

The Winter King: A Novel of Arthur Study Guide

The Winter King: A Novel of Arthur by Bernard Cornwell

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Contents

The Winter King: A Novel of Arthur Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 3-51.....	4
Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 51-94.....	7
Part 2, The Princess Bride, 97-155.....	9
Part 2, The Princess Bride, pgs. 156-184.....	12
Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 187-241.....	14
Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 242-266.....	18
Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 269-331.....	20
Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 332-361.....	23
Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 365-397.....	26
Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 398-425.....	28
Characters.....	30
Objects/Places.....	42
Themes.....	46
Style.....	49
Quotes.....	52
Topics for Discussion.....	58



Plot Summary

The Winter King by Bernard Cornwell begins a three-novel story of Arthur, showing him intending to unite Britain against the invading Saxons and Irish, but indulging his passion for Princess Guinevere sowing the seeds of civil war. The novel examines closely the society of fifth-century Britain, particularly the growing clash between pagans and Christians.

The Winter King by Bernard Cornwell purports to be the reminiscences of an aged monk, Derfel Cadarn, who is trying to debunk the growing Camelot legends by recording his eyewitness account

as Arthur's right-hand man. Each of the five parts begins with the two of them and Derfel's cranky superior, Bp. Sansum, also a participant, discussing the project.

The High King Uther needs an heir, but his grandson Mordred is born crippled. Christian and pagan attendants compete from the delivery onward to control and manipulate him. Uther's illegitimate son, Arthur, banished to Normandy, is summoned to protect the child after his mother Norwenna is brutally murdered by her new husband, King Gundleus of Silesia, who wants the throne. The baby king escapes assassination but it nearly ceased by Gundleus before Arthur arrives.

As part of the power balancing among kingdoms, Arthur is betrothal to Princess Ceinwyn of Powys, but jilts of her to marry Guinevere of Henys Wryn. Ceinwyn's father, Gorfyddyd, vows to avenge her by taking Arthur's life, and the peace of Britain is destroyed. As warfare breaks out with the invading Saxons, King Ban of Benoic across the English Channel, whom Arthur had served as warlord while living in exile, demands that Arthur live up to his oath to defend him against the Normans. Unable to keep his oath, Arthur dispatches Derfel to do his best. Derfel immediately clashes with Edling (Crown Prince) Lancelo, but befriends his half-brother Galahad. The Normans besiege the island capital, Ynys Trebes, home to irreplaceable manuscripts from antiquity. Derfel finds the Druid Merlin, missing from Britain for years, in monastic disguise working in the library. They narrowly escape to Britain.

Merlin again disappears on his own business to restore Britain to its pre-Roman Gods, while Derfel rescues his beloved Nimue, Merlin's lover and priestess, from the Isle of the Dead. Arthur's foes mass against him and a major battle becomes inevitable. It takes place at Lugg Vale, after which Britons are united to face the growing Saxon hordes.



Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 3-51

Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 3-51 Summary

As winter nears, the old Monk Derfel scribes stories about Arthur for Queen Igraine of Powys. He pretends to be writing a Gospel in Saxon to keep it from his illiterate and bigoted bishop. Derfel begins: In the last year of the High King Uther's reign, Princess Norwenna shrieks in hard labor in Caer Cadarn. A Christian, she bans pagan charms, but Uther, desperate for an heir, summons Morgan to take over the birthing. She delivers and is ordered to care thereafter for clubfooted future King Mordred.

Norwenna, Mordred, and a retinue arrive in Ynys Wydryn, Merlin's realm, already crowded with children like Nimue and Derfel, "snatched from the Gods," who are learning under Morgan to become Druids to restore Britain's proper Gods. Pagans and Christians taunt one another's sanctuaries, Thorn and Holy Thorn. From Ligessac, chief of Mordred's guard, Derfel learns the truth about the death of the Edling (Crown Prince) Mordred, which Uther blames on Arthur. With Arthur banished, the Saxons will resume their conquests. One day, Bp. Bedwin, King Gundleus of Siluria, and Gundleus' Druid Tanaburs arrive to examine Norwenna as marriage material. They are curious about the contents of Merlin's secret room, but Nimue has sneaked inside and emerges, screaming, naked, and wearing talismans on her head. They flee. Nimue and Derfel lie together in the dreadful Tower, seal a blood pact, and talk about magic and their vocations as priestess and warrior. She has not yet suffered any of the Three Wounds prerequisite to belonging to the Gods.

At the High Council at Glevum, a Roman town inside the border of Powys, feeling the approach of death, Uther summons the meeting, with Morgan representing Merlin; against her wishes, Nimue and Derfel go along. After the mock battles, heroic songs, and Christian rituals at which a young priest Sansum plays a key role preaching, Nimue solemnly tells Derfel that they have but one chance to regain the Gods.

Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 3-51 Analysis

The novel opens as the aged Monk Derfel describes how he is writing the tales of Arthur for Queen Igraine of Powys, the benefactor of his monastery. He works under the pretense of preparing a Saxon language Gospel, lest his superior, Bp. Sansum, Arthur's determined enemy, find out. After this introduction, the ailing High King Uther is portrayed as needing a male heir by his Edling (Crown Prince) Mordred's widow, Norwenna. As a Christian, she has banned pagan birth rituals and has on hand Uther's most trusted advisor, Bp. Bedwin. When Uther's patience runs out he sends Derfel, then a boy on the cusp of manhood, to summon Morgan, the great Druid Merlin's protégé, to deliver the child. It appears with a minor deformity that can be overlooked because it is a male. Determined that this new Mordred survive, Uther commends him to Morgan, his illegitimate and unacknowledged daughter. That Uther blames his illegitimate son



Arthur, Morgan's younger brother, for the first Mordred's death and has banished him, is left cloudy.

The long second chapter is dense with background information on Merlin's hereditary realm, Ynys Wydryn, also known as Avalon and the Thorn, on the coming to Britain of the Roman legions and in their wake Christianity, and the ongoing struggle of faiths. The Monk Derfel confesses that during his youth he scoffs at the claims of Christianity, which he now embraces, but still dismisses the legend of Joseph of Arimathea's budding staff, having seen the monks' chicanery with his own eyes. Ynys Wydryn is peopled with a fascinating variety of characters: Nimue, sole survivor of a shipwreck in the River Severn, who becomes Derfel's playmate and later Merlin's lover and second-in-command; Morgan, Arthur's disfigured illegitimate sister, Merlin's prophetess and lover until he turns to Nimue; Sebile, a beautiful Saxon slave with whom Derfel enjoys speaking his native tongue; Pellinore, a blind, mad former king who inspires Derfel to become a warrior, and Gudovan and Hywel, who teach Derfel to read and write and to fight, respectively.

Having established the characters in this crazy community, which Derfel insists is a pleasant place to grow up, strangers approach. The description of the compound and defenders makes it clear that if they do not come in peace, they will have their way. Gundleus and his Druid Tanaburs, accompanied by Bp. Bedwin, are come to look over Norwenna as marriage material for the already-married king. Having been seen as expendable at the birth of her son, she is barely acknowledged now; if Gundleus decides to have her, he will deal with Uther, not her. After the formalities, Gundleus and Tanaburs decide to examine Merlin's private room, but are scared off by Nimue, who has sneaked inside and made herself gory and horrible. They flee in panic.

Nimue and Derfel remain in Merlin's quarters, scattered with the revolting tools of his trade, and talk. Nimue slices both of their left palms to make a blood pact that will bind them for life and into the Otherworld. She explains her sense of oneness with the Gods, which cannot be manipulated by magic but from which flows magic, and the "Three Wounds of Wisdom" that a Dervish or Priestess must endure as preparation to Body, Pride, and Mind. Merlin has gone through them all, Nimue through none. This swiftly changes at Gundleus' hands, and Nimue and Derfel find another ground for unity: the need to destroy their tormentors Gundleus and Tanaburs.

The third chapter depicts the first High Council held in Britain in sixty years as Uther, feeling his mortality, arranges the fate of his kingdom. As Merlin's deputy, Morgan is invited, despite her sex. Nimue annoys her by tagging along, implying that Merlin wants her there. Derfel, a country boy, gawks at the Roman ruins in Glevum, located just inside the border of Gwent, making Tewdric the host monarchy. By contrast, Nimue sniffs at them; such ostentation is the cause of the Romans' fall. The rituals accompanying councils is described in vivid detail. There are mock combats between the kings' champions that threaten to become real killing scenes. The role of champions recurs throughout the novel. Participants next enjoy epic poems and songs about past glorious battles, with still-living heroes being saluted. Derfel has already indicated how distorted such tales become.



Against Morgan's orders, Nimue and Derfel then attend a Christian service, which the now-Christian, then-pagan narrator sees for the first time. He asks many naïve questions and describe the events and participants. Chief among these is an up-and-coming young priest, Sansum, who delivers a diatribe on Britons' failure to throw off the old Gods. Nimue has had enough and leads the way out. She tells Derfel that Britain has but one chance to win back the God, and in amazement tells him that it is not the God's task to love humans. She brushes off Derfel's blushing declaration of love.



Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 51-94

Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 51-94 Summary

The High Council aims at forging peace among kingdoms. Two of the dozen thrones on the dais are empty. Below the royalty sit counselors, magistrates, and Morgan and Nimue. Bedwin and Agricola report on the Saxon threat and state of the kingdoms. Gundleus appears and takes his place. Later, Uther talks of securing his Edling's future. He disqualifies Arthur as a candidate to wed Norwenna, and Gundleus, having paid the bride-price, accepts baptism. He is unhappy to be saddled by a council and three oath-bound defenders of Mordred's life: Tewdric, Owain, and Merlin. After a terrifying performance by Nimue and talk of the "Knowledge of Britain," Morgan says that Merlin's oath is dependent on an oath from Arthur. Uther relents.

Norwenna and Gundleus get married and are parting that night, he to battle the Irish and she, as a Queen, to Ynys Wydryn, where life continues unchanged during a blissful, bountiful summer. Arthur remains in Armorica, where King Ban is reluctant to lose his warlord. When Uther dies and is cremated in the ancient ways, contrary to Bedwin's desires, Morgan mourns him and the bishop summons Arthur home. When Powys attacks Gwent, the Saxons join the fray, Owain, assigned to take Norwenna and the baby to Christian Durnovaria, diverts to help Dumnonia's ally fight for survival. As the war goes well, Gundleus comes to take Mordred to Caer Cadarn for acclamation as King. Norwenna is determined that it be a Christian ritual. Morgan and Nimue do not object but divine that treachery is ahead. Norwenna expels them. Gundleus arrives with twenty horsemen and is admitted to the compound. Hywel senses trouble but is ordered down. Sebile brings Mordred out. As Gundleus greets his wife, he plunges his sword into her and stabs the crying baby. Ligessac defects to the Silurians and helps massacre his own and Merlin's men. A few are allowed to escape. Derfel runs to save Nimue, who hides in Merlin's room. He hears her scream as Gundleus rapes her and gouges out an eye. After ransacking the place, the Silurians set it on fire. Derfel drags and carries Nimue out through a hole and down to the beach, where Hywel lies dead. Derfel takes his sword and loads Nimue in a marsh boat to escape. They are pursued in slower craft. Nimue announces that she now has two of the Wounds of Wisdom and now only must go mad.

They arrive in Ermid's Hall after the other refugees and learn that Gwlyddyn and Ralla have substituted their baby for Mordred. Knowing that Gundleus will soon see this, they walk to sanctuary in Caer Cadarn—knowing that Gundleus will anticipate this and seize the throne of Dumnonia. In the woods, Derfel and Gwlyddyn ambush two scouts, marking Derfel's first elating combat and kill. As they approach Caer Cadarn, Gundleus' war band, including cavalry, appears. As the fugitives run, Dumnonian horsemen come to their inadequate defense. Mighty Owain exchanges pre-battle insults with Gundleus, shield-walls form, and both sides drink to grow courageous. A horn sounds sweetly three times and, Godlike, Arthur appears.



Part 1, A Child in Winter, pgs. 51-94 Analysis

The High Council continues with its business sessions. State of the kingdoms reports are given, with the late Prince Mordred's death and Arthur's bravery in battle going unmentioned. The poetic versions sung the night before have already taken root. Uther emphasizes the centrality of his kingdom as a breadbasket for Britain and the need for all to unite to prevent the Saxon's from invading. Currently they are being bought off at a high price. Siluria and Powys, missing from the meeting, are causing troubles up north and it seems likely they will be fought by a coalition before Gundleus of Silesia arrives. He reports that all is well. The royals discuss possible husbands for Norwenna, to serve as baby Mordred's protectors, of course, but the decision to give her to Gundleus is already made. When Arthur's name is first brought up, Uther publicly and explicitly denies paternity of Arthur and disallows him as a candidate. The royals create a council to advise Gundleus and appoint three men to protect the Edling. Morgan accepts the honor on Merlin's behalf before Nimue leaps up, screams, spins, spits on Gundleus' shield, and talks of Merlin seeking the "Knowledge of Britain," that will knit the country together and restore to it the Gods. As the Christians protest loudly, Morgan adds the proviso that Arthur must be a fourth protector. Three is a luckier number, but Arthur is a mighty warrior, so the assembly agrees and Uther has to accept.

The fourth chapter shows the carefully-constructed peace fall apart when Uther dies. This contrasts with the fairness of the weather that summer and the abundance of the harvest. Norwenna, married to Gundleus but still living unhappily among the pagans at Ynys Wydryn, looks forward to taking her baby to his birthplace, Caer Cadarn, to be acclaimed King, and then to live among fellow Christians in a proper place. She sharply rebukes Morgan and Nimue, never the best of friends, when they unite to warn her of trouble that they foresee divining in a cauldron. They see rightly, of course. Gundleus comes to the Thorn, kills Norwenna and the baby, rapes Nimue and gouges out one of her eyes, and burns Merlin's compound down. Few escape, but these include Derfel and agonized, near-crazy Nimue, who says that she has now experienced two of the Three Wounds needed to become a prophetess. As the fugitives assemble across the lake, it is revealed that Gwlyddyn and Ralla have selflessly substituted their son for Mordred, who must be rushed to sanctuary at Caer Cadarn before Gundleus realizes what has happened and heads to the only logical place. From the time that Gundleus arrives, Cornwell indicates that something is afoot among the protectors, but the plot moves so swiftly that the murders come as a shock

Cadarn, who has been longing for combat since being trained by Hywel, picks up his dead teacher's sword, which he will name in his honor, Hywelbane. Note that all warriors name their swords. Derfel uses it to ambush two Saxon foot patrols, fighting alongside vengeful Gwlyddyn, who offers him practical advice. Derfel next joins the shield-wall short of Caer Cadarn as Gundleus overtakes them. He describes such combat in minute detail, including the ritual cursing, heavy drinking, false charges, and sheer terror. He fills in more technical data later in the book; at this point he is faithfully recalling his experience as a rookie. They are saved when Arthur appears. The horn blasts that herald his coming recur in the book's final Battle of Lugg Vale.



Part 2, The Princess Bride, 97-155

Part 2, The Princess Bride, 97-155 Summary

Igraine is unhappy that Derfel writes nothing of Arthur's early years. Derfel summarizes what little he has learned. Igraine urges Derfel to write faster and include fantasies. Derfel admits to adding drama to Arthur's arrival: Owain had known he is coming. The battle is a rout. Young Derfel is dazzled by Arthur and his horsemen. Gwlyddyn introduces them and Derfel is drawn into Arthur's "infectious confidence." Arthur assigns Derfel to Owain for further seasoning but promising to take him into his force. All wait for Arthur to kill Gundleus, but he spares him, to be judged by kings rather than for revenge, but allows Owain to claim Gundleus' lover Ladwys. Derfel reminds Tanaburs of their first meeting and scares him into the forest, yelling back that Derfel's mother is alive. That night, the Dumnonians feast at Caer Cadarn. Arthur orders rebuilding of Merlin's hall and refurbishes Uther's Roman villa at Lindinis. Derfel works the fields, trains, and learns about Merlin, Arthur, and the Isle of the Dead. He is on guard duty as Owain talks about falsifying tax records in and plots with greedy Prince Cadwy of Isca an attack on tin miners diverting profits to Kernow. Derfel rues having to take part in something so cowardly, but obeys, feels terrible, and as a monk continues repenting for it.

Derfel takes part under Griffid ap Annan in autumn battles against Saxon raiders near Venta as Mordred's councilors argue about whether Christians or pagans should raise the boy king. Owain, who worships all Gods equally, volunteers. Griffid believes this is to keep him out of Arthur's hands. Derfel is eager for his first real battle and disappointed when the Saxons see bad omens and withdraw. In the next encounter, Derfel kills four, earning respect, and learns from a captive, Wlenca, of a new Saxon king, Cerdic. Arthur meanwhile, has beaten Aelle's Saxons in Gwent and cut off Gorfyddyd's left arm in battle. After the solstice, Mordred is acclaimed at Caer Cadarn. Nimue arrives early, sporting a golden eye, observes that Derfel and Lunete are mismatched, and predicts that he will be a great warrior. Merlin is gone because the "Test of Britain" has come. Arthur attends out of curiosity. The royalty are tense. Morgan organizes the ceremony but leaves it to the Druid Balise, Merlin's mentor, to officiate. Bedwin offers a Christian prayer before the crying king is carried around the rocks on a shield and offered symbols of office. Owain then offers the ceremonial challenge to object to the acclamation or swear allegiance. Over Bedwin's objections, Wlenca is offered as a human sacrifice and his blood-trail is analyzed for omens of a successful reign.

Tristan arrives during the cheerless feast, armed contrary to custom and demanding justice for his slain tin miners. On his honor, Cadwy denies responsibility, but Tristan produces an eyewitness, nine-year-old Sarlinna. As Arthur interrogates her kindly, she describes Owain's tattoos. Bedwin believes her, but agrees that she is not "among the tongued-ones" entitled to testify, whereas Owain is. Knowing the truth but oath-bound not to talk, Derfel is oppressed. Arthur finds him on guard duty, insists he not break his word. They talk of war as only a means of gaining peace, and of Gorfyddyd's children



Cuneglas and Ceinwyn, whom Arthur intends to marry to help unite Britain. War with Kernow must be avoided. Derfel's reaction convinces Arthur to fight Owain as Tristan's champion and then become Mordred's sole protector until he comes of age. Derfel is sorry that Owain must die. Dawn brings heavy rain as Arthur calls out Owain over Bedwin's protests. When Owain objects to his using magical Excalibur, Arthur borrows Derfel's Hwylbane, and swears that Derfel has not betrayed him. Owain takes the offensive until he slips in the mud and Arthur thereafter is unrelenting. Both suffer wounds before Owain misjudges a feint and is slain. No one challenges the outcome and Arthur takes Derfel into his troop.

Part 2, The Princess Bride, 97-155 Analysis

Part two opens with Queen Igraine visiting Derfel, requesting faster writing and information about Arthur's early life that Derfel simply does not know. She wants to hear about shape-shifting, while Derfel admits at the end of the first part to have committed tale-shifting—making Arthur's arrival more dramatic than it had actually been.

The rout of Gundleus' force is omitted because Derfel is too overwhelmed by the sight of Arthur to observe much. A few warriors escape (and come back later to haunt Arthur) but Gundleus is captured along with his lover. Morgan and Nimue want vengeance on him, but Arthur insists that any punishment be the result of legal proceedings. Otherwise, warfare cannot be abolished as he wishes. Having told Igraine all he knows about young Arthur, Derfel recalls his first impressions of Arthur, giving Igraine what she wants to read: "a face of kindness," and then correcting it to put together a mosaic of all that puts him in awe: his face, his armor, his horse, his manner, and the way he makes everyone with whom he speaks feel special. Derfel repeats this throughout his story. Working one night beside Arthur re-roofing the villa, Derfel hears his views on many things and is promised one day to fight by his side. In the meantime, he is left with mighty Owain to complete his military training. Owain teaches him two things that save Derfel in later fights: stab do not slash, and do not send horses against a shield-wall.

Derfel senses tension between Arthur and Owain, who claim to be great friends, and is disillusioned when Owain schemes with Cadwy to teach dishonest tin miners a lesson. Pretending to be Irish invaders, the conspirators descend on a camp and slaughter men, women, children, and animals. Derfel has spent much time describing the tattoos worn by Cadwy's people, so even a single survivor would be dangerous. This crime, for which aged Derfel still repents, soon pits Arthur and Owain in mortal combat and the matter of the oath of secrecy which each cowardly warrior swears speeds Derfel's transfer directly to Arthur's band. This chapter describes the social structure of Britain, divided into clans and septs and the island's entry into the Bronze Age. Note Tanaburs' claim that Derfel's mother is still alive. This taunt recurs at the novel's conclusion.

The sixth chapter deals with war and peace. The Saxon threat increases and Derfel experiences the thrill of true combat. Veterans, including Arthur, tell him of the horrors and he experiences some, but gains his comrade's respect by his first foray. The young Saxon prisoner with whom Derfel talks becomes the sacrifice at King Mordred's



acclimation. Derfel is sorry about his horrid death, which is dragged out to allow the Druid and Morgan to augur for signs of how the reign will go. Morgan is troubled by what she sees but keeps it to herself. The rituals of kingship are carefully described and interpreted.

The banquet afterward is subdued until Kernow's Edling, Tristan, arrives, demanding restitution for his father's subjects who were treacherously slain while mining tin. He presents a young survivor as an eyewitness, who implicates Owain. There begins a debate about legal witnesses. Only Lords, Druids, priests, fathers speaking about their children, magistrates, gift-givers speaking about their gifts, maidens speaking about their virginity, herdsmen speaking about their animals, and the condemned speaking their final words are "Tongued-ones." Owain as a Lord cannot be contradicted by a girl. The intricacies of "sarhaed" (blood-price) are examined. Knowing that, unless Kernow obtains justice, war is inevitable, Arthur decides to accuse Owain on Tristan's behalf and fight him to the death. He is careful not to let Derfel break his death-oath to his fellow warriors, but obtains an agreement that Owain dying to avert war would not be unjust. Arthur's obsession with oaths runs throughout the novel.

The one-on-one combat is described in detail, beginning with the challenge, the insults, and the bishop's attempt to head it off. Arthur fights with Derfel's sword rather than his own because Owain objects to its magical powers. The night before, Derfel wonders why Arthur hopes it will rain, but sees as barefooted Arthur keeps his balance better than heavy-booted Owain. Arthur transforms during the battle, as all trace of kindness in his face gives way to a shocking "rictus of hate." Having endangered Derfel among Owain's men, Arthur takes him into his own band. He has shared with Derfel his intention to become virtual dictator of Dumnonia until Mordred comes of age. Arthur's humanity returns as he reminds Derfel to find the young witness a new kitten.



Part 2, The Princess Bride, pgs. 156-184

Part 2, The Princess Bride, pgs. 156-184 Summary

Lunete, who is pregnant, is staying in Lindinis when Arthur takes his men north to winter in Corinium. She and Derfel's comrades blame him for Owain's death and close in to kill him when Nimue scares them off. Nimue swears to kill Gundleus if he is released for political reasons and dismisses the idea that Arthur can bring peace to Britain. Before heading out, Arthur issues judgments on many matters, including assigning Mordred to the Christian magistrate Nabur, paying him well, requiring him to allow a pagan tutor, and returning Ladwys to Gundleus' side. Arthur swears before the kings that he is not usurping Mordred's throne, but it is clear that he is now sole arbiter in Dumnonia. En route north, they stop in Ynys Wydryn to view construction and leave Morgan and Nimue there.

In Corinium, Lunete gives birth to a boy who dies shortly. Ailleann's twins, Amhar and Loholt, are terrors. Arthur forbids them to go home to Benoit as his marriage to Ceinwyn approaches. There is no news of Merlin. Arthur joins Tewdric on a mission of peace to meet Gorfyddyd. Gundleus and Ladwys accompany them as prisoners. A notorious fool, King Leodegan of Henis Wyren is sent to greet them. He points out Arthur's battle damage along the march. He has daughters to marry off, including Guinevere, who is betrothed to the slovenly, impoverished Valerin. Her sister Gwenhwyfach has no prospects. The cruel Irish are menacing in the West, threatening to pull Britons out of fighting the Saxons.

The company reaches Caer Sws, Powys' functional center, and are taken into Gorfyddyd's feasting hall. His Edling, Cuneglas, who desires peace, presides, calls for a mutual defense pact among Powys, Gwent, and Dumnonia. He hopes his marriage to Helledd of Elmet will bring that kingdom into the alliance to face, united, the Saxons. Gorfyddyd's price is to be named High King and to have his cousin, Gundleus, restored to his throne. To seal it, he gives his daughter, Ceinwyn, to Arthur. The betrothal ceremony takes place in a hall atop Caer Dolforwyn. Arthur appears in dazzling armor, soon followed by Ceinwyn, who offers her intended a halter as a token of obedience. Powys' Druid Iorweth blesses them. Derfel in the background loses his heart to beautiful Ceinwyn and is sorry that she is entering a marriage of dynastic convenience. During the partying, Ceinwyn gives all members of Arthur's guard, including Derfel, a small token. Derfel gets a brooch. Arthur, meanwhile, sees in back of the hall a beautiful red-haired woman who steals his heart and Britain, on the brink of peace, is broken.

Arthur is mad with love, possessed, and sure that no one will fight over a broken engagement. Tewdric and Sansum both fail to straighten Arthur out before he rides off, ostensibly to complete wedding arrangements but in fact to elope with Guinevere. Sansum performs the brief ceremony in a glade, after being promised a bishopric, appointment as Mordred's chaplain (with funding), and a place on the council. Guinevere demands the restoration of her father's kingdom as a wedding gift. They rush



home ahead of Gorfyddyd's retribution. Fate is inexorable. Word spreads rapidly. Valerin comes to fight, but Arthur refuse. Cuneglas sends Iorweth to rescue the peace pact, arguing that a Christian marriage is invalid and he should have Guinevere as lover and Ceinwyn as wife. Bedwin agrees. Not even the threat of warfare will move Arthur, who is sure that Cuneglas' good sense will prevail. Arthur remodels Lindinis' villa to befit his bride's rich tastes. Leodegan controls Dumnonia's treasury and spends lavishly. Guinevere excludes everything that is not beautiful, including Arthur's sons. By autumn, Arthur sees the damage he has done and prepares for war. He tries to make it up to Ceinwyn, but Gorfyddyd insists on Arthur's blood. Gundleus too is arming, and more Saxons and Franks are pouring in. Britain goes to war.

Part 2, The Princess Bride, pgs. 156-184 Analysis

The seventh chapter brings part two to a conclusion, opening with great hopes that Britain's kings can unite against the threats coming from East (the Saxons) and West (the Irish, particularly Diwrnach, usurper of Henis Wyren). Dynastic weddings are being planned to shore up alliances, including Arthur's to beautiful young Ceinwyn of Powys. This is a concession, because Arthur in battle has cut off her father's left arm and during his long recovery he becomes a drunkard. Nevertheless, the betrothal is celebrated and plans are made for the wedding. Derfel writes about this with difficulty, for at first sight he falls in love with Ceinwyn and at times in the remainder of the novel suggests that they become lovers. He is disappointed in his hero Arthur who, it seems, has a history of mad infatuations. Derfel suggests that Arthur is crazy enough to be confined in the Isle of the Dead.

Attempts to talk sense back into Arthur's head cross religious lines. Pagan and Christian leaders agree that he should marry Ceinwyn and keep Guinevere as his lover. Powys' Druid is quick to note that a Christian ceremony is invalid. The young priest Sansum agrees to marry the couple when they elope, but places high demands. The fact that he disregards Rome in being named a bishop calls into question whether he later is, in fact, a bishop. He is, certainly, an artful simoniac, arranging exclusive control over King Mordred and a place on the council along with his bishopric. Sansum's melodramatic call to God to accept him as a martyr is repeated later in the novel and frequently recalled. Christianity never looks worse than in this incident. Arthur, anxious to wed, grants all of his demands. His men grumble, learning that Guinevere also demands that they fight to regain her father's throne as a wedding gift. Derfel quotes Merlin's sayings twice. First, that Guinevere should have been drowned at birth, and second, that fate is inexorable. Arthur's happiness (which soon fades) moves Britain to the brink of war and Merlin is still nowhere to be seen.



Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 187-241

Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 187-241 Summary

Queen Igraine is full of questions about the stories just told. Derfel refuses to talk about the love of his life, other than to deny it is Nimue or Lunete, and thinks fondly Ceinwyn's brooch, which he has preserved. Igraine wants the romance of Camelot, but Derfel recalls gore and justice. He resumes his story in beautiful Amorica, "the Land across the Sea." These are the "bad years" when Britain is in chaos because of Arthur. Enemies surround him. Cadwy rebels against him. Tewdric blames Arthur but fights with him for his own protection, and both lose lands to invaders. Derfel earns the title Cadarn ("the mighty") and joins Arthur's horsemen and learns to appreciate Arthur's ability to outfox enemies. Derfel is promoted to captain and declines the supreme honor of being invited to defect to the enemy.

Sagramor initiates Derfel into the service of Mithras, a Roman God for soldiers. Derfel is disarmed, stripped, blindfolded, and ordered to obey silently. The initiation, like battle, assaults every sense, but Derfel comes through to become part of a secret, elect society that spans the Roman Empire and beyond. Among the local brotherhood are friends and enemies, including Bp. Bedwin, a member since long before becoming a Christian who stays for the companionship. Arthur has been initiated but does not attend, keeping his beliefs to himself. Like Derfel, Bedwin misses Merlin, but believes he is not yet needed while there is no alternative to Arthur's leadership. After the feast, Ligessac bribes Derfel to serve Gundleus but is rudely rejected.

In the spring, Arthur bribes the Irish to keep Powys and Siluria busy while he puts down Cadwy's rebellion, but the Saxons, bribed by Gorfyddyd, attack at Durocbrivis. King Ban then sends Bleiddig to summon Arthur to defend Benoic as he has sworn. Arthur promises to come in three months, if he can, and dispatches Derfel with sixty men. He laments that Ynys Trebes, the capital, is a haven of poets when what is needed are spearmen, and that he cannot discuss peace with Cuneglas while Gorfyddyd lives. Arthur asks Derfel to visit Guinevere en route and send him news. She is said to worship Isis, a foreign mystery cult that Sansum wants destroyed, but Arthur is happy for any solace she can find. Some day, he intends to restore her father's throne.

Derfel denies that he has come to spy on Guinevere as she shows him around the restored Roman villa. She tells him to bathe; he is intoxicated by her beauty and perfume. Noting that a statue resembles Gorfyddyd, Guinevere recalls how he once tried but fails to rape her, and she gets a Druid to put a death-charm on his daughter Ceinwyn. Guinevere asks about Nimue's magic, needing protection against Sansum's preaching. They go for a walk through the prospering town past Nabur's handsome house to the ruins of an exquisite temple to Mercury being rebuilt by the Christians as an artless chapel for Mordred. Sansum quietly endures her insults, saying that the



Christians are winning slowly, but chides her about Isis. When Derfel also wonders about the Goddess, Guinevere leads him to her dark shrine. As he tells her about Merlin's quest for lost knowledge, Derfel gasps and blushes at the sight of Guinevere's body back-lit in a window. Nimue has twice refused to become priestess of the Temple of Isis. Guinevere comes close to treason by telling Derfel that Isis determines who sits on thrones. Dismissed, Derfel, who dislikes the sea, goes off to war, praying to see Britain again

Ynys Trebes is more beautiful than Rome or Jerusalem. Its fortified villas are built atop a steep granite island best reached by boat for the tidal plain at low tide is hazarded by quicksands, but even at high tide the waves are tumultuous. Lesser buildings ring it and a quay allows landing in calm weather. A stone wall at the base keeps the Franks at bay. Derfel is awestruck as he is led through the palace and decides that it is well worth fighting for. A bare-breasted harpist catches his attention. Ban is copying a parchment when Derfel is introduced, and is disappointed to hear that Arthur will not soon follow him. He explains that they are a fili of poets and guides him through the library. He identifies a surly monk, Fr. Celwin, who contradicts everything he says about writers whose works may be preserved nowhere else. Ban insists that Derfel stay for dinner to meet his warrior sons, Lancelot and Galahad. Lancelot is insulted that Arthur has sent a mere child to defend Ynys Trebes. Derfel instantly dislikes him, politely accepts a few taunts, determines that he is not a Mithraist, and then batters him bloody. Galahad says he has long wished to do that. Ban is undisturbed, but Queen Elaine is upset. Celwin notes that such ferocity will be needed to protect the poets. Galahad suggests that Derfel go ashore to avoid assassination and says that Lancelot's reputation as a fighter is pure poetry. The war is hopeless and Derfel must take care to save his own life. Derfel instantly perceives that this is an honest, valiant man. Galahad leads Derfel out, bringing his own armor and weapons.

They fight for Ynys Trebes for two years against all odds and Lancelot is never seen in battle, but the poets sing of his victories. The forested mainland is perfect for hit-and-run attacks. The Franks call the defenders "forest wolves," and they add wolf-tails to their helmets and howl to frighten them. By day Galahad fights well, but at night the scholar comes out. A Christian, he tells Derfel about paradise, the Roman's building ability, arts, and law. He laments that it will vanish. The British Gods are gone and Christ will soon return. He broods about selfish Lancelot whom no one can control. Steadily, the battle retreats towards Ynys Trebes and Arthur does not come. Huddled inside the fortress, they see a two hundred-man shield wall against which fifty survivors cannot prevail. Most civilians go to neighboring Broceliande, leaving mostly Dumnonians to fight. Lancelot preens as commander of the city and demands that the whole defense be conducted from behind the walls, protected by the tides. They will live on fish. Questions reveal that arms are in short supply. Ban speaks of the scrolls as the last link to civilization and still hopes that Arthur will appear. During another morale-building tour of the library, Derfel is put under oath to save Fr. Celwin's life.

The Franks attack, are bloodily repulsed or drown, and attack again. The poets sing Galahad's praises. Eventually, the Franks figure out the tides, build a proper causeway, and keep the fishermen from going out. Rations grow short and tempers shorter. By



summer, the Franks are assaulting the gates. They slaughter relatives of the defenders. Bleddig rushes out to rescue women and children but is cut down and staked up to serve as a warning. Trying to climb the walls, the Franks suffer massive casualties but keep coming. As soon as they swarm into the city, Lancelot, his mother, and the poets flee by boat. Derfel must rescue the priest to whom he is sworn.

Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 187-241 Analysis

The eighth chapter opens by showing what trouble Arthur has gotten himself—and all of Britain—into by spurning Ceinwyn for Guinevere, and then concentrates largely on religions. Derfel tells in detail about his initiation into the mysteries of Mithras. He is able to reconstruct the action from seeing it performed many times on others; during it he is blindfolded and kept disoriented—much as happens on a battlefield. Passing the tests, Derfel is admitted to the brotherhood, whose membership spreads beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire. He learns the password and the requirement that when fighting fellow Mithriasts, one must slay them swiftly and cleanly. This comes into play later in the novel. Arthur is a member but does not attend, preferring that pagans and Christians both believe that he stands with them. Bp. Bedwin, surprisingly, is a member, inducted in his pre-Christian days and unwilling to forgo the fellowship.

While Arthur is surrounded by trouble, King Ban recalls him to Normandy, but Arthur sends Derfel and a handful of warriors, promising to follow if he can. He asks Derfel en route to visit Guinevere and report on her well-being. This visit allows the all-female cult of Isis to be described almost in as much detail as Mithras. Derfel is allowed to see inside the shrine and sees an embarrassingly large amount of Guinevere as sunlight from a window plays through her translucent gown. She then takes Derfel to see a beautiful pagan temple torn down and being turned into a shoddy Christian chapel for the King. Sansum, about whose illiteracy and ambition Derfel has learned from Bedwin at his initiation, absorbs all of Guinevere's barbs about his crucified carpenter-God, quietly predicting his victory over the pagans. Guinevere intends to erect a Temple of Isis and install a reluctant Nimue as priestess; Derfel advises forbidding Nimue to come if she wants to attract the stubborn woman. Derfel heads for Normandy, hating the water, and praying to the Sea Goddess for a safe return to Britain.

The ninth chapter describes Ynys Trebes, concentrating on King Ban's library, containing scrolls of Aristophanes, Horace, Tertullian, Silius Italicus, and others, perhaps in unique copies. The King's pride is Silius Italicus' eighteen-volume history of the Second Punic War. In the library is a cantankerous, hunchbacked monk, Fr. Celwin, who mocks all of the works that Ban prizes, but particularly this story of the "second turgid war." This reference becomes vital later in the chapter, when Celwin reveals himself to be Merlin in disguise, exasperated not to have realized earlier that Silius writes only seventeen volumes on this topic.

Derfel from the start dislikes the Edling, Lancelot, whom he describes as a male Guinevere in beauty and attitude. Unable to bear Lancelot's gibes at dinner, Derfel attacks and beats him badly, but Lancelot refuses to retract his insults. His half-brother,



Galahad, congratulates Derfel on doing what he has always wanted to but been unable. It is the beginning of a firm friendship. Galahad is a Christian and a scholar in addition to being a valiant warrior. Nights, while campaigning, Galahad tells Derfel about paradise, Christ's second coming, and his battles with the passions, including killing, lusting, and envy. The young pagan does not see why those should bother him but does not argue. During the defense of Ynys Trebes, which Lancelot commands but in which he does not participate, the Normans steadily advance, absorbing heavy losses but never stopping. Expendable slave labor builds the causeway across which the armed hordes finally swarm. When the walls are breached, Lancelot swiftly saves himself, his mother, and the poets who sing of his military prowess. The chapter ends at the point of Galahad and Derfel fleeing in a hidden boat when Derfel remembers his pledge to save exasperating Fr. Celwin. Galahad shows him the way.



Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 242-266

Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 242-266 Summary

Galahad and Derfel, now fast friends and nearly brothers, race to the palace. The king is copying a manuscript and dies refusing to leave. Cenwin opens and rejects scrolls while Galahad and Derfel fight frantically. The priest removes his disguise to reveal Merlin and continues searching until he finds a particular one, grabs his cat, and follows out a window and down to the dock. Merlin has arranged for a boat, aboard which he explains that he has been looking for a mislabeled and misfiled scroll. In the boat is a sealed chest, which Merlin declares is all that matters. Galahad weeps, seeing his home go up in flames. With Merlin again looking and acting himself, ageless, agile, dominating, penetrating, mischievous, wise, and wise, they take ship to Britain. In the cabin, Merlin ask about everything at home while several times trying to concentrate on how a renegade Druid has recorded for the Romans all that is known about the Druid religion—and that has since been mostly lost. Merlin has also collected the lost Treasures of Britain, talismans that if brought together with rituals described in the scroll release great power.

Lancelot's party reaches Dumnonia first and he begins painting himself as a hero and Derfel and Culhwch as weak links. Derfel, Galahad, and Merlin stand in the crowd to hear the distorted story of Ynys Trebes' downfall and swear it is a lie. Arthur restores order and tearfully embraces Derfel. News spreads that Merlin has returned—but has disappeared again. When Derfel tells Bedwin about the treasures and scroll, the bishop hopes the Gods will help, for Britain's situation is desperate. Gorfyddyd is uniting the tribes against Arthur. Nimue being sent to the Isle of the Dead, spared death as a witch only on Guinevere's insistence. Sansum, her accuser, is stripped of Mordred's chaplaincy and administers the Holy Thorn. Finally, Ceinwyn is to marry Gundleus and Arthur's head is to be Gorfyddyd's wedding gift.

Part 3, The Return of Merlin, pgs. 242-266 Analysis

Merlin, disguised as Fr. Celwin, has been all over Europe looking for the Treasures of Britain and a unique treatise that tells how to use them to gather the power of the Gods. Before invading Britain, the Romans want to understand the people and force Caleddin, the Ordovician Druid, to write down for Suetonius Paulinus all that is known about the Druid religion. What modern Druids practice is a tiny remnant. At the end of his search, Derfel learns that it is in the Ynys Trebes library, mislabeled as the eighteenth book of Silius Italicus' seventeen-volume Second Punic War and misfiled under Plato. Even Bp. Bedwin is happy that it is found because Britain is in grave trouble, as Gorfyddyd seeks to unite all kingdoms against Arthur. Much of the chapter is told through Bedwin, whom Derfel sizes up as not much of a Christian but a very good man. To complicate matters,



Merlin, saying that he has an old man's bladder, never returns from relieving himself, and many believe he is a figment of Derfel's war-deranged mind.

Arthur, meanwhile, manages to bring peace between the Lancelot faction and the Galahad and Derfel, whom Lancelot had supposed (perhaps hoped) had perished at Ynys Trebes. How stories are doctored is again illustrated, as is another challenge to fight, symbolized by the ramming of one's sword into the ground. In "making up" for Arthur's sake, Lancelot and Derfel whisper their first insults from two years prior. Part three's final revelation is that Bp. Sansum has gotten Nimue incarcerated on the Isle of the Dead, from which no one has ever escaped. He had wanted to kill her as a witch, but Guinevere's influence is too great. That Derfel will have to rescue Nimue goes without saying.



Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 269-331

Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 269-331 Summary

Queen Igraine demands to see Ceinwyn's brooch and makes Derfel promise to give it to her one day. Feeling sorry for the people of Ynys Trebes, she asks about several names and is unhappy that Derfel so hates Lancelot's dishonesty. They gossip about Sansum before he appears and they share an inside joke at his expense. Derfel resumes his tale.

Derfel gets into a legal dispute with Nabur, trying to care for his impoverished men. Arthur is amused; Guinevere is not. Derfel believes that Merlin has gone to rescue Nimue from the Isle of the Dead. Arthur gives him the title "Lord" before telling of the fight to come. Gold is running out to keep Aelle out of battle and Arthur must face Gorfyddyd after harvest. Guinevere takes Derfel on a stroll to talk about Arthur's enemies and Lancelot. She does not want to hear about his cowardice but wants assurances that Derfel will not oppose his joining Mithras. Derfel hides his anger when he finds Lancelot attending the council meeting, named head of the Durnovaria garrison to free Mordred's men for war.

Hearing that Merlin has not seen Nimue, Derfel proceeds to the Isle of the Dead, at the end of a long narrow causeway. Pagans and Christians agree that it is a damned place. Three walls separate it from the mainland. Guards patrol the shore. The commander warns that Derfel can never return. Talking bravely, Derfel has never been so scared. He is rowed to the first gate, and then walks through the other ungated walls. A ragged mob attacks, but he flees and fights. He meets peaceful Malldynn, who explains the isle's set-up and says someone of Nimue's description lives with the sea folk. Tricking Derfel to turn his back, Malldynn attacks, craving human flesh, but is subdued. Derfel heads south, goes hut to hut, and is finally pointed to a cave protected by talismans. Inside is Nimue, curled up, naked. She attacks, hearing her name, and relents only when her palm throbs in contact with Derfel's. He cloaks her and carries her out. At the gate, Galahad and Cavan hold the guards at bay on Bedwin's orders. Derfel returns to the land of war.

Derfel is washing and feeding Nimue at Gyllad's farm. Religious tension is rising and the Christians are saying the war is lost. Derfel delights Nimue by building her a bower for the Lughnasa. She talks about madness having a purpose, just like Merlin finding Caleddin's scroll: the Gods play games with humans and their gifts demand a price. Nimue has paid hers. Derfel and Nimue find pure happiness on Lughnasa, making love and thinking briefly of an ideal life together. She swears that Gundleus may be betrothed that day, but he will not live to marry. On Lughnasa's Eve, Aelle breaks the truce and Dumnonia appears doomed unless he can be bought off again. Lancelot is keeping his large treasure well-hidden, but Nimue suggests the Christians at the Holy Thorn have hidden plenty. Sansum pleads poverty, but unsubtle threats make him look for things of value. Meanwhile, Arthur tells of plans to kill Gundleus, give Lancelot his



throne, and marry him to Ceinwyn. That is sure to bring peace. Derfel says nothing about this, but insists that Lancelot not join Mithras unless he proves himself in battle. One of Arthur's men sees where Sansum hides the real valuables. The bishop again prays about his imminent martyrdom, but Arthur vouchers it all as a loan. Derfel stops to visit Gudovan, who brings him up to date on old friends, and Sansum and Morgan playing games together. Christianity is making steady gains. Derfel shares dismal war news, trying to be optimistic.

Preparing to ride northward, Arthur and Derfel talk about their many enemies and fears that Tewdric may not fight. Arthur laments that the war is his fault, but Derfel feels that the Gods send him Guinevere when he needs her. Arthur dislikes talk of destiny. They carry "God's money" to Aelle. Farmers grumble about peace in Uther's day and war in Arthur's as the column passes through burnt towns and unreaped fields. They meet the enemy at noon in a clearing. Derfel serves as a skillful interpreter, arranging with Therdig a meeting with the Bretwalda next day. They spend the night at the Stones, surrounded at a distance by Saxon campfires. Unable to sleep, Arthur tells Derfel about a previous visit with Merlin and the testing that led to his receiving Excalibur. His destiny, says Merlin, is to "yield Britain back to her Gods." Derfel argues against Arthur's skepticism about Merlin's goals.

At dawn, Aelle leads his two hundred spearmen to meet the Britons. Arthur says bluntly that he needs help killing Gorfyddyd, who poses the greater danger to the Saxons. Arthur asks only three moons of peace, but Aelle the Saxons need plunder. Arthur offers them vulnerable Ratae, complete with a guide. Aelle agrees, demanding two more hostages. Britons and Saxons eat together that night and part the next afternoon. Arthur feels dirty, buying the deaths of hundreds of innocent Britons, on top of breaking his oath Ban. Arthur had come to the meeting knowing that Ratae would have to be sacrificed and being willing to do it. This is needed to keep yet another oath: to keep Mordred on his throne. Arthur solemnly vows to kill Aelle to avenge Ratae.

Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 269-331 Analysis

Chapter eleven opens with Derfel assuming that Merlin will rescue Nimue from the Isle of the Dead. He is given the title "Lord," told that they will surely fight after the harvest is in, and walks privately with Guinevere. After chitchat it becomes clear that her interest is in Lancelot. She says he needs a wife, a kingdom, and unopposed entry into Mithras. Derfel has not concealed his contempt for Lancelot's cowardice, but hold his rage at this insult. He would share it with Bedwin, but Lancelot arrives for a council meeting and Derfel hears that he and his troops are staying in the city while Mordred's guardians go to war. Learning that Merlin has done nothing about Nimue, Derfel heads south.

Derfel as narrator recalls the many deadly situations he has been in as a warrior, but declares going to the Isle of the Dead the most fearful. He paints a picture of skulls used to ward off visitors, walls, and gates, adorned with more skulls. The one lucid person he meets claims to have been exiled by King Uther for saying his first Edling Mordred is crazy; the man then tries to cannibalize Derfel. From him, however, Derfel learns where



Nimue is probably located, near the sea, which is fitting in a sea child. Derfel describes the power with which she attacks him and how only the throbbing scars of their blood pack bring her mind back. Bedwin has sent troops to effect their escape. His stock keeps climbing as the novel goes forward.

The twelfth chapter shows Derfel caring for Nimue and them together celebrating the autumnal solstice, Lughnasa, making love and thinking briefly of an ideal life together. The practices of this fertility festival and the myths of Lyonesse, an idyllic place beyond the Western Sea are described before Dumnonia is thrown back into crisis by the Saxons' breaking the truce on the eve of the feast. Arthur goes to the Christians to collect gold to reinstate the truce. Sansum, of course, claims holy poverty and points out that High King Uther had exempted the church from such levies. Arthur retorts that Mordred now controls the treasury. One of Arthur's men reveals where the Christians are hiding true valuables, and Arthur claims them, vouchering their value. Sansum performs another martyrdom melodrama, as before Arthur and Guinevere's wedding.

Derfel serves as Arthur's translator during two meetings with the Saxons. He shows himself adept at paraphrasing insults and hurling the insults that seem obligatory to establishing status. Aelle finally becomes more than a feared name; he is a fearsome warrior demanding lands to feed his people, not gold, but seeing that Gorfyddyd is potentially a greater danger to him than Arthur. The Saxon way of life is also filled in. Arthur delivers into his hands the frontier fortress of Ratae as part of the bargain and afterward vows solemnly to kill Aelle and his men as retribution for so many innocent British lives. The chapter contains a long lamentation about unkept and broken oaths and a remembrance of how at Stonehenge Merlin had entrusted Excalibur to Arthur and revealed to him his destiny to bring back Britain's Gods.



Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 332-361

Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 332-361 Summary

The band comes back to Gwent, where Arthur sees his sons and has Derfel deliver a necklace to Ailleann, whom he will not free until the evil twins are of age and she cannot abscond with them. Ailleann points out Arthur's weak point: ambition, which battles his conscience for supremacy. Because he forgives his enemies he has to fight them repeatedly. She hopes that Guinevere can strengthen his soul. Returning to Arthur, Derfel learns that Guinevere is pregnant and Arthur is overjoyed for them both, but cannot imagine them retiring to farm after the war. The troop marches boldly to inspire confidence in the sullen peasantry. Arthur has exchanged armor with Morfans, who is riding close to Gorfyddyd's men to confuse them. Tewdric has aged. His factories are producing weapons and Agricola is grimly watching for the enemy. Nimue blesses the spears, and even the Christians are eager to receive it. Agricola's spies say that they face a horde drawn from eight kingdoms including Demetia—Oengus Mac Airem's dreaded Blackshields. There are whispers among Dumnonia and Gwent's troops that Arthur should leave Britain. Agricola prays that Merlin will arrive to talk sense into the army. A council of war is slated for that evening in Magnis.

Bp. Conrad of Gwent opens the meeting with a defeatist prayer for strength rather than victory. No Druids are available. Tewdric reports that the Saxons have withdrawn, but Agricola puts the odds against them at two-to-one. Tewdric wants to fight from inside fortified Magnis. The enemy holds ever pass and hilltop. Their best spearmen, two hundred strong, are in Lugg Vale, whose cross-like terrain Arthur describes in detail. Staying inside Magnis will only encourage the enemy to bypass them and plunder their lands. Arthur proposes attacking at the enemy's strongest place: Lugg Vale. Tewdric's Edling, Meurig, asks why fight Gorfyddyd at all. Tewdric takes over: Gorfyddyd fights for his family's honor and might intend to preserve Mordred's reign. Gorfyddyd is refusing to talk to anyone but might grow discouraged wasting time besieging an armed fort. Arthur sees that he is beaten. Galahad volunteers as an outsider to learn Gorfyddyd's intentions. If he intends to dethrone Mordred, Tewdric vows to fight.

Derfel rides with Galahad, disguised as his servant under the symbol of the cross. Derfel has never ridden a horse and finds adjusting difficult. Commander Halsyd welcomes them at the border and passes them to Caer Sws. The whole area is thick with enemy soldiers. Stakes have been erected for the pagan sacrifices before battle. Galahad and Derfel are admitted to Gorfyddyd's great hall, where Gundleus and Cuneglas are enthroned beside him. Tanabus and Iorweth attend their masters. Derfel does not think he is recognized. Gorfyddyd is wary, but his Edling Cuneglas, a man of peace, looks worried. Lancelot declares Tewdric's desire for peace but willingness to fight. Gorfyddyd laughs at the idea after he has spent so much on preparation, but insists that his quarrel is with Arthur alone. Anyone who harbors the "whore-lover" will suffer. Ligessac points out Derfel to Gorfyddyd and the hall echoes with calls for Derfel's death. As Galahad pleads for Derfel's life, Merlin enters majestically with dire threats of



retribution for eternity. All sink to their knees as Merlin dares anyone to defy him. He demands to know why these Britons would fight fellow Britons rather than Saxons. He prophesies that Ceinwyn will avenge herself and live a happy life. If Gorfyddyd wants Arthur's head, he should go claim it personally. Collecting Galahad and Derfel, Merlin leaves, pleased with his performance, amusing the Gods. They talk briefly about Nimue and how the Treasures of Britain will command the Gods when Merlin recovers the key treasure: the Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn. Nothing matters except restoring Britain back to pre-Roman conditions, removing all foreign Gods. Fate is inexorable.

When Merlin leaves, Iorweth accompanies Galahad and Derfel to the feast, but makes them eat in Queen Helledd's hall rather than among the warriors. Iorweth believes that Merlin expects too much from the fickle Gods. Ceinwyn, as sweet as ever, is in the hall, trying to feed her nephew. Galahad plays with his food and coaxes him to eat. Ceinwyn blushes, seeing that Derfel still wears her brooch. Hellded blames Arthur for the war, and Derfel agrees. She denies that Gorfyddyd would take Mordred's throne. After dinner, Derfel sits beside Ceinwyn on a couch, enthralled. She says firmly that it is her duty to marry whomever her father chooses. Derfel tells Ceinwyn that only at this moment does he understand the madness that had seized Arthur at the betrothal. He blushes, but she indicates enigmatically that she is pleased. He watches when he tells her of Arthur's plan to marry her to Lancelot. She passes to Arthur word that she holds no grudge and begs his protection if Arthur wins the war. Derfel pledges his own protection forever.

Part 4, The Isle of the Dead, pgs. 332-361 Analysis

The thirteen chapter focuses on the growing clouds of war, first at a council of war at Magnis, where Dumnonia and Gwent are isolated from all of the other kingdoms, and at Caer Sws, where Powys' Gorfyddyd, self-proclaimed High King of Britain, is preparing for the final assault. Both sides agree that Arthur is the cause of the war, and no one is more pained than he. Arthur calls for a surprise offensive in Lugg Vale, describing how its terrain plays to their advantage despite overwhelming numerical odds on the enemy's side. Powy's commander calls for a more conventional siege situation, hoping to wear down the enemy's enthusiasm before being starved out. When Meurig asks the fundamental question—why fight at all—Arthur knows he is beaten. Meurig's father insists that he will honor his pledge to protect Mordred's throne, but needs to know Gorfyddyd's intentions. The High King has sent the last messenger's head back in a sack, grimly indicating that negotiations are over. Nevertheless, Galahad, as an independent third party, volunteers to talk with him. Derfel insists on going along.

This brings them to Powys' capital, Caer Sws, where Mordred had been acclaimed and Arthur and Ceinwyn betrothed, only for Arthur to sully her honor by running off with Guinevere. Gorfyddyd insists that the family honor must be restored by Arthur's death. The hall already has a locker room atmosphere when the envoys arrive. Derfel is identified as one of "Arthur's whelps" and is on the point of being killed when Merlin appears and puts him and Galahad under his protection. He explains to the Christian prince the power of the Treasures of Britain and declares that collecting and activating



them is his sole priority. He likes Arthur, but Arthur's fate is his own to work out. Merlin wants Britain purged of all foreign Gods, achieving the same level of fanaticism as Sansum, but in a more charming way.

The chapter and part four end with Derfel sitting with Ceinwyn, talking about her fate and falling hopelessly in love with her. She gives him reason to believe she may feel the same about him, but she accepts her fate to marry for the good of the realm and he accepts that he is slave-born and she noble, giving them no chance. Derfel vows that he will protect her forever.

Moving into the final part of the book, note that neither side is comfortable about the savage Irish Blackshields as enemies or allies. They have currently lined up with Gorfyddyd, but his men are grumbling about it. Their shift in loyalty will prove decisive, but they will be as disliked by the grateful new side—Arthur's.



Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 365-397

Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 365-397 Summary

Queen Igraine is elated to know that Derfel loves Ceinwyn, which explains his hatred for Lancelot. Igraine has always wondered what "scandal" had surrounded her husband's great aunt, but Derfel objects to the word. He is sorry he has included personal items for her to read, and defends Guinevere against Gorfyddyd's charge of being a whore. Derfel insists on not getting ahead of his story.

Galahad and Derfel observe the bloody human sacrifices for the reading of auguries. Derfel daydreams about Ceinwyn. Before they leave Caer Sws, Gorfyddyd suggest that he will spare everyone if Arthur surrenders to him. Cuneglas is embarrassed by his father's descriptions of what he will do to Arthur and lurid claims about Guinevere's past. Gorfyddyd accepts to become Mordred's new protector. Derfel sings dreamily on the way home. Galahad agrees with Merlin that Gorfyddyd's word cannot be trusted, but Tewdric will believe him. They agree that this will drive a wedge between Tewdric and Arthur. Tewdric wants security not adventure and will look for a way to get rid of Arthur gracefully.

Back in Magnis, while Tewdric plans to hide in the Roman fort in anticipation of a truce with the enemy, Arthur gathers his five commanders to free them and their men for their loyalty oath, and also to ask them to fight with him at Tugg Vale. They refuse to be released and pledge to fight. They attack at dawn. Morfans, who has ridden the enemy line in Arthur's armor, makes a rough model of the Vale, indicating the strategy. Derfel's men go during the dark to dismantle a barricade preventing the horsemen from entering the fray. Sagramor commands the spearmen, while Arthur takes fifty horsemen to attack the main body at Branogenium and in retreating, suck them deep into the valley. As they fight Sagramor, Arthur will sweep in from the rear. There is danger that the Blackshields will advance from Coel's Hill, but Tewdric's men are supposed to deal with them. If they lose, Arthur's death will seal peace. Galahad's job is to rally Tewdric before joining the fight. None of Derfel's men abandons him, and Nimue accompanies them to the Vale, offering a "spell of concealment." A cold rain makes keeping Derfel's men together difficult in the black night until Nimue takes the lead. When they halt before dawn, she rallies the men to a Britain rid of foreign things. They make it down the steep slope clumsily, but the enemy is not alerted. At the bottom, they run and whoop as wolf-tailed killers, setting fire to huts as they go. The heavy trees of the barricade are hauled apart and the men form a shield-wall and advance until, meeting Gorfyddyd's massive and growing shield-wall, they slowly retreat to fight in the gap they have just opened. Derfel and Valerin, the opposing commanders, exchange ritual insults, threats, and demands for surrender. Neither yields. Hearing that Arthur is in position and explaining the strategy to his men, Derfel waits.

Valerin's men are still drowsy and smoke blows into their eyes. Their line stops away from Derfel's and begins the usual preliminaries. Derfel's men turn and flee as Arthur's



horn sounds and his horsemen descend on the Powysians. Derfel's men form defensive circles. The carnage begins. Sagramor's 150 spearmen come into play. Derfel refuses to kill prisoners, but cripples their ability to fight and release them. Arthur ends his pursuit at the ford and prepares for part two of the strategy: draw Gorfyddyd into an ambush. He and Derfel exchange armor as a decoy. Derfel finds it oppressively heavy and difficult to fight in. The men dig a ditch in front of the felled trees to cause the enemy to stumble during the final attack. They leave intact the gap to allow their final retreat before fighting to the death. To prevent encirclement up the steep hillside, Nimue constructs a ghost fence of severed heads. No one will cross without a Druid guide. From a local shepherd they learn of a second ford to the north that could cause problems. Nimue is unafraid and declares that Merlin will do whatever he needs to do for the good of Britain. She asks Derfel to give her Gundleus alive. Men forgive one another before going to battle.

Men defiantly sing the War Song of Beli Mawr when the enemy arrive. It takes the enemy an hour to form up on the far bank. Iorweth announces that they want only Arthur's head before the Druids set to work cursing the other side for an hour. Valerin then steps forward to insult Arthur before finally charging, and Derfel runs him with his sword, insists that Guinevere is a lady, and, recognizing that Valerin belongs to Mithras, dispatches him quickly. He also disposes of Valerin's lover's ring from Guinevere.

Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 365-397 Analysis

The fourteenth chapter shows Queen Igraine and Monk Derfel for a last time playfully talking about his refusal to tell the story out of sequence of August what he now regrets having revealed. The story continues with the Battle of Tugg Valley. Dumnonia stands alone, abandoned by the pacifist King Tewdric and overwhelmingly outnumbered. Arthur's battle plan, relying on surprise, is laid out, everyone is freed of his loyalty oath, but none take advantage of it, and all begin praying often and fervidly to his own God(s). Derfel's men form the vanguard since they have the most experience maneuvering at night. Most of the ritualized aspects that precede a fifth-century British battle are by this point familiar, but the details continue to amuse. Opposing Druids still seem to have a cordial fellowship, despite the curses they must hurl at each other. The battle consists of two parts. Derfel's men open the tree wall that prevents a mounted attack, draw out the enemy, and then join in the slaughter as Arthur's mounted troops race through to trample the enemy. Part two calls for Arthur to draw out the bulk of Gorfyddyd's army to be attacked by hidden spearmen. The unfolding of this plan makes up the final chapter.



Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 398-425

Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 398-425 Summary

Derfel insists that the bards have gotten the Battle of Lugg Vale wrong. The first clash occurs in the river ford and turns into a shoving match. The next fight is on the near bank as the enemy try to flank them. Sagramor orders the retreat and, with no sign of reinforcements from Tewdric, falls back to the tree fence. Derfel fights savagely in the center, with Nimue behind, shrieking and cursing. Galahad brings bad news: no reinforcements from Gwent. Unexpectedly, Tristan arrives with six fighters from Kernow, against his father's orders. They are assigned to the middle. As the battle wages back and forth, Arthur charges, scattering the enemy. Gorfyddyd orders a new shield-wall, sacrificing a third of his men but, outnumbered, Arthur's cavalry is stopped. When Cuneglas asks them to surrender, he passes Ceinwyn's regards to Derfel, whose heart leaps. The Blackshield Irish arrive, escorted past the ghost-fence by Merlin, calls on all combatants to join him in reclaiming the last Treasure of Britain, the Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn. Gorfyddyd insists that the Cauldron can wait. Arthur halts the killing, blames himself for not breaking through, and later despises the victory. Merlin supports Arthur as his energy flags. Cuneglas and Iorweth tell Arthur of Gorfyddyd's mortal wound and are surprised that Arthur asks to apologize to the king for offending his house. When Gorfyddyd keeps up his lies, Arthur is furious, but lets it go when Cuneglas announces the old man's death and his ascending the throne. Arthur offers him peace, friendship, and freedom, but demands Gundleus' life and an oath that Gorfyddyd had lied.

Word spreads fast from the stinking battlefield and many plans begin forming. Derfel is given Gundleus. Tanaburs alone remains loyal to the fallen king, putting up a protective ghost-fence and cursing Derfel and Nimue as they approach. Tanaburs talks about controlling Derfel's mother's living soul by having raped her; touch him and they both perish. Remembering his mother's cries, he cuts Tanaburs down the middle, sending him to Bel. Derfel hopes that Norwenna in the Otherworld hears Gundleus' scream as Nimue approaches him.

Part 5, The Shield-wall, pgs. 398-425 Analysis

The novel concludes describing phase two of the Battle of Tugg Vale. Derfel and Arthur exchange armor to confuse the enemy and the Dumnonians again use controlled retreat to draw the enemy into traps. The biggest danger is always that idealistic Arthur will surrender himself to achieve peace, but Gorfyddyd, however much he talks about only wanting to avenge his family honor, is greedy for the spoils of war. Arthur, said always to be so ready to forgive enemies that he is doomed to fight them repeatedly, makes instant, honorable peace with Ceinwyn upon his father's death. His only demands—that Ceinwyn admit his father has lied about Guinevere being a whore and the life of Gundleus—are easily granted. Merlin's final appearance shows him entirely



preoccupied with restoring pre-Roman Britain. The fate of the armies at war is of no concern to him, although he finds it incomprehensible that Britons would fight Britons rather than join in defense against outside foes. All of his appearances are enigmatic and have a deus ex machina character. Here he appears accompanying the dreaded Blackshield Irish, whom he has apparently convinced to switch sides in the fight.

Before his brutal death, Tanaburs again talks about having raped Derfel's mother at the time he throws the boy into the death-pit. What he means by this giving him control over her and Derfel's souls in the Otherworld is left unclear, although there have been hints that warriors enjoy those the services of whom they have slain as slaves in the Otherworld. As they face death, the soldiers talk about banqueting together there. After a period of time, it seems, they are allowed to take on another body and return to the good, green earth. Derfel's murder of Tanaburs nicely parallels the latter's attempt to kill him as a boy, including the dedication of his soul to the God Bel. The only difference is that Derfel does not miss as Tanaburs had. Derfel enticingly leaves Gundleus' fate at Nimue's hands to the reader's vivid imagination.



Characters

Derfel Cadarn

The narrator of *The Winter King*, Derfel, is a tall, dull, flaxen-haired Saxon, captured with his mother by King Gundleus of Siluria and Gundleus' Druid, Tanaburs. Derfel survives being sacrificed in the "Death Pit," and is adopted by the Druid Merlin along with Nimue, who survives a shipwreck. Each feels that their survival shows that the Gods specially value their lives. Merlin's scribe, Gudovan, teaches Derfel to read and write, while Hywel, Merlin's steward, once a famous warrior, teaches him to fight. Arthur's disfigured sister Morgana is in overall charge of the two wards.

After Gundleus destroys the Thorn and kills Norwenna—but fails to kill the infant King Mordred—Derfel, bearing the sword that he calls "Hywelbane" (named for his late teacher), joins Arthur's spear men. When Arthur is too tied up in warfare to honor his promise to defend Ynys Trebes in Normandy, he sends Derfel there with thirty warriors. There Derfel becomes best friends with the brave, scholarly Prince Galahad and instant enemies with the vain, cowardly Edling Lancelot. During his two years there, he takes Pellcyn (Puss), a widow, as his lover. She and her child die in the evacuation as Derfel escorts Merlin to a boat.

On returning to Dumnonia and setting the record straight on the fall of Ynys Trebes, Derfel rescues Nimue from the Isle of the Dead where the insane are housed, for they are oath-sworn to one another after ritually sharing blood. The former slave has fallen hopelessly in love with Arthur's rejected fiancée, Princess Ceinwyn, before the valiant Lord Derfel Cadarn ("The Mighty") and impersonates Arthur during the desperate Battle of Lugg Vale, which for a while ends internecine warfare among Britons so they can concentrate on pushing back their common Saxon foes. Derfel slays Tanaburs at the conclusion of the novel, recalling now the Druid had offered him to the God Bel, and leaves Gundleus to Nimue's untender mercies.

As an old man, Derfel, a one-armed widower, becomes a Christian monk at Dinnewrac in Powys and befriends Queen Igraine, for whom he writes his memoirs. Derfel's superior is Bishop Sansum, the only other survivor of the times about which Monk Derfel writes and still a rigid opponent of paganism. Monk Derfel fears that the stories, which he is writing in Saxon to prevent Sansum from learning what he is up to, will be distorted when translated into English, but he is determined to do his best to tell history as he has seen it.

Arthur

The eldest living son of King Uther, Warlord of Dumnonia, husband of Guinevere, and protector of the underage King Mordred, Arthur is the dominant figure in this novel. He is twenty-five or twenty-six years old as the book opens. Queen Igraine of Powys, who has



commissioned Arthur's right hand man, Derfel Cadarn, to write about Arthur, believes the myths of Camelot, while Derfel tries instead to tell the historical truth. Derfel calls Arthur "the Warlord, the King that Never Was, the Enemy of God," and "the best man I ever knew." Derfel has wept much over Arthur. Arthur's mother is also named Igraine and resents being thrown out of Uther's household when she finally bears an illegitimate male child. He tells little about his early years.

Arthur is fastidious, gaunt, neither ugly nor handsome, but has a "singular face," long, bony, and strong. Good (and ferocious) at fighting, he prefers peace because battle is so uncertain. He idealizes good order, and uses careful diplomacy whenever possible. He receives his sword, Caledfwlch ("Hard Lightning") better known as "Excalibur," from Merlin. He wears gleaming armor, carries a shining shield, and rides a great black warhorse, Llamrei.

Arthur is in exile in Normandy as the novel opens, disowned by his father as a bastard and held responsible (unfairly) for the death of Uther's Edling (Crown Prince). The birth of a new Edling, also named Mordred, with a crippled foot, followed by Uther's death, cause a crisis in Dumnonia, and Arthur is summoned home to guarantee that the throne will survive for Mordred to sit up. Arthur gives his oath never to seek the crown. He becomes betrothed to the beautiful Princess Ceinwyn of Powys, but at the betrothal dinner becomes love-struck by the red-haired Guinevere and secretly marries her. Previously he has two sons, Amhar and Loholt, by mistresses Ailleann. Guinevere becomes pregnant during the novel.

The upshot of Arthur's marriage is that Ceinwyn's father, King Gorfyddyd, gathers a vast army to avenge his honor. Arthur tries to placate the old man (whose left arm he earlier shears off in battle) and feels true guilt over having harmed Ceinwyn, but Gorfyddyd is stubborn. Arthur deeply regrets putting the town of Ratae into Saxon hands as the cost of maintaining their neutrality as the great Battle of Lugg Vale becomes inevitable. Once Gorfyddyd is slain, Arthur calls off the war and befriends his son, King Cuneglas. Arthur feels deeply that this war is entirely his fault.

Nimue

The Druid Merlin's lover and chief priestess after he drops Arthur's disfigured elder sister, Morgan, Nimue is the childhood playmate of narrator Derfel Cadarn. An Irish girl, she is seized by Saxons and alone escapes a shipwreck, which gives her a life-long devotion to Manawydan, Goddess of the Sea and Don, Briton's most powerful Goddess. Nimue grows up in Merlin's household with Derfel, whose escape from a Druid death pit makes him think that he too is specially protected by the Gods. Merlin takes Nimue as his lover when she is 13-14 years old, and she becomes the second most important person in Ynys Wydryn. Nimue has a wedged-shape face and black, tousled hair. She is neither beautiful nor plain. She is clever and often as a child mischievous.

During Merlin's long absence through the first two thirds of the novel, Nimue is the pagans' chief spiritual defender against the encroaching Christians. Merlin has told her



that until she is wounded in body, pride, and mind cannot, like him, link with the Gods. The first two are achieved when treacherous King Gundleus kills Queen Norwenna and her baby, King Mordred (a substitution spares him): Gundleus rapes Nimue and gouges out an eye. Gundleus leaves her to burn to death, but Derfel, her blood brother, rescues her. She aborts the resulting pregnancy and vows to kill Gundleus horribly.

Always thin, with her black hair tied back, shrouded in a vast black cloak, Nimue looks at the world with one good eye and another made of gold, with a combination of madness and anger on her countenance. While Derfel is on a mission in Normandy, Nimue is committed to the Isle of the Dead, fifth-century Briton's version of an insane asylum. There, she achieves the third wound needed to be a full priestess. Derfel goes to this unthinkable place to rescue her. She huddles naked, filthy, and emaciated in a seaside cave. Restored, she makes love with Derfel once, and then turns her attention to vengeance on Gundleus. Nimue accompanies Arthur's undermanned army, spitting curses at his enemies and invoking the Gods on the troops' behalf. She several times uses a potent "charm of concealment" to prevent enemies from seeing her men. She takes up an enemy sword to fight at the climactic Battle of Lugg Vale and claims the right to kill the cornered, cringing Gundleus.

Aelle

The self-proclaimed Saxon "Bretwalda" (Ruler of Britain), Aelle rules the hordes that are constantly invading eastern Britain and spreading out to conquer farmlands. Arthur pays off Aelle to desist from his attacks long enough for the Britons to settle their bloody differences at the Battle of Lugg Vale, offering not only gold but also the border town of Ratae. During the negotiations, in which narrator Derfel Cadarn translates, one of Aelle's men notices a facial resemblance between them.

Ailleann

Arthur's slender, black-haired slave lover, a few years older than he, Ailleann dresses royally and looks wise. She is given to Arthur by his brother-in-law, King Budic. She has borne him two thoroughly nasty sons, Amhar and Loholt, knowing that he will eventually marry royalty and abandon her.

Bedwin

The Bishop of Dumnonia, Bedwin is chief counselor to the High King Uther (and later of Arthur) and one of the protectors of Uther's crippled grandson and successor, Mordred. While a sincere Christian, Bedwin is also since his early military years a Mithraist and is unenthusiastic about young Sansum's aggressive attitude towards the pagans. Narrator Derfel Cadarn, writing long after the events as a Christian monk, describes Bedwin as not much of a Christian but a good human being.



Cadwy

Prince of Isca, Cadwy is a second-rank noble, ruling a sprawling tribe that considers itself superior to other Britons. Isca is a Roman town but Cadwy prefers living among the heavily-tattooed folk. Short, bald, middle-aged, and heavily built, Cadwy protects Dumnonia against raids from Kernow or Ireland. Well-off, Cadwy wants to grow wealthy by mining tin.

Ceinwyn

The Princess of Powys and sister of King Cuneglas, the lovely Ceinwyn, nicknamed "Seren" (Star) for her silvery beauty, is Arthur's fiancée until Guinevere catches his eye during their betrothal banquet. When Arthur abandons Ceinwyn, her father, King Gorfyddyd, vows vengeance, leading inexorably to the great Battle of Lugg Vale at which Gorfyddyd is slain. Narrator Derfel Cadarn meanwhile, has fallen secretly in love with Ceinwyn and always wears beneath his armor a brooch she gives him at that ill-fated banquet. At their one later meeting, Ceinwyn indicates subtly that she may share Derfel's feelings. The old Monk Derfel intimates to Queen Igraine, for whom he writes this history, that Ceinwyn becomes the love of his life.

Culhwch

Arthur's cousin, Culhwch serves alongside narrator Derfel Cadarn as one of Arthur's warriors, beginning in the defense of Ynys Trebes. Culhwch is a squat, bearded, long-armed brawler who little resembles Arthur and wants of life only enemies, women, and drink. He commands thirty horsemen, but by the time Derfel arrives, he is down to half, fighting on foot. He yearns to return to Arthur's side. Culhwch is delightful sarcastic during the war council chaired by Lancelot, apologizing for belching each time Lancelot hears him commenting to Derfel under his breath. Culhwch is one of the commanders at the Battle of Lugg Vale.

Cuneglas

The Edling (Crown Prince) of Powys for most of the novel, Cuneglas makes peace with Arthur as soon as his father, King Gorfyddyd, dies during the Battle of Lugg Vale. Cuneglas has a guileless young face with long, plaited mustaches. Unlike his father, whom he admits is a liar, Cuneglas is patient and sensible man. Earlier, although he prefers the pagan Gods, Cuneglas allows the Christians to preach as in Gwent. Unlike his father, Cuneglas believes in peace and calls for a mutual defense pact among Powys, Gwent, and Dumnonia. He hopes his marriage to Helledd of Elmet will bring that kingdom into the alliance to face, united, the Saxons.



Druidan

A dwarf, bitter at his fate of being small, Druidan is captain of Merlin's household at Ynys Wydryn, commanding a force of blind, lame, and mad men. He dresses every day as a full-grown warrior. His one attempt to seduce Nimue is rebuffed and Merlin beats him for it. Druidan tends Merlin's pigs.

Galahad

Fair haired and with a broad, strong face, the Prince of Benoic becomes a landless exile in Britain after the fall of his homeland to the Normans. Unlike his half-brother, Lancelot, Galahad is a valiant fighter, helping narrator Derfel Cadarn and the disguised Druid Merlin escape the siege of Ynys Trebes and fights at his side during the Battle of Lugg Vale. Galahad is also an exemplary but not pushy Christian.

Gorfyddyd

The middle-aged, heavily-built, small-eyed King of Powys, Gorfyddyd loses his left arm in battle to Arthur, but reluctantly welcomes him to a peace conference at Caer Sws in the company of Tewdric of Gwent and the prisoner, King Gundleus of Siluria. During his recuperation, Gorfyddyd becomes a heavy drinker. While drunk, Gorfyddyd tries and fails to molest Guinevere. During Derfel's years in Normandy, Gorfyddyd gets the plague but survives and becomes the center of an anti-Arthur alliance, determined to restore family honor after Arthur breaks his engagement to Princess Ceinwyn. While dying at the Battle of Lugg Vale, Gorfyddyd continues calling Guinevere a whore. Arthur demands that his successor, Cuneglas, a relaxed, friendly, and peace-loving man, admit that his father is a liar as the only condition of peace. Cuneglas does so willingly.

Gudovan and Hywel

The Druid Merlin's sober, hard-headed, hard-working scribe and steward respectively, Gudovan and Hywel keep Ynys Wydryn operating during Merlin's long, unexplained absence early in the novel. Gudovan teaches narrator Derfel Cadarn to read and write, while Hywel teaches him to fight. Hywel had been a famous warrior before losing a leg in battle. Gudovan survives the massacre and oversees rebuilding but Hywel is slain on the beach. Derfel claims his sword, which he names Hywelbane, and uses it with great distinction in battles throughout his life.

Guendoloen

The Druid Merlin's wife, skilled in herbs and charms, Guendoloen is rejected by Merlin when she grows disfigured. Guendoloen hates the adopted orphans Nimue and Derfel



and the dwarf commander, Druidan. She casts spells on them all—and on her ex-husband.

Guinevere

Arthur's beautiful red-haired, green-eyed wife, Guinevere is a princess of lost Henis Wyren (Lleyn), ruled at the time of this novel by the savage Irish King Diwrnach. She is penniless when Arthur sees her in the crowd attending his betrothal to Ceinwyn, Princess of Powys. They quickly elope, destroying the newly-won unity of Britain and plunging it into civil war. Merlin always insists that it would have been good if Guinevere had been drowned at birth. Guinevere's symbol is the stag crowned with a crescent moon—uniting her father's symbol with that of the Goddess Isis.

Guinevere dislikes all things ugly and banishes them from her presence in Lindinis. As a devotee of the Goddess Isis, Guinevere builds a great dark hall for the secret rites, which she shows once to narrator Derfel Cadarn. She tells him about how King Gorfyddyd of Powys once tries and fails to rape her and she gets a Druid to give her a death-charm against his daughter Ceinwyn. Guinevere dislikes Arthur's twin sons Amhar and Loholt by his mistress Ailleann, and the thought of losing her own figure during pregnancy.

Guinevere is a determined enemy of Christianity and of Bp. Sansum in particular. Her home includes a shrine to Isis and she wants to build a full temple. Involving Nimue in her plans, she gets her to tear down Sansum's new chapel, which gets Nimue condemned as a witch. Guinevere is able to get her sent to the Isle of the Dead rather than being executed.

Gundleus ap Meilyr

The King of Siluria, Gundleus comes late to the High Council at Glevum, unapologetic about raids on Gwent. Gundleus' banner bears the sign of the fox. He ostensibly puts away his low-born wife Ladwys before marrying Norweena, mother of the infant King Mordred. After treacherously killing Norweena at Merlin's hall as she kneels before him, Gundleus renounces Christianity and takes Ladwys back. Gundleus believes that he has also slain Mordred, but a substitution has been made and Mordred escapes. Gundleus then rapes Nimue and plucks out one of her eyes, thus becoming the object of the sorceress' fearsome revenge. Gundleus is captured by Arthur while trying again to kill Mordred, but not put to death as Nimue and others demand. He is imprisoned in Corinium until it becomes politically expedient to restore him to his throne. His next marital conquest is to be Princess Ceinwyn of Powys, but Gundleus is again captured during the Battle of Lugg Vale. He is last seen cringing and screaming as Nimue comes to claim his life.



Gwlyddyn and Ralla

Gwlyddyn is a carpenter at Merlin's Ynys Wydryn and his wife Ralla is wet nurse for the infant King Mordred. When King Gundleus of Siluria comes treacherously to kill the baby and his mother, Gwlyddyn and Ralla substitute their son so that Mordred can escape. Narrator Derfel Cadarn is amazed at the sacrifice and vows revenge for the innocent baby. Out for revenge, Gwlyddyn accompanies Derfel on a patrol, gives him useful pointers on hand-to-hand combat, and congratulates him on his first combat. Gwlyddyn later is contracted by Arthur to rebuild Ynys Wydryn.

Igraine

Igraine is the Queen of Powys, wife of King Brochvael, to whom the elderly Derfel Cadarn, by then a Christian monk, narrates this story. She is protector of the small monastery and conspires with Derfel to prevent Bishop Sansum from finding out that Derfel is talking about Arthur.

A different Igraine is the mother of Morgan, Morgause, Anna, and Arthur. She comes from Caer Gei in Gwynedd and is said to be the daughter of Cunedda, the High King before Uther. Because she is born to a royal concubine, Igraine is not royal. Said to be beautiful and rancorously witty, she marries a chieftain of Henis Wyren. Arthur never says anything else about her to narrator Derfel Cadarn. Uther denies the children's paternity and casts them out when Arthur is born. The girls he eventually marries off.

Lancelot

Savagely handsome, tall, well-built, narrow-faced, dark-eyed, and world-weary, Lancelot is introduced while still Edling (Crown Prince) of Benoic, in his father Ban's idyllic palace atop Ynys Trebes. Then and later, as the exiled King of Benoic, Lancelot enjoys a reputation for bravery that has never been witnessed by comrades in arms. King Ban dies in the attack on Ynys Trebes, but Queen Elaine escapes with Lancelot, leaving his half-brother, Galahad, to fight alongside narrator Derfel Cadarn. Lancelot is somehow "almost reptilian" in appearance, but enjoys admiring himself in the mirrors that he collects. He wears a helmet adorned with a pair of spread swan's wings and immaculate, untouched armor that he claims in antiquity belonged to Agamemnon.

Lancelot and narrator Derfel Cadarn are mutual enemies from first sight, when Derfel arrives at Ynys Trebes to carry out Arthur's oath to aid King Ban. Derfel sees Lancelot and the brotherhood of poets sneaking away during the Norman attack and calls Lancelot a liar in public for his version of the battle. Arthur plans to marry Lancelot to his ex-fiancée, Princess Ceinwyn, and to induct him into the mysteries of Mithras, both projects that Derfel opposes. Unlike Galahad, Lancelot does nothing but posture at Lugg Vale.



Ligessac

The chief of the baby-King Mordred's guards at Ynys Wydryn, Ligessac is a tall, thin, greedy Christian adept with bow and arrow. He tells narrator Derfel Cadarn, then a boy, how the Edling (Crown Prince) Mordred dies at the hands of the Saxons and not at all the fault of Arthur as High King Uther claims. Ligessac defects from Queen Norwenna's guard when King Gundleus murders her and later, after Derfel's induction into Mithras, tries to recruit him to Gundleus' service. At Gorfyddyd's war council on the eve of the Battle of Lugg Vale, Ligessac recognizes Derfel, disguised as Prince Galahad's servant, and nearly gets him killed.

Lunete

An Irish foundling a year younger than Nimue, living at Ynys Wydryn, Lunete escapes King Gundleus' massacre. On the way to Caer Cadarn, he tries to comfort the wounded Nimue and Derfel, whom she previously disdains as a mere boy. Derfel suddenly realizes that she is pretty. Lunete moves in with Derfel in Lindinis rather than return to burnt Ynys Wydryn. They are already fighting when they lose a baby and Lunete moves on from their marriage. Derfel hears that she has become a priestess of Isis.

Melwas

The king of Belgic tribes living on the frontier of Saxon claims, Melwas is land-hungry and ferocious in battle. He is suspicious, fat, and foul-breathed. He has raised and armed a competent force of three hundred men by levy. When Dumnonia sends reinforcements to the capital, Venta, under Griffid ap Annan, Melwas and his troops stay securely inside the crumbling ramparts while sending Griffid into the woods to flush out the enemy.

Merlin of Avalon

The chief Druid of Dumnonia and a wealthy man who can afford to wander about amusing himself, Merlin has long white hair drawn back from his Druid tonsure, plaited, tied with black ribbons. His long beard is likewise plaited and bound. His face is dark, deeply lined, long, and bemused when he is up to mischief. As the novel opens, Merlin has long been missing from Britain for years. Only in the final third is it revealed that Merlin has been traveling around Europe, gathering the lost Treasures of Britain in order to restore Britain to its rightful Gods. In his absence, Merlin's realm at Ynys Wydryn continues to care for orphans, cripples, and the insane under the guidance of Morgan, Arthur's maimed sister. Merlin's wife, Guendoloen, has been put aside when she grows disfigured by a sickness during the "Bad Time," and hates and curses the others. By the time the novel opens, Merlin has slept with his ward Nimue, and Nimue has supplanted Morgan as second in importance at Ynys Wydryn.



At Ynys Trebes in Normandy Merlin, to his dismay disguised as a Christian monk, Fr. Celwin, finds the only written account of pagan ritual in pre-Roman times and escapes with narrator Derfel Cadarn and Galahad to Briton. Merlin remains elusive, coming and going in his quest, until the climactic Battle of Lugg Vale, when he rallies the troops to support him in his quest for the Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn, the greatest of the Treasures. Arthur argues that they should achieve peace among Britons first. Merlin's assistants are Morgan, Arthur's disfigured older sister, and Nimue, an up-and-coming sorceress who edges out Morgan, causing conflict. All three in this novel are implacable foes of Christianity.

Mordred

The "Winter King" for whom the novel is named, Mordred is born to Norwenna in the opening pages as Dumnonia's last hope for a peaceful succession. His father, also Mordred, is killed in battle before the story begins and the High King Uther is nearing the end of his days. Mordred is born with a club foot—a bad omen according to the pagans—and sent to the Druid Morgan's protection at the Thorn (Ynys Wydryn).

Mordred is a "grim child" with red hair and stubborn heart, cared for by his wet nurse, Ralla, and her husband Gwlyddyn. He is baptized at the neighboring Holy Thorn. Occupying Merlin's pagan hall, Norwenna is given in marriage to King Gundleus of Siluria, who treacherously kills her and believes he has also murdered Mordred. A substitution has been made, however, and Mordred is spirited away. Mordred is acclaimed king at one year old and assigned to a guardian, Nabur, a Christian magistrate. Arthur also assumes responsibility for Mordred's safety until he reaches the age of maturity and takes the throne. From the start, Mordred is a disgusting, ill-tempered baby who tries everyone's patience.

Morfans

One of Arthur's warriors, Morfans is the ugliest man that narrator Derfel Cadarn ever sees: goitered, hair-lipped, and misshapen. He trades armor with Arthur to ride along the enemy lines, reconnoitering before the Battle of Lugg Vale.

Morgan

Arthur's elder sister, Morgan, serves as the Druid Merlin's chief priestess before he turns to younger Nimue. Their rivalry is palpable. Before the novel opens, Morgan is grossly disfigured in a house fire that widows her and forces her to wear a golden mask and body-covering cloak. Morgan treats her as a lady and puts her in charge of his child wards, Nimue and narrator Derfel Cadarn. He also trains her to be a prophetess. She is about thirty years old when she is called in to assist in the birth of King Mordred, after Princess Norwenna's Christian attendants nearly lose mother and baby. The High King Uther, Morgan's father, summons her to represent the missing Merlin at the first British



High Council to meet in sixty years. Unhappily, she accepts Nimue's company, and that of Derfel, on the trip to Glevum.

Norwenna

The wife of the Edling (Crown Prince) Mordred, who dies in battle before the novel begins, Norwenna gives birth to the deformed baby Mordred after the Christians attending her are expelled and the Gods of Britain are invoked by the pagans led by Morgan. Norwenna is "a fierce and sharp-tongued Christian," and no beauty, having a round face, piggish eyes, a sour-lipped mouth, and pitted skin. As discussions are held over who should be the baby's protector, King Gundleus of Siluria takes Norwenna's hand and sets her up in Ynys Wydryn, where Ralla is wet nurse for the infant King. As Norwenna kneels before Gundleus in greeting, he plunges his sword into her and then kills the baby that Gwlyddyn and Ralla have substituted for Mordred. Narrator Derfel Cadarn is amazed at the sacrifice and vows revenge. Norwenna's grave becomes a place of Christian pilgrimage.

Oengus Mac Airem

The Irish King of Demetia, Oengus changes sides in the Battle of Lugg Vale, giving Arthur victory. In return, he demands a share of slaves and wealth from dead King Gundleus' kingdom. His fearsome troops are known as the "Blackshield Irish," because they paint their shields black in the blood of slain foes.

Owain

The Champion of the High King Uther of Dumnonia, Owain is first seen in the preliminary events of the High Council held at Glevum, in mock battle with two of King Tewdric of Powys' champions. Owain is a huge man with tattooed arms, broad chest, and a bristling beard decorated with warrior rings. The bout is stopped before blood flows. Owain senses trouble with King Gundleus of Siluria strides into the meeting late, but is restrained by his sovereign. Owain is given charge of narrator Derfel Cadarn's ongoing military training and treats him well. Derfel is dismayed when he overhears Owain plot with Prince Cadwy of Isca to raid a camp of Kernow tin miners and is then forced to take part in the savage killing. When the Edling (Crown Prince) of Kernow, Tristan, demands justice, Owain denies a survivor's eyewitness account, and Arthur challenges him to a fight to the death to determine the truth. Owain is slain after a determined battle.

Pellinore

A British king, dethroned, blinded, and driven mad by the Saxons, Pellinore is spared the fate of the Isle of the Dead by Merlin. Pellinore lives on Ynys Wydryn in a small compound, where he rails about his troubles but also hears messages from the Gods.



Everyone fears and avoids the violent man except Derfel, who gains from Pellinore the ambition to become a warrior.

Sagramor

Arthur's Numidian commander, Sagramor projects a great, chilling stillness in battle, the opposite of restless Arthur. Sagramor speaks in atrocious English (Numidia is the region of Algiers in Northwest Africa). He has a reputation as fearsome as he looks: tall, very thin, fast, long-faced, laconic, scarred by war, perpetual scow that hides a droll, generous character. He swings what sounds to be an Arab scimitar. Sagramor initiates narrator Derfel Cadarn into Mithras and fights beside him as commander of the foot soldiers at Lugg Vale.

Sansum

The Bishop of Dumnonia, Sansum has two roles in the novel, first as an illiterate, power-hungry young cleric, and second, in old age, as the narrator Derfel Cadarn's superior when Derfel converts to Christianity and becomes a monk. Sansum insists that suffering is good for monks, as it reminds them of Christ. He, therefore, withholds firewood and adequate food. Derfel pretends to be translating gospels into Saxon when, in fact, he is narrating his life's story for Queen Igraine, Sansum's patroness. Short, thin, with a clean-shaven chin and receding forehead, Sansum preaches political diatribes against the pagans. Behind his back he is called Lughtigern ("Mouse Lord") because of tufts of hair that stand up.

Sansum comes from Gwent, a Christian kingdom. The illiterate son of a tanner, he rises in the priesthood under King Tewdric, gains prominence by preaching at the High Council at Glevum and later marrying Arthur and Guinevere as they flee from Caer Sws. As payment, he receives a bishopric and becomes the infant King Mordred's chaplain. He loses the latter position by conspiring with Nabur against Arthur and becomes guardian of the shrine of the Holy Thorn at Ynys Wydryn opposite Merlin's pagan center. Old Bp. Bedwin tells Derfel that frenetic Sansum wants his job, although he cannot read. He has a marvelous memory and learns by heart from a slave's reading.

Monk Derfel writes about "Saint" Sansum, insisting that two young novices share his sleeping cell and, unlike in other monasteries, forbids marriage. Queen Igraine suspects that Sansum may be homosexual from some of Derfel's innocent stories.

Sebile

A Saxon slave captured and raped by the Britons, Sebile is a rare beauty whose post-traumatic stress is healed by Morgan. Sebile becomes her slave and companion. Fearful of men, she nevertheless gives birth to babies year after year, few of whom survive. The rest Merlin sells as slaves. Years later she is killed by an unknown assailant.



Tanaburs

A Druid of Siluria, Tanaburs takes narrator Derfel Cadarn from his screaming mother as a child to throw into the "Death Pit" as a victory sacrifice to the Gods. Tanaburs and his men then rape the bereft woman. Derfel survives and is adopted by Britain's most powerful Druid, Merlin. Tanaburs wears a dirty gray robe embroidered with hares and crescent moons and carries a moon-tipped staff. He has blue eyes, a long nose, and a "slack dribbling mouth." He hangs bones in his long white hair to make clattering noises as he walks.

Derfel never forgets that early crime and faces off with Tanaburs several times during the novel, including at the Battle of Lugg Vale. Derfel asks only to kill his old tormentor, dispatching him with a fearsome slash of his sword, consigning him to the God Bel, as Tanaburs had shouted at his intended sacrifice. Tanaburs claims that he will take Derfel's mother to the Otherworld with him.

Tewdric, Meurig, and Agricola

The Christian King of Gwent, Tewdric is Arthur's ally but fails to send troops to the Battle of Lugg Vale, believing defeat is inevitable. His son, the Edling (Crown Prince) Meurig is a simpering but young fellow, contrasting with the real commander of Gwent's Roman-style forces, the severe old Agricola. Agricola at a council of war disagrees with Arthur's seemingly suicidal plan to fight at Lugg Vale, while Meurig pedantically asks why fight Gorfyddyd at all, since he has no designs on the Dumnonian throne.

Tristan

The Edling (Crown Prince) of Kernow, Tristan opposes his lecherous old father, King Mark, by fighting alongside Arthur at the Battle of Lugg Vale.

Uther

The King of Dumnonia, High King of Britain, and "Pendragon," Uther, as the novel opens, is apprehensive about the birth of a grandson, his last hope of leaving a legitimate heir. His son Mordred is killed in battle before the novel begins and Uther blames his illegitimate son, Arthur. Arthur is in exile in Normandy. Feeling the approach of death, Uther calls Britain's first High Council in sixty years at Glevum, summoning his illegitimate daughter Morgan to represent the missing Druid Merlin. Uther travels slowly, making a last inspection of his kingdom. He dies shortly after forcing the Lords of his kingdom to protect Mordred until he comes of age. Uther's banner bears the sign of the dragon.



Objects/Places

Caer Cadarn

The sacred place of the pagans where the kings of Dumnonia are acclaimed, Caer Cadarn with its great hall and high ramparts provides the novel's opening and is several times revisited. The High King Uther has decided that Caer Cadarn alone is appropriate for the birth of his grandson and badly-needed heir. The conflicting rituals of Christians and Druids to ensure a successful birth are carefully depicted here. The novel returns to Caer Cadarn for the baby King Mordred's acclamation and a council to decide who will care for him and his throne until he comes of age. Caer Cadarn is near the Roman villa at Lindinis, where Arthur and Guinevere normally live.

Dinnewrac

A fictional monastery in Powys, Dinnewrac is where the elderly pagan warrior Derfel Cadarn, the novel's narrator, has become a monk and is recording on parchments his eyewitness stories of Arthur. The monastery is located dangerously just a half-day's walk from the Saxon front. The monastery's superior, Bishop Sansum, had been an ardent foe of Arthur, and would forbid the work if he were not told that the Monk Derfel is writing a Saxon gospel for Queen Igraine, the monastery's patroness.

Dumnonia

The dominant Kingdom in modern-day southwest England, Dumnonia is home to most of the major events in the novel. Uther, the High King dies shortly after a crippled grandson, Mordred, is born, and a council is appointed to preserve his throne until manhood. Arthur is Uther's bastard son, blamed for a previous Edling (Crown Prince) Mordred's death in battle and banished to Normandy. Arthur is a lightning rod for trouble when he returns to Britain, and the great war that culminates in the Battle of Lugg Vale is largely a result of his remaining on the island alive. Dumnonia has heavy traces of Roman rule: roads, forts, towns, and villas, and Christianity has made deep inroads into the old religion, building churches over Druid groves and holy wells to provoke them. Bishop Sansum encourages missionary activities and the outright persecution of pagans.

Glevum

A Roman town on the River Severn, Glevum, located just inside the border of Gwent, is the scene of the first High Council meeting in Britain in sixty years. The High King Uther summons Morgan to attend on behalf the mysteriously vanished Druid Merlin, and narrator Derfel Cadarn and Nimue accompany her. Glevum stinks of feces but is a still-impressive town of paved streets and stone buildings, impressing the village boy, Derfel.



King Tewdric's soldiers wear impressive Roman battle dress. At the center of town stands the vast white, pillared building in which the council meets. Nimue finds it a bad omen, for such hubris is the cause of the Romans' fall.

Gwent

A kingdom lying southeast of the Powys, Gwent is ruled by Christian kings, who restrain their subjects from the ecstatic practices that are beginning to plague Dumnonia and Gwent. King Tewdric is Arthur's ally but fails to send troops to the Battle of Lugg Vale, believing defeat is inevitable. Gwent's soldiers, commanded by Agricola, wear impressive Roman battle dress.

Isle of the Dead

A peninsula in southern Britain where the criminally and politically insane are housed for the remainder of their lives, the Isle of the Dead is dreaded by all Britons. After losing an eye and being raped by King Gundleus of Siluria, Nimue suffers the third wound needed to become a full priestess—losing her mind—and is sent to the Isle of the Dead.

Returning from years in Normandy, narrator Derfel Cadarn dares to penetrate the three walls of the Isle of the Dead, which have never released anyone alive. He is repeatedly warned of the danger, but his pact with Nimue is sacred. He is several times assaulted, once by a would-be cannibal, before finding Nimue, naked and shivering in a cave by the sea. He brings her to her senses and carries her out. Merlin claims to come and go from the Isle of the Dead, seeking intelligent people with whom to converse. Cruachan's Cave on the Isle of the Dead is said to be the entry way to the Otherworld, crossing the "sword bridge."

Kernow

The claw-like tip of the peninsula separating the Western Sea from the English Channel, Kernow is ruled by King Mark, a dirty old man who withholds forces from the Battle of Lugg Vale, but his son, the Edling (Crown Prince) Tristan, comes any way to Arthur's rescue. Kernow earlier demands reparations from Dumnonia for coal minors exploring Dumnonia under contract and protection, and Arthur fights Owain to obtain justice.

Lloegyr

The Eastern portion of Britain occupied by the Saxons, Lloegyr forms the "Lost Lands" that center on London. Arthur's goal is to unite all of Britain to fight a war of liberation for Lloegyr.



Lugg Vale

Now known as Mortimer's Cross, Hereford and Worcester, Lugg Vale is the site of the major battle with which this novel climaxes. Narrator Derfel Cadarn, a key participant, notes that legends have blown the confrontation out of proportion, but acknowledges that it is crucial to Arthur's taking power in Southern Britain—and that all of the horrid suffering and death are entirely Arthur's fault for having jilted Princess Ceinwyn of Powys. Her father's death on the battlefield ends the enmity when Arthur offers no recriminations. The battle falls into two parts, each utilizing speed and deception. In the end, the defection of the dreaded Blackshield Irish drops victory into Arthur's lap. They arrive late, accompanied by the Druid Merlin, who insists that all stop fighting to help him find the long-lost Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn. When all of the objects are brought together, the Gods will return and hear Britons' prayers.

Powys

A kingdom extending through the hinterlands of modern Wales and England, Powys lies north of the coastal kingdoms of Demetia, Siluria, and Gwent. Powys is only lightly touched by the Roman occupation. Its capital, Caer Sws, is a Roman fort, but there are fewer roads, villas, or towns than in Dumnonia. Powys' most sacred place is the summit of Dolforwyn, where kings are acclaimed and cremated. Ratae, a great fortress on the eastern frontier, falls to the Saxons before the Battle of Lugg Vale when Arthur treacherously betrays it to keep the Saxons out of fighting that largely is intended to restore the honor of Princess Ceinwyn, whom Arthur has jilted. When her father is killed, her brother, the new King Cuneglas, embraces peace enthusiastically.

Siluria

The southern coastal region of Powys, Siluria lies between Demetia and Gwent on the Severn Sea. It is ruled by Gundleus, who marries Queen Norwenna of Dumnonia, scheming to assassinate both her and her infant son, King Mordred. This act is one of the factors that leads to the great Battle of Lugg Vale, at which Gundleus is killed. Arthur intends for Siluria's throne to go to King Lancelot, who has lost his throne in Benoic, and for him to marry Princess Ceinwyn of Powys to further solidify alliances.

The Stones

Stonehenge is the site of Arthur's meeting with the Saxon "Bretwalda" (Ruler of Britain), Aelle, at which Arthur shamefully betrays the border fort of Ratae in order to guarantee that the Saxons stay out of the looming Battle of Lugg Vale. Arthur buries there a vow to kill Aelle after victory. He recalls for narrator Derfel Cadarn that it is at the Stones years ago that the Druid Merlin gives him his magical sword, Excalibur, after an all-night ordeal of holding it at arm's length. Arthur must be willing to return it on demand.



The Twelve Treasures of Britain

Twelve common, ordinary objects given by the Gods to British tribes but lost and dispersed in Roman times, the treasures are, in the Druid Merlin's mind, the key to regaining Britain's religion and legacy. He spends his life finding them and the only written Druid document, penned for the Romans by the captive Druid Caleddin. Missing for two-thirds of the novel, Merlin finds the scroll in Normandy and then disappears in further searches. He reappears at the great Battle of Lugg Vale, declaring that the Britons must drop everything, unite, and find the thirteenth and greatest treasure, the Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn. When all of the objects are brought together, the Gods will return and hear Britons' prayers.

Ynys Trebes

An island offshore of Armorica (Normandy) connected to the beach by a causeway at low tide but isolated at high tide, Ynys Trebes is the capital of the Kingdom of Benoic, an idyllic place of justice and enforced religious tolerance. Said to be more beautiful even than Rome of Jerusalem, Ynys Trebes houses priceless, unique scrolls of Greco-Roman literature. King Ban is an aesthete, supporting professional poets and personally copying manuscripts. His Edling (Crown Prince) Lancelot pretends to be a great warrior and intellect, while his younger half-brother, Galahad, exemplifies both. During his exile from Britain, Arthur is Ban's warlord and has sworn to return to defend it if necessary. When the call comes, narrator Derfel Cadarn goes instead, but Ynys Trebes falls and the great library burns. The island is not rebuilt and becomes known as "The Mount of Death."

Ynys Wydryn / The Tor / Avalon

Ynys Wydryn is the modern Glastonbury, Somerset, the site of the Druid Merlin's headquarters. It means "Isle of Glass," but is not an island; rather, it is a bit of high ground in the midst of a tidal bog. Merlin's ancestors have ruled the rich agricultural region for generations. The Tor is the steepest, highest part, atop which stands Merlin's hall and the "dream tower" in which he communes with the Gods. It is surrounded by a wooden stockade and filled with children "snatched from the Gods," whom Merlin hopes to train as a new cadre of Druids and Priestesses to restore the traditional religion.

To the west stands a rival Christian sanctuary, the "Holy Thorn," build around the (supposedly) still-growing remnants of the thorns that crowned Jesus Christ at the crucifixion. The pagans enjoy pointing out that it repeatedly dies and is secretly but unsuccessfully replaced. Queen Norwenna is murdered at Ynys Wydryn, but her baby, King Mordred, is spirited away, and Merlin's priestess Nimue is raped and has one eye gouged out there, starting her on her way to fully sorceress powers. Norwenna's grave becomes an object of veneration and pilgrimage.



Themes

Religion

Religion is woven throughout *The Winter King*. Christianity has since Roman times been making inroads into traditional Druidism while foreign faiths, Isis for women and Mithras for male soldiers, have been introduced but enjoy small followings. The initiation rites of Mithras are detailed as an assault on all the senses—like the battlefield.

Enmity between paganism and Christianity is not yet great (although millennialism—the belief that the mysteries of the Book of Revelation is about to be poured out—is on the rise, preached by vagabond priests followed by hordes of women. Christians use the sign of the cross much as Druids using spitting and touching iron to ward off evil. The new faith appears to be a thin veneer. The senior Christian bishop, Bedwin, is a tolerant man, even maintaining his membership in Mithras from his early warrior days. Zealous, energetic, grasping Sansum is his opposite. His Holy Thorn monastery faces Merlin's headquarters and "dream tower." The two side snipe at one another and the pagans wonder at the meaning of the new rituals, but there is no open hostility. Merlin regularly mocks the idea of a crucified carpenter-God and Derfel admits that the Holy Thorn could not possibly have been brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathaea as pious tradition holds.

Arthur is said to believe neither in the British Gods nor the "milksop" Christian God, but Bedwin holds that Arthur believes in God(s) because it is unreasonable to think that the world has created itself. He keeps his faith to himself, however, so that pagans and Christians both think he stands with them. Arthur's wife, Guinevere, a devotee of Isis, speaks stridently against the followers of the "dead carpenter." Their constant whining about guilt offends her, as does their lack of aesthetic sense and silly talk about not breathing air once breathed by pagans. Curiously, she also says, "Why offend some Gods to exalt your own? It doesn't make sense."

Among the pantheon of British Gods, those most often mentioned are the High God Bell, the most powerful Goddess, Don, Manawydan fab Llyr, the Sea God, Cernunnos, the Horned God (Merlin's protector), Camulos the War God, Aranrhod the Golden, Goddess of the Dawn; Taranis, God of Thunder; Crom Dubh, the dark, crippled God ... The pagans' great festivals are Beltain marking spring, when they build massive fires and feast at midnight, and Lughnasa, the vernal equinox, which is said to be propitious for marriages (but not Arthur's to Ceinwyn). Missing for most of the novel, gathering together the lost and dispersed Treasures of Britain, Merlin is determined to summon back and control the British Gods.

Finally, note that the narrator, one of Arthur's closest lieutenants, has become a Christian monk and lives in Bp. Sansum's monastery. Derfel believes all of the Christian doctrines but his language frequently lapses. Writing a history for the Christian Queen Igraine, patroness of the monastery (who also lapses verbally from time to time), Derfel



frequently describes his feelings at the time and then hurries to recant as a Christian. The illiterate Sansum believes that they are translating the gospels into Saxon. Derfel regularly, quite innocently, demonstrates how unchristian his superior is.

Oaths

In *The Winter King*, Arthur is bitter about being bound by oaths on every side and unable to keep most. The dying High King Uther, while denying Arthur's paternity, demands an oath that Arthur put his grandson Mordred on the throne. This is an ongoing oath for which Arthur will have to fight most of Britain's kings allied against him. On a more minor scale, Arthur's father in law, Leodegan, demands that Arthur retake his stolen kingdom, Henis Wyren, but it will mean subjecting his warriors to fighting the dreaded Irish King Diwrnach.

While fighting in Dumnonia, Arthur cannot keep his oath to King Ban. He sends Derfel Cadarn and thirty warriors to help in the defense of Ynys Trebes but it falls to the Normans and with it an irreplaceable library. The doomed King watches the sea, confident that Arthur will return and make good his oath, but it is beyond Arthur's ability to do so. Later, Sagamor argues that the Gods forgive oaths that cannot be kept. A man whose house is burning down cannot be expected to throw water on his neighbor's roof. Arthur is too conscience-worn to be comforted.

Arthur's worst failure is breaking his oath to wed Ceinwyn. At the betrothal banquet, Arthur falls instantly in love with Guinevere and quickly elopes. He cannot see how this could cause much trouble, but Ceinwyn's father, Gorfyddyd, insists on blood revenge for the treachery, and begins gathering his fellow kings against Arthur. Peace had just been agreed upon when Arthur breaks his betrothal oath and Britain is brought to the brink of war.

Arthur feels deep guilt over all of his broken and postponed oaths, but the worst is his premeditated selling out of the border fortress at Ratae to the Saxons in order to keep them from attacking for three months. Arthur inscribes Aelle's name on a rock and buries it at Stonehenge, uttering yet another oath: to kill the Saxons who pillage Ratae—providing he survives the coming war. He asks the Gods' forgiveness.

Literary Criticism

The Winter King deals with literary criticism in the opening passages of each of its five parts. The aged Monk Derfel Cadarn has been commissioned by Queen Igraine of Powys to write down his first-hand memories of fighting alongside Arthur. Songs and tales of Camelot are already popular and Derfel's insisting that they are mostly unfounded and distorted somewhat rile his gentle patroness. Although he speaks and writes fluent British, Derfel writes in his first tongue, Saxon, to prevent his superior, the illiterate Bishop Sansum, from finding out what they are up to. Sansum is a life-long enemy of Arthur and believes all pagan remnants must be stamped out. In one delightful passage, Igraine asks the bishop about a passage in the Gospels about which he once



preaches. Sansum believes a camel (as in the camel going through the eye of a needle) is a large fish.

Derfel's greatest fear is that when his parchments are translated into British, the text will be adjusted to reflect the popular image of Arthur and Lancelot. He knows that he cannot prevent this and simply does his best to tell the stories accurately. He makes and later admits to one case of literary license himself, what he terms "tale-shifting." Derfel makes the conclusion of Part 1 more dramatic than it truly is, suggesting that Arthur returns from exile in Normandy just in time to save the baby King and his retinue from sure destruction. Derfel has to admit that the commander of Mordred's guard knows that Arthur is in Britain and shadowing the enemy force. Derfel's admission comes in the context of Igraine wanting to hear about exciting things like shape-shifting. Derfel's witty admission backfires, for thereafter Igraine wonders if he may have taken other literary license.

Perhaps addressing this question and perhaps merely expressing his frustration, Derfel frequently remarks on how Arthur and Lancelot are treated with hyperbole in song and story. Lancelot actively encourages this, to build a reputation for bravery that he does not intend to display on the field. His half-brother Galahad, as well educated and literate as he, is a fighter who cares little about his reputation. Challenged once by Igraine about painting his rival for Ceinwyn's hand more darkly than necessary, Derfel does not deny his prejudice. Lancelot and Galahad grow up on Ynys Trebes, home to a vast library and professional poets. They regularly exercise their talent in praise of Lancelot. King Ban and a visiting monk-scholar (Merlin in disguise) debate the style and content of several authors of antiquity, and a reference to a non-existent eighteen volume of Silius Italicus' History of the Second Punic War helps most subtly to lead Merlin to the only guide to per-Roman Druid rituals.



Style

Point of View

The *Winter King* is told as a memoir by an aged Christian monk, Derfel Cadarn, a contemporary and associate of Arthur. He writes as a key figure in the drama of late fifth-century Britain, employing the first-person past tense, and frequently quoting vast amounts of dialog. Derfel spends a good deal of time defending Arthur against his diverse detractors and outright enemies. While he considers his conversion sincere, Derfel writes with great nostalgia and sympathy for his former faith.

The novel's point of view is distorted by the fact that Monk Derfel at the beginning of each of the five parts into which it is divided, interacts with Queen Igraine, the young wife of King Brochvael of Powys, who is the protector of the small monastery. Derfel knows that Igraine wants to hear the romantic nonsense that is being sung by the minstrels but hopes that what he writes in the Saxon language is not being twisted during translation into British. Once Derfel admits to staging a dramatic climax to Part 1, Igraine is thereafter skeptical about other manipulations. Derfel insists that he is telling everything as he has seen it and resists hurrying.

Derfel also is forced to interact with Bishop Sansum, the old and cranky superior in the monastery with whom as an impudent young pagan warrior Derfel had often clashed. Sansum would like nothing better than to catch Derfel in some heresy for which he could burn him at the stake. After a few pages of dealing with Igraine and Sansum, Monk Derfel settles back into narration, losing himself as Lord Derfel, warrior.

Setting

The *Winter King* is set in England in the last quarter of the fifth Christian century and spatially covers most of southwest England and Wales. The maps on the end pages are invaluable in keeping track of all the place names. It purports to have been written by the Monk Derfel Cadarn in a time when Britain's "enemies" have taken control and changed its name to England.

Dumnonia is the dominant kingdom, home to Arthur, Derfel, and the underage King Mordred. Arthur's Druid Merlin, Arthur's sister Morgan, Merlin's priestess and lover Nimue, and the Christian Bishops Bedwin and Sansum operate in this kingdom. At the tip of the peninsula to the west lies the Kingdom of Kernow. On the southern shore is the dreaded Isle of the Dead, which Derfel dares invade to bring Nimue back to the world of the living.

Across the "Dividing Sea" (the English Channel) in Armorica (Normandy), where Arthur has endured his exile from Dumnonia, Derfel fights to preserve the precious literary legacy at Ynys Trebes (Mont St. Michel). He vividly describes how the tides there long protect the fortress.



Gundleus reigns in Siluria, the middlemost of three kingdoms bordering the Severn Sea in present-day Wales: Demetia, Siluria, and Gwent. Gwent alone is heavily Christianized. North of these stretches Powys, ruled by stubborn old Gorfyddyd, who is determined to kill Arthur for jilting his daughter, Ceinwyn and talks the others into a united war against him and anyone who sides with him.

To the east lie the "lost lands" of Lloegyr, centering on London. These have been captured by Saxon tribes crossing the German Sea. This immigration is continual, and Arthur's goal is to unite all Britons in throwing the Saxons out. To do so, Arthur buys off the Saxons at the price of innocent British blood in Ratae to keep them away from the great confrontation at the Lugg Vale (present-day Mortimer's Cross, Hereford and Worcester). During the novel's final chapter, this peaceful green place is turned red with blood and Gorfyddyd must die before Arthur's plea for peace is heard.

Language and Meaning

Bernard Cornwell masterfully depicts life in Britain ca. CE 480. He captures delightfully the fauna, flora, geography, and weather that form the British people. He also describes in graphic detail the horrors of early medieval warfare, capturing how the men arm and armor themselves, the tactics they have learned from the hated Roman Legions who have come and gone from their island. He imparts surviving Druid beliefs and new Christian practices in a time before the conflict of faiths grows passionate. He shows life at every level of society.

The novel is written in modern British English with no attempt at capturing Welsh, Irish, or Saxon in dialogs. Most place names are given in the tongue-twisting original forms; a few have their meaning explained in English on first use. Likewise, most personal names retain the original spelling; the exceptions are major characters such as Arthur, Guinevere, Galahad, and Lancelot. Most of the implements of agriculture, cult, and warfare bear antique names, easily understood in context and lending a picturesque air to the rich narration.

Cornwell uses a complex narrator. Derfel Cadarn is an elderly Christian monk commissioned by the Queen of Powys, Igraine, to chronicle his adventures as Arthur's right-hand-man. The old monk writes in Saxon to avoid censure by his superior, Bishop Sansum, who is also a major figure in the era about which Derfel writes. Derfel worries that translators into English will turn his historic truth into legends of the sort that already abound.

Derfel is born a Saxon but is stolen by Druids as a young boy, offered as a sacrifice, but survives. He is taken in by the great Druid Merlin and grows up with his future priestess Nimue. The Saxon boy identifies fully with British life and becomes a true Briton. He accepts the British Gods, with all the superstitious gestures and utterances. While fully a Christian, Derfel in telling his story falls back into old ways of speaking and thinking and often has to apologize for his lapses. The sifting process is constant and Derfel does not disguise the unchristian behavior of Arthur's enemies.



Structure

Barnard Cornwell's *The Winter King* is the first novel in the Warlord series. It is preceded by an extensive list of characters and places, which are nominally helpful. By contrast, the details maps on the end pages are invaluable references to the myriad of places. Following the novel is a brief "Author's Note" in which Cornwell talks about how he manipulates the Arthurian legends and why he has chosen to retain the awkward Welsh personal and place names for mood.

The body of the novel consists of five numbered and titled parts: 1) "A Child in Winter," 2) "The Princess Bride," 3) "The Return of Merlin," 4) "The Isle of the Dead," and 5) "The Shield-wall. Each of these is broken into unnumbered and untitled chapters. Each part begins with the aged Monk Derfel Cadarn, long ago Arthur's right-hand man in the thick of the events he narrates, talking about his writing project and interacting with his delightful, inquisitive patroness, Queen Igraine, and sometimes with his cranky superior, Bishop Sansum, the only other survivor of those times. After he talks a while with Igraine and answers direct questions, he slips back into reverie and describes.

Part 1 describes the birth of King Mordred, involving a conflict between Christian and pagan attendants with the old God finally prevailing. The High King Uther, feeling his advanced years, needs a male heir; his legitimate son has died in battle, for which he blames his illegitimate son, Arthur. Arthur is banished to Normandy and the Druid Merlin has been missing for some time. King Gundleus of Silesia marries and subsequently murders Mordred's mother, narrowly missing assassinating the baby King, whom he pursues and surrounds in an open field. The situation is hopeless until Arthur arrives.

Part 2 centers on Arthur's betrothal to Princess Ceinwyn of Powys and jilting of her to marry Guinevere. Ceinwyn's father, Gorfydd, vows to avenge her by taking Arthur's life. Arthur, meanwhile, is trying to figure out how best to preserve Mordred's throne until he comes of age. Another oath binds Arthur to King Ban of Benoic, where Arthur had lived in exile. Part 3 shows Derfel going to Benoic on Arthur's behalf to do what he can. Galahad and Lancelot are introduced as sons of Ban. The Normans besiege the capital and Derfel is sure that he is doomed until Merlin comes out of his monastic disguise and leads a small band to safety.

Part 4 shows Derfel rescuing his beloved Nimue, Merlin's lover and priestess from the Isle of the Dead, the grim place to which the insane are banished for life. Arthur's foes mass against him and a major battle becomes inevitable. Part 5 shows that battle, culminating in the surprise victory at Lugg Vale, after which Britons are united to face the growing Saxon hordes.

The novel generally proceeds in chronological order, but Derfel regularly pauses to explain the relevant past: the Roman conquest and occupation and the twelve Treasures of Britain hidden from the Romans and being reassembled by the Druid Merlin in an effort to attract the British Gods back to battle the encroaching Christians. He fills in information on the major characters, including himself throughout the novel.



Quotes

" 'Enough,' Uther growled. The High King was no Christian and did not like any man attempting to make him one, though he did accept that the Christian God probably had as much power as most other Gods. The events of this night were testing that toleration to the limit.

"Which is why I was there. I was a child on the edge of manhood, a beardless errand-runner who crouched frozen beside the King's chair on the ramparts of Caer Cadarn. I had come from Ynys Wydryn, Merlin's hall, which lay on the northern horizon. My task, if ordered, was to fetch Morgan and her helpers who waited in a pig-herder's mud hovel at the foot of Caer Cadarn's western slope. The Princess Norwenna might want Christ's mother as her midwife, but Uther was ready with the older Gods if that newer one failed. "And the Christian God did fail. Norwenna's screams became fewer, but her whimpering more desperate until at last Bishop Bedwin's wife came from the hall and knelt shivering beside the High King's chair. The baby, Ellin said, would not come and the mother, she feared, was dying. Uther waved that last comment aside. The mother was nothing, only the child mattered, and only then if it was a boy." Part 1, pp. 7-8

"She kissed the sword as she had been commanded, and just as her lips touched the grey steel, Gundleus rammed the blade hard down. He was laughing as he killed his bride, laughing as he slid the sword down past her chin into the hollow of her throat and still laughing as he forced the long blade down through the choking resistance of her writhing body. Norwenna had no time to scream, nor any voice left to scream with as the blade ripped through her throat and was rammed down to her heart. Gundleus grunted as he drove the steel home. He had slung his heavy war shield so that both his leather-gloved hands were on the hilt as he pushed and twisted the blade downwards. There was blood on the sword and blood on the grass and blood on the dying Queen's blue cloak, and still more blood as Gundleus jerked the long blade violently free. Norwenna's body body, bereft of the sword's support, flopped sideways, quivered for a few seconds, and then was still.

"Sebile dropped the baby and fled screaming. Mordred cried aloud in protest, but Gundleus's sword cut the baby's cries short. He stabbed the red blade down just once and suddenly the golden cloth was drenched with scarlet. So much blood for so small a child." Part 1, p. 74

" 'There is a purpose to all things,' Arthur said, 'even being a soldier.' He smiled at me, as though apologizing for being so earnest, yet he had no need to be apologetic for I was drinking in his words. I had dreamed of becoming a soldier because of a warrior's high status and because it had always seemed to me that it was better to carry a spear than a rake, but I had never thought beyond those selfish ambitions. Arthur had thought far beyond and he brought to Dumnonia a clear vision of where his sword and spear must take him.

" 'We have a chance' — Arthur leaned on the high rampart as he spoke — 'to make a Dumnonia in which we can serve our people. We can't give them happiness, and I don't



know how to guarantee a good harvest that will make them rich, but I do know that we can make them safe, and a safe man, a man who knows that his children will grow without being taken for slaves and his daughter's bride price won't be ruined by a soldier's rape, is a man more likely to be happy than a man living under the threat of war. Is that fair?" Part 2, pp. 143-144

" 'Last night,' Arthur said, 'you agreed to marry us. Why do you refuse now?'

"Sansum shrugged. 'I have wrested with my conscience, Lord.'

"Arthur understood and sighed. 'So what is your price, priest?'

" 'A bishopric,' Sansum said hurriedly, struggling to his feet.

" 'I thought you had a Pope who grants bishoprics,' Arthur said. 'Simplicius? Isn't that his name?'

" 'The most blessed and holy Simplicius, may he still live in health,' Sansum agreed, 'but give me a church, Lord, and a throne in the church, and men will call me a bishop.'

" 'A church and a chair?' Arthur asked. 'Nothing more?'

" 'And the appointment to be King Mordred's chaplain. I must have that! His sole and personal chaplain, you understand? With an allowance from the treasury sufficient for me to keep my own steward, doorkeeper, cook and candleman.' He brushed grass off his black. Gown. 'And a laundress,' he added hastily.

" 'Is that all?' Arthur asked sarcastically.

" 'A place on Dumnonia's council,' Sansum said as though it were trivial. 'That's all.'

" 'Granted,' Arthur said carelessly. 'So what do we do to get married?'" Part 2, p. 178

" 'Ah, and this is a work you must already know,' the King said, drawing another scroll from its box. 'Marcus Aurelius's Meditations. It is an unparalleled guide, my dear Derfel, to the manner in which a man should live his life.'

" 'Platitudes in bad Greek written by a Roman bore,' the priest growled.

" 'Probably the greatest book ever written,' the King said dreamily, replacing the Marcus Aurelius and drawing out another work. 'And this is a curiosity, indeed it is. The great treatise of Aristarchus of Samos. You know it, I'm sure?'

" 'No, Lord,' I confessed.

" 'It is not perhaps on everyone's reading list,' the King admitted sadly, 'but it has a certain quaint amusement. Aristarchus maintains—do not laugh—that the earth revolves around the sun and not the sun around the earth.' He illustrated this cantankerous notion with extravagant wheeling gestures with his long arms. 'He got it backwards, do you see?'

" 'Sounds sensible to me,' Celwin said, still without looking up from his work.

" 'And Silius Italicus!' The King gestured at a while group of honeycomb cells filled with scrolls. 'Dear Silius Italicus! I have all eighteen volumes of his history of the Second Punic War. All in verse, of course. What a treasure!'

" 'The second turgid war,' the priest cackled.

" 'Such is my library,' Ban said proudly, conducting me from the room, 'the glory of Ynys Trebes! That and our poets. Sorry to have disturbed you, Father!'

" 'Is a camel disturbed by a grasshopper?' Father Celwin demanded, then the door was



closed on him and I followed the King past the bare-breasted harpist back to where Bleddig waited." Part 3, p.. 219

"He was not a good Christian, Bishop Bedwin, though he was a very good man. Sansum now tells me that Bedwin's goodness will not prevent his soul from roasting in hell. But that summer, fresh back from Benoic, all our souls seemed doomed to perdition. The harvest was just beginning, but once it was gathered, Gorfyddyd's onslaught would come." Part 3, p. 266

" 'Ah! The Gospel writers at work! My two evangelists!' Sansum, his hands dirty from the earth he had thrown at the lepers, sidled into the room to give this present parchment a dubious look before wrinkling his nose. 'Do I smell something foul?' he asked.

"I looked sheepish. 'The beans at breakfast, Lord Bishop,' I said. 'I apologize.'

" 'I am astonished you can abide his company,' Sansum said to Igraine. 'And shouldn't you be in the chapel, my Lady? Praying for a baby? Is that not your business here?'

" 'It's certainly not yours,' Igraine said tartly. 'If you must know, my Lord Bishop, we were discussing our Saviour's parables. Did you not once preach to us about the camel and the needle's eye?'

"Sansum grunted and looked over my shoulder. 'And what, foul Brother Derfel, is the Saxon word for camel?'

" 'Nwylle,' I said.

"Igraine laughed and Sansum glared at her. 'My Lady finds the words of our blessed Lord amusing?'

" 'I am just happy to be here,' Igraine said humbly, 'but I would love to know what a camel is.'

" 'Everyone knows!' Sansum said derisively. 'A camel is a fish, a great fish! Not unlike,' he added slyly, 'the salmon that your husband sometimes remembers to send to us poor monks?'" Part 4, p. 272

" 'Nimue?' I was forced to go on hands and knees to crawl the last few feet to where she lay. 'Nimue?' I said again. This time her name caught in my throat for I was sure she must be dead, but then I saw her ribs move. She breathed, but was otherwise still as death. I put Hywelbane down and reached a hand to touch her cold white shoulder.

'Nimue?'

"She sprang towards me, hissing, teeth bared, one eye a livid red socket and the other turned so that only the white of its eyeball showed. She tried to bite me, she clawed at me, she keened a curse in a whining voice then spat it at me, and afterwards she slashed her long nails at my eyes. 'Nimue!' I yelled. She was spitting, drooling, fighting and snapping with filthy teeth at my face. 'Nimue!'

"She screamed another curse and put her right hand at my throat. She had the strength of the mad and her scream rose in triumph as her fingers closed on my windpipe. Then, suddenly, I knew just what I had to do. I seized her left hand, ignored the pain in my throat, and laid my own scarred palm across her scar. I laid it there; I left it there; I did not move.

"And slowly, slowly, the right hand at my throat weakened. Slowly, slowly, her good eye



rolled so that I could see my love's bright soul once more. She stared at me, and then she began to cry.

" 'Nimue,' I said, and she put her arms around my neck and clung to me. She was sobbing now in great heaves that racked her thin ribs as I held her, stroked her and spoke her name." Part 4, pp. 293-294

"Arthur smiled 'Some men are better at knowing than doing, Derfel. Ban was very wise, but not practical. I have to be both.

" 'To be a king?' I dared to ask, for stating such an ambition was counter to everything Arthur claimed about his destiny.

"But Arthur took no offense at my words. 'To be a ruler,' he said. He had stopped again and was staring over the dark cloaked shapes of his sleeping men at the stone in the circle's centre, and to me it seemed as if the slab of rock shimmered in the moonlight, or perhaps that was my heightened imagination. 'Merlin made me strip naked and stand on that stone all night long,' Arthur went on. 'There was rain on the wind and it was cold. He chanted spells and made me hold the sword at arm's length and keep it there. I remember my arm was like fire and then at last it went numb, but still he would not let me drop Caledfwlch. "Hold it!" he shouted at me, "hold it," and I stood there, quivering while he summoned the dead to witness his gift. And they came, Derfel, rank on rank of the Otherworld to see the sword given to me.' He shook his head at the memory. 'Or perhaps I just dreamed those worm-eaten men. I was young, you see, and very impressionable, and Merlin does know how to put the fear of the Gods into young minds. Once he'd scared me with the throng of dead witnesses, though, he told me how to lead men, how to find warriors who need leaders and how to fight battles. He told me my destiny, Derfel.' He fell silent again, his long face very grim in the moonlight. Then he smiled ruefully. 'All nonsense.'" Part 4, p. 321

"He smiled again and stood up. 'But we're not mice. We have some of the greatest warriors ever to life a spear. We have champions!' The cheering began. 'We can kill cats! And we know to skin them too! But.' That last word stopped the next cheer just as it began. 'But,' Arthur went on, 'not if we wait here to be attacked. Wait here behind Magnis's walls and what happens? The enemy will march around us. Our homes, our wives, our children, our lands, our flocks and our new harvest become theirs, and all we become are mice in a trap. We must attack, and attack soon.'

"Agricola waited for the Dumnonian cheers to die. 'Attack where?' he asked sourly.

" 'Where they least expect it, Lord, in their strongest place. LuggVale. Straight up the cross! Straight to the heart!' He held up a hand to stop any cheering. 'The vale is a narrow place,' he said, 'where no shield-line can be outflanked. The road fords the river north of the valley.' He was frowning as he spoke, trying to remember a place he had seen only once in his life, but Arthur had a soldier's memory for terrain and only needed to see a place once. 'We would need to put men on the western hill to stop their archers raining arrows down, but once in the vale I swear we cannot be moved.'" Part 4, pp. 340-341



"I had been staring at him, as much with astonishment as with relief, but I was also wondering just what Merlin was doing in this citadel of the enemy. Druids, of course, were free to travel where they liked, even in enemy territory, but his presence at Caer Sws at such a time seemed strange and even dangerous, for though Gorfyddyd's men were cowed by the Druid's presence they were also resentful of his interference and some, safe at the hall's rear, growled that he should mind his own business.

"Merlin turned on them. 'My business,' he said in a low voice that nevertheless stopped the small protest dead, 'is the care of your souls and if I care to drown those souls in misery then you will wish your mothers had never given birth. Fools!' This last word was snapped loudly and accompanied by a gesture from the staff that made the armoured men struggle down to their knees. None of the kings dared to intervene as Merlin swept the staff to give one of the skulls hanging from a pillar a sharp crack. 'You pray for victory!' Merlin said. 'But over what? Over your kin and not your enemies! Your enemies are Saxons. For years we suffered under Roman rule, but at last the Gods saw fit to take the Roman vermin away and what do we do? We fight among ourselves and let a new enemy take our land, rape our women and harvest our corn. So fight your war, fools, fight it and win, and still you shall not have victor.'" Part 4, p. 352

"Gorfyddyd did not want peace. He wanted slaughter. He rode up and down our line, controlling his horse with his knees and shouting at our men. 'You're dying because your Lord can't keep his hands off a whore! You're dying for a bitch with a wet rump! For a bitch in perpetual heat! Your souls will be cursed. My dead are already feasting in the Otherworld, but your souls will become their throwpieces. And why will you die? For his red-headed whore? He pointed his spear at me, then rode his horse directly at me. I pulled back lest he saw through the helmet's eyeslit that I was not Arthur and my spearmen closed protectively around me. Gorfyddyd laughed at my apparent timidity. His horse was close enough for my men to touch, but Gorfyddyd showed no fear of their spears as he spat at me. 'Woman!' he called out, his worst insult, then touched his horse with his left foot and the beast turned and galloped back towards his army." Part 5, p. 402

"My mother had been screaming, and I still heard her screams as I kicked my way through Tanaburs's circle of skulls, and her screams melded into the Druid's shriek as I echoed his long-ago cry of death. 'To Bel!' I shouted.

"Hywelbane cut down. And I did not miss. Hywelbane cut Tanaburs down through the shoulder, down through the ribs and such was the sheer blood-sodden anger in my soul that Hywelbane cut on down through his scrawny belly and deep into his stinking bowels so that his body burst apart like a rotted corpse, and all the time I screamed the awful scream of a little child being given to the death-pit.

"The skull circle filled with blood and my eyes with tears as I looked up at the King who had slain Ralla's child and Mordred's mother. The King who had raped Nimue and taken her eye, and remembering that pain I took Hywelbane's hilt in both my hands and wrenched the blade free of the dirty offal at my feet and stepped across the Druid's body to carry death to Gundleus.



" 'He's mine,' Nimue shouted at me. She had taken off her eye-patch so that her empty socket leered red in the flamelight. She walked past me, smiling. 'You're mine,' she crooned, 'all mine,' and Gundleus screamed.

"And perhaps, in the Otherworld, Norwenna heard that scream and knew that her son, her little winter-born son, was still the King." Part 5, pp. 424-425

Topics for Discussion

How are dynastic marriages portrayed in the novel? Do they seem a stable, profitable way of securing alliances? Pick one and discuss its ramifications in detail.

Who is the least tolerant character in terms of religion? Describe his or her views against the norms of that religion.

How does enigmatic and elusive Merlin unify the novel?

How do Christians and pagans differ in their views towards magic and superstition? How are they alike?

What is the legacy of the Roman occupation of Britain? What are the good and bad aspects?

Are the Saxon and Irish incursions into Britain motivated in the same ways? Discuss the manifestation of racism in the novel.

How is Queen Igraine of Powys used to keep the novel moving forward? How does she help delineate the character of Derfel Cadarn in the present day and as a participant in the story?