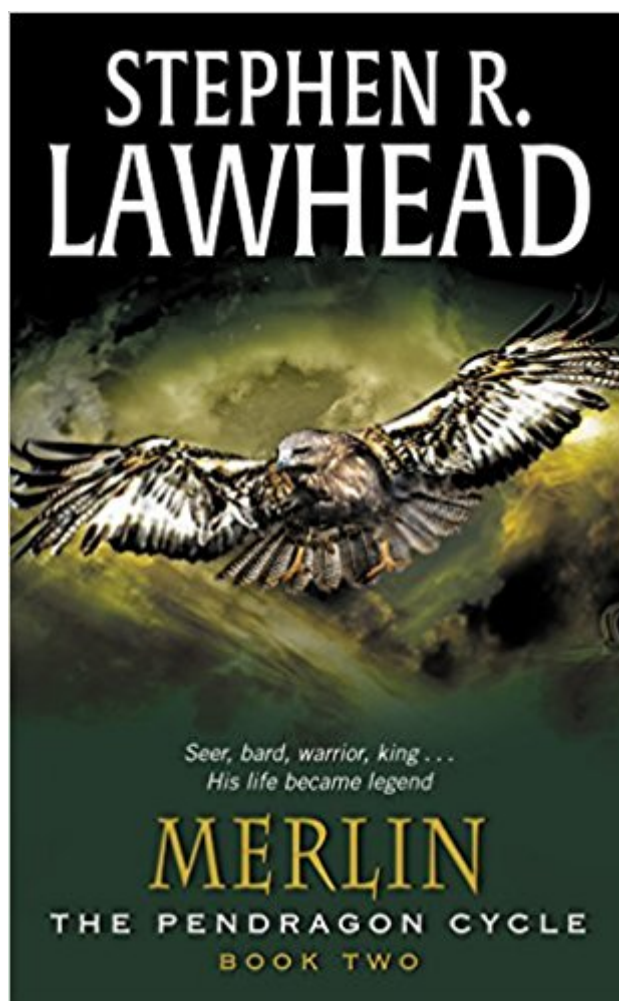


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Merlin (The Pendragon Cycle , Book 2)



Synopsis

A stunning saga of courage and destiny in a legendary time of chaos and kings. He was born to greatness, the son of a druid bard and a princess of lost Atlantis. A trained warrior, blessed with the gifts of prophecy and song, he grew to manhood in a land ravaged by the brutal greed of petty chieftains and barbarian invaders. MERLIN: Respected, feared and hated by many, he was to have a higher destiny. For it was he who prepared the way for the momentous event that would unite the Island of the Mighty—the coming of Arthur Pendragon, Lord of the Kingdom of Summer. MERLIN—Entertains and tantalizes . . . an exciting and thoughtful addition to the ranks of Arthurian fantasy. • Locus

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Customer Reviews

"Entertains and tantalizes...an exciting and thoughtful addition to the ranks of Arthurian fantasy."--Locus

He was born to greatness, the son of a druid bard and a princess of lost Atlantis. A trained warrior, blessed with the gifts of prophecy and song, he grew to manhood in a land ravaged by the brutal greed of petty chieftains and barbarian invaders. Merlin: Respected, feared and hated by many, he was to have a higher destiny. For it was he who prepared the way for the momentous event that would unite the Island of the Mighty—the coming of Arthur Pendragon, Lord of the Kingdom of Summer.

Lawhead's Pendragon cycle is a fascinating series of novels. Not only does it rewrite the Arthurian myth--turning the traditional tale on its head--but it puts early Christianity in a much more favorable light by focusing on the pure goodness of the Christian ideal. Goodness and virtue can triumph over evil, given the chance. This does not mean that the author shies away from the epic violence and bloodshed of the era, there is that aplenty, but it he also creates characters with moral values, who weather dreadful disasters and experience many corresponding joys in their lives. I also enjoyed the Cymryc focus of this series and its tie-in with the Atlantian myth. I was moved to tears at times, and saddened by the fact that the ideals driving these characters died so rapidly in subsequent British history. If only... Maybe one day we will come to our senses.

Merlin is the first fantasy book I've read in a long time that reflects historical and cultural understanding comparable to that of Tolkein and Lewis. I've read medieval Arthurian legends extensively, and my thought during the first part of the book was, "Wow." A "wow" because Lawhead pulled off the combination of faithfulness to old legends understood in contextual depth, and also "wow" for storytelling that works without strain in English for people who don't know the medieval versions, and a final kind of "wow" because a so-to-speak translation that faithfully bridged the two. When I manage any one of those three, I think I am doing well. Lawhead managed all three. There are other merits; the treatment of a gifted childhood is one of the best I have read, along with *A Wind in the Door*, and worthy of nonfiction treatment like *Guiding the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers*, which covers both giftedness in general and profound giftedness in particular. And though the book was first recommended to me as a portrayal of giftedness in literature, it is one of several unexpected gems. Though I am not a bard, the portrayal of awen reminded me of one time I was invited to a keyboard before a music conservatory and gave a very well-received improvised performance (and was ten years out of practice). Merlin is a character one wants to identify with. If there is one weakness, it might be of a history student who commented that historical fiction seems to have one character who is "enlightened", who has something like our perspective. It could be that all of the major characters are postmoderns wearing armor or other period accurate clothing, but if not, someone like the senior monk in *The Name of the Rose* is a rational skeptic who doesn't go for ancient superstitions, at least not compared to everyone else. And Merlin speaks almost like a skeptic of "that which men call magic," like one would today speak of "Unix wizardry" which is really only technical competence with computers. For a portrayal of Merlin, the "sword and sorcery" is awfully light on the "sorcery". Not that this is itself

without precedent in serious tellers and retellers of Arthurian legend: Sir Thomas Mallory's late medieval transformation of the legends has been described as downplaying the supernatural, a strange claim to someone understanding Mallory today, but Mallory essentially created a thousand-page synopsis of an encyclopedia's worth of medieval Arthurian legend, and he tends to leave out things like Excalibur lopping off the tops of hills. And for someone who genuinely understands the legends, a free hand in pursuing faithfulness has always been part of the picture: practically every medieval telling and retelling seems intended to straighten something else. If Merlin comes across as something like a skeptic, speaking modestly about "that which men call magic" and usually trying to do without those powers, this is permitted to someone who knows the legends well and is trying to faithfully reform them. The same goes, for another example, with Lawhead mostly cutting out the glorification of carrying on, at least in gesture, with another man's wife. And all the medieval versions which spread like wildfire beyond Celtic lands, from the *Brut*, or *History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*) onwards, have in addition to courtly love a glorification of violence and manslaughter where two knights will hack each other to death's door and be well again within a fortnight; Lawhead's Merlin may very directly be a war hero, but one has something of restraint, a sense that violence is necessary and appropriate in certain places but one does NOT want to be constantly fighting with whomever for no real or particular reason. And indeed Lawhead's Merlin condemns killing in peacetime even for equal revenge against vile offenses. If there is one criticism to be raised of this masterpiece, it is that perhaps like any modern retelling of the story (or medieval, too, for that matter; NONE of the medieval sources I've read or heard of show anything we would today recognize as historical, cultural, or archaeological knowledge of the British Isles in the 6th century the *Brut* asserts), it is anachronous. Besides the questionable (if partly plausible, to me) portrayal of the relation between Christianity and pagan Druidry, there is a moral compass that is skeptical, not going in so much for superstition, eviscerates the tradition of courtly love that practically powers Chretien de Troyes and every medieval author since that I have read, and approximates a limited and austere "just war theory" (which says that violence can be permitted in certain extreme circumstances, but is really to be avoided if possible), when the *Brut* and every subsequent version of the stories have violence for the sake of violence and no real sense that it is worthy of a knight to try to avoid violent confrontation when that is reasonably possible. Thus on three axes, those of skepticism vs. the occult, chastity vs. flirty courtly love, and restrained violence vs. violence as basically glorious, a major anachronism is placed on these legends. But as stated, Lawhead has pulled off three "wows". "Wow" because he was faithful to the medieval legends, "wow" because it works well as modern storytelling whether or not the reader has

exotic knowledge of old legends, and "wow" because he combines them in a translation that works better than we have any reason to hope for. CJS Hayward, author, *Merlin's Well*, *The Sign of the Grail*

This is an excellent series of books. Entertaining. Good story. Love the Christian emphasis. Would be curious how much of the Christian influence is accurate.

I read all of the Pendragon Cycle years ago, and loved them all, and own them all in print. I have loaned them out various times, and unfortunately, one of them was never returned to me. So when I saw them available for my Kindle, I thought "Yes! This way I will be sure to have them all, to read and enjoy over and over. Besides, I confess that it is now difficult for me to hold these large books up to read, especially in bed, so this works for me very well, and I am delighted to have them in Kindle format. I do have to say that my favorites are the first three: *Taliesin*, *Merlin*, and *Arthur*; the quality of these is outstanding. The ones which followed are fine, but they are not nearly as well-written. I highly recommend all the first three!

The story of Arthur, MERLIN, & Camelot is a familiar one. This author approaches it with an emphasis on Celtic Lore and ancient Christian beginnings. While the narrative occasionally bogs down with song lyrics and Merlin's insane musings from the future, the story of his youth, marriage, & struggle to achieve his destiny is always fascinating. This version is less slick and Disney-like than most with a heavy emphasis on tribal conflicts. The surprising component in this novel is that Avalon and Merlin are portrayed as Christians not pagans. This adds a new twist to the familiar tale and helps to explain the basis of Camelot and its founding principles.

The second book in the Pendragon Cycle by Stephen Lawhead doesn't disappoint. I thought the first book in the series, *Taliesin*, was a great book, but *Merlin* is a must read. Unlike *Taliesin*, *Merlin* is told in the first-person which I felt made the book more enjoyable. The book is loaded with high kings (yes, there are several), bards, druids, evil, and epic battles with the ever present and menacing barbarians, the Saecsen. Now, on to *Arthur*.

Stephen Lawhead has never disappointed me with his works. While waiting for his next installment of his "Bright Empires" series, I decided I would pass the time reading the "Pendragon Cycle", which has kept my attention through each of the books. "*Taliesin*" was a great book to lead off the series,

followed by "Merlin", and I am now reading "Arthur", which also very good. If you are interested in early British lore, I highly recommend the "Pendragon Cycle", as it provides a very unique perspective on the Arthur legend. Kudos to Mr. Lawhead!

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