

The Taker and the Keeper The Death of the Good Wizard

by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin



AUTHORS' NOTES on the Story of King Arthur

I. The History of the Story

The story of King Arthur has been told for hundreds of years, but it has changed in the telling and retelling. Historically, Arthur was probably a sixth century Celtic warrior or king. Elements of the tale turn up in early Celtic oral tradition, although the versions we know best are from a much later cycle of medieval romances.

In the ninth century AD, the Welsh cleric Nennius wrote magical powers and supernatural feats into the story of a battle leader named Arthur. By 1066, when the Normans conquered Britain, King Arthur's story was well known.

In about 1135 Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote a history of British Kings in which he emphasized Arthur's heroic qualities. He included the characters of Merlin, Guinevere, Gawain, and Mordred. The Round Table first turned up in French tales of 1155.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Arthurian legends took on Christian aspects, and the king and his knights became heroes of chivalric romances. Arthur's tales were then told in many languages all over Europe.

The late twelfth century French versions emphasized the deeds of individual knights. Chrétien de Troyes wrote about courtly love, and introduced the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. At about the same time, the tales appeared in English for the first time, written by the priest Layamon.

As the stories expanded, the storytellers emphasized that Arthur would survive death and return. Storytellers added a place called Avalon where Arthur was taken to be healed, and a prophecy by Merlin that Arthur would return someday.

The version of King Arthur's story that is most familiar today is Sir Thomas Malory's 1469 *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which was printed by William Caxton in 1485.

The following is excerpted from "Arthur," an entry written by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin for the *Storytelling Encyclopedia: Historical, Cultural, and Multiethnic Approaches to Oral Traditions Around the World*, David Adams Leeming, Ed., Phoenix, Arizona: The Oryx Press, 1997.

Arthur's story contains many elements common to other heroic tales. He was the son of a king, but his parentage was hidden. He was taught by a wise man—the magician Merlin. He was made king after he acquired a magical weapon—the sword Excalibur.

As the legend goes, Arthur accompanied his half-brother to a joust in London. When Sir Kay discovered that he had left his sword behind, Arthur went to get him a sword that was embedded in a stone. Arthur easily pulled the sword from the stone, a feat many other knights had attempted in vain.

King Arthur gained fame as a warrior and as a just ruler. He had a Round Table made so that he and all his knights would be equals when they gathered



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there. Arthur married Guinevere, and in the early stories his downfall was due to his wife and the traitor, Mordred. Later romances added the element of illicit love between Guinevere and the knight Lancelot...

The extraction of a sword from rock appears in the Greek myth of Theseus and in Norse legends (and Wagnerian operas) about Siegfried. Many of the other knights in medieval romances also had swords with names and magical powers.

Twentieth-century retellings of the Arthurian legend include T.H. White's 1958 *The Once and Future King*, which integrates fantasy and satire of contemporary English mores; John Steinbeck's retelling of Malory's stories in 1976; Mary Stewart's Arthurian novels of the 1970s and 1980s; and Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1982 *The Mists of Avalon*, which presents a fresh perspective by telling the story through the women characters.

Lerner and Loewe had success on Broadway with their 1960 musical, *Camelot*. The Arthurian legends have been popular in movies and on television, including several versions of Twain's novel [*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*] and the 1965 Disney animated feature, *The Sword in the Stone*.

Magic weapons, special and secret origins, and mystical tutelage, show up in tales of heroes around the world. In recent times they have appeared in Malalamud's 1952 novel *The Natural* and the 1984 film, as well as in the Star Wars movies. Such elements, as well as Arthurian characters, are also common in science-fiction/fantasy books, films, and comic books...

We would add that many of these same heroic elements are prominent in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories and in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy—and of course, in the popular movies made of both series.

II. Summary of the Arthur Story

England's King Uther died without a successor, and the country went without a King for many years. According to a prophecy, whoever could pull the sword Excalibur out of a stone (or an anvil) would be England's true king. But years passed, and nobody was able remove the sword from the stone. Without a leader, the kingdom fell into disarray.

An orphan named Arthur was raised by the family of the knight Sir Ector. The magician Merlin saw to it that the boy was educated, and Arthur became the squire to Ector's son, the knight Sir Kay.

Sir Kay was scheduled to fight in a great tournament. On that day, Kay sent young Arthur to retrieve his sword, which he had left behind. Arthur remembered seeing an old sword stuck in a stone in a nearby churchyard, so he went to get that one instead. Arthur pulled out the sword and gave it to Sir Kay.

Everyone immediately recognized that the sword was Excalibur, and they knew that whoever had removed it from the stone was the King of England. But they refused to believe that the boy Arthur could have possibly done what so many noble knights had failed to accomplish.

Arthur cooperatively put the sword back into the stone. When nobody else was able to pull it out again, Arthur easily removed it himself.

Merlin then revealed the truth. This boy Arthur was actually the son of Uther, and the true heir to the English throne.



III. King Arthur and the Monomyth

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) studied the mythology of cultures around the world and wrote about their common themes. Campbell is the author of many works, including *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) and the four-volume *The Masks of God* (1959-67). Bill Moyers' interviews with Campbell were broadcast by PBS in 1988 in the series *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. Campbell described a single story line that he called the "monomyth," found in hero tales from all cultures.

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

—Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*,
(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973) p. 30.

Elements of the monomyth appear again and again in the stories of King Arthur and his knights. These elements can be identified in the earliest and most basic events:

SEPARATION: Arthur is raised by a foster family.

INITIATION: Arthur pulls the sword from the stone.

RETURN: Arthur becomes King.

In popular culture today, storytellers have made deliberate use of Campbell's ideas. An internet search will turn up sites where these connections are discussed.

