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GERALD WITHERS



ARTHURIAN TRADITION

ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF'S
THE SWORD AT SUNSET

THE AUTHOR



- 1920-1992
- Children's author and historical fiction writer
- *Sword at Sunset* is the 5th installation of part of a longer series following the British people after the departure of Rome and the confrontation with the Saxons
- Credited by Raymond Thompson as one of the "some of the finest contemporary recreations of the Arthurian story"



THE STORY



- Spanning 40 years of a man's life in a single flashback made upon the deathbed, *Sword at Sunset* covers a rugged, Machiavellian Arthur, a British war leader struggling all his life with conflicts inside and out. Conflicts which are presented in hate, betrayal, deception, agony, and crushed romance. With *Sword at Sunset* being void of all fantastic elements of the romantic King Arthur, Sutcliff presents for her readers a historic and believable Artos the Bear.

THE ARTHUR



- Called Artos the Bear, a horselord and soldier
- Begotten under a hawthorn bush
- Has a hard time with feelings (perhaps a bias from the author)
- First loyalty to the idea of a Britain united over his king and family and friends
- Not necessarily against only the Saxons, but any threat to his perfect Britain



THE CHARACTERS



- Bedwyr: Lancelot figure, a harper, with an ugly face and raised brow, Artos' second
- Cei: Kay figure, brute with a beard and likes his women and wine
- Gwalchmai: Gawain figure, crippled chief physician, former novice, dies before Artos
- Guenhumara: Guinevere figure, daughter of another king, offered 100 men as her dowry
- Medraut: Mordred figure, pitiful creature born and raised on hate, first seeking love from Artos, then desires his destruction
- Ambrosius: both a father and Merlin figure, uncle, though outliving Uther, killed by cancer and a deer
- Ygernia: Morgause figure, half-sister banished to the hills by Uther, seeks nothing but revenge for it

MYTHIC AND SYMBOLIC INSPIRATION



- Hawthorn Bush: symbol of the union of opposites
Historically a symbol of fertility and associated with the female goddess aspects (Artos' mother of the old world)
- Bear: “arth” Welsh for bear. King of the forest, powerful
- Birds of Rhiannon: birds of a fairy that sing on a silver tree used to lure a hero to destruction (Ygerna luring Artos, Bedwyr's harp)
- Corn King & Queen: god sacrificed to goddess for a good harvest to come (Artos sacrificed for a better Britain)
- Hallowed Hills: home of the aboriginal people of Britain with ill will toward the lighter men
- Horned One: correspondent of the king of the realm and the stag king—renewed fertility along with Midsummer Fires

QUESTIONS



- How does taking the fantastic elements out of the Arthurian legend change it?
- In the book, both Ambrosius and Artos seem to have a knack of foresight, sometimes acting on it, sometimes not. Do you think Sutcliff combined elements of Merlin in each character with historical names?
- Artos has no dreams of Fortune's Wheel. Why and how are dreams used in the rest of Arthurian lore?
- Why do you think Sutcliff ended the book with no concrete death of Artos? Take into consideration his return. Was she trying to be realistic?
- How does the time period Sutcliff is writing in (early 1960's) affect her novel?
- What goals do you think were behind the writing of this book?
- Loyalty is a strong theme in the Arthurian legends. In Sutcliff's version, Arthur is loyal to the idea of Britain above all else. How does this aspect of him compare to other versions?