



The Once and Future King

T.H. White

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Once upon a time, a young boy called “Wart” was tutored by a magician named Merlyn in preparation for a future he couldn’t possibly imagine. A future in which he would ally himself with the greatest knights, love a legendary queen and unite a country dedicated to chivalrous values. A future that would see him crowned and known for all time as Arthur, King of the Britons.

During Arthur’s reign, the kingdom of Camelot was founded to cast enlightenment on the Dark Ages, while the knights of the Round Table embarked on many a noble quest. But Merlyn foresaw the treachery that awaited his liege: the forbidden love between Queen Guinevere and Lancelot, the wicked plots of Arthur’s half-sister Morgause, and the hatred she fostered in Mordred that would bring an end to the king’s dreams for Britain--and to the king himself.

The Once and Future King Details

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From Reader Review The Once and Future King for online ebook

Oriana says

In case anyone is wondering: I picked this book up for a re-read because of one throwaway line in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*. I haven't read this since high school, but I remember loving it almost giddily as a tween.

Since it's a big monster of a book, I took a steak knife to it, as I often do, and cut it in half so I could carry it about and read it on the subway without breaking my back. Here's the new cover I put on my DIY'd "vol 2," from *Vice* magazine. I find it creepy & rather fitting:

Anyway, I have been reading this for days and days and days and days and days—exactly a month, it turns out (thanks for keeping track, Goodreads!), which is about four times longer than it takes me to read most books. I'm not at all sorry to have spent so long with it, as this book encompasses multitudes, and was just consistently entralling the whole time. I remembered it only sketchily from high school, mostly only the first book, much of which is retold in the Disney movie *The Sword in the Stone*: Arthur as a boy being turned into a fish and a bird, scampering about learning lessons from comical genius klutz Merlin, who is always knitting his beard into his scarf.

All that is, of course, still there, still fun and silly and charming and delightful. But, like all good epics do, what starts as a somewhat childish fantasy story grows up as its characters do, maturing in deed and thought and even language, so that by the end it is more philosophy than slapstick, more high art and the endless search for meaning than antics and adventures. The difference between right and wrong, the search for God, love and its lapses and failures, why men fight wars, how the sins of the father are visited tenfold on the son, the impossibility of absolute justice, the very meaning of life—all these are dissected, mulled over, worked around and through over these 700 pages. Additionally, throughout, there are the most fascinating digressions: on falconry, on the food and fashion of the day, on the political landscape of the British Isles through history, on many different sorts of weapons and their uses, on all the various accessories that make up a knight's attire, on needlepoint and castle architecture and the effects of weather patterns on different birds.

And of course, over it all runs the arching taut string of the foregone conclusion: everyone knows that this story is ultimately a tragedy, that no matter how carefree young Arthur frolics as a servant-turned-fish, he will still pull the sword from the stone to be revealed as King of England, he will still marry the beautiful Guenever who will have a decades-long affair with his best friend Lancelot, he will still be seduced by his half-sister to sire the bastard who will wind up being the agent of not just Arthur's own demise, but the disintegration of the entire Round Table and all those lofty goals of chivalry and valor.

So even at its sweetest, this is a bitter tale, a beautiful awful devastation, an incredible encapsulation of human failure despite all the most noble of intentions. It's wonderful and terrible and crushing and glorious.

What a spectacular world to spend a month thrashing about in.

Matthias says

Five stars? All the stars! This is the best book I have ever read. My other 5-star-ratings pale in comparison to this big wonder of a book. My Goodreads-rating system needs revision. Hors categorie.

A fantasy classic? It's so much more than that. It's about everything that matters in life, told in the warm voice of a brilliant and gifted author. He has struck a chord within me that will keep on trembling forever.

Humor, adventure, suspense, tragedy, poetry, romance, philosophy, history, faith, sociology, tradition, fantasy, the list goes on and on. It contains everything.

A page-turner. More than 600 pages? Not to worry. By the time you're done with them it will have felt like 600 days do after they are over. Short. But not 'too short', for they will have left a mark.

This book is a friend. Possibly, probably, for life. I love him first page to last, and finishing it hurt a little as with all tender goodbyes, but I will revisit him often.

I have already encountered difficulties suggesting and praising this book to friends, given their association of Merlyn = just for kids. They are wrong.

This book is perfect in every way, apart from the problem it presents me with now: What to read next? Which book(s) to taint with its enormous shadow?

Katie says

Spoiler alert, I guess. But not really. It's been 600 years.

I love this book so much, you guys. I feel like I can't even articulate it. It is possibly my new favorite book.

The Once and Future King is a book about nostalgia, though not in the typical sense. It's hazy and dreamy and romantic, and it has some of the loveliest prose you're going to find anywhere, but it's not about the idealization of the past. If anything, it can be read as an examination of its failure: all throughout the book, from little Wart's childhood education to Gawaine's final letter, feudal society is shown as cruel and restrictive and artificial. Moments of beauty are precarious, nearly always undercut in the end by the violent or the absurd.

But I'd argue that it remains at its core a book about nostalgia, because it is a book that is persistently fixated on the sadness of failed possibilities. At first, The Once and Future King seems oddly disconnected, jumping around from character to character throughout its four books. It is difficult at first to determine the protagonist. But I think it's a story about a person who tries to build something new, something great and lovely and filled with possibility, and then it is a story about the thousand myriad ways in which such an attempt can crack, and teeter, and fail.

One of the most interesting parts of the whole book comes from a single chapter featuring the knight Lionel recounting his adventures in pursuit of the Holy Grail, a trip that reached its climax when he nearly killed his

brother Bors. He then confesses that he did, in fact, kill a hermit attempting to protect his brother. Lionel rattles off a litany of mitigating circumstances, finishing with this: “I’m afraid I was simply in a passion,” admitted Lionel after a bit. “You know how you get.” It seems terribly unfair and insufficient, but that’s the point – for all of Arthur’s efforts, for all the potential that the Round Table offers, all it takes is a streak of cruelty, a moment of pride, or even a singular episode of kindness for it to start the process that brings it all crumbling down.

But one of the loveliest things about *The Once and Future King*, and the part that will make me love it forever, is the fact that despite all this sadness it’s never cynical. It’s an almost painfully human story, and it offers kindness and the possibility of understanding to all of its characters. It is a master class in the potential of omniscient narration, and it is at times almost unbearably lovely and kind. It also puts faith in the potential of the past: if its resentments and divisions can cause the violence of the present, its stories can also break those cycles, and offer the possibility of a more open view.

It is absolutely wonderful, and you should go read it as soon as you can.

Cait • A Page with a View says

I love how the first 1/3 of this story is basically that Disney cartoon of the Sword in the Stone. I had no idea they followed the book so closely!

Also, I need this in my life:

Markus says

A curious book. *The Once and Future King* is at the same time a very classical and completely unique retelling of the Arthurian legend, but it unfortunately falls short of almost all the others.

On one side it's an interesting attempt at reforging the legend to something not quite set in time and place, and a fascinating mix of Medieval English myths. On the other there are many aspects of the style that ranged from slightly annoying to deeply flawed.

Firstly, the book is written too much like a fairytale for my taste. I realise this is what some people would want, but I couldn't take the constant use of things like castles made out of food, extremely forgetful and laughable knights, and witches seemingly taken from the pages of the Brothers Grimm.

Second, the anachronisms are absolutely unforgivable. White is apparently talking to the reader, and thus sees fit to bring in, among other things: Eton College, Oliver Cromwell, communism, Freudian psychoanalysis and the IRA. This does not belong in a medieval fantasy and serves for nothing but ruining the mood.

Third, White does not place his Arthurian epic in a historical setting, or even in a vague context. He puts it in the middle of the High Middle Ages, taking out all the events that actually happened during that time and calling it myth. This would have been fair enough if he had simply kept quiet about it, but alas, we get to

hear all about the legendary William the Conqueror, the imaginary Richard Coeur de Lion, the supposed king Edward III, the so-called Henry IV. Just like the previous point, this just killed the book for me.

The book does have its good sides. It is pleasant and entertaining reading sometimes (although the entertainment occasionally comes from laughing at the author's style), and it does have a few enjoyable aspects. It is incredibly, conservatively, British, to the extent of making Tolkien look like a radical hippie by comparison. It includes Merlyn as a time traveller constantly travelling backwards in time. And it serves the reader a moral lesson on the atrocity of war and nationalism, two of the greatest evils in the world, using said Merlyn, with his knowledge of the future, as a vehicle.

"I never could stomach these nationalists," he exclaimed. "The destiny of Man is to unite, not to divide. If you keep on dividing you end up as a collection of monkeys throwing nuts at each other out of separate trees."

Jeremy says

I read this book about every two years. It is one of my absolute favorites. The stories and the characters are so well-crafted that I can read it over-and-over time and again with just as much pleasure as the first time. This novel is actually divided into four 'books' within itself, and while you can read the four books out of order, it really is meant to be read from front to back.

The first book, "The Sword In The Stone", is much like the Disney animated movie that was adapted from it. There are a few scenes in the movie which are not in the book, and quite a bit in the book which is not in the movie, but the overall flavor is the same, and the essence of the story is there. The main thing lacking from the movie, which is quite important in the novel, is that Merlin is teaching Arthur (Wart) about the ways of humanity, civilization, and society, so that when he becomes the King he will not just continue with things as they have been, but learn to reason and think for himself, to try his best to make the world a better place.

These lessons are referred to again and again later in the novel. This first book has far more magic and fairy-tale qualities than any of the rest of the book.

The second book is called "The Queen of Air and Darkness", and primarily has to do with Arthur's nephews from his half-sister, Morgause, and ends with Morgause, not knowing that Arthur is her half-brother, bewitching him and seducing him to give her a child. This child, Mordred, is the essence of fate of Arthur and what makes this novel such a tragedy. White reveals this information as well, and knowing it here does not spoil the remainder of the book in anyway. This second book is one of the shortest of the four.

The third book is easily my favorite and is called "The Ill-Made Knight". It is the story of Sir Lancelot. This portion of the novel (and many smaller pieces of it) are where a great many Hollywood movies pull their King Arthur and Lancelot material from, only they usually get it all wrong. Lancelot, in this book, is the greatest knight in the world, though he is quite ugly - not the sexy and charming knight as is always portrayed in the movies. His face is often compared to a gargoyle. I believe this is quite important. It helps the reader to better understand his relationship with Queen Guenevere ("Jenny") and to understand that the Queen does not have this lifelong affair with her husband's best friend simply because he is charming and handsome and the best knight in the world. The character of Lancelot (as are Arthur and Guenevere) is so richly characterized. His struggles with his faith and humanity, and how those play against his love for his best friend's wife, are his lifelong struggles. Lancelot is shown to be an honest person, of the truest sense, even though he lives this lifelong struggle of adultery with his best friend's wife. The love triangle between Lancelot, Guenevere, and Arthur (and Qudrangle with God, as White often represents it) is the heart of this book, though the book really focuses on Lancelot's internal struggles. This book also serves to explore Arthur's attempts at removing the "Might Is Right" mentality of the Middle Ages, and gives us the Quest for the Holy Grail stories. This book, along with the first book, represents the bulk of this novel's content.

The last book, "A Candle In The Wind", brings together all the elements of Arthur's tragedy. The irony in this book is how Arthur's own new system of "justice" is used against him bring to light (publicly) the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere.

This novel is a wonderful exploration of humanity, society, and civilization, and a beautiful fairy tale tragedy.

Heather says

Seriously, how do you review the pinnacle of all fantasy? You can argue with me, but that, in my opinion, is what The Once and Future King is. Sure, the evil enchantresses are stout and grumpy, the magical castles are made out of food, the lily maidens are fat and of a certain age, and the knights in shining armor refer to one another as 'old chap's. Oh and did I mention that King Arthur's nickname is 'the Wart'?

Somehow, T.H. White takes the legend, undresses it, and gives it a new kind of dignity. Fantastical happenstance takes secondary place to human emotions and actions, noble, selfish, and ridiculous. And the narrator himself always lurks somewhere, hastening to explain himself when it seems necessary, or simply describe the king of the fishes as 'rather American looking, like Uncle Sam.' To some the novel- subdivided into four books- may seem big and slow-moving. But it is not a book to read in a day; nor should it be, since it concerns entire lives, whole worlds, both real and imaginary. The characters are spared no description; we know them better than we ever could have before. This is fiction at its finest.

Darwin8u says

"They made me see that the world was beautiful if you were beautiful, and that you couldn't get unless you gave. And you had to give without wanting to get."

? T.H. White, The Once and Future King

I loved it and my two brats (11 & 13) absolutely enjoyed it, even if many of the jokes, the funky anachronistic blending of the Medieval with the Modern, might have floated a bit over their tiny wee heads.

Anyway, I think White perfectly captured the magic, power, fears and the joy of both youth and myth with this retelling of early Arthurian legend. White's theme of power and justice ("Might Makes Right") seem to perfectly capture the political Zeitgeist of now. Perhaps, White like Merlin was just writing through time backwards and wanted to capture the queer contradictions of Imperial Democracy in the global 21st century, but wanted to write it in the 1930s so Disney would be around to animate it (ugh) in the 60s and thus make his point resonate better in the early 21st century.

You might think a novel that basically focuses on a love-triangle (a quadrilateral if you include God), several affairs, a man's struggle between his love for a woman, love for God, love for his best friend, would not hold the interest of a 13 and an 11-year old for long, but this is T.H. White. The characters are so human, so filled with frailties, heroics, and insecurities that White could have written about cooking for 300 pages and my kids would have been rapt from page 1 to the end.

The story turns, about half-way through, solidly to Lancelot. It is impossible to understand Lancelot without looking at Arthur, Guinevere, Elaine & Galahad. And White digresses throughout TO&FK to capture these stories. The middle of the book pivots as Camelot, under Arthur's leadership, undergoes a change from physical quests (Round Table v. Might makes Right) to spiritual ones (Round Table > Grail quest). This change captures/mirrors the dynamic of Lancelot's own story (the vacillation between the physical and spiritual).

Finally, the weight of the conspiracies, the betrayals, the killings, and the expulsions are all there pushing against the King (I love when T.H. White calls Arthur - England) and his faith in man and justice. It just isn't to be. Do I need to hide the ending? Am I going to spoil the book for you? Come now, we are all mostly adults here. Camelot fails, but T.H. White explores the failure almost as beautifully as he does the magic of Camelot. He captures the magic of Camelot by focusing on the humanity of the people. He isn't satisfied with making (or keeping rather) Lancelot, King A, Guinevere, and even Mordred locked up in the stale symbols they often become. The trite shadows of type is not T.H. White's jam. He wants to humanize everybody. He wants to show the motives, the nuances of character that makes the reader LOVE these figures not because they symbolize things like bravery, chivalry, or justice ... but because they remind the reader of elements, times, moods and flaws found buried within. T.H. White started with a fantasy novel, but ended with an exploration of war, humanity, love, and hope.

Look, I'm skeptical of fantasy novels. They aren't my thing. I want literature. I want something that pushes you against the wall of your own head and dares you to think bigger. I think T.H. White was aiming for that -- and holy anachronisms - he nailed it.

Jeff says

3.5 Stars

Way back when, I took a college class in Arthurian literature. This book was not included in the course which had us read just about everything else written about the legendary king. By the end of the semester I was sick of King Arthur, the round table, the Holy Grail and knights in general; as a consequence, I didn't bother reading this book until now. Before I finally picked it up I assumed it would be something like Camelot (a crappy musical); I heard Lerner and Lowe based the musical on the book. They did, but it is a loose adaptation.

This book is divided up into 4 shorter books. Merlyn is in the first two. He isn't in rest. The book suffers for it. Merlyn, a wizard who ages backwards from the far distant future is a hoot. He's the heart, soul and humorous center of the book. I understand that each book represents an era in Arthur's life, but Merlyn's presence is sorely missed.

The first two books are laden in fantasy. You have plenty of magic, unicorns, griffins, a talking owl, a castle made of food, etc. The first book was the basis for the Disney feature, "The Sword in the Stone".

The latter books deal with Lancelot and Guenevere, Arthur's desire to bring a civilized society to England, the quest for the Holy Grail and the round table's demise.

As the book goes through each tonal shift, White maintains a very contemporary voice (with modern day references and allusions) throughout. As this worked in the more whimsical first half, it becomes jarring

when juxtaposed with the epic sorrow and madness of the Lancelot/Guenevere affair.

Lancelot, in White's rendering is, to put it mildly, conflicted. I guess sleeping with your best friend's wife, the Queen, and trying to hold onto Christian and chivalrous ideas at the same time will do that. His misery is palpable. Also, White makes Lancelot ugly as a mud fence. No Richard Gere or Franco Nero images in your mind while reading - this isn't a bad thing.

The female characters (there aren't many) are ill-served by White, none are very likable.

If you're looking for a more entertaining version of the Arthurian legend, read Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex*. Or just read the first two parts of this book.

Beth says

I carried a quote from this book around in my purse for decades. In my original version of the book, it is on page 111 and begins, "The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then - to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn."

Another quote reads: "You see, one gets confused with Time, when it is like that. All one's tenses get muddled, for one thing. If you know what is going to happen to people, and not what has happened to them, it makes it difficult to prevent it happening, if you don't want it to have happened, if you see what I mean? Like drawing in a mirror."

T.H. White has an imagination large enough to stimulate the reader regardless how many times this book is read.

Sarah says

T.H. White's Arthurian opus, *The Once and Future King*, is probably as influential on the modern fantasy genre as *The Lord of the Rings* and The Chronicles of Narnia, yet has been overshadowed in the mainstream by its two major adaptations: Disney's animated feature *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), which is based almost exclusively on the first quarter of the book, and the Broadway musical *Camelot* (stage debut 1960, film 1967) which is based on the last half. To adapt White's whole book, and do it justice, is probably impossible. Even reviewing it accurately is an intimidating prospect. I will try my best.

White has adapted Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte de Arthur* for modern audiences in this tome, divided into

four books:

The Sword in the Stone, which chronicles Arthur's childhood in Ector's castle and his tutelage by Merlyn

The Queen of Air and Darkness, which follows the war between the newly-crowned Arthur and King Lot of Orkney from the perspective of Lot's four young sons: Gawaine, Gaheris, Agravaine, and Gareth. The titular character is their mother, Morgause, who is terrifying. Cassandra Clare, true to form, has "borrowed" this title for one of her own books.

The Ill-Made Knight, which centers on Lancelot's adventures, struggles, and family problems

The Candle in the Wind, wherein Mordred comes to power, and everything Arthur worked so hard to build collapses on him.

The tone of the first book is blithe and frequently, brazenly crosses from mere *Monty Python*-like silliness to outright self-parody. Merlyn, born at the wrong end of time and constantly blurting out anachronisms, is mostly a figure of great fun, while his owl Archimedes, Sir Ector, and the haplessly questing King Pellinore are wholly so. When I was younger, I remember watching *The Sword in the Stone* with a friend and being appalled by the irreverent treatment of Merlyn, especially the scene at the end where he shows up in the royal hall wearing a Hawaiian t-shirt and sunglasses. Little did I know that the book itself is almost as flippant—I think he wore a top hat in this version.

Yet even at this early point we get subtle hints of the darkness to come. The shards of social commentary are intriguing, such as White noting that the great predatory fish in the moat, who is the first to tell Wart (the child Arthur) that "Might makes Right," looks like Uncle Sam.

Also, Robin Hood—*Robin Wood* in this version, and don't you forget it—is camped out in the same forest as Ector's castle, and he's as merry and fun as you could ask for.

As the book progresses, both the comedy and the blatant anachronisms recede, although they don't disappear entirely until the end. The first quarter ends with the coronation of the boy Arthur, noting that Archimedes sent a great-grandson to "perch upon the King's throne and make messes behind it" or something to that effect. We then launch right into the early bloodlust of the Orkney brothers, and their sickeningly creepy relationship with their sickeningly creepy mom, but even this plot thread tangles for a while with the romantic travails of the senile Pellinore and a well-meaning trick by Sirs Palomides and Grunmore going horribly awry.

By the time that Morgause has worked her grisly magic on Arthur and become pregnant with the child of that incest, though, we are fairly settled in the darkness, with Lancelot, who even as a child is wracked with self-loathing and impossible expectations of himself. White's insistence that Lance was hideously ugly is a curious departure from every other portrayal of the character, although the female characters sure don't react to him as if he were. Perhaps Lance's inverted hatred is so strong it effects even the narrator, or perhaps the author (whose life seems to have been sad and lonely) rendered the "ill-made knight" as a skewed self-portrait.

The Grail-Quest here is undertaken as a morale-boosting exercise to Gramarye (the name of Arthur's kingdom; apparently Camelot is only the capital city) and is mostly told through flashbacks by the knights who came home. Galahad is portrayed as an arrogance priss with no concept of teamwork who gets on everyone's nerves. I can see that. The quest itself makes about as much sense here as it does in any other

version, that is to say none.

Arthur's reign is usually understood as fairly short, but White again diverges from popular conception and portrays the King as a broken old man at the end, who has lived long enough to become the villain (in a fashion) and see the same eyes in different people and all that. Lance and Gwen are not much younger. Yet Gareth, only a few years younger than Lancelot, is cut down in the bloom of his youth, and Mordred is portrayed as even younger. Meanwhile Ector, Pellinore, and Lance's Uncle Dap live to positively biblical ages. Trying to figure it all out was starting to give me a headache, so I can only imagine how White felt writing it.

In White's version, the story takes place not in fifth-century, post-Roman Britain, but in a parallel twelfth century. Here Robin and his merry men exist independent of Richard and John—in fact, the real kings and queens are considered legends here.

But all the suspension of disbelief is well worth it. White's character development for Arthur and Lance is spectacular, while Merlyn will cheer your soul, Morgause will freeze your blood, Guinevere will earn your loathing and Elaine, your pity.

Content Advisory

Violence: There are spurts of it, and where it occurs, it's dreadful, some of it against animals. Morgause boils a cat alive as part of her evil magic. Later she wraps Arthur in a ribbon of human skin in order to bespell him. The young Orkney boys slaughter a helpless unicorn and messily butcher it. The man who later becomes Sir Bedivere beheads his wife for adultery. Agravaine slays his mother for the worst possible reason. Lancelot splits a guy's head in half, and later, in berserker mode, strikes down his friend Gareth.

Sex: No racy scenes are described, but we know that a drunk Lancelot gets deflowered by Elaine, mistaking her in his altered state for Guinevere. The young Arthur falls asleep having a vague dream about a beautiful, hypothetical wife, and awakens to find Morgause climbing out of his bed with her gruesome ribbon while her four young sons look on. Lance and Gwen have secret liaisons for twenty-four years, none of which are ever shown. Even in her old age, Morgause maintained the appearance of a young woman through her witchcraft, and had successfully seduced Pellinore's son Lamorak when they were ambushed and murdered by Agravaine, who is all but directly stated to have incestuous feelings for his mother. Mordred is hinted at sharing those feelings, and he also has a creepy preoccupation with Guinevere—his attempt to force her to marry him brings about the final battle.

Language: Lancelot accuses the late Tristan of boorish behavior including racism: "He was always riding on poor Palomides for being a n****r." That's it for the whole book.

Substance Abuse: Ector's hunting guests get hammered. Lancelot gets hammered on one occasion. Gawaine is either hammered, angry, or hammered and angry, which isn't a Scottish stereotype at all *clears throat aggressively*.

Disney did a surprisingly faithful job of adapting the first quarter of the book, although I am very relieved that they didn't attempt the others at the time. The musical *Camelot* is definitely prettier and simpler than the last half, but it catches all the important themes, and preserves the poignant ending with little Tom of Warwick (who grows up to be Malory).

This weighty novel will appeal to a wide range of people and I heartily recommend it to anyone who can handle its gory flashes and its sorrow.

Ted says

From Geoffrey of Monmouth (1*) to Thomas Malory (2*) to Alfred Lord Tennyson (3*) to T.H. White (4*) to Lerner & Lowe (5*) ...

1* *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), 1130s.

2* *La Morte d'Arthur*, 1485

3* *Idylls of the King*, 1859-85

4* *The Once and Future King*, 1938-41

5* *Camelot*, 1960 Broadway!! The big time!!!

1) See here for the association of the musical *Camelot* with the Kennedy Administration.

2) Here's an extended quote from the first page of the book, to indicate the flavor ... (don't confuse with Harry Potter, this was written in 1938).

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was the Organon, Repetition and Astrology. The governess was always getting muddled with her astrolabe, and when she got especially muddled she would take it out on the Wart by rapping his knuckles. She did not rap Kay's knuckles, because when Kay grew older he would be Sir Kay, the master of the estate. The Wart was called the Wart because it more or less rhymed with Art, which was short for his real name ...

In the afternoons the programme was: Monday and Friday, tilting and horsemanship; Tuesdays, hawking; Wednesdays, fencing; Thursdays, archery; Saturdays, the theory of chivalry, with the proper measures to be blown on all occasions, terminology of the chase and hunting etiquette.

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This was one of the best books I read in my *early* college years.

The overly-"*Madison Ave.*" cover is an advertisement for (and/or playing off the popularity/fame of) the Lerner & Loewe musical *Camelot*, whose original run on Broadway opened on December 3, 1960 and closed on January 5, 1963 (873 performances). The original cast included the rather duo pictured on the cover - Richard Burton and Julie Andrews.

Somehow I first heard the music from this while on an NSF summer institute at Pan American College in 1961. I associate the music with both that experience, and with the Texas girl I met there that I fell in love with. (view spoiler)

I still have the vinyl record of *Camelot*. Haven't listened to it for a long time. (view spoiler)

Well ... that's *The Once and Future King* for me. Rating increased from 4 to a 5 somewhere along the way.

.....

Previous review: Stoner

John Williams

Random review: Light in August

Next review: Complete Works, Shakespeare

Previous library review: Sword of Honor trilogy *Waugh*

Next library review: To the Lighthouse *Woolf*

Corinne Edwards says

This book terrified me, on many levels. It's 667 pages long, to begin with. It's been a while since I read a serious chunkster like that (besides Harry Potter, which somehow in my mind doesn't really count...).

Besides that, I am just not a fan of "Authur" stories, despite my deep love of the Disney movie The Sword and the Stone, of course. Ever since I saw the musical "Camelot" in the theater when I was in high school, the story just didn't appeal to me. Then my book club chose this as our monthly selection and I finally decided it was time to tackle this monster.

Was it worth reading? Absolutely. This book is so much more than just Arthur and Camelot. The first section of the book is essentially the Disney movie, and that part does grab you and you love Wart so much that you keep reading just to find out how it ends for him (although, it got harder and harder to keep reading for a while there, in the middle - it got a bit slow).

White, our beloved author, is a genius, really. He's like your friend or fellow book club member, who just happened to be there, in the middle ages, and he's telling you the story with his own language and always using references to modern day concerns and people. He sometimes appears to mock them and their ways (oh, especially those blundering old knights...), other times he pities them, but mostly, I felt as though he was trying to understand them and why they made the choices they did.

The book is, to me, chiefly three different things.

First, it is a the "historical" study of England at the time, which is both interesting and confusing, with many Lords and Kings and battles etc. Obviously this is a fantasy book and it's based on legend, but either way, we read a lot of political and historical stuff.

Second, much of the book is devoted to a character study of Arthur and Guinevere and Lancelot. Arthur, the imperfect, naive, thoughtful and above all, forgiving king. Guinevere, the stubborn and difficult to understand queen/mistress - White often just tells us straight out that he doesn't know why she made the choices she did. And Lancelot - the ill-made knight, the self-loathing hero of the round table who made a lot of mistakes and yet always tried his best to be moral (except where Guinevere was concerned, of course).

Thirdly, I felt like this was a very moral and philosophical book. White asks difficult questions, usually through Arthur, trying to figure out questions like: Is man inherently good? Why do we have wars and what causes them? Which do we owe more loyalty to, our family (clan) or our country? Is it better to get revenge or to forgive? How do we best create peace: through worship, through wars or through civil justice?

This book is truly a work of art. I must admit however, that as soon as the "Sword in the Stone" section of the book is over, the story was completely depressing, in every way imaginable. Nearly everyone is either deceived, deceitful, or unhappy. Bad things are constantly happening to good people and even the good people seem to be constantly making bad choices. I must also admit that it was still insanely interesting and worthwhile - and, even amid the depressing things, I found myself laughing out loud. Often I found myself pondering the idea of actions and consequences and how often our actions can lead to things in our future that we never could've imagined. My heart ached for Arthur, for what he had and for what he lost.

But, you should read it. Read it for Arthur and Sir Pellinore and for White's use of the word "chuckle-head." I'd be surprised if you regret it.

Apatt says

The Once and Future King was recommended to me on Reddit as probably the best Arthurian fantasy book extant. I have read Stephen R. Lawhead's The Pendragon Cycle and Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon and - if my memory serves me correctly – did not care for either of them. I am still interested in the Arthurian saga though so I proceeded accordingly.

The Once and Future King is divided into four parts, the first three previously published as separate books. The four parts are:

- The Sword in the Stone
- The Queen of Air and Darkness*
- The Ill-Made Knight
- The Candle in the Wind

I usually try to avoid reading a book's synopsis first before reading it so initially I was surprised the protagonist of the first part The Sword in the Stone turns out to be some kid called "The Wart" instead of Arthur, Merlyn is of course instantly recognizable even with the "y" instead of the "i" in his name. By page 30 I was a little tired of reading about The Wart and wondered when Arthur would show up. Not being a complete idiot (only a partial one) I did suspect that the Wart is indeed Arthur but I had no idea why they could not just call him by his proper name. So I peeked at the book's summary and resumed reading.

I find *The Sword in the Stone* to be very whimsical and very juvenile, cartoonish even, not my cup of tea at all. The chapters are quite episodic and the book seems to lack any real sense of momentum or urgency. Most of it feels rather disjointed as there is no single clear story arc to unify the chapters. The reader is basically following The Wart's charming magical childhood adventures under Merlyn's tuition. It is all very nice and safe and rather soporific. The numerous chapters where Merlyn transforms The Wart into various animals to go on adventures mostly bored me. The effortless transformations are just too Teletubbies for me to simply suspend my disbelief.

I almost gave up on reading the entire *The Once and Future King* after finishing *The Sword in the Stone* but cooler heads (on Reddit) prevailed and I am assured that it gets better after this first volume. I quote from a sage advice I received from Reddit:

"The books change in style as they go - the first (The Sword in the Stone) is much more light comic in tone, but they get much darker in The Ill Made Knight and The Candle in the Wind, so don't judge too much by the

first book. If you're not enjoying Wart's boyhood adventures you could try skipping there."

Also, I do like T.H. White's prose style which is quite charming in an old school sort of way, though the floweriness and his love of obscure words sometimes get the better of him. So I stayed the course and continued with *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (The Witch in the Wood).

My favorite portrayal of King Arthur (*^?^*)

The Queen of Air and Darkness is a considerable improvement on *The Sword in the Stone*. It is mainly the story of the Orkney clan (Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, Gareth), sons of King Arthur's half-sister Morgause. Given their unloving upbringing by their mother it is not surprising how several of them grow up to become Arthur's antagonists. This part of the book is much less juvenile than *The Sword in the Stone*. There is a scene (view spoiler) which is quite tragic. However, the chapters involving King Pellinore, Grummore and friends still contain too much childishe buffoonery for my taste. The "romance" between King Pellinore and the Questing Beast is like something out of a Tom and Jerry episode. As a separate book I would just about rate *The Queen of Air and Darkness* 4 stars.

With the third part of the book *The Ill-Made Knight* *The Once and Future King* makes a huge leap forward in quality and maturity. *The Ill-Made Knight* focuses on the legendary Sir Lancelot (well, most of the characters of *The Once and Future King* are legendary must Lancelot is *extremely* legendary). Starting from his childhood, his rise to being the best knight in the world and his love affair with Queen Guenevere (more commonly spelled as Guinevere in other books). The various quests he goes on to distract himself from his illicit love are great adventure yarns. While these often have fantastical elements there is no juvenilia to speak of. Tonally *The Ill-Made Knight* is much more mature than the previous two parts of *The Once and Future King* and I was finally really digging the book at this point. The characterization of Lancelot is very well done, he is the most interesting, complex and conflicted character in the book. It is also interesting that T.H. White makes him ugly instead of giving him the usual knight in shining armor look. His affair with Guenevere is a tragedy for all concerned, the queen even drives him completely bonkers at one point. Lancelot's relationship with his other lover, the poor totally friendzoned Elaine is even more tragic.

The final part of the book *The Candle in the Wind* continues the sophisticated tone of the previous part. This part of the book is a culmination of all the previous parts, even the childish animals transformations of *The Sword in the Stone* is given a mature context here. *The Candle in the Wind* is mainly concerned with the downfall of King Arthur (and there is no mention of Norma Jean anywhere). I really like this description of Arthur:

"He was a kind, conscientious, peace-loving fellow, who had been afflicted in his youth by a tutor of genius. Between the two of them they had worked out their theory that killing people, and being a tyrant over them, was wrong. Now, in the effort to impose a world of peace, he found himself up to the elbows in blood."
Poignant stuff.

King Arthur is far too nice for his own good, he is well aware of his wife's infidelity but tries to overlook it as best he can, and he is not a silly cuckold as some would have us believe. He turns a blind eye for the sake of his best friend and his unworthy wife. Unfortunately his vengeful son Mordred cannot leave well enough alone and this leads to a war he does not want, his Chivalry project and his Round Table collapsing miserably. *The Candle in the Wind* is the most philosophical part of *The Once and Future King* and leaves the reader with much to reflect upon.

Over all I like *The Once and Future King* a lot in spite of the juvenilia of *The Sword in the Stone*. If you are interested in Arthurian fiction this is definitely one for your TBR list.

* Goodreads lists this as The Witch in the Wood, the original title.

Jonathan Terrington says

A complex and multi-tiered depiction of the epic Arthurian legend. This book is unlike any other I've read either focusing on the myth or simply in terms of fantasy writing.

While the story begins with *The Sword in the Stone*, a novel I had already read years ago it was refreshing to re-familiarize myself with T.H. White's eccentric and unique style of portraying the character of King Arthur as a child. In fact I believe *The Sword in the Stone* is the deepest depiction of the childhood Arthur I have read as many other stories gloss over this. Yet it is important to understand Arthur's beginnings in order to understand his growth of character and this firstly sets T.H. White's work apart from the other tales about Arthur.

White's use of humor and his linking of the myth to the present was incredibly clever. He was in part able to both tell the tale and provide a join critique and analysis of the legend. And such a deep analysis was able to be therefore used to reflect upon the human condition, upon human beings, their wants and desires and what it is that drives them to do such acts as Guenevere in being unfaithful to Arthur. Or as Mordred desiring her as his own. It is a more effective analysis than Freud's simple conclusion that men are simple carnal beings I feel, for what it showed me is that White recognizes that yes few men are truly good but at the same time few men are truly base. It is the way they react to the events of life that makes them ignoble or even noble.

It was an incredibly deep book with so many angles that it simply astounded me. Was it a fantasy, a fairytale to enjoy with magic and well constructed characters? Was it a commentary? Was it a critique? Was it for children or for adults? Was it an analysis? Was it a collection of psychological observations? I believe that this book was all of these and yet none at the same time. It is a book that derives aspects from all of these and yet is never truly one of these alone. For here T.H. White has created a grand epic that I recommend all people read.

However, for all of its depth and magnificence I felt it was let down at times, particularly right near the end. This was majorly due to its pacing. At times it was fast and furious and at others it was slow and ponderous. It never truly was consistent. And for me this made it difficult to get into at times. I would recommend Roger Lancelyn Green's tales of Arthur instead for their pace. However T.H. White's work has a greater depth than any other Arthurian tale I have read and it is for that it is to be admired.
