The most immediate problem that confronts those who would examine the rôle of Arthurian legend in fiction for younger readers is to determine how extensive that body of fiction actually is. Clearly many young people read books written for adults, just as many adults read books written for younger people; and many books marketed for younger readers were certainly not written for them exclusively. Rosemary Sutcliff speaks for many authors when she states, 'I would claim that my books are for children of all ages, from nine to ninety'. As far as Arthurian legend is concerned, the most important book to defy categorization is *The once and future king* (1958) by T.H. White. This is demonstrated in *Approaches to teaching the Arthurian tradition* (1992), where Maureen Fries notes, and numerous references confirm, that among university instructors it is the ‘most widely mentioned twentieth-century novel’, while Muriel Whitaker asserts, ‘In modern juvenile fiction, the essential work is T.H. White’s *Sword in the stone*’. In this instance I have compromised by including *The sword in the stone*, but not the other parts that eventually made up *The once and future king*. It is well to remember, however, that such decisions do determine the body of material that is examined, and thus the conclusions drawn.

Leaving aside works that are essentially retellings of the traditional stories, the fiction in that body of material may be

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broadly divided into three groups, associated respectively with the Holy Grail, Merlin and King Arthur. The first group is concerned with moral and spiritual values, the second with magic, the third with heroic struggle, although there may be overlapping within individual books.

Four novels deal with the quest for the Holy Grail, but in none is it conducted by Arthur’s knights. *Eusebius the Phoenician* (1969) by Christopher Webb (the pseudonym under which Leonard Wibberley wrote his juvenile historical fiction) anachronistically mixes cultures when a Phoenician merchant prince with a crew of Vikings sails to Dark Age Britain to seek the Grail, encountering the Firbolg, as well as an aged and powerless Arthur, on the way. In the other three novels the searchers are young people – during the late twelfth century in *The hidden treasure of Glaston* (1946) by Eleanore M. Jewett, the contemporary period in both *The flowering thorn* (1961) by Elizabeth Yunge-Bateman and *The sparrow child* (1958) by Meriol Trevor. All involve Glastonbury, except the last which is set in Cornwall.

In these modern novels, as in medieval romance, stories of the Grail inspire the devout to set out in quest of the sacred vessel. This quest, however, proves to be a learning process for the characters themselves. Each book teaches the importance of serving others, a commitment that demands self-sacrifice. The five children in Yunge-Bateman’s novel decide to form a society called the League of the Flowering Thorn in honour of Joseph of Arimathea, and in their search for the Grail cup they perform good deeds and rebuff unbelieving vandals. Jewett’s crippled protagonist risks his life to save his friends, and he decides to copy out from memory a Grail manuscript destroyed in a fire, rather than join his father in the Holy Land. He generously persuades his father to accept his friend in his place. Webb’s Eusebius also learns the importance of serving others rather than himself, and Trevor’s young protagonists must recognize and atone for their sins.

Yet while self-sacrifice is considered vital in all the Grail novels, the rewards gained far outweigh it. All who seek the Holy Grail find spiritual contentment, and some are even granted a vision of it. For one, the young cripple in Jewett’s novel, this brings physical as well as spiritual healing. These novels thus choose to emphasize the inspirational nature of the Holy Grail, rather than caution against unrealistic expectations of those who seek it.

Novels dealing with Merlin are much more numerous.4 His

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4 See Peter H. Goodrich, ‘Modern Merlins: an aerial survey (bibliographic essay)’, in *The figure of Merlin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, eds Jeanie Watson and Maureen Fries (Lewiston, NY/Queenston, ON/ Llampeter, Wales: Mellen, 1989), 175–97; and Christopher Dean, *A study of Merlin in English literature from the Middle Ages to the present day: the devil’s son* (Lewiston, N.Y./ Queenston, Ont./ Llampeter, Wales: Mellen, 1992).
power sends young people into a magical otherworld in *Merlin's magic* (1953) by Helen Clare, and into the past in *Merlin's ring* (1957) by Meriol Trevor. In Edward Eager's *Half magic* (1954) and Clive Endersby's *Read all about it!* (1981), he rescues them from the difficult situation in which they find themselves, though in Grace Chetwin's *Out of the dark world* (1985) it is Morgan le Fay who provides magical assistance. In the process, the young people learn some valuable lessons.

In Andre Norton's *Here abide monsters* (1973) and Susan Cooper's *Dark is rising* series (1965–77), by contrast, Merlin is too preoccupied with other concerns to offer much help. He is willing enough to offer help in *The boy apprenticed to an enchanter* (1920) by Padraic Colum, but the boy must eventually face his enemy alone. Sometimes, indeed, Merlin himself needs help in his struggle against the forces of evil, and he receives it from the young protagonists of *Steel magic* (1965) by Andre Norton, *The sleepers* (1968) by Jane Louise Curry, *Sir MacHinery* (1971) by Tom McGowen, *The testing of Tertius* (1973) by Robert Newman, *Raven* (1977) by Jeremy Burnham and Trevor Ray, and *Winter of magic's return* (1985) and *Tomorrow's magic* (1987), both by Pamela F. Service. Such demands encourage the young people to develop their own abilities and self-reliance.

In these novels, Merlin fights for good against evil, but in *The weathermonger* (1968) by Peter Dickinson his power plunges Britain back into a new Dark Age when he is prematurely awakened by a misguided chemist. The young protagonists must persuade him to resume his disturbed sleep in order to restore the mixed blessings of modern civilization. He is not the only Arthurian figure to be awakened into the modern world with troubling consequences, however. In William Mayne's *Earthfasts* (1966), Arthur and his knights emerge from the cavern where they have been sleeping; in Nancy Bond's *String in the harp* (1976), visions and creatures from Dark Age Wales begin to appear when the tuning key to Taliesin's harp is found; and in *The whispering knights* (1971) by Penelope Lively, Morgan le Fay is conjured up by a magical spell. In each instance the young people learn the dangers that result from ill-considered tampering with the natural order.

Whereas the Holy Grail inspires succeeding generations to undertake the quest once again, richly rewarding those who possess faith and compassion for others, the magic of Merlin and others offers more cautionary lessons. In Clare's *Merlin's magic*, it teaches a group of the children to value the human imagination, for that alone can preserve an appreciation of the beauty and splendour of past ages. In Trevor's *Merlin's ring*, it transports thirteen-year-old Felix back to the days leading up to Arthur's victory at Badon. There he witnesses the political divisions and plottings that were ultimately to doom Arthur's cause, and he concludes, 'the only real defeat is to
give in to evil, to ambition and spite and greed. I hope I never will! I don’t want to be like Aurelius and Mordred and those who destroyed unity’.\(^5\) Trevor makes clear that the main threat to civilization comes not from the barbarians outside the gate, but from within ourselves: ‘Nastiness inside is much worse than danger outside, even if it doesn’t seem to be’ (107), Felix recognizes. It is from the perils of irresponsible behaviour that Merlin’s magic rescues the children in the novels by Eager and Endersby.

Because Merlin is busy with his own concerns, or even in need of help himself, he is not always available to look after others. Thus in Cooper’s series, the struggle between the forces of Light and Dark is so evenly balanced that it allows no relaxation of effort: “Sometimes,” Will said slowly, “in this sort of a war, it is not possible to pause, to smoothe the way for one human being, because even that one small thing could mean an end of the world for all the rest”\(^6\). In *The testing of Tertius* by Newman, the forces of evil are so powerful that they take Merlin captive. As a result it is left to young Tertius to lead the expedition to rescue him. When reminded of the responsibility that will be his, Tertius replies, ‘I wish it weren’t. But since there’s no one else I must do what I can too’.\(^7\) Because the young protagonists are left to cope on their own, or even entrusted with heavy responsibilities, they learn self-reliance and develop their own abilities much more rapidly than would have been possible in a more closely protected environment.\(^8\)

They rise to the occasion, defeating the foes who too readily underestimate their abilities and winning warm praise and honours. Thus Arthur himself in Newman’s novel commends the young people: ‘For all of you played a part in this great adventure. And none of you shall lack proof of my love and gratitude’ (159). Their success is gratifying for younger readers, struggling themselves to win recognition for their abilities and achievements in a harsh world of adult values. Yet the novels conclude on a warning note. ‘Nothing is won forever as nothing can be built that will last forever’ (159), Newman’s Merlin reminds his listeners; while in Cooper’s *Silver on the tree* he tells them that, although the Dark has been vanquished, ‘the world will still be imperfect, because men are imperfect. Good

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6 Susan Cooper, *The grey king* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 147. For a more extended discussion of Cooper’s series, see my study *The return from Avalon*, 100–104. Other novels included here are also discussed.


men will still be killed by bad, or sometimes by other good men, and there will still be pain and disease and famine, anger and hate'.

The novels in which the past is awakened are no more reassuring. In Mayne's *Earthfasts*, Keith manages to replace the candle so that Arthur and his followers may resume their sleep — 'because King Arthur's time was not yet come'. Disaster is only narrowly averted here as in the other three novels, however. Nor is the hard-won victory permanent: 'Next year where will we be?' asks Peter at the end of Bond's novel; and in Lively's the young people are told that the evil Morgan le Fay 'is never routed for ever, for of course she exists at different levels of time to you'.

The third group of novels, all of which are associated in varying degrees with the figure of Arthur, follows the traditional pattern of the many medieval romances in which a young champion seeks to prove himself worthy of a place at the Round Table. Although some of the protagonists may be too young to achieve so lofty a goal, their achievements help them to take a major step towards it. Three involve the figure of Gareth. In *The sword in the tree* (1956) by Clyde Robert Bulla, eleven-year-old Shan travels to Arthur's court to bring Sir Gareth to rescue his father; E.M.R. Ditmas's *Gareth of Orkney* (1956) reinterprets Malory's story of Gareth himself; and in *The dragon's quest* (1961) by Rosemary Manning, a Cornish dragon undergoes an experience that humorously parallels that of his friend Gareth.

Others besides Gareth prove themselves by their heroic service, however. Tor earns the right to become a page in *Page boy for King Arthur* (1949), then a squire in *Squire for King Arthur* (1955), both by Eugenia Stone; while in Catherine Owens Peare's *Melor, King Arthur's page* (1963), Melor too is made a squire after he saves the king from a huge boar. In Gwendolyn Bowers's *Brother to Galahad* (1963) and *The forgotten kingdom* (1970) by Norman Power, the protagonists are already squires, as is sixteen-year-old Brian in Robert Newman's *Merlin's mistake* (1971). He wins knighthood and much more besides when he embarks on a quest to find the champion to overthrow the Black Knight. In Allen French's *Sir Marrok: a tale of the days of King Arthur* (1902), a knight eventually overcomes his evil adversaries through wisdom and fortitude. Providing service to Arthur and his knights of the Round Table brings out the noblest qualities in these young heroes, despite the mistakes they commit.

The influence of Arthur's values persists even after his death, moreover. In Donald J. Sobol's *Greta the strong* (1970), the young hero chosen for a quest by the last Round Table knight is not male.

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but female; in Bryher's *Ruan* (1960), a boy in sixth-century Cornwall is inspired by a harper's tale of Gawain setting forth on a voyage to Avalon to undertake a similar voyage of his own; in Andre Norton's *Dragon magic* (1972), an American teenager relives the experiences of a namesake among Arthur's followers; and although Katherine Paterson's *Park's quest* (1988) is set entirely in the modern period, its young hero is deeply influenced by Arthurian legend. They too become better people because they try to measure up to an ideal. This is true even in *The eagles have flown* (1954) by Henry Treece, which places Arthur's reign in a savage Dark Age setting and subjects it to a very anti-romantic scrutiny.

The remaining novels are concerned with the development of Arthur himself, as well as that of other characters. *The sword in the stone* (1938) by T.H. White recounts Arthur's childhood adventures before he draws the sword from the stone; *The lantern bearers* (1959) by Rosemary Sutcliff follows the career of an ex-Roman officer in the bitter war against the Saxons; *The stolen lake* (1981) by Joan Aiken takes place in a world with an alternate history in which a reborn Arthur meets a long-lived Guinevere in South America; in *The third magic* (1988) by Welwyn Wilton Katz, a Canadian teenager is drawn into another world where she meets and falls in love with a youth, only to discover that they are destined to become Morgan le Fay and Arthur.

Like the Grail novels, the novels associated with the figure of Arthur follow the adventures of young people who have been inspired by a glorious ideal, although in this case it is of a kingdom founded upon peace and justice in this world rather than the next. In their efforts to live up to this ideal, however, the young people must overcome the many foes that threaten Arthur's kingdom, as does Gareth in Ditmas's novel. He must not only defeat more experienced knights, moreover, but also win the permission of his mother to go to Arthur's court in the first place. Since she plans he should enter the Church, this proves no light task, and she is who imposes upon him the undertaking to serve for a year in the royal kitchens in an effort to discourage him from becoming a knight. French's *Sir Marrok* follows the pattern used by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century, in which the hero, after initial successes, commits an error of judgement. Because he too readily trusts the beautiful but evil Lady Irma, Marrok is transformed by witchcraft into a huge wolf. In this shape, nevertheless, he continues to fight against evil, protecting his peasants and vassals until the enchantment is shattered. What these novels teach is that those who remain constant in adversity and vigilant against evil will ultimately triumph.

Although they do learn to overcome faults such as impatience and naivety, both Gareth and Marrok concentrate upon external
enemies rather than inner growth. The young pages in the novels by Stone and Peare, however, redeem their errors, not only by deeds of valour, but also by learning to control their wilful and thoughtless behaviour. Indeed in Stone's *Page boy for King Arthur*, Tor almost burns down the castle when he watches squires jousting instead of tending the fire. The squires, for their part, encounter still more probing challenges. Thus in Newman's *Merlin’s mistake*, Brian learns to appreciate the highly capable, if at times sharp-tongued, Lianor above her more beautiful but shallow sister.

Such novels tend to be overtly didactic unless tempered by humour as is Newman's. To youngsters captivated by the imaginative world of chivalry, they do, nonetheless, offer a valuable caution against easy escapism, as well as a reminder that increased responsibility must be earned with diligence. Personal growth takes on importance. Thus after witnessing the downfall of Arthur's kingdom in Norton's *Dragon magic*, Artie Jones recognizes that he has been too eager to impress the 'in-crowd': 'he was thinking about Modred and Artos - sometimes it was easy to choose the wrong side - just because you wanted to be a part of something which showed'.

The young people discover, furthermore, that the admired figures in Arthur's court are not without their own failings. Kay the Seneschal proves a hard taskmaster for the churls and pages under his authority in several novels; Guinevere preserves her life by sacrificing that of others in Aiken's novel; while in Treece's even Arthur himself stoops to acts of violence and political expediency. This discovery teaches the young people not to be deceived by appearances or reputation, rather to judge others on the basis of their actions. As a result, they shed their illusions about life, gaining instead the wisdom and maturity needed if they are to take their proper place in society.

This process of education is most fully developed in White's *Sword in the stone* in which Merlyn serves as the tutor to Wart, as the young Arthur is nicknamed. Convinced that 'Education is experience, and the essence of experience is self-reliance', Merlyn transforms his pupil into various creatures. As fish, hawk, goose, and ant, Arthur discovers the realities of power, and this, along with other lessons, prepares him for kingship after he pulls the sword from the stone.

There is, however, one further lesson that young people must learn, and it is taught in the last and, along with White's *Sword in the stone*...
stone and Cooper’s *Dark is rising* series, the best, of the Arthurian novels for younger readers: Sutcliff’s *Lantern bearers* and Katz’s *Third magic*. It is the lesson that even after we have done our best to follow the ideals that we believe in, we are still liable to error and subject to the workings of a fate beyond our control. In other words, the wisdom and power earned with such pain do not guarantee happiness and success.

Aquila, the hero of Sutcliff’s novel, chooses to stay and fight for Britain when the last Roman soldiers are withdrawn. But a Saxon raiding party attacks the family farm and burns it to the ground, after killing his father and their servants, abducting his sister, and leaving him tied to a tree to be devoured by wolves. Another band of raiders come across him, however, and carry him off to Juteland as a thrall. This experience, together with the bitter years of servitude that follow, deeply scar Aquila who is sustained by his pride and the hope, somehow, of finding his sister. Taken back to Britain, he does indeed meet her again, only to discover that she is married to one of the Saxons who attacked their farm and that she has borne him a son. She helps her brother to escape though she refuses to leave her husband. This Aquila considers to be betrayal: ‘He had said that he forgave Flavia, but he hadn’t been able to make the words mean anything. Just words. And Flavia knew that. He knew that she knew. He felt lost and adrift in a black tide of bitterness, and the last thing that he had to hold to was gone’ (103). He makes his way to the camp of Ambrosius to resume the struggle against the Saxons.

To fight in defence of his homeland is one thing, but the bitterness that Aquila feels is another, for it poisons his relationship with others. Although he ‘had made some kind of mended life for himself, some kind of place among Ambrosius’s Companions, . . . He went always in a kind of armour, and a man who does that cannot have friends’ (148). His problems with women are more serious, however. At Ambrosius’s request, he agrees to marry the daughter of a Celtic chieftain in order to foster links between the Celtic and Roman parties in Britain, but he does so reluctantly: ‘Because of Flavia he wanted nothing to do with women, ever. They were dangerous, they could hurt too much’ (155). He deliberately represses any feeling of sympathy for Ness, his prospective bride, even though he realizes that she will be ‘torn away from all that she knew and loved. . . . Once he began to feel sorry for the girl the whole thing would become unbearable’ (158). His justification is

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15 *The dark is rising* by Cooper was a 1974 Newbery Honor Book and *The grey king* was the 1976 Newbery Award Winner in the U.S.A.; Rosemary Sutcliff won the Carnegie Medal in Britain for *The lantern bearers* (1959; quotations are from the Puffin edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981)); Welwyn Wilton Katz won the Governor-General’s Award for Children’s Literature in Canada for *The third magic* (Toronto: Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1988) (quotations are from this edition).
that 'he also had been torn away from all that he knew and loved, and more harshly than this' (158). As might be expected, he comes perilously close to losing his wife and the son whom she later bears him.

It is this marriage, however, that proves his salvation, for he gradually learns to love again. 'After Flavia, he had felt that whatever happened to him, he had nothing to lose. It was a very safe feeling, a kind of armour, and he clung to it because he had been afraid to go unarmed. But now he had something to lose again' (188). When the Celtic chiefs desert Ambrosius, Ness chooses to remain with her husband rather than go with her own people: 'it is too late. I belong to you now, I and the child' (191). Aquila recognizes the parallels between the situation of Ness and his sister, and this becomes a vital step in his redemption. This is achieved finally when he saves the life of his sister's son after a battle and sends him back to his mother with a message that signals both forgiveness and apology. 'She,' he recognizes, 'was not free as I was free' (268).

Aquila thereby finds his own peace and salvation: 'He had all at once a feeling of great riches . . . , and in some way that he neither understood nor questioned, he had found Flavia again' (272). The book closes with an image of rebirth, as the old damson tree by their house, long barren, so it seems to Aquila, is transformed: 'He looked up at the old damson tree, and saw the three stars of Orion's belt tangled in the snowy branches. Someone, maybe Ness, had hung out a lantern in the colonnade, and in the starlight and the faint and far-most fringe of the lantern glow it was as though the damson tree had burst into blossom; fragile, triumphant blossom all along the boughs' (272).

The dominant pattern in The lantern bearers is thus one of loss, suffering, and redemption through love, and it serves to remind us that even those who fight against the barbarians most uncompromisingly may make mistakes for which they pay a high price. There is also, however, a pattern of fate that influences events, as Aquila himself comes to recognize during his years of thralldom, and which Brother Ninnias believes to be the working of God's will and 'the Grace of God' (261). This pattern of a controlling fate assumes still greater prominence in Katz's Third magic.

From the very start of the novel, the two protagonists - a Canadian teenager named Morgan Lefevre, and a youth named Arddu from the world of Nwm - seem helpless pawns in the war between the First Magic of the Circle, wielded by women, and the Second Magic of the Line, wielded by men. Both powers are equally ruthless in their willingness to manipulate and to destroy people for their own ends, with the result that Morgan and Arddu must struggle desperately merely to survive. As if this were not
enough, they also seem to be used by a mysterious Third Magic for its own designs. Sent by it to Earth during the Dark Ages, they find themselves transformed so that Morgan 'had become Morgan LeFay, and Arddu had become King Arthur, and the legends were there, waiting to be made' (200). This, however, locks them into yet another pattern of events over which they have no control. 'For Arddu there was kingship, and all the choices that would lead, in the end, to the breaking of the Round Table and death on the battlefield. For her there was a Quest to be initiated and a sorcerer named Merlin to be bested, and above all, there was a baby named Mordred to be kept alive. For without that baby, Morgan Lefevre would have no ancestors, and without ancestors, she could never be born. And she must be born, for she was here now' (200). With this insight comes the further realization that 'Mordred must live to kill Arddu, and she, who loved Arddu, had no choice but to allow it' (200).

The force of destiny would appear to be inescapable, but Morgan and Arddu do learn, nonetheless, that much can be achieved by fortitude in adversity. Though their situation often seems desperate, perseverance is rewarded as they escape one peril after another. In the process they develop latent abilities that they did not realize they possessed. Thus Morgan, confronted by Second Magic alarms at the end of the iron bridge, reaches deep within herself: 'Everything they’d been through, and now they weren’t going to escape after all! Rage flooded her. . . . “Put on the torc”, she ordered Arddu. The words came from deep within her. She sounded different even to herself, authority in her voice, a certainty more powerful than instinct' (71).

This growth is assisted, moreover, by the talismans that they are given: to Morgan the Grail, to Arddu Excalibur. As the latter lays hand upon the sword, 'Magic washed over him, and he let it happen. It was a cleansing, a widening of the eyes, a healing. . . . Power was in his hand. Power was his hand' (158).

The novel offers a sobering view of life, for the characters are at the mercy of events over which they have very little control. As Morgan complains, it is not fair, and that is one of the bitterest discoveries young people must make about life. Yet this message is balanced by a further insight: 'It is not fair, and it will not be easy, but there will be compensations. The Grail is one. . . . Take it, child, and make it thine own. Thou wilt lose it, but something of it will stay with thee always' (182).

What these two novels provide is awareness of the difficulties that are found in life, no matter how hard we strive. The brightness of the ideals that inspire the young people in so many of the novels we have been considering often dazzles their eyes to the darker reality of the world. Viewed as one single group, Arthurian fiction for younger readers cautions against unrealistic expectations, lest
disillusionment lead to bitterness and defeatism. Warned of the dangers that lie ahead, they may endure and eventually triumph.

If the victory they achieve is less complete than they might hope, it remains, nonetheless, preferable to many of the alternatives. For though Arthurian legend warns us that the defeat at Camlann is inevitable, it also reminds us that our efforts to preserve the light may be rewarded. As Aquila perceives at the end of The lantern bearers, there is ‘No respite in this war, and maybe only darkness at the end of it. But for himself, now, in this present moment, he seemed to have come to a quiet place in which to rest a little before going on’ (272). Or, as Arddu puts it at the end of The third magic, ‘It won’t be easy . . . , but there will be — compensations’ (204). We may not succeed in creating the best of all possible worlds, but if we try our best, it may be enough.