The Wizard in the Tree Short Guide

The Wizard in the Tree by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

The title The Wizard in the Tree may at first conjure an image of a magical man sitting among the branches of a tree, but Alexander's title has a literal meaning— Mallory, his heroine, finds a wizard enveloped in a tree trunk. The wizard was trapped there ages ago when the magic peoples of the earth were leaving the ordinary world to go to an island called Vale Innis. They were not to harm any living thing during this journey, but the wizard Arbican did not think the injunction extended to breaking off a tree branch for a walking stick. He broke a branch and was instantly swallowed up by the tree.

Mallory liberates Arbican into a world very different from the one he remembers; here there are pistols, steam engines, and all manner of devices that alarm him. This technological wizardry is offset by his realization that the people of Mallory's world are just as confused and ignorant as the inhabitants of the world he had been leaving. He is irritable and sometimes rude, but Arbican manages to show Mallory that life offers more than just his kind of modern magic. Human beings have their own manner of magic: they can make magical events happen if they only apply themselves and work to make it happen. The Wizard in the Tree is a clever adventure featuring a wizard lost out of his own time and a young woman who learns to stand up for herself and create her own fairy-tale ending.

About the Author

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

Alexander was born in Philadelphia on January 30, 1924, to Edna Chudley Alexander and Alan Audley Alexander, a stockbroker. His early and avid reading of mythology and folk tales may have inspired such noted books as The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen (1991; see separate entry) and The Arkadians (1995; see Volume 9), novels that derive their plots, philosophy, intellectual content, and poetic imaginings from the ancient cultures of China and Greece.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Setting

The world of The Wizard in the Tree is deliberately vague about details like dates and physical locations. Alexander creates a setting where the remarkable can easily happen as part of everyday life by placing the story in a land that blends characteristics from different countries and time periods. The technology is that of the early nineteenth century: there are steam engines, single-shot pistols, and coal mines, but horses still rule the roads and telephones are not to be found. The culture of The Wizard in the Tree is primarily Alexander's own invention, though it resembles that of European rural areas until relatively recent times. Mallory's village is dominated by a squire who controls the local society with wealth acquired by leasing the land he owns to tenant farmers. However, the world is not an entirely feudal one in which a squire can do anything he pleases; the rule of law has been imposed, and even a squire must obey it. Scrupnor's efforts to evade the law and Mallory's efforts to find some kind of justice in her society form the heart of the novel's plot.

Social Sensitivity

The values expressed in The Wizard in the Tree are traditional American ones. Arbican tells Mallory that humans have their own kind of magic, and this human magic turns out to be a product of self-reliance, quick thinking, and honesty. Arbican also makes the point that people must recognize these qualities in themselves and understand their value. Much of The Wizard in the Tree is devoted to Mallory's discovery of her own strengths, such as intelligence, a determination to do right by others, and courage. As she discovers these qualities in herself, she grows increasingly confident in her ability to make good choices and use good judgment, and she gains the power to act with maturity on her own behalf and on behalf of others. Frequently expressed in the novel is the view that all young people can create their own kind of magic if they strive to do what is right and have faith in their own abilities. This view is tempered by another American value, the quality of modesty, which is especially valued in leaders; Mallory may have accomplished great deeds by the novel's end, but she does not crow about them. Instead, she worries about how well she will perform as the new squire.

Her display of the qualities of mercy and forgiveness, when she decides to set the Parsels free of their obligations to the Holdings, is fully in the manner of those timehallowed traditional American values. Her accomplishments coupled with her concern for others suggest that she will be a fine squire and community leader.

The values Mallory displays contrast with those manifested by Scrupnor and the other villainous figures. Scrupnor is greedy and self-aggrandizing. No one has to tell him how great he is, although he enjoys people saying so, because he is eager to announce to anyone that he is a man of vision. He is callously indifferent to the suffering of others, caring not at all that his coal mines will make many people homeless and doom others to lives of hopeless drudgery. He is everything that a leader should not be, and his devotion to evil prevents him from making his own magic the way Mallory can.

Moreover, he is a symbolic indictment of industrialization at any cost. The events of The Wizard in the Tree imply that some kinds of progress may be bad for people. Arbican pointedly disapproves of pistols and steam engines, both of which endanger people.

Furthermore, the coal mine that supplies the fuel for steam engines and for industry in general is depicted as an evil that will ruin lives and lower the quality of life for the community. Farming, even the pitiful efforts of a farmer who wants to kill the pig because meat is rare, is depicted as much better for people than coal mining. This sets at odds two traditional American values: a belief in the goodness of technological progress and a belief that rural values are superior to urban ones. Alexander plainly sides with the rural values, even though industry brings wealth to some people, such as road builders and tavern owners.

Literary Qualities

The Wizard in the Tree is a long fairy tale, in spite of Mallory's assertion that "nothing ends as it does in fairy tales." The novel has a fairy-tale ending—through her goodness and efforts to help others, Mallory becomes the new owner of the Holdings. She has changed from an abused orphan working as a servant for people who beat her, a traditional fairy-tale figure, into a community leader who could, if she wished, lord it over those who once ruled her life. The Wizard in the Tree has typical fairy-tale elements: a magical figure, stark contrasts between good and evil, and amazing events that enable a weak figure to become a strong one. The Wizard in the Tree begins much as a typical fairy tale does: a young woman in the woods encounters a magical figure who will change her life. The central figure of a fairy tale encounters a series of trials that test his or her cleverness in particular but also reveal the figure's vulnerability and innate goodness. Although accustomed to being bullied and ordered about, Mallory uses her intelligence and quick-wittedness to outthink her oppressors and to help Arbican. That Arbican is a grouch is also typical: magical figures in fairy tales are often indifferent to human affairs and usually require close watching to keep them out of mischief. Mallory must hawkishly watch Arbican because of his penchant for getting into trouble.

Although the themes of The Wizard in the Tree are mature and the heroine is a young adult, the novel has a somewhat childlike tone; this tone reflects the traditions of the fairy-tale form, which usually makes straightforward contrasts between right and wrong. This tone of guileless simplicity also reflects the oral nature of the fairy-tale tradition; these tales were told aloud, not read from the printed page. The occasionally lilting prose and childlike explanations echo the oral tradition, which attracted listeners of all ages with musical language and, without confusing adornment, explained story events that listeners had to grasp the first time they heard them, without recourse to a written text.

Themes and Characters

Mallory, the main character of The Wizard in the Tree, is a goodhearted and forgiving person who strives to help Arbican, a wizard she finds in a tree trunk: Even as she watched, the crown of a balding head, wreathed by long strands of grizzled hair, thrust up from the trunk; then a lean, wrinkled face, its beard tangled in splinters. Cobwebs trailed from its nose and a clump of mushrooms sprouted from one ear. The bright eyes blinked furiously.

The magical figure of Arbican introduces the theme of the novel: people can make their own magic without having magical powers. The world's magical beings long ago sailed off to Vale Innis, ending magic in the human world; since then, many false notions about magic have become part of human folklore. Mallory asks for three wishes and is told that she cannot have any.

Though three wishes are standard goodconduct prizes in fairy tales, Arbican insists that Mallory and he are not in a fairy tale.

He says, "Magic can't work miracles," meaning that all magic is an illusion in real life.

He also insists that magic is of little value when applied to the important aspects of life: "Why do you think our age ended?

Because our magic failed." Then he adds, "There was no enchantment to make you [humans] the least bit kinder, gentler, or happier. Without that, there was no point in it." Arbican's attitude causes Mallory much frustration; living in a household where she is physically abused, without family or friends, she urgently desires to be freed from her misery. The discovery of a wizard seems like a miracle of good luck, but Arbican is a grouchy man who is not very interested in human affairs. He says, "Whether I care or not has nothing to do with the facts of the matter. I told you before: I create illusions, I don't mistake them for the way things are."

Underlying Arbican's irritability and insistence that his magic will do Mallory no lasting good is the idea of another kind of magic. This magic, the novel's unifying theme, is created by humans when they strive to make their lives better, and it derives from good hearts, hard work, and a deep belief that one can improve one's character and quality of life. For much of the novel, Mallory does not believe that she can make her life better, even as a somewhat frustrated Arbican tells her that she can.

She does not seem to understand his point, as reflected in her insistence that he give her magical help. She remains unsure of herself even to the end of the novel, when her unselfish efforts to help Arbican result in the kind of miracle that his magic cannot perform—her transformation from abused servant to wealthy landowner. This uncertainty is a very human quality, and good people are often unsure of their abilities to do good. Here it helps to make Mallory a more convincing figure.

Arbican is a complex character far removed from the stereotypical fantasy wizard willing to use his magic at the drop of his pointed necromantic hat. Although Arbican's grumpiness, coupled with his vulnerability, makes him endearing, it does not make him unique—there are many testy and peevish magical figures in literature.

Read T. H. White's The Once and Future King (1958; see separate entry) for a notable example. What makes him stand out is his insistence on factualness. Throughout The Wizard in the Tree, Arbican tells Mallory to look at the facts of the world. He does this in part because he wants her to set aside the notion that his wizardry could make her life better. She eventually learns that in real life people make their own lives better by improving their conduct and by working hard to alter what is displeasing. She also discovers that there are no tidy, happilyever-after endings in life. When she becomes the squire, she realizes that she still has work to do. Her happiness does not lie in her exalted position in the community but rather in what she does and will be doing for the rest of her life. The magic that makes good lives requires constant effort.

Arbican is thus an unusual figure whose obsession with empiricism clarifies the unifying theme by showing that the world of facts includes how people live just as much as the tangible world of objects. The first step to solving problems in life is to make a realistic assessment of all aspects of the situation, extract the facts that pertain to it, and then logically proceed to take the steps that will correct the problem. When he talks about basing one's actions on evidence, Arbican sounds very much like a scientist.

In dismissing fairy-tale notions about magic and telling Mallory to base her ideas on what can be observed, he is like a modern scientist telling a student to use empirical evidence rather than preconceived fantasies to learn about the world. This approach has the interesting effect of making Mallory—who believes in fairy tales and has spent much of her life yearning for a fairytale outcome that will make her life happy—seem more magic-minded than Arbican the wizard. Alexander probably created this effect deliberately, because the events of the story reveal Mallory to be the truly magical figure, the person whose caring about others transforms her life into something much better than it had been. Arbican's misfiring magic serves Mallory almost as a diagnostic tool or as a scientific experiment to collect data; it provides her with experiences and a proper frame of observation that help her correctly interpret facts about her life and the lives of others.

The Wizard in the Tree should not be mistaken as a book only for the very young; the idea that a person can make his or her own magic has meaning for people of any age. The theme is explored in a mature and complex way that requires thought and some worldly experience from readers. Mallory is occasionally called a "slut," and the gamekeeper Bolt makes sexual advances toward her, details suggesting that The Wizard in the Tree is meant for young adult readers who recognize their meaning. These readers are likely to understand that Mallory's lowly social position and lack of family and friends to protect her make it possible that she can be both beaten and sexually molested with near impunity; her life is indeed a desperate one. This makes her eventual triumph all the more the kind of miracle Arbican refers to when he says that he cannot perform miracles. Mallory's growth into a strong person is a triumph of her

spirit over a potential life of degradation, and such spiritual growth is a kind of miracle that people have to make for themselves, a miracle that no outer magic can create.

Topics for Discussion

1. What does Arbican mean when he says that his kind of magic failed and that is why the people of magic left for Vale Innis?

2. What does Arbican mean when he says humans (not magical people) have their own magic? How does The Wizard in the Tree illustrate Mallory's magic?

3. Why does Mallory choose to help Arbican, even though he is very grouchy, even rude?

4. Why does Mallory forgive Mr. Parsel's debt to the Holdings even though she was often beaten in his home?

5. Mallory says that she may be a bad squire because she knows little of accounting and business, but Arbican says that he thinks she will do well. Do you think she will be a good squire?

6. Scrupnor seems to be a bad man from the moment he talks of putting his tenants out of their homes as a "blessing for those cottagers." Why do many of the characters in The Wizard in the Tree not recognize his villainy?

7. Although The Wizard in the Tree has fairy-tale qualities, it also has modern elements: accounts of chopping down trees to make a road and of coal mines replacing farms. Is it awkward to put modern issues in a fairy tale?

8. Which characters in The Wizard in the Tree are stereotypes? Which ones are more fully developed than stereotypes?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mr. and Mrs. Parsel agree to buy their produce exclusively from Scrupnor in exchange for a loan. Scrupnor can thus charge them whatever he wants; eventually, Mr. Parsel realizes that the prices may be so high that he can make no profit from his business. This kind of oppressive and exploitative arrangement is now illegal in the United States.

What is the history of such bond relationships in the United States, and why were they outlawed? You might begin by looking up sources under the terms indentured servitude, wage slavery, and kickbacks.

2. What are the different ways in which coal is mined? Which way does Scrupnor seem to have in mind for his coal mines? What will happen to the land where the coal is to be mined?

3. Why is coal valuable? What is it used for?

4. What are the fairy-tale elements of The Wizard in the Tree? What fairy tales in particular have similar traits?

5. What other literary works have characters who are grumpy, somewhat comical wizards? What are these wizards like? Do they resemble Arbican? Do these works use their wizards in the same way Alexander uses his?

Arbican is forever getting into trouble.

From breaking a branch and being swallowed by a tree to turning into a pig, the bumbling wizard seems to display problems with thinking clearly. Will he make the trip to Vale Innis without incident, or will he get into more trouble? Keeping his Wizard in the Tree personality intact, write a story about Arbican's journey in his magical ship.

For Further Reference

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——. "No Laughter in Heaven." Horn Book (February 1970): 11-19. Alexander's discussion of the use of humor in literature seems to be in part a defense of how he uses humor in his own writings.

——. "Wishful Thinking or Hopeful Dreaming." Horn Book (August 1968): 383-90. Fantasy offers hopeful dreams of a better future and can teach moral behavior to readers.

Barrow, Diana. "The El Dorado Adventure." In Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults. Vol. 6. Edited by Kirk H. Beetz. Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1994, pp. 3081-89. This good, thorough analysis of Alexander's novel The El Dorado Adventure (1987) also has a solid biography of Alexander.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. "Lloyd Alexander."

In More Books by More People. New York: Citation Press, 1974, pp. 10-18. A brief biographical account of Alexander that emphasizes the sources for his fiction.

Related Titles

The Wizard in the Tree stands alone among Alexander's works, the rest of which belong to one of several series, either novels set in the same imaginary worlds, such as the Westmark books and the Prydain Chronicles, or ones with similar styles and objectives, such as the recent novels The Remarkable journey of Prince Jen (1991; see separate entry), The Arkadians (1995; see Volume 9), and The Iron Ring (1997; see Volume 9). These last books, tales of adventure and magic, focus on individual ancient cultures and make use of their value systems. Like most of Alexander's fiction, The Wizard in the Tree uses magic to illuminate ethical values and reflects a respect for the mind of the reader. The characterization is not as strong as in most of his other novels, primarily because The Wizard in the Tree is a long fairy tale, a form that usually features stereotyped characters. Mallory, on the other hand, is a wonderful creation who can stand proudly beside Alexander's best characterizations. The Wizard in the Tree also shares with Alexander's best work the ability to inspire love of language and love of ideas, and like them it can inspire passionate devotion not only in young readers but in readers of any age.

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