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# High King, The

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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First published between 1964 and 1968, the five books of 'The Chronicles of Prydain' chart the adventurous exploits of Taran, an Assistant Pig Keeper. In this, the last in the cycle - winner of America's Newbery Medal in 1969 - Taran becomes High King.

Admiring critics have praised Alexander's subtlety of characterisation, his wisdom, his humour and his epic prose. Yet this novel's chief quality is simply the highly competent telling of an adventure story - rapid action, exciting cliff-hangers, poignant deaths, all narrated in an elevated prose. There are ingredients which were already familiar to readers of *Lord of the Rings*: the gathering of the Companions, the heroic journey, the formal modes of address, the struggle against a Dark Lord with the very future of the World in the balance.

Characters in sagas tend to the predictable; drawn through two or three often repeated strokes. Glew will always witter on about when he used to be a giant, Gurgi will indulge his penchant for rhyming ('munching and crunching?'), Prince Rhun will behave like a dashing but dim public school boy. 40 years ago, before the complex uses of fantasy made by, say, Le Guin or Pullman, these deeds of derring-do gave children a kind of Tolkien for younger readers. But where Tolkien's tale had deep roots in Anglo-Saxon and Norse, the Wales which Alexander claims as his inspiration seems chiefly evident in romantic names and a roughly similar coastline. Some 21st-century readers may feel that Prydain remains rooted in the pre-feminist sixties. Princess Eilonwy, the only major female figure in this novel, would much rather have been a bloke. At the end, when she surrenders her magical powers in order to spend her life with Taran, the all-wise Dallben nods and, 'Yes,' he said gently. 'Yet you shall always keep the magic and mystery all women share. And I fear that Taran, like all men, shall often be baffled by it.'

Looking back, it's been quite a journey. GF

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