

Sabriel Short Guide

Sabriel by Garth Nix

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Overview

Sabriel receives an otherworldly message from her father, Abhorsen, which leads her on a quest into the Old Kingdom and through the Gates of Death to find him and prevent a malevolent creature called Kerrigor from destroying the Land of the Living.

Along the way, she learns to look beyond appearances for the true faces of friends and enemies, and grows to accept that Death comes for everyone at some point.

About the Author

Award-winning author Garth Nix took the fantasy world by storm with the publication of his second young adult novel, *Sabriel*, in 1996. A native of Australia, Nix was born in Melbourne in 1963 and eventually settled in Sydney. He put his bachelor's degree in professional writing from the University of Canberra to good use, working as a sales representative, publicist, and senior editor in the publishing field. He also worked in a bookstore, served four years in the Australian Army Reserve, and established a marketing agency. Nix has focused solely on his writing since 1998. His background in the Australian Army Reserve adds a dose of realism to the border scenes and fighting in *Sabriel*.

According to Nix, his hobbies include "fishing, bodysurfing, collecting books of all kinds, reading, films, writing and lunch."

In the "How I Write" section of his website, Nix says his ideas "stem from a single image or thought that lodges in [his] brain and slowly grows into something that needs to be expressed." His idea for *Sabriel* came from a photograph of Hadrian's Wall. Using a Waterman fountain pen, Nix writes his first draft in longhand in small, easy-to-carry notebooks. When he types his second draft on the computer, he makes revisions as he goes.

Sabriel won Best Fantasy Novel and Best YA Novel in the 1995 Aurealis Awards for Excellence in Australian Speculative Fiction, and was nominated for an Australian fan award the same year. It is an American Library Association Notable Book, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and a LOCUS magazine Recommended Fantasy novel. The New York Public Library listed it as a Book for the Teen Age in 1997, and VOYA: The Voice of Youth Advocates listed it with the Best Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. Six states in the United States short-listed it for awards.



Setting

Sabriel opens with a prologue detailing the title character's birth and first encounter with Kerrigor. Almost before she takes her first breath, Sabriel slips past the First Gate of Death to be snatched up by Kerrigor from the stream flowing through the Second Gate. The Abhorsen, her father, follows close on her heels, managing to rescue her and banish Kerrigor for a short period of time. The prologue gives the book a definite fantasy flavor with a magical battle that sets the stage for later events and provides a glimpse into the enmity between man and demon.

The switch from fantasy prologue to a seemingly modern setting jars the senses momentarily until Sabriel secretly resurrects a younger classmate's pet rabbit that was hit by a car. This day, eighteen years later in Ancelstierre at the Wyverly College for Young Ladies of Quality, a messenger from beyond the Gates gives Sabriel her father's sword and bandolier which is holstered with seven bells of increasing size.

Abhorsen would only pass on the tools of his trade if he were unable to help himself, or if he were dead. Sabriel immediately makes plans to find him or his body, leaving behind the genteel, almost cloistered air of her school. Even though magic is on the curriculum at Wyverly because the school is so close to the border of the Old Kingdom, young ladies must receive special permission from their parents to take the class. Sabriel's ease with magic sets her on a level with the teacher of the class.

The country of Ancelstierre is reminiscent of the English countryside before World War II. Towns have electricity and motor vehicles, but Ancelstierre is still mainly an agrarian society with most people living in small villages and farming the land around them. The countryside close to the border between Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom, however, is affected by the magic leaking through the protective barriers, and monsters occasionally roam in the night.

Charter Mages help guard the border and protect the citizens. If Ancelstierre possessed a higher level of technology, computers, and biological and chemical warfare, it would change the entire flavor of the book by taking the focus off the people.

The Perimeter Command guards the border at a fortified barrier resembling Hadrian's Wall. The soldiers possess an odd mix of technological and medieval weaponry as they parade around in battle fatigues toting guns, with swords strapped to their waists or backs. When technology fails without warning at the border, the swords are their backup weapons. They also rely on the Charter Mages' magic and the binding power of Charter symbols to defeat the Dead that do not stay dead. The wall also symbolizes the gradual change from magic and superstition to technology by providing a physical point of change from which the characters move further into magic or technology. Because technology is pure science and reason, and magic relies heavily on belief, magic refuses to work around technology. Reason can defeat belief, and vice versa, which is why Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom are polar opposites.



Time moves differently in Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom, emphasizing the technology versus magic debate. A patrol can spend two weeks in the Old Kingdom and return to find their comrades think they have been gone only eight days: the soldiers left back at base rely on their clocks to keep track of time, while the soldiers on patrol in the Old Kingdom have to rely upon the physical changes in their environment from night to day.

Sabriel's encounter with Kerrigor takes place in a waterway beneath the ruins of the castle in the crumbling capitol city of the Old Kingdom. There has not been a ruler for four hundred years, nor a regent for the past twenty. The water is a pale imitation of the various streams, rivers, and oceans flowing through the Nine Gates of Death, but Sabriel carefully treads them using secrets learned by Abhorsens in the past to find her father and free him.

Large stretches of unpopulated, desolate land might have been inspired by Nix's travels through the Middle East while writing Sabriel. The description of Sabriel's robelike armor and helmet also has a Middle Eastern flair. Nix also wrote parts of this novel at the beach, and Sabriel's journey takes her to the ocean as she nears the end of her quest.



Social Sensitivity

At eighteen, Sabriel is a confused mixture of woman and child, learning to be confident of her own abilities yet still wanting and needing her father's guidance and advice. In this way, she typifies older teens who want to be treated as adults but have second thoughts and doubts when the time comes.

Sabriel's reaction when she first sees Touchstone as a nude wooden figurehead is perfectly normal. She experiences an embarrassed fascination with his complete nudity, having only seen pictures in textbooks.

His exposed body conversely makes her aware of her own, covered by clothes and armor in the beginning of a sexual awakening only hinted at in this book.

Sabriel's fight against death for the life of her father is also a normal reaction. Death is something that happens to other people, other families. Teens especially blind themselves to the possibility of death as a consequence of their actions as they experiment with greater freedom and new experiences.

Sabriel shows an obsession with how death ends life and action, but when Colonel Horyse steps into battle after experiencing a vision foretelling his death, he emphasizes the point that everyone has a time and place to die. Worry will not change the future, but action will.

Another sensitive topic for teens is the separation Sabriel experiences from her father. With high divorce rates today, many teens are separated from one parent or the other. Sabriel's longing to be with her father is offset by her understanding that he left her at Wyverly for her safety and benefit.

Many teens do not have her reassurance and lose touch completely with a parent after divorce due to distance or lack of concern on the parent's part.

Literary Qualities

Nix tells the story almost solely through the point of view of Sabriel. Her thoughts, her fears, her triumphs are foremost. The only change in point of view occurs near the end when Touchstone begins to awaken from his melancholy state and begins to let go of his guilt and self-recrimination.

Water appears as a recurring motif. It is a source of life when it falls as rain, and it stands as a barrier to the undead preventing their passage. The undead cannot cross the rivers or ocean waters without a bridge.

At the same time, each Gate of Death is represented by some form of water, whether the seductively, gentle danger hidden in the fast-flowing stream of the First Gate or the crashing waves, hidden eddies, and rampaging rivers of the later gates.

Keys also appear as a motif. The Abhorsen's surcoat is woven in a pattern of keys reflecting the fact that Sabriel, as the latest one to bear the title, is a key to banishing the undead, a key to the Gates of Death, and a key to the survival of Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom. She is a key in that only her touch can release Mogget's collar, and only her skills can release Touchstone from his wooden tomb.

Nix takes imagery to new heights as he deftly captures the essence of a character or the look of a background with vivid descriptions that are deceptively simple: The final confirmation of strangeness lay beyond the Wall. It was clear and cool on the Ancelstierre side, and the sun was shining—but Sabriel could see snow falling steadily behind the Wall, and snowheavy clouds clustered right up to the Wall, where they suddenly stopped, as if some mighty weather-knife had simply sheared through the sky.



Themes and Characters

"A year ago, I turned the final page of *The Book of the Dead*. I don't feel young any more," Sabriel says to Colonel Horyse when they meet for the first time at the border.

The title character is tall and slender with ghostly pale skin and raven-black hair. She has been fighting undead creatures since childhood, and her eighteen years weigh heavily on her shoulders. Her burden grows heavier when her father disappears and she realizes his name, "Abhorsen," is a title that has been passed along to her.

Like her father, Sabriel is "an uncommon necromancer": she sends the Dead back to Death rather than calling them forth to serve her as most necromancers do. Her journey to find her father shows her curious blend of wisdom and innocence as she takes the prodigious amounts of book learning she has amassed over the years and puts it to practical use. Her situation is learn or die, and she learns quickly, but at no time does she become a larger-than-life heroine who is unbeatable. There is always an element of chance in her battles that could just as easily shift to favor the other side. Her flaws make her more accessible as a character.

The Abhorsen, her father, actually appears only briefly, but readers still get the sense of a man of honor and strongly held convictions who does not abuse his power as a necromancer. He sends Sabriel to school in Ancelstierre to protect her from the Dead creatures he fights, but he faithfully visits with her through a spell on the full moon every month. Sabriel's memories show him as a loving father, and he only drags her into battle as a final resort. He accepts his own death, but he fights to keep his only daughter alive.

Colonel Horyse realizes who Sabriel is almost from the moment they meet. By calling her Abhorsen, he accords her the support and honor her position expects, but he relates to her in a father-daughter manner saying she reminds him of his own daughter who is Sabriel's age. A tough, battle-hardened warrior, Horyse is not surprised by much anymore except the appearance of a teenage girl as defender of the realm.

At her father's home, Sabriel inherits Mogget, a creature appearing to be a large cat wearing a collar saturated with binding spells. The spells force Mogget to serve Sabriel, but it does so at its own pace in its own sly manner. The semblance of a cat bestows a cuddly, domesticated image on what turns out to be a wild creature composed of Free Magic that only wants the Abhorsen dead so it will be freed.

In a hidden valley, Sabriel and Mogget find the funeral barges of the royal family.

One figurehead of a nude young man catches Sabriel's eye, but when she examines him closer she feels faint emanations of magic running beneath his wooden frame. The magic leads past the First Gate of Death where she realizes the young man has been trapped half in, half out of Death. Following her gut instincts, she returns him fully to life. The young man claims to have been a member of the Royal Guard, but the only name he is willing to give is "Touchstone," the name commonly given to the fool in folktales.



Throughout the novel, he is the stiffest character in actions and demeanor, perhaps as an offshoot of so many years trapped as a wooden man. Only as his feelings for Sabriel bring him back to life does he begin to relax somewhat, but he still carries a burden of guilt as a result of his unwitting betrayal of the royal family he served.

Kerrigor embodies the evil Sabriel fights.

He is absolute evil without even a hint of compassion to link him to the humanity he cast aside hundreds of years ago. His quest for power corrupted his soul and made him anathema to the Land of the Living. His goal is to open the Gates of Death and conquer the living.

The primary theme of Sabriel is the quest, or journey. Sabriel undertakes a journey to find her father, and life is a journey towards death. Even though Sabriel has dealt with death and the undead since her birth, when it comes to her own father, she is as much in denial as anyone facing the loss of a loved one. Her quest is not to defeat death per se, because it is a natural part of the life cycle, but to face her own fears of death and loss and, if not conquer, at least learn to accept them.



Topics for Discussion

1. Sabriel is torn between two worlds yet comfortable in both. How do teens (or children) now deal with the pull of two cultures?
2. Colonel Horyse compares Sabriel to his daughter. Does this make him underestimate her capability as the Abhorsen?
3. How does the Charter work? Does it compare to religion in any way?
4. How does the idea of nine gates in Sabriel compare/contrast with Dante's vision of the levels of Hell in *The Inferno*?
5. What purpose does magic serve? What are the differences between Free Magic and Charter Magic?
6. Do people still believe in magic? Or do most people associate magic with witchcraft?
7. Is the Paperwing truly alive, or is it merely animated by the spells cast upon it?
8. Why does Touchstone conceal his true identity?
9. Does the Perimeter Command fit your idea of a military outpost? What peculiarities exist here that are not seen in the modern foot soldiers?
10. What is the importance of the recurring theme of water?
11. Is the Abhorsen a suitable father figure, or does he abandon his responsibilities to Sabriel? Would you want the Abhorsen for your father? Why or why not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When was Hadrian's Wall built? Who built it, and why? Would you compare it to the Berlin Wall in Germany or the Great Wall of China?
2. Describe the history and the purpose of boarding schools. How have they changed over time?
3. What is the purpose of a border patrol?

What are some borders that are still being patrolled today?

4. How does the idea of nine gates in Sabriel compare/contrast with Dante's vision of the levels of Hell in *The Inferno*?
5. Discuss the history of—and belief in— magic and mysticism through one culture or group of people such as the Druids, the Native Americans, or the African tribes.
6. Sabriel uses skis to reach the Perimeter Command crossing. What is the history of skiing as a form of travel? When did it become more of a sport?
7. The Perimeter Command uses swords in addition to guns. Discuss the history of either weapon.

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Related Titles

The second title in Nix's trilogy beginning with *Sabriel* was released in 2001. *Lirael: Daughter of the Clayr* focuses on a group of people only briefly mentioned in *Sabriel*.

Nix's science fiction title, *Shade's Children*, also offers a strong female teen protagonist leading a band of teens into battle against a menace taking over Earth.

Sally Estes, in her review for *Booklist*, suggests fans of the fantasy *The Golden Compass*, book one of Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy, will enjoy the adventures of *Sabriel* and her companions.

Lyra, the main character in Pullman's trilogy, has a demon named Pantalaimon as a companion, although Pantalaimon is not looking for a chance to escape like Mogget.

The setting combines the real and fantasy, starting out at Oxford University in England and mentioning modern countries with a blend of historically extinct peoples and countries mixed with fantasy. Both *Sabriel* and *Lyra* lack the influence of an immediate parental figure of either sex, yet both are pivotal to events shaping their worlds.

Other fantasy adventures with appeal for readers of *Sabriel* are Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword*, which follows the adventures of a young woman named Harry who is kidnapped into a foreign culture to become one of their greatest heroines when she saves them from total annihilation. A prequel tale, *The Hero and the Crown*, tells of the Princess Aerin who originally wielded the Blue Sword in defense of her country. In Mercedes Lackey's *Arrows of the Queen*, a young farm girl is chosen by one of the magical horse-like Companions to be the Queen's Own, a position of tremendous power for a fourteen-year-old insecure about herself and her future.

Related Web Sites

Nix, Garth, http://www.eidolon.net/garth_nix/). June 16, 2001. Author's website.



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