

MICHAEL MORPURGO, *Arthur, High King of Britain*. Illustrated by Michael Foreman. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995. Pp. 137. ISBN: 0-15-200080-1. \$19.95.

ANNE MCCAFFREY, *Black Horses for the King*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996. Pp. 217. ISBN: 0-15-227322-0. \$16.

JANE YOLEN, *Passager*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996. Pp. 76. ISBN: 0-15-200391-6. \$15.

Joining the growing list of recent Arthurian fiction are three new young adult volumes from publisher Harcourt Brace & Company. In the first of these, *Arthur, High King of Britain*, author Michael Morpurgo sets his version within a modern frame: a young boy living in the western Scilly Isles off the Cornwall coast sets out to walk to the Eastern Isles and back between the tides, but becomes stranded in the fog. He is rescued by King Arthur himself, who has spent the past fourteen centuries in Lyonesse—as he refers to the isles—waiting for the time of his return. As the boy recovers from his ordeal, the king relates the story of his life and reign.

Morpurgo's retelling is more or less a 'Camelot Highlights,' beginning with the boy Arthur's first meeting with Merlin and the drawing of the sword from the stone which allows him to become king. It includes all of the familiar motifs found in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*: Arthur's receiving Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake, the incest with Margawse which leads to the birth of Mordred, the traitorous love between Lancelot and Guinevere, and the Grail quest signaling the decline of the fellowship of the Round Table, the conflict with Mordred, and Arthur's last battle and departure.

Arthur's guest is also allowed to choose three knights among those names inscribed on the Round Table (also preserved in Lyonesse) whose stories are included as part of the history. Here the author departs from Malory's version and incorporates the plots of other, older medieval sources—*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gottfried von Strassburg's version of *Tristan*, and parts of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*—as Arthur relates the adventures of these three knights. This approach leads to a nicely rounded collection of Arthurian stories for a new young reader, which is attractively illustrated with Michael Foreman's watercolors.

However, Morpurgo makes some very curious changes in the retellings. Most of the elements of the story of Tristram and Iseult are retained, but Morpurgo completely leaves out the love potion (an integral part of every version of the story!), and attributes the lovers' attachment to their own free choice. In the last battle, Arthur refuses to kill his son; it is his faithful dog Bercelet who kills Mordred after the treacherous knight has given the king his death-blow. And finally, the dying King Arthur is taken to Lyonesse, not Avalon, by six ladies who become his guardians during his long rest. The Scilly Isles have a long traditional association with the drowned land of Lyonesse (although none with Avalon), so this last rearrangement may serve to fit the story into its new frame, but the rest of these alterations are not so easily explained and set a jarring note for readers familiar with the standard Arthurian elements.

Anne McCaffrey's *Black Horses for the King* and Jane Yolen's *Passager*, besides both taking a quite different approach from Morpurgo's Arthurian compilation, share some other similarities as well. Each of these is a 'coming-of-age' story, and both tales are based on previously published short stories. McCaffrey's hero, Galwyn Varianus, is the son of a bankrupt Roman Celt who escapes an apprenticeship on his tyrannical uncle's ship to join Lord Artos. Galwyn's knowledge of horses and his facility with languages makes the boy invaluable to Artos, whose mission is to find horses for the Britons' defense of their land against the invading Saxons. McCaffrey's novel, developed from a short story with the same title which appeared in the anthology *Camelot* [edited by Jane Yolen, 1995, Philomel] is a well-researched look at fifth-century Britain, particularly the historical realities of horse-breeding, farriery (horse-shoeing) and cavalry practices which would have been employed by the Arthur of Gildas and Nennius. McCaffrey's Arthurian world also owes much to Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset*, but the plot, told in the first person by her protagonist, is the individual story of Galwyn's progress into awareness and adulthood, set during a period of conflicting cultures and the emergence of an enduring hero.

Jane Yolen's *Passager* is the first book of a new 'Young Merlin' trilogy written for readers of ages 8–12. *Passager* is an expanded version of a short story, 'The Wild Child,' published in 1986 as part of a collection of Arthurian tales called *Merlin's Booke*. Here a young feral boy, abandoned in the forest, is captured and befriended by a falconer, who restores both the boy's name and his humanity. Yolen weaves bits and pieces of many legends surrounding Merlin, such as his being the son of a princess and a demon, or a wild man in the woods, and uses these to explore the connection between the mage's name and the ancient arts of falconry. A superb prose stylist, the author creates an evocative sketch of her character, but this is more an enigmatic glimpse of Merlin than a retelling of the traditional tales. As a novel, the story is somewhat spare, and the sophistication of theme and language may make the book more suitable for older readers. The second volume in this series, *Hobby* (which uses some of another story, 'Dream Reader', from Yolen's earlier collection) will be published in the fall of 1996, and the final book, *Merlin*, is due out next spring.

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