sheriff's domain, and the location of the castle where Robin's father was held. Executions are held in the town square, and men are mustered there to track down the Outcasts.

Historically, Nottingham was a midsized market town and local governmental center. In Robin of Sherwood, this means that the town is not merely a source of danger: it is also a good stage for the tricks and exploits which embarrass the Sheriff and his henchmen. Thus Robin and his men keep going into Nottingham even if prudence would advise against it. In modern terms, such appearances are part of their public relations effort. Many of the town's ordinary people were secretly sympathetic to them, both as benefactors of the poor and as champions of the popular but absent King Richard, and no doubt enjoyed seeing them outwit the hated Sheriff.

A few parts of the book have other settings. Half of one chapter shows Robin's journey to Austria to rescue King Richard.



This section is somewhat more descriptive than the Sherwood scenes, with river imagery and a dark, foreboding tone. The rivers recall the forest streams where Friar Tuck and Little John first encountered one another. The opening and closing scenes take place in contemporary Britain, during and after a tremendous storm. These pages include some of the most visual depictions of the entire book, as they tell about the giant tree, now felled, and the forest animals' behavior in the storm's wake. The medieval Sherwood forest was much larger than the remnant which is shown in these passages. Presumably the boy's grandmother's house, where he stays while the storm rages, is built on land that was once part of Robin Hood's domain.



Social Sensitivity

Robin Hood's story is so widely known and enjoyed that it is easy to overlook the message of radical social justice at its center. When the rich and powerful further enrich themselves by preying on the poor, the latter may be justified in taking back enough to live on. King Richard I was out of the country and had no part in the oppression practiced by his brother John and John's supporters. Hence Robin and his band are not shown as anarchists or mere robbers.

They support legitimate authority and work for the return of their king, but fight with those who misuse the power they hold.

Morpurgo depicts many of the Outcasts as physically imperfect in some way. Will Scarlett is a hunchback. Robin's father is blind, because the night when he was imprisoned the Sheriff's men put out his eyes.

Other members have lost tongues or limbs in the Sheriff's reign of terror. There are also Outcasts who look different with no apparent cause. Marion's hair is pure white. She refers to herself as a "mutant"; possibly she is an albino.

By including characters with these traits, the author shows that all people who shared his goals were welcome in Robin's band of Outcasts. Moreover, when Robin Hood decides the band needs training in martial skills for the task ahead, no adult is exempt.

Robin's father helps out by teaching archery, something that he can do even when blind. Like any other group under siege, each member has to help in any way he or she can.

After Richard returns and rewards Robin with a pardon and a title, Robin refuses to go along on Richard's next crusade. He tells the king that his people need him at home.

Robin's words reflect the judgment of history; Richard spent only six months of his ten-year reign in England. The message is somewhat soft-pedaled but the meaning is clear. The first duty of a leader is to look after his people, not to travel far away seeking glory and excitement. Robin realizes this is true for himself also, and sets out to return to the forest. But, for both men, the lesson comes too late. This is a welcome contrast to some media treatments which show leadership only in terms of exciting fights and other "action."



Literary Qualities

This is a relatively short book. Although the story is mostly told in text, the illustrations by Michael Foreman help bring the characters to life and intensify the impact of various events. The narration is from a fairly distant third-person point of view, except for the opening and closing scenes which are related by the modern boy in first-person mode.

The Robin Hood tales were first published as a collection of ballads and folk songs in the late fourteenth century. Partly because of this format, they are not strong in either character development or in subtext.

Later treatments have almost always retained this pattern. Even if the authors try to do something new and innovative, the Robin Hood saga remains primarily an adventure story, in which all the characters keep their assigned roles, and good and evil are clearly defined.

This is true of the present work. Michael Morpurgo has added several new elements to the basic story. Among these are: Robin's present-day descendant, or double, discovering his bones and relics; the large percentage of physical impediments and mutations among the Outcasts; and the visit of Blondel (Richard I's minstrel) to their camp and Robin's subsequent role in accumulating gold for the King's ransom and actually taking it to Austria. Yet the defining events from the Robin Hood canon remain the heart of the book, as well as being the most exciting parts.

Some readers who have read other versions may wonder whether the additions are necessary. The first two features widen the book's range of role models. Many readers enjoy a story more if it has someone like themselves doing heroic deeds. The ransom-raising and trip to Austria are more problematic, as they seem to violate historic facts. (The ransom was raised by heavy taxation.)

Robin and Marion's small son Martin is a "non-canonical" addition but falls into a slightly different category. He does not appear in most versions, but neither is there a tradition that the couple never marries or never has children. Within this book's structure, his presence serves at least two functions. If Robin's bones are to be discovered by his descendant, he needs to leave at least one child. The kidnapping of Martin also gives Marion a heroic mission; she can confront the Sheriff and his sister the Abbess and plead a mother's love in order to trick them into supposedly trading the child for Robin Hood.

Most young people will read or view several versions of the Robin Hood story during their youth. Robin of Sherwood is among the most accessible to elementary school readers and young teens. Without the archaic language of some retellings written for this audience, it is a good introduction to the adventures of a beloved folk hero.



Themes and Characters

All the major characters of Robin Hood lore appear in the pages of this book. The central theme is the same as that of the legend: good prevailing over evil. People oppressed by cruel and corrupt officials can survive, and even help others do so, by making a sanctuary and community. Banding together, honing their skills and planning well, they can even carry the resistance into the enemy's territory and undermine him by making him seem ridiculous.

Robin, the leader of the band (called "Outcasts" rather than outlaws in Robin of Sherwood), is a very young man when he joins them. Forced to flee when the Sheriff of Nottingham's men catch his father with a stag he has just shot, Robin runs into the forest. There he hides in a cave, where a white-haired girl finds him and introduces him to the group of Outcasts.

The boy has little choice except to join them, but he broods about his father's fate, and how he abandoned him. Marion, the girl, tells him that his father was taken away rather than killed on the spot, and Robin determines to save him before he is hanged. Loaned a horse and dagger by the Outcasts, Robin goes to Nottingham despite their warnings that a rescue is impossible. Disguised as one of the Sheriff's guards, he gets the old man out of the dungeon and city, and takes him into the forest with the Sheriff's men in hot pursuit.

This daring deed wins the Outcasts' admiration and trust. Robin has shown that the Sheriff can be foiled, even in his own castle, and a rough justice accomplished.

When Will Scarlett declines to lead the Outcasts as guerrilla fighters, saying he is too old and tired, Robin reluctantly accepts the role. His bravery and well-planned tactics—qualities he will demonstrate again and again as the struggle goes on—outweigh his extreme youth.

Robin has to use these traits often, as new outrages by the Sheriff and Sir Guy of Gisbourne constantly provoke the Outcasts' anger. He has to steer a course between rash action and fearful hiding, with some of the band urging each response. In this book he is shown taking some time to think over the right way to react to a new threat. When the Sheriff and Prince John put on a show of force by riding through Sherwood with a thousand heavily armed men, a silent forest greets them. The Outcasts are in hiding.

Robin decides the threat has to be met. He sets out to enlarge the band, and to recruit specialists who can manufacture weapons and train every Outcast in wrestling, swordplay, and archery. Thus a second theme emerges, that of effective leadership and its demands.

Like most other versions of the legend, this book lacks complex characterization.



Robin himself is the best developed character, as he is shown in many roles and struggling with hard decisions. Other characters are known chiefly by their names, physical traits, and occupations. Will Scarlett is shown as a hunchback and a former tailor. Friar Tuck, noted for his rotund body and enjoyment of trickery, is the resident cleric. Little John is, of course, a giant of a man with a russet beard. He often lingers behind to wind up the band's efforts, as when he returns late from the archery contest because he has waited so he can grab and bring Robin's forgotten prize of cash and a silver arrow back to him. Marion is a sweet and clever young woman who gives Robin emotional support and, later, love. The Sheriff of Nottingham and Sir Guy of Gisbourne are villains simply because they are greedy and cruel. Prince John is portrayed as popular lore has always depicted him, a rapacious man eager to usurp his brother's throne.

Some themes found in other versions of the Robin Hood story are missing here. As this book's Robin comes from a peasant's family rather than being the dispossessed Earl of Huntingdon, there is no theme of Robin working to recover his lands. Nor is there any hint of Marion being engaged to and held by Sir Guy, a suitable match by blood but not by temperament in many of the tales. The social class conflicts and the theme of Norman versus Saxon, found in some versions, do not appear.

Instead, there is another character and perhaps another thematic thread in the framing device which opens and ends the book.

An unnamed modern boy finds relics of Robin Hood after a storm and later reburies them and plants a tree on the site after living through the book's events in Robin's persona. In these sections, it is unclear whether he is Robin Hood's descendant or his reincarnation. His connection with another boy so far away in time symbolizes how the story, and the land where it happened, has endured for many centuries.

Whether it says anything more about psychic connections through time, or the bonding power of blood, is left for each reader to decide.



Topics for Discussion

1. Most of the men who join the Outcasts undergo a physical challenge or trial of some kind before they are accepted.

What are some examples? Why do you think this happens?

2. Does Robin's single-handed rescue of his father from the castle seem plausible? What about his acceptance as the Outcasts' leader when he is so young?

Why or why not?

3. Little John was King Richard's armorer and fought with him in the Holy Land.

Why does no one believe him when he comes back with word that the King is imprisoned in Austria?

4. Whenever Robin Hood lies low for a while, the Sheriff is sure he is dead.

Why is it so hard for the Sheriff to believe Robin is still alive?

5. Why was it illegal to hunt deer in Sherwood Forest? What are some presentday parallels?

6. What resources does the forest have that the Outcasts can use to survive there?

7. Why was Robin so unhappy at the king's court after he was pardoned and given a title? What does Sherwood Forest represent to him?

8. King Richard I was one of the great heroes of the Middle Ages. Yet when he plans a second Crusade, Robin tells him he should stay home instead. Do you think Robin was right? Why or why not?

9. Friar Tuck eats too much, plays practical jokes, and is a fierce fighter. Yet the Outcasts have no doubt that he is a man of God. Do you agree?

10. Marion is not shown doing many exciting things in this book, aside from her rescue of her son after he's been kidnapped. What are some of the ways she helps Robin and the other Outcasts carry out their plans?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Is there a real Robin Hood behind the legend? If so, what did he do? Support your answer with information from books and/or the Internet.
2. Robin Hood's adventures were first told to people through ballads, poems, and folk tales. Take one of the episodes from this book, or make up your own, and tell it in one of these formats.
3. Which character, other than Robin Hood, do you think deserves more attention in the story? Why?
4. In Robin of Sherwood and most other versions of this story, the forest is a place of refuge and safety. In many other stories with a medieval setting, ranging from fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" to complex young adult novels like Patricia McKillip's *Winter Rose*, the forest is a place of peril. How do you account for the difference? Give examples from both types of works.
5. Historians do not think Richard I was as good a king as he is portrayed in popular stories like that of Robin Hood.

Some historians also say that his brother John, who was king after him, is the victim of "bad press," that John was actually more unlucky than evil. Read some accounts of the two kings and their times, and give your conclusion about them, using evidence from your reading.

6. Read or view another version of the Robin Hood story, and write a paper comparing and contrasting its approach with that of this book.

For Further Reference

Cooper, Ilene. "The Booklist Interview: Michael Morpurgo." *Booklist*, no. 9-10 (1996): 816. This interview, primarily focused on the author's book *The War of Jenkins' Ear*, gives insights into how the author develops ideas for his books.

Keen, Maurice. "Robin Hood: A Peasant Hero." *History Today*, vol. 41, no. 10 (October 1991): First published in 1958, this historian's study offers interesting facts connecting the growth of the Robin Hood legend with such events as the rise of the longbow and the abolition of serfdom.

O'Meara, Donna. "Only in . . . England."

Faces: People, Places, and Cultures, no. 7 (March 2001): 6. This is a sidelight article about the Major Oak, which is over 600 years old, 33 feet in trunk diameter, and is said to have been a place where Robin Hood might have stored goods, or even hidden. The huge tree under which the boy found Robin's relics may have been based on it.

Phelan, Carolyn. Review of *Robin of Sherwood*. *Booklist*, no. 3 (1996): 350. This review states that the book is "a fine, original piece of storytelling," with special notice of its framing events and the watercolor illustrations.

Review of *Robin of Sherwood*. *Publishers Weekly*, no. 33 (1996): 84. This short review praises the book's "well-paced narrative" and Foreman's "dynamic" renditions of its scenes.



Related Titles/Adaptations

The author has no other directly related books. His most similar works, in content and approach, are *Joan of Arc: Of Domremy* (1999) and *Arthur: High King of Britain* (1995).

Both are illustrated by Michael Foreman and retell the deeds of a legendary/historical figure. Like *Robin of Sherwood*, these two books use the device of opening and closing with a young narrator of modern times as a way of "falling into" a long-ago world. His book *The Ghost of Grania O'Mallery* (1996) draws upon Irish lore about another outlaw, a woman pirate, and has an ecological theme.

Modern recastings of the Robin Hood legends are many and varied. Among the filmed versions that may be familiar to young readers are the classic 1938 movie *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, starring Errol Flynn, and *Prince of Thieves* (1991) with Kevin Costner. The television series *Robin of Sherwood*, which aired during the 1980s, was notable for its mix of Celtic paranormal elements and political/social themes. Some episodes from it are available as videocassettes.

In books, there is a wide range for young people of varying interests and reading levels. For those who want a relatively short text and many pictures, *Robin Hood* (1996) by Margaret Early, is a good choice, with a definite medieval tone. Robin McKinley's *The Outlaws of Sherwood* (1988) is an excellent young adult novel with more depth than many versions offer. *The Forestwife* (1993) by Theresa Tomlinson is a reframing of the story with Marian as the viewpoint character.

Related Web Sites

"Robin Hood." <http://www.benturner.com/robinhood/>. March 14,2002. A personal site maintained by a Robin Hood enthusiast, this includes a Robin Hood forum, many links to other sites, and a large assortment of other information.



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