

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The High King

by

Lloyd Alexander

Book Information

Lloyd Alexander, The High King

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Interest Level: MG

When the sword of Dyrnwyn falls into the hands of Arawn Death-Lord, Taran and his friends raise an army to march against him.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Fantasy/Imagination, Magic; Power Lessons AR, Grade 6; Series, Chronicles of Prydain

Main Characters

Arawn Death-Lord the evil ruler of Annuvin, who seeks to enslave Prydain; Taran kills him

Coll the farmer of Caer Dallben who acts as Taran's counselor and friend; he dies helping Taran fight the Cauldron-Born

Dallben the powerful enchanter who reads the prophecies of Hen Wen and <I>The Book of Three</I>

Doli the dwarf who has the power to become invisible; he helps guide Taran to Arawn's castle

Fflewddur Fflam the good friend of Taran and Gwydion who advises Taran and helps him fight the evil of Arawn and the Cauldron-Born; he struggles in his work as a bard

Glew the sniveling greedy former giant of Mona, who causes a cave-in in the Fair Folks' mines when Doli tries to lead Taran's army through the mine tunnels

Gurgi the furry loyal friend of Taran, who saves Glew from burning to death in Arawn's dungeons

Gwystyl a scout of the Fair Folk, who reluctantly helps rescue King Smoit

Hen Wen the oracular pig of Caer Dallben, that prophesies the fate of Dyrnwyn

Kaw Taran's crow messenger, that tells Medwyn of Arawn's plans

King Math the High King of Prydain who dies fighting the Cauldron-Born when they storm Caer Dathyl

King Pryderi the arrogant king who allies with Arawn because he believes it is the only way to achieve peace in Prydain; he dies when he tries to murder Dallben

King Rhun the bumbling but brave and kind king of Mona, who tricks Magg's followers into believing an army is entering Caer Cadarn; he is killed in the battle

King Smoit the burly king of Caer Cadarn, who is imprisoned by Magg until Eilonwy, Rhun, and Fflewddur rescue him

Magg the Chief Steward the greedy accomplice of Arawn who briefly takes over Caer Cadarn; he dies a horrible death when he puts on Arawn's iron crown

Medwyn the ancient friend of the animals, who sends wolves and bears to help fight the battle against Arawn

Prince Gwydion the seasoned warrior who works with Taran to destroy Arawn; his magic sword, Dyrnwyn, is stolen by Arawn

Princess Eilonwy the brave princess who possesses latent magical skills; she is in love with Taran and helps fight Arawn's forces

Queen Achren a fallen queen who taught Arawn about dark magic; she is determined to avenge herself against Arawn

Taliesin the wise Chief Bard of Prydain, who offers Fflewddur a new harp

Taran the Assistant Pig-Keeper, who becomes High King of Prydain after defeating Arawn

Vocabulary

agitated upset

falter to hesitate or stop

forfeit to lose or give up

lineage ancestry or origins

paltry insignificant, trivial

unscathed unharmed

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Synopsis

In the land of Prydain, Taran is enjoying his homecoming at Caer Dallben with Princess Eilonwy, Dallben the enchanter, King Rhun, Gurgi, and Glew the former giant when Fflewddur the bard suddenly charges into the room with the near-dead Prince Gwydion over his shoulder. Taran quickly tends Gwydion's wounds while Fflewddur tells how Gwydion tried to save Taran and was attacked by the Huntsmen of Annuvin who stole Dyrnwyn, Gwydion's magic sword. Queen Achren helps them figure out that Gwydion was actually fooled by Arawn, Death-Lord of Annuvin, disguised as Taran.

Dallben tries to get Hen Wen the oracular pig to prophesy the future, but Hen Wen is terrified by the omen she must give. Taran persuades her to identify the symbols to be interpreted by Dallben. Though incomplete, the prophecy seems to indicate an ominous future for Prydain.

Determined to stop Arawn, Gwydion and his friends set out for Annuvin to retrieve Dyrnwyn. Along the way, the group splits up so Princess Eilonwy can retrieve items forgotten on King Rhun's ship. The two groups agree to meet again at the castle of Taran's friend, King Smoit, at Caer Cadarn. Half the group is imprisoned in King Smoit's castle, which has been taken over by the evil Magg. With the help of Gwystyl of the Fair Folk, Eilonwy leads the rest of the group in a rescue mission, but King Rhun dies during the fight.

After the battle at Caer Cadarn, Gwydion realizes that it is necessary to raise an army to fight Arawn. He asks each of his friends to travel to different areas of Prydain to alert the kingdoms that Arawn is gaining power. Taran must travel to the land of the Free Commots, persuade the people to pledge allegiance to him and prepare for battle, and then travel to Caer Dathyl, home of the High King Math and the rallying spot for the new army.

At Caer Dathyl, Taran is joined by his friends, and they wait for King Pryderi and his army. When Pryderi arrives, he unexpectedly announces his

alliance with Arawn and demands the surrender of King Math. A bloody battle ensues, and King Math dies fighting Arawn's Cauldron-Born soldiers, who can only be killed by the sword of Dyrnwyn.

After the battle, Gwydion realizes that Annuvin is vulnerable because the Cauldron-Born have left it unprotected. Taran attempts to delay the return of the Cauldron-Born while Gwydion rushes to Annuvin.

After a long march, Taran and his army take position at an old wall and force the Cauldron-Born to take a difficult path through the mountains. Many days of marching pass. Taran's army manages to hold the Cauldron-Born at bay until the Cauldron-Born unexpectedly attack his camp and overrun Taran's outposts. When the battle is over, Taran realizes that Eilonwy and Gurgi are missing. He wants to take time to search for them, but Fflewddur insists that Taran needs to lead the army after the Cauldron-Born if there is to be any hope of defeating Arawn.

Finally Taran presses on and eventually encounters an army of Fair Folk led by Doli. Doli tells him of old mine tunnels that go through the mountains and might help Taran cut off the Cauldron-Born before they reach Annuvin. The mines, however, are crumbling from disuse, and when Glew greedily grabs at a gem and falls, the tunnel caves in, stopping Taran's army and forcing them to turn back.

In the meantime, Eilonwy and Gurgi are prisoners of a band of ruffians, but a pack of wolves sent to fight Arawn saves them. Eilonwy sights Taran's army coming out of the mine just in time to warn them that they are about to collide with the Huntsmen.

Eilonwy and Gurgi rejoin Taran as he and his advisors are planning how to defeat the Huntsmen, who are camped in the valley below. Doli suggests flooding the valley and drowning them. The plan succeeds, and the army rushes on to stop the Cauldron-Born.

In the meantime, Dallben the enchanter is back at

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Caer Dallben when King Pryderi comes to assassinate him. Dallben warns Pryderi that Pryderi's death is foretold in *The Book of Three*. King Pryderi does not believe Dallben, and lightning destroys Pryderi when he grabs the book.

Taran's army is still traveling to Annuvin when Taran's crow tells them that Queen Achren is lying injured in a ravine. Taran forms a rescue party while the rest of the army forges forward. Achren is badly wounded, and a storm strikes before the group can rejoin the army. Fflewddur burns his harp to save them from freezing.

When the storm ends, Taran's group finds the army. Queen Achren insists that Taran lead the army over the steep Mount Dragon, since she knows that is the only good access to Annuvin. During the climb Taran almost falls but is saved by a gwythaint, a large bird he had once befriended, who flies him to the top of the mountain. When Taran pushes a large boulder to fend off the Cauldron-Born, he finds Dyrnwyn under the rock. Taran stabs one of the Cauldron-Born with the sword, and all the Cauldron-Born collapse and die.

Once inside the fortress at Annuvin, Queen Achren warns Taran that Arawn is present in the form of a serpent, but the serpent kills her before she herself can escape. Taran beheads the serpent, and it reforms into the headless body of Arawn. While Annuvin crumbles and collapses, Taran and his allies leave for home.

Back at Caer Dallben, Dallben informs Taran and his friends that it is time for them and all the Sons of Don to go to the Summer Country now that their work in Prydain is done. Dallben explains how the predictions of Hen Wen and *The Book of Three* had actually shown a new beginning for Prydain rather than a horrible end. Taran decides that it is his duty to stay and rebuild Prydain, and Dallben announces that Taran is now the High King. In order to stay with Taran, Eilonwy renounces her powers as an enchantress, and they marry.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why do the Fair Folk help Taran's army even though their king is very critical of humans?

The Fair Folk know that if they let Arawn gain control of Prydain, they will suffer along with the rest of the creatures of the land. They also seem to have little faith in the humans' ability to do anything properly, as shown by Doli's disgust when Taran questions his plan for killing the Huntsmen.

Literary Analysis

How does the author reveal Taran's past adventures?

Throughout the story Taran encounters people he has met in past stories, such as Glew the former giant, Annlaw the potter, and Dwyvach, the Weaver-Woman. At the point of meeting, either one of the characters or the narrator gives a few clues or a brief explanation of Taran's connection to the character.

Inferential Comprehension

What is the most likely reason that Arawn sends King Pryderi to kill Dallben?

King Pryderi is very vocal about his intention to use Arawn to unite Prydain under his own rule. Since Arawn's intention seems to be to gain control of Prydain, King Pryderi is a threat to him. Arawn probably hopes that he can get rid of two threats at the same time by forcing King Pryderi and Dallben to kill each other.

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Constructing Meaning

How does the reader know that Eilonwy does not like to follow the code of behavior expected of a lady?

She complains about her wasted time learning ladylike ways under Queen Teleria. She is resentful of the fact that the ladies of the court insist she wash her hair when she comes to Caer Dathyl, and she refuses to stay with them. She also shocks Taran by dressing in men's clothes and fighting in battle as soon as she has a chance to do so.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Lloyd Alexander acknowledges that he incorporated elements of old Welsh legends into his telling of *The High King*. Have the students read some Welsh legends and then, in a classroom discussion, see if they can identify the Welsh motifs, beliefs, and characters used in *The High King*.

Making Predictions *The Book of Three* gives Dallben clues to the future that help him decide how he should respond in certain situations, such as when King Pryderi comes to kill him. Have the students create their own *Book of Three* that makes three predictions for Prydain's future.

Comparing and Contrasting In *The High King* there are several different leaders, each with his own strengths and weaknesses as a leader. Have the students compile a chart of all the leaders that shows their similarities and differences. Have the students assess what they believe to be the greatest weakness and the greatest strength of each leader.

Recognizing Setting The terrain of Prydain and Annvin contributes greatly to the plot of this story. Have the students make a map of the lands described in this story based on details in the book. Have them draw different colored dotted lines that show the paths Taran and Gwydion followed as they traveled across the land.