



The Coming of the King (Books of Merlin, #1)

Nikolai Tolstoy

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The legend of Merlin is one of the greatest and most mysterious of all literature. This novel is a reimagining of his life and impact on Celtic Britain, bringing to life the world of the Celts in all its valor and violence, love and lust, poetry and profanity.

The Coming of the King (Books of Merlin, #1) Details

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Author : Nikolai Tolstoy

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From Reader Review *The Coming of the King* (Books of Merlin, #1) for online ebook

David says

Nikolai Tolstoy draws from the Mabinogion, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, Beowulf, and the Norse Eddas to tell a story of post-Arthurian Britain through the eye of Merlin. This Merlin isn't the advisor of Arthur we've come to expect from works like *The Once and Future King*, but rather a shaman living nearly a century after Arthur's defeat at Camlan. The book runs the gamut from action, to ribald humor, to surreal visions. I especially loved the fact that one of Merlin's teachers is the Salmon of Lyn Liw. At times this is a dense and challenging read and I'm not sure I would have gotten as much out of it if I hadn't read several of the stories of the Mabinogion plus some of the Norse Eddas. Still, I found this a compelling look through the eyes of a Celtic shaman and may have to give this another read in the future.

Micaela says

A very weird book. I don't think it would appeal to all that many people, as it is very dense and confusing. The parts I liked were really only appealing because they were all obscure references that only someone, like me, who has read a considerable amount of medieval literature is likely to understand. There is a scene quoting the Saga of Grettir the Strong almost word for word, for example. It draws from numerous, disparate medieval sources.

SPOILERS are recommended, because you are going to need them if approaching this book with no medieval background: the tale follows young Merlin as he gains the mystical powers necessary to serve as advisor to the high King, who is Maelgun, not Arthur. Merlin is the son of a virgin and incubus/pagan God and a child of prophesy. After baptism, he is thrown into the sea, so he learns how to turn into a fish and does that for many years. Then, eventually, he is caught in the weir of Gwyddno Garanhir (a weir is a wooden fishing barricade in an estuary, btw), and rescued by Gwyddno's son Prince Elfin. At Gwyddno's court, the child Merlin is a curiosity to most, and a colleague to the bard Taliesin, who is another vessel of the Gods. Eventually, Merlin proves his use by helping Elfin get out of an embarrassing political blunder with neighboring Prince Rhud. Thus, when the princes are called to muster for campaigns against the Saxons with King Maelgun, both Merlin and Taliesin go along for the ride.

On the way to Gwynedd, Merlin has an out-of-body experience in which he and Taliesin journey into the wilderness and play Gwyddbwl (aka the historical game Tafl in Tolstoy's interpretation), the game of Fate, determining in advance the outcome of the campaign--it doesn't look good. Taliesin's shade vanishes, leaving Merlin alone on the mountain, only to be rescued by a great falcon, which also happens to steal Merlin's eye without permission in order to drop it in the well of wisdom and earn Merlin the Second Sight, even greater than what he was born with.

Upon reaching Gwynedd, Merlin meets an old Roman centurion (V-something. I don't have the book on me). They initially hit it off well, and V tells Merlin his life story for a very long time, stopping only when Merlin is suddenly gripped by the Sight and the other world. Since Merlin is mysteriously comatose, V naturally wanders off--I said it was weird. Merlin then goes on a psychological journey into the layers of his own mind and the underworld, finally battling the grotesque ruler of the dead. He is aided back to the real world by his mysterious love interest star-maiden. Anyhow, the upshot is that now Merlin can not only See events, he can influence them too.

The army sets out to head off the Saxons, but the Saxons also send for reinforcements from the continent, including the legendary Beowulf. The Saxons literally have Odin on their side firing up the army. Meanwhile, Merlin decides to do some reconnaissance, so he travels into enemy territory as a fish. He does discover what is happening (turns out the Saxons were ready for them), and he has another mystical experience to try to change the fate he and Taliesin foresaw. He ends up very weak and half mad by the time he makes it back to warn the king. Unfortunately, the king is also ailing, and Merlin's information rapidly becomes useless. Merlin and Maelgun and V must whether a siege in an old decrepit fort without hope of relief. Fortunately, Elfin actually manages to pull a fast one and get put to fetch reinforcements. The siege is lifted, and Merlin battles Odin himself to ensure victory.

Cwn_annwn_13 says

This book had huge amounts of potential that it didn't quite live up to. Tolstoy has wrote some great non fiction on British Dark Ages history and pre-Christian European religion (do your self a favor and read his book Quest for Merlin!) but as far as fiction his writing style just didn't flow well. It took some determination for me to get through it and I have a huge interest in the type of subject matter covered in this book. I'm not at all saying this book is bad, its just a disappointment compared to what I thought it could have been. If you have a big interest in Dark Ages British history, Welsh and/or Arthurian lore, or pre-Christian European religion then you may enjoy this. If your more a casual fan of that type stuff then you will probably want to skip it.

David Earle says

Enjoyable but hard to follow at times. Sad that he didn't finish the series.

Michael says

The medieval French interpreters of the Matter of Britain drew heavily upon the Celtic myths and folktales of Brittany and Great Britain when they wrote their own chivalric stories. The heroes of those earlier tales were seen by the French as uncouth and unchristian and they generally cast the native heroes as boorish and unmannered when compared with the "new" cultured French heroes.

Tolstoy has taken back the original traditions and shows these characters, warts and all, as people set within their own culture. Based on Welsh and Germanic mythology, the manners and mores might not be what we have come to expect from Arthurian heroes, but the combination of earthy humour and high mysticism strikes a chord of realism, despite the fantasy setting. The kings and warriors aren't paragons of chivalric virtue, but then they pre-date the chivalric ideal and demand to be treated on their own terms.

It's such a shame that Tolstoy's legal difficulties at the time of the publication of this first volume in an intended trilogy prevented him from continuing the series.

Heather says

It took me forever to read this freaking book! So dense and chewy. Oh, its about Merlin not God, deceptive title.

Holly Lindquist says

This book introduces the unfortunate phrase "trouserful of wantonness" in perhaps one of the worst descriptive paragraphs I've ever read. The entire book is yet more of the same. If English was the author's second language I might understand.. oh wait, he's from England. There is no excuse. (If you do read this book and come across the paragraph I mentioned, read it aloud to your best friend. See if they don't smack you.)

Katerine says

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Sue says

This book was written in the style of the Norse sagas. I think Tolstoy often got carried away with this style and didn't pay enough attention to the subject matter and the plot. It seems as if about 200 pages or so of "style" could have been cut out and it would have made the book far more interesting and readable. Merlin as a baby and the final battle were very interesting sections but there was much more of the book that I felt as if I was slogging through. I rarely quit reading a book but I almost gave up on this one. I read this was the first in a trilogy. I won't be reading the other two. I'm only giving it a three because of the attempt at the style of the Norse sagas and those parts that were interesting and good reads.

Steven Malone says

Excellent vision of the post-Arthurian Briton and the way and magic of the druid Myrddin. Highly recommended for those interested in this area of fantasy or historical fiction. Explore everything Arthurian and ancient British from druidic shape-changing to Roman military science to Celtic lifestyles.

Mike S says

This is a masterpiece, Nikolai Tolstoy did a tremendous amount of research to write this, the amount of imagination and detail that went into this book is astounding.

I really liked Michael's review.

Paul says

Professor of Arthurian Mythology has a crack at writing the historical fiction version of Arthur. The telling point of how well this was received is that the book calls itself "The First Book of Merlin". There was never a second. If The Sword in the Stone or Excalibur is your taste for Arthurian fiction then this is not the book for you. It's heavy on Celtic imagery, and the real world explanations of various Arthurian myths and elements may leave the unfamiliar scratching their heads.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in December 2001.

This novel, the first of a projected trilogy which hasn't yet appeared (and probably never will), made quite a stir among my more literary friends when I was a student. As Arthurian fantasy goes, it is unique in several

ways, and, while tedious in places, it is generally engrossing.

The title leads the reader to expect a Sword in the Stone scenario, with Merlin tutoring the boy Arthur, but in fact Tolstoy has completely separated the two characters, making the king precede the wizard by about fifty years. The king of the title is not Arthur, but an even later ruler who, at the beginning of the novel, goes to Merlin's grave to consult with the ghost of the enchanter.

The Coming of the King is one of the most difficult novels about the Celtic Dark Ages to read, making almost no concession to the modern reader. Names and, frequently, concepts such as fate are given only in Celtic forms, and then not even in the ones most likely to be familiar to readers. There is a pronunciation guide, but no glossary. Forms of Celtic literature are imitated in ways which are sometimes disconcerting or off-putting (it certainly helps if you have read, say, the Mabinogion). In one way, this is a virtue: it makes the novel atmospherically Celtic; but The Coming of the King is not an easy read. (Traditional tales from other cultures are also worked in, including Beowulf and a touch of the Kalevala; these borrowings are more interesting to catalogue than to read.)

The best sections of this novel are the least portentous: the amusing story of Merlin as a precocious baby and the exciting siege of Deinerth. This is where Tolstoy forgets that he is writing mythology and gets carried along by his own story. (To try too hard to produce mythology is a common fault in modern fantasy authors, one which is an annoying legacy of Tolkien's influence. Even if there is something in the reader which is stirred by the epic ideas, this is stifled when these are expressed in turgid prose.)

Tolstoy went on to become involved in one of the bigger libel cases of the 1990s, when he was sued after suggesting that British officers handed over Yugoslav resistance fighters to Tito after the end of the war knowing that they would be massacred. The second and third books of this trilogy seem to have been forgotten in the stress of the massive damages awarded against Tolstoy; a pity. The Coming of the King, as a result, stands as a unique and different Arthurian fantasy, and this alone is a considerable achievement.

Jared says

This novel is rather an acquired taste. Partly fantasy, partly a historical novel, partly a fanciful reflection upon the defunct pagan religions of Britain and its Germanic invaders, to best appreciate "The Coming of the King," one should first read (and probably study) and get the general "feel" of the tales, legends, and genealogies in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* and the Welsh Annals, the sermon of St. Gildas on the downfall of Britain, the Mabinogion, the Welsh triads, the bardic poems in the Four Ancient Books of Wales, the early medieval entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the Anglo-Saxon poems Beowulf, Widsith, Deor, and Finnsburh. Drawing on those hoary texts from Britain's Dark Ages -- the chaotic transitional period following the collapse of Roman authority when the various early medieval British (Welsh) and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms took shape -- Tolstoy does a masterful job of weaving together and crafting a mythic-themed story set in the reign of Maelgwn the Tall, King of Gwynedd, who was the most powerful king in Britain during the latter 500s A.D. In this novel, Tolstoy also experiments with and explores his own theories about the origin, nature, and development of the Merlin myth, and particularly fascinating was his adaptation of the Beowulf story, with imaginative depictions of the half-pagan culture of the late Roman/early medieval Britons or Welsh, and the brutally pagan culture of the Anglo-Saxons. However, the book could have really done without the chapter in which the pagan mystical/mythical union of the divine masculine figure of Merlin with the divine feminine figure of his sister Gwendudd is graphically sexualised as an incestuous encounter. Undoubtedly that chapter is the worst passage of the novel and reads and feels like an intrusion

into the story (did Tolstoy think he needed to add a sex scene to help him sell books?) -- one may skip right over that chapter and continue reading and not miss anything essential to the plot or character development.

Sam says

This version of the traditional Celtic mythology adds a new twist to the Arthurian tales by adding in hints, bits and suggestions from Scandinavian and Russian mythologies as well as the original Celtic tales. This combination makes for a unique series of stories that follows the king of the title (not the one you think) as he begins his quest to achieve power and rule his peoples well. In doing so he arrives at Merlin's grave where he speaks to his ghost rather than the man himself. This is a hard read, especially for those not familiar with the original tales as Tolstoy hasn't altered the style or language to suit today's reader. Personally I don't mind this, having read the Mabinogion and other such Celtic tales I'm quite familiar with many of the terms used but it would've been good to have a glossary for those not so familiar with these (I did refer back to my Mabinogion on occasion to remind myself of a few I'd forgotten). Vividly written and enthralling, especially if you can get over the language barrier.
