

**BEN'S NOTES**

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**THE ONCE  
AND FUTURE  
KING**  
**BY T. H. WHITE**



**Third  
Thursday**  
**Book Club**

# T. H. WHITE'S *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING*

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*<sup>1</sup> is widely considered the most influential fantasy novel ever written. Drawn from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *The Once and Future King*'s retelling of the Arthurian legend has been an inspiration for authors ranging from J.K. Rowling (the *Harry Potter* series) to Lev Grossman (*The Magicians*) to Neil Gaiman (*American Gods*). T.H. White wrote only one great book: *The Once and Future King*. But that book was written over the course of decades, and really encompasses several smaller novels, fitted together with master craftsmanship. It is a funny novel, a political novel, a novel of romance and adventure — but most of all, it is a novel about the relationships between human beings, and how they reconcile those relationships with eternal, meaningful values ... or whether the struggle and failure to do so is both the great human tragedy, and the source of man's inherent dignity.

## T. H. WHITE: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

T.H. White was born on May 29, 1906, in British-occupied India; his father worked with the Indian police, and his mother was allegedly “psychopathic,” according to biographer Sylvia Townsend Warner.<sup>2</sup> He attended Cheltenham College in England and then Queen's College at Cambridge University, where he graduated with first class honors, having written extensively on Malory. He wrote novels during summer vacations, but it wasn't until 1936 that he re-embraced the Malory legend. He wrote in his notes, “The whole Arthurian story is a regular Greek doom, comparable to that of Orestes.” He began work on the book that would become *The Sword in the Stone*. That book was chosen in 1939 for the Book-of-the-Month Club, making him an overnight success.

As World War II approached, he wrote the second book, *The Witch in the Wood* — which would later be re-edited and retitled *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, and then *The Ill-Made Knight*. Finally, in 1939, he completed *The Candle In The Wind*. He did write a fifth volume, *The Book of Merlyn*, but his publisher essentially rejected it; some editions of *The Once and*

*Future King* now include it. In 1958, for the first time, the compendium known as *The Once and Future King*, which includes all volumes but *The Book of Merlyn*, was published.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, creators of *My Fair Lady*, tried to turn the last three books into *Camelot*, a musical which contains a multiplicity of beautiful songs (*How to Handle a Woman* and *If Ever I Would Leave You* among them) but little of the magic of the book.

White was widely characterized as peculiar. He lived alone, pursued hobbies including hunting and fishing with alacrity, and was rumored to be a homosexual and a sado-masochist in his personal life. He devoted himself to learning what Warner called “techniques,” adding “it was part of his theory about the Renaissance or polytechnic man who could shoot and hunt a hare in the morning, fell a tree in the afternoon, and write a sonnet in the evening. If he saw an implement—plough or paintbrush—he wanted to use it; if he watched a skill, to practice it, and having got what he wanted, went on to something else.”<sup>4</sup>

He died at the age of 57, with *The New York Times* obituary quoting one reviewer who called White “a modern exile in time longing for the past. If he had lived in his beloved past, he might well have been hanged as a warlock.”<sup>5</sup>

### THE SWORD IN THE STONE: LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

*The Sword in the Stone*, which brought White to international prominence, has little connection to Malory; Malory's epic does not cover Arthur's youth. *The Sword In The Stone* posits Merlyn as a guide for a young bastard named Wart, treated well by his guardian, Sir Ector, but increasingly badly by his quasi-adopted brother Kay. Merlyn takes Wart under his wing and teaches him what he will need to know to become King of England, and the hero of legend. Merlyn doesn't bother versing Wart in religion or politics directly; he understands that the best teacher is experience — and he understands that children must be allowed to take risks so that they may grow. Merlyn is no helicopter parent. “I will come,” he tells Wart on his first foray into the natural world. “But in future you will have to go by yourself. Education is experience, and the essence of experience is self-reliance.”<sup>6</sup>

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