

The Woman Who Rides Like a Man Short Guide

The Woman Who Rides Like a Man by Tamora Pierce

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Overview

The Woman Who Rides Like a Man is an exciting fantasy adventure with a decidedly feminist perspective. It relates the adventures of Alanna of Trebond, the only female knight in the kingdom of Tortall. The book's well-described medieval setting and elements of magic make it good fantasy, but its approach to the issues of sexism and bigotry give it relevance in the real world. The author uses Alanna's story to discuss the nature of prejudice, the value of tolerance, and the many issues related to growing into adulthood.

About the Author

Tamora Pierce was born on December 13, 1954, in Connellsville, Pennsylvania. She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1976. Before writing her first novel, she worked as a tax data collector and clerk, a social worker, a banking secretary, and an assistant to a literary agent. She also wrote and produced radio plays. Her wide-ranging interests include Japanese history, film production, psychology, medieval history, folklore, and the occult. She is a former instructor in the history of witchcraft at Pennsylvania's Free Woman's University. Her interest in medievalism and magic are evident in all of her books about the fearless female knight Alanna. While Alanna's adventures have apparently been brought to a close with the last book of the Song of the Lioness Quartet, Pierce intends to keep writing novels and radio plays. She lives with her actor/filmmaker husband in New York City.



Setting

The book is set in the mythical kingdom of Tortall, which resembles medieval Europe in most respects. The heroine, Alanna of Trebond, having won her shield of knighthood in a previous adventure, decides to leave the capital city and the palace where she was trained to seek further adventures in the great Southern Desert. Together with her squire, Coram, and her cat, Faithful, she is accepted as a member of one of the Bahzir desert tribes. After killing the tribe's evil shaman, Ibn Nazzir, in a magic duel, Alanna finds herself saddled with the job of shaman herself, at least for the time being. The book follows Alanna's adventures as she seeks to understand the ways of the Bahzir—and herself. The story brings her into confrontation with an old lover, an evil from her past, and her own greatest fears.



Social Sensitivity

The *Woman Who Rides Like a Man* is a story that should appeal to many girls because of its sympathetic heroine and its message that girls can do anything boys can. Readers are likely to find the story exciting as they savor Alanna's triumphs in the face of adversity.

By focusing on the heroine's struggle to prove herself in a world that is dominated by men, Pierce directly attacks notions of stereotyped sex roles that still exist in our own society. Alanna finds that she must choose between becoming the prince's wife or keeping her own independence. It will also be noted that Alanna is sexually active in this story. Although there are no explicit sex scenes, Pierce does touch briefly on the subject of birth control, and begins to explore Alanna's growing love for two very different men: Prince Jonathan and George Cooper, the King of the Thieves. Pierce's approach to Alanna's sexuality is, for the most part, restrained and matter-of-fact. Sex is treated as just another part of Alanna's busy life.

Pierce's story frequently attacks intolerance and cruelty, especially persecution that is based on religious differences. At the end of the book, Coram and Alanna arrive in the town of Alois just in time to free a sorceress from a vicious mob about to burn her at the stake for practicing magic. While Alanna is able to free the woman, she finds that the sorceress has already been so brutally tortured that she is near death anyway. The woman dies mourning for the misguided people who killed her and Alanna magically raises a monument to honor her.

The book's references to magic and the polytheistic religions of both the Tortallans and the Bahzir may prove disturbing to some parents, even set within the context of a fantasy. But these same elements will appeal to others as a plea for religious tolerance.

Another subject that may trouble some readers is the book's violence.

There are several battles and at least two violent deaths in the novel. Pierce does not glamorize violence, however. Her battle scenes are brief and focus on the fighting skills of the combatants, not on graphic descriptions of gore. Alanna's moral courage is just as important as her physical skill in battle. She repeatedly battles against the evil magic of the crystal sword, rather than give in to the blade's delight in bloodshed. We see Alanna using her magic to heal others almost as much as we see her fighting. Her tending of the Bahzir wounded after a raider attack on their village emphasizes the human cost of all warfare.

Literary Qualities

In *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, Tamora Pierce demonstrates not only her ability to spin a lively, readable fantasy full of adventure and suspense, she also uses her detailed knowledge of medieval customs and history to create a believable setting. Readers will enjoy her descriptions of battle, armor, weapons and fighting techniques that were used in the middle ages. Her writing is clean and reads quickly. Her characters are engaging and believable.

The writer has also done a good job of creating not just a credible fantasy world, with its own history, customs and religion, but has also created two distinct cultures within that world. In *The Bahzir and the Tortallans*, Pierce is able to show two very different ways of life.

Alanna is a likeable heroine who struggles with many of the issues young people still face today as they reach adulthood. The presence of this theme places *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* in the tradition of many "coming-of-age" tales that appear in Western folklore and literature.



Themes and Characters

The most important characters are Alanna, her squire Coram, her cat Faithful, whose speech she understands, and Prince Jonathan, Alanna's first love. Also important are the members of the Bahzir tribe that adopts Alanna, notably their chief, Halef Seif, and two magically gifted girls, Kara and Kourrem, whom Alanna trains to be shamans. Later in the story, an important role is also played by Alanna's old friend George Cooper, the King of the Thieves.

The most important theme is Alanna's own growth into womanhood. The character starts out by being impetuous and quick to anger. Becoming an adult means taking responsibility for her own actions, as Alanna does after she kills the Bahzir shaman Ibn Nazzir in combat. Although Alanna has no desire for the kind of power Nazzir used, Bahzir law dictates that she must take the place of the slain shaman until she can train new apprentices to accept the post. She selects the boy Ishak and the girls Kara and Kourrem as her trainees.

These previously outcast children are magically talented, but they lack the skill and training to control their gifts.

Alanna knows that untrained magic is dangerous. In training the three children to use their powers wisely, Alanna is not only taking responsibility for her own actions, but also for the welfare of the society that has accepted her.

Reaching womanhood also means that Alanna must accept herself fully.

She has spent so much time struggling to prove herself the equal of male soldiers in combat, that she has not completely accepted her more traditional "feminine" skills. Among the Bahzir she learns to develop these previously ignored talents. She learns to weave from one of the Bahzir midwives. And in training the children, she learns to use her own magic more fully. Her ability to heal, in particular, proves useful in the aftermath of a desert raider attack on the Bahzir village. For Alanna, using her magic powers is the most dangerous task of all, since she has always feared her own gift. Ultimately the heroine discovers that she does have the skill to use all of her talents wisely, and that she can be both warrior and woman.

That realization brings her into conflict with her own first love, Prince Jonathan. While Jon admires Alanna's strength and her warrior's skills, he expects her to give up her freedom among the Bahzir in order to become his wife. Convinced that Jonathan is seeking to marry her only as an act of rebellion against his proper royal family, she refuses the proposal. This leads to a fight and a bitter breaking of the relationship. Jon returns to his castle in the north while Alanna seeks solace for a time with George Cooper, also known as the King of the Thieves, who has been in love with her for some time.



George and Alanna's relationship quickly takes a romantic turn, but when George returns to the capital city to see to his own affairs, Alanna decides to return to the desert and the Bahzir tribe that has adopted her, with whom she can be "fully and completely Alanna."

Meanwhile, Alanna continues to struggle with her continuing nightmares about Duke Roger of Conte, an evil sorcerer whom she killed in a duel during an earlier adventure. The mysterious crystal sword she has acquired in battle bears the same decoration on its hilt as Duke Roger's jeweled wizard's rod. Even though the Duke is dead, his memory is a potent reminder of evil—a power that Alanna must overcome just as she struggles to overcome the evil magic that is latent in the crystal sword. The power and nature of evil is another important theme in *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*. The author shows her readers two different kinds of evil in her work. The first is greed for power. The author stresses that the desire for power exists in everyone and must be controlled or it will harm many—including the one who seeks power. Alanna discovers that the crystal blade was indeed forged by Duke Roger and that its evil magic instills a desire to kill and destroy on all who bear it. She begins to tame the sword and suppress its tendency toward evil, but when young Ishak, enamored of the sword's power, steals and tries to use the blade, the magic of the sword destroys him.

A second form of evil that the author discusses is prejudice, with its partners cruelty and intolerance. Alanna encounters many prejudices against women in the course of her adventures.

Ironically, once the evil shaman Ibn Nazzir is dead, Alanna is well-accepted by the desert people. On the other hand, Prince Jonathan, who trained with Alanna, who knows her well and claims to love her, exhibits blatant prejudices when Alanna refuses his marriage proposal. He calls her unfeminine, and mocks her desire to live a life free of royal constraints.

Pierce likes to show contradictions in her characters. They often behave in unexpected ways, expressing the theme that appearances are deceptive. Alanna, as a woman, often surprises other people with her fighting abilities.

George Cooper, a thief by trade, is honest and loyal to his friends. The cat Faithful is no ordinary cat, and is able to speak so that Alanna understands him. By showing the reader aspects of her characters that may not be obvious to the other people in the story, Pierce emphasizes the idea that it is not wise to judge people by their external characteristics. Alanna also judges the Bahzir too quickly. At first they seem tradition-bound and unnecessarily cruel.

But as the heroine comes to know them, she discovers that their traditions include fairness and consideration for others, and that they are receptive to new ideas that will further the welfare of their tribe. Gradually, Alanna finds that she can accept some Bahzir traditions, which are as new to her as her ways are to the desert people.



Topics for Discussion

1. Alanna is a trained warrior. Yet she tries to avoid killing others. She feels guilt over her killing of the Duke Roger of Conte in battle. What do these actions and feelings reveal about Alanna? Do those qualities make her a better warrior, or not?

2. Is Alanna justified in her anger at Prince Jonathan? Is Jonathan being unreasonable in assuming Alanna will marry him? What might either character have done to avoid the bitter breakup that occurs in Chapter 7?

3. Marrying Prince Jonathan would bring Alanna great honor, wealth, and prestige. It would also bestow heavy responsibilities on her. If you were in Alanna's place, how would you decide?

What factors would you consider in your decision?

4. Ishak meets with disaster by stealing the crystal sword. Might Alanna have done something to stop him from taking it? Is she right to decide that she must stop worrying about other people's decisions?

5. Is George Cooper a better match for Alanna than Prince Jonathan? What qualities about George make him more or less suited to Alanna?

6. Jonathan is a prince, yet he is selfish and thoughtless of others at times.

George is a thief, yet he is thoughtful and considerate toward Alanna. What do you think the author is saying about the meaning of outward appearances?

7. Do you agree with Faithful that Alanna should stop feeling guilty about the deaths of Duke Roger and later, Ishak? What does the cat mean when he says that Alanna cannot keep other people from their destinies? How might this apply to Alanna's brother, Thom?

8. The sorceress of Alois feels pity for the very people who kill her. Is this sentiment believable? Did the sorceress deserve to die? What do you think the author is trying to say about religious intolerance?

9. How does Alanna's vision foreshadow the book's ending? Are there other examples of foreshadowing in the book?

10. Kara chooses Kourrem to be the head shaman, even though she herself is older. What does this choice say about Kara? What qualities in Kourrem make her a good choice for this duty?

11. Why does the shaman Ibn Nazzir fear Alanna? Is his fear justified?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. One of the author's themes is the importance of friendship. Does Alanna choose her friends wisely? How does each of her friends help Alanna in the course of the story?
2. Alanna chooses to stay with the Bahzir tribe to train their future shamans. This is her way of taking responsibility for killing Ibn Nazzir, the old shaman. What are some other ways in which Alanna takes responsibility for herself and her actions?
3. Faithful, the cat, seems to have a sixth sense for trouble. What are some of the ways in which Faithful's remarks to Alanna foreshadow the upcoming events in the plot?
4. What does Alanna teach the Bahzir tribe that adopts her, and what do they teach her? What do you think the author is trying to say about the need for change and the importance of tradition? Can change and tradition coexist?
5. Do you agree with Myles that Alanna is wise to refuse marriage if she is unsure about it? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

Review. *Best Sellers* (September 1986): 237-238. Recommends the book for those who have an interest in medieval culture and history and praises the author's portrayal of women's issues.

Review. *Booklist* (June 15, 1986): 15431544. Finds the book enjoyable reading, but the character of Alanna not quite as likeable as in her two previous adventures.

Review. *Horn Book* (May 1986): 333-334.

Calls Alanna's adventures "lively and enjoyable, a happy blend of fantasy and adventure with a strong, vigorous heroine."

Review. *Junior Bookshelf* (October 1989): 243. The critic calls Tamora Pierce "a great storyteller," and finds Alanna an engaging character, but wonders if magic elements and an invented setting are really necessary to the author's tale.

Review. *Kirkus Reviews* (February 1, 1986): 215-216. Praises *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* as a thoughtful book touching on many of the concerns that real teenagers face, as well as providing a good adventure story.

"The tale . . . combines all the best charms of fantasy, adventure, and romance."

Review. *School Librarian* (November 1989): 163. Points out some potentially controversial elements in the author's portrayal of religion.

Review. *School Library Journal* (August 1986): 105-106. Praises Pierce's work as engaging and readable fantasy.

Related Titles

Alanna's early adventures are related in the first two books of The Song of the Lioness Quartet. *Alanna: the First Adventure* introduces us to the heroine when she disguises herself as a boy in order to train as a knight. *In the Hand of the Goddess* pits Alanna against a dangerous sorcerer, Duke Roger of Conte, as she fights to earn her shield as a knight of the realm. Alanna's adventures following her encounter with the Bahzir in *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* can be found in Book Four of the Quartet: *Lioness Rampant*. In this concluding adventure, Alanna sets off on a quest for a legendary magic talisman, confronts the evil Duke Roger yet again, and must choose among the three men who have engaged her affections.



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