



# The Dark Is Rising

*Susan Cooper*

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## **The Dark Is Rising** Susan Cooper

*"When the Dark comes rising, six shall turn it back, three from the circle, three from the track; wood, bronze, iron; water, fire, stone; five will return, and one go alone."*

With these mysterious words, Will Stanton discovers on his 11th birthday that he is no mere boy. He is the Sign-Seeker, last of the immortal Old Ones, destined to battle the powers of evil that trouble the land. His task is monumental: he must find and guard the six great Signs of the Light, which, when joined, will create a force strong enough to match and perhaps overcome that of the Dark. Embarking on this endeavor is dangerous as well as deeply rewarding; Will must work within a continuum of time and space much broader than he ever imagined.

## **The Dark Is Rising Details**

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# From Reader Review The Dark Is Rising for online ebook

**Jonathan Terrington says**

*'When the Dark comes rising, six shall turn it back;  
Three from the circle, three from the track;  
Wood, bronze, iron; water, fire, stone;  
Five will return, and one go alone.'*

*'Iron for the birthday, bronze carried long;  
Wood from the burning, stone out of song;  
Fire in the candle-ring, water from the thaw;  
Six Signs the circle, and the grail gone before.'*

*'Fire on the mountain shall find the harp of gold  
Played to wake the Sleepers, oldest of the old;  
Power from the green witch, lost beneath the sea;  
All shall find the light at last, silver on the tree.'*

As a child I developed my love of fantasy and superheroics. I suppose that what appeals to a child about a fantasy novel is the sense of mystery, adventure and the fact that no one in a fantasy novel need be powerless against the forces of evil let loose in the world. Haven't you ever dreamed about being able to use magic to solve the inconvenience of lacking a parking spot or being late to work? Isn't one of our greatest fears that sense of powerlessness, the frustration that we cannot control everything?

I know that some people do not like this series. I suppose it is better appreciated when read as a child. Reading it again now for the fifth or so time I see the simplicity of the narrative, those few elements that don't quite make sense or seem a little shallow. I must admit that the slight dig at how religion isn't relevant in this magical world also irks me in the book. But that said this is in the end a novel and when you can see those little things you laugh at them and then ignore them to enjoy the overall story. Or at least I do. The one thing I've always appreciated about this series is the story of Dark versus Light, good versus evil, one boy discovering his supernatural powers.

The three verse poem written above represents the entire sequence of this series (which I prefer to read in the order of book 2, 1, 3, 4, 5 as for me the proper story begins here in the story of Will Stanton, last of the Old Ones. On his eleventh birthday, Will discovers that he has a calling to discover six magical signs which will enable the forces of the Light to begin their battle over evil.

Most of the mythology and fairytale elements of this story are taken from Celtic origins which is a fascinating set of mythology to me. But don't ever read this expecting Tolkien or Lewis I still rate them a little higher than this. But this is still a classic children's fantasy series and deserves to be read by audiences. Interestingly reading it today it still reads like the first time I read it. Only I'm an even faster reader now than I was then. Perhaps my powers are awakening like Will's...

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## **Nikki says**

Slightly ahead of the ideal time to read this book — which would be veery slowly, a chapter or two at a time, over the Twelve Days of Christmas. I never have the patience for that! As usual, I loved *The Dark is Rising*; the quiet moments of enchantment, the beautiful writing, the warmth of the family relationships and the reality of the bickering, protective group of siblings. There's more adult, complicated stuff as well as simple squabbling among siblings: the whole relationship between Merriman and Hawkin is a difficult one, and foreshadows what John Rowlands says about the Light in a later book. The morality of the Light is a cold, clear justice.

One thing I noticed a lot this time, though, was how Britain-centric the sequence is. Every so often it'll make a reference to other parts of the world — the Jamaican carnival head, the darker skinned Old Ones, etc — but it talks about the battle for "this land". As though the struggle between Light and Dark throughout history is focused on Britain. I'm not sure that's an attitude that can really fly anymore, however simple and obvious it may have seemed when the books were originally written. I love how rooted the books are in Britain, the landscape and the people and the different histories that intertwine, the Anglo-Saxon and the Celtic, the Roman. But the focus on Britain as the whole centre of the fight against the Dark seems short-sighted.

Still, that is the other thing to love: the glimpses of mythology surrounding the books. Not just the Arthurian mythology, but the mysterious king whose dead hands held the Sign of Water for Will; the lore of the smiths; the Old Ways; Herne the hunter... I wish I could read beyond the pages into all that richness.

Originally posted here.

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## **Stephen says**

2.5 stars. I really thought I was going to like this more than I did. It was well-written and the premise of a story was interesting. I just never really got into the story and found myself waiting for something exceptional to happen. Unfortunately, it didn't. That said, it wasn't a bad book and, being short, it didn't take too long to get through.

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## **Devin says**

I saw the movie "The Seeker" which I now use as a standard to judge all movies I really dislike; but I was required by my class to read it so I did.

Honestly, the book was entertaining. But I still didn't like it for multiple reasons:

The beginning was really hard to follow. Susan Cooper needs to make it less work for the reader to try and figure out what's going on. The plot was good; the classic battle between the darkness and the light. But Will Stanton didn't have to make any sacrifices; seriously zero. I thought this book was going to turn around when the Dark Rider threatened to kill his sister if he didn't give up the signs of power, but she didn't even get hurt. I think any hero needs to make some great sacrifice in order to pass his testing. Basically, a character who had to pass a test, where (though the threat of a sacrifice was present) actually made no sacrifice, was never truly tested.

The only reason the plot line was not unbearably predictable was because it was so substandard I kept expecting the author to take things to the next level. Cool concepts, but there are way better books than this

that present a more through understanding into what Susan Cooper was trying to accomplish. It really reminded me of the story of The Argo, how it's all about Jason's quest to become a hero but he never even does anything; he has all the argonauts complete all his tasks for him. Definately not my style.

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## Trin says

Reread. I saw the trailer for the upcoming movie—and more importantly, I saw Darcy's furious reaction to the trailer for the upcoming movie, and I realized that I didn't remember these books well enough to be properly furious myself. I read the first two in the series, in the wrong order, when I was much younger, but didn't recall being particularly engaged by them, which was why I never continued. I figured that, rereading them as an adult, I'd see the error of my ways.

Sadly, I didn't. I still don't find these books very engaging. Over Sea Under Stone is, as even Darcy admits, only so-so: the setting is great (the rambling old Cornish house, the standing stones perched on their cliffs, the sea-cave), and at least one of the siblings (Barney) is spunky and entertaining, yet the treasure hunt-plot is oddly slow, and the conclusion completely unsatisfying in my mind. (They give the grail to a museum and get 100 quid? Barney has his "Dude! Merlin!" revelation? Yawn.) I thought *The Dark Is Rising* would be better, but it didn't do much for me, either. There's a lot of portentous stuff, but I felt that every scrape Will gets into he gets out of either through the intervention of an adult or thanks to a deus ex machina. Meanwhile, the Dark Rider and the Dark in general seemed oddly unthreatening to me, while being an agent of the Light did not seem particularly exciting or pleasurable. I never wished I was *there*: with, say, the Narnia books, I wanted SO BADLY to go through a wardrobe or a painting of my own, even if it was dangerous; but being an Old One mostly seems dull and chanty to me, to the point that if the position were offered on craigslist, I think I might pass. What is wrong with me?

Because I really do feel, having this reaction, that there must be something wrong with me and not the books: so many people—and people whose opinions I trust—love them. Oh well. I suppose I didn't like The Lord of the Rings, either.

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## Lyn says

The Dark is Rising by Susan Cooper is a young adult fantasy novel first published in 1973.

The second book in the series of the same name, apparently the first book, Over Sea, Under Stone, was written for a younger audience and provides more of a prequel than a beginning point.

This book tells the tale of Will Stanton, who on his eleventh birthday learns that he is an Old One, a member of a group with magical powers who represent the Light, opposed to the members of the Dark. Cooper uses colorful Celtic and Britannic legends and lore to create a world where Will must collect signs of power to be used against the forces of the dark. Cooper also uses time travel elements to further compliment this imaginative and well-written fantasy.

Not bad, but definitely for the younger crowd.

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### **Mike (the Paladin) says**

Not impressed. Comparing these to Lewis and Tolkien is a BIG stretch. This is the second book in the series and I must say I was seriously disappointed. The comparison to Lewis or Tolkien probably caused me to drop my rating...I even considered a one. Decide for yourself about this but There is for me a feeling of what could have been in these books. The writing itself isn't the problem it's just (and this is my opinion) the story feels awfully flawed.

I wanted this to be a better book, I really wanted to like it. And since it's been made into a movie (more or less)I'm sure some do love it. So, as I said, decide for yourself.

I like an occasional YA read. Many are good regardless of the reader's age. This one just failed for me. If you like it I'm happy for you. I'd read it personally before turning it over to young readers. Just me.

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### **Jessica says**

Read this for the second time ever for the #DarkIsReading challenge. I had forgotten a great deal of it, like the fact that it takes place between the Winter Solstice and Twelfth Night. I remembered that it was Will's 11th birthday, but not the significance of the date/s.

It has been really interesting to read it now, with a community, and see how many people were influenced by this book and series. I can also see how it has influenced modern middle grade fantasies.

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### **Alex says**

Stop me if you've heard this one: A boy living in England discovers on his 11th birthday that he has special powers. An early encounter with an enemy leaves him with a scar. With guidance from a few mentors, he is trained and learns about the Dark, which he can vanquish by collecting several ancient objects.

Well, putting aside my increasing irritation with J.K. Rowling's lack of originality, I really enjoyed this (earlier) novel, which was surprisingly well-written. (Especially compared with A Wrinkle In Time, which I read immediately preceding this.) The forces of the Dark are unfortunately kept pretty vague, and Will's quest seemed too easy throughout, as if it were merely happening to him, but I enjoyed the careful placement of details and the large number of important supporting characters, including 8 siblings.

I need to mention here that the book uses much Christian imagery, has several crucial scenes take place in a church, and is set almost entirely during Christmas time, but I was impressed by how little this bothered me - it has hardly the blatant Christian overtones of C.S. Lewis or Madeleine L'Engle. (Again, another favorable comparison with A Wrinkle In Time.) Furthermore, one character makes the point that the traditions involved predate Christianity, and indeed this book should appeal to anyone interested in the Pagan origins of Christmas.

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## Arianna says

Getting my brother (12) to read is liking getting a cat to take a bath, getting a high-schooler to go to school, getting a cheerleader to go to computer club.

All those really difficult things in life.

I read this series myself about a year or two ago, so when he needed a book to do for literature in his homeschool, I suggested that he pick this one and I'd do it with him.

He moaned and groaned and hated life, that he'd have to do something so awful as *reading*.

I just shrugged and told him to suck it up and drive on.

We get started, and the first chapter goes just like I expected it to. We take turns reading out loud, 2 pages at a time, and each time his turn is over he hands the book to me like it burned him to touch it, let alone read it. But then, after we hit the end of the second chapter or so, I notice something: he starts to enjoy it.

He starts sneaking in an extra page once in a while, 'accidentally' skipping my turn.

Towards the end, he's reading 10, 20 pages in one sitting by himself (out loud, remember) as I sit and work on my knitting. (Because I can't just sit there, donchaknow. ^^). Now it's a fight to get him to *stop* reading long enough for us to discuss the questions.

When we finish the book and he takes the final test, he steals my copy away and reads it again.

And again.

And again.

I begin to lose hope of ever recovering my book, but one day I find him his own set in the thrift store.

Maybe he'll actually go on to the next book in the series now. \*laughs\*

Anyways. I love this book. I love this series.

A friend of mine actually suggested it to me once many, many years ago, but I never read it. For some reason the name stuck in my mind, though.

Happy I am that it did, for now I've another great series I can read and reread.

As does my brother. ^^

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## mark monday says

*The Dark Is Rising does no wrong  
Each word in place so perfectly;  
And I have loved you oh so long  
Cherishing your company.*

*Young Will was my delight,  
Merriman my heart of gold  
Christmas cheer my heart of joy  
All thanks, my lady Cooper.*

*You have been ready at my hand  
To grant me what I often crave:  
A wintry chill across the land  
Villains dark and a child brave.*

*Black Rider was my delight,  
Maggie Barnes my heart of gold  
Christmas menace my heart of joy  
And tragic Walker to sting the soul.*

*Thy battles betwixt Dark and Light  
Where Time and Space twist madly;  
Thy family tender but never trite  
All these I cherished gladly.*

*Young Will was my delight,  
Merriman my heart of gold  
Christmas cheer my heart of joy  
All thanks to Susan Cooper.*

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## **Sarah says**

With *The Dark is Rising*, Susan Cooper sets the stage for a sweeping fantasy saga about nothing in particular.

When Will Stanton, an English lad from an unusually large family, turns twelve, he finds out he is an Old One - a being of great and mysterious powers who can hop in and out of human time and space anytime he chooses. Occasionally assisted by Merriman Lyon, who was once called Merlin and is now passing himself off as an archaeology professor, Will sets off to assist The Light, who are good, because reasons, in their great struggle against The Dark, who are evil, because reasons. Will's quest is to do something and go somewhere, or more likely go somewhere else and watch somebody else do something that was important because it was.

It does not bode well for this book that I read it only nine months ago and cannot for the life of me remember the plot, let alone the point. Maybe because it possesses neither.

Cooper dazzles with her strong prose. With words that sound like music together, she tricks you into thinking you're reading a good book that has meaning and occasionally even makes sense. If you then run off and read the three remaining books in the sequence as fast as you can (I did), you might not notice until halfway through *Silver on the Tree* that this series is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

But sadly, this is the truth of the matter. Cooper tries to set up her two sides as absolute good and absolute evil, but her book either doesn't know or doesn't care what those words actually mean. There is little distinction between the behaviors of the two sets of characters. Both are after power, use violence and deception to achieve their ends, and view ordinary people caught up in their confrontations as collateral damage. And the critics compare this series to Narnia and Middle-earth, because England and pretty words.

This is most manifest in the character of Will. He doesn't want any harm to come to his family because of him, but his feelings regarding them are alarmingly detached. I don't care if he's really a five-thousand-year-old inter-world traveler who is not their blood relative and only got plopped into their family because reasons. As far as he knew until literally yesterday, these are his mum and his dad and his siblings we're talking about here. He ought to love them, not just care about them in this cool, distant, holier-than-thou way.

Not to mention that Will has no discernible interests outside of being an Old One, and doesn't even seem particularly enthused about that. He learns everything he needs to know about nearly everything in the universe over the course of a few minutes, and is never inquisitive about anything ever again. He is sedate and obedient to an unusual point for anyone. He's not close to any of his siblings or either parent. He doesn't seem to notice sports, science, action movies, comic books, rock music, or girls. In short, he is nothing like any twelve-year-old boy I ever met, and I doubt anyone else has met one like him either. He is bland to the point of being creepy. He is so devoid of personality he makes Harry Potter look like Howl Jenkins.

And what does being an Old One entail, exactly? Saving the world. Okay, how? By driving away The Dark. How does one do that? Um...by, uh, chanting, I guess. And time-travelling, to get, uh, artifacts. The Things of Power. What do the Things of Power do? Well, they can block people. And when you put them all together, they make a humming noise or...something. Also, be sure to snipe at the good-hearted Anglican priest who's just trying to protect his flock. Silly man just doesn't understand that God and gods are silly superstition and the Old Ones are the real deal.

The anti-Christian found in so much of contemporary fantasy does not start with Rowling, or even with Pullman. It starts here, in this book. It starts with Cooper.

I feel awful skewering a Newbery book like this, but I really wonder what the committee was thinking when they selected this one. Perhaps they were too bamboozled by Cooper's beautiful prose to notice that there is no character development, no plot, no overarching theme, and no story.

The next book in the series is *Greenwitch*, which is a lot better than this one if only because the Drews (remember them from *Over Sea, Under Stone*?) are in it.

In conclusion, this book and this series are an incoherent mess that have done nothing to merit the title of "classic" except be around for forty years - and that is only because their underlying ideology is compatible with the narcissistic gnosticism of our time. Not recommended.

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## **Ron says**

3.5 . . . maybe. A good story; well told. It fits neatly between The Chronicles of Narnia and Harry Potter. Very English; magical realm beyond the mundane; contemporary (more or less) to the time of writing; YA that should appeal to adults, but it doesn't have the--dare I use this word?--magic.

William, the eleven year old protagonist, is too passive. He floats through the book's big crises more as observer than an actor. Great things happen around him, but the reader does not feel that William is engaged in them. His involvement and angst, if it exists, isn't communicated well.

Also, despite his pack of brothers and sisters, I don't get the familiar interaction as among the Pervsie children or Harry and his friends.

Which suggests another problem: the lack of humor. Both Lewis and Rowling had it. Cooper not. In stories, as in life, the frivolous provides contrast for the serious.

Still, I'm surprised this isn't/wasn't more popular. Perhaps it was because Cooper was moving toward Rowling in her ideals while staying closer to Lewis in her prose. Perhaps she wasn't in sync with the pulse of the 1970s. And, of course, her series had neither an Aslan nor a Hogwarts. Merriman is no Aslan nor a Dumbledore. And William is no Harry, nor Peter or even Edmund.

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## **Kathleen says**

**3.75 stars.** Long past childhood, I read this book for this first time. High marks for the fabulous writing (see excerpt below) and for the vivid setting (I felt I was there, during the Christmas season, in Hunterscombe, England).

**The plot** is fairly gripping -- especially the scene in the church on Christmas Day, after everyone left, and the scene in Will's home, when a VERY unwelcome guest was invited to come in, and the scenes of the bone-biting deep-freeze that struck. Other good scenes come to mind, too.

However, gradually it became a bit too easy for Will to find the Signs. All six came easily to hand, and all six were hidden right there in his own village. What are the chances?

Also, Will never had to sacrifice anything in his epic quest to save the world, even though he had to make a very difficult choice to pass "the testing" later in the book. In Tolkien's *The Return of the King* Frodo and Samwise suffered loss. In *The Chronicles of Narnia* Edmund paid a price for falling afoul of the White Witch. I started to realize that NOTHING BAD could happen to any of the protagonists in this book (not even The Lady). Nor to Will's family (unless you want to count a sprained ankle).

**Characterization:** The portrayal of Merriman was pretty cool, but I wanted to know more about him. That's okay, though. There is an entire series to learn more.

I could not quite buy into Cooper's portrayal of Will as both an ordinary little boy and an Old One, the protector of the planet. It was just odd to me, how Will moved back and forth from Old One to child.

Good portrayal of The Walker. Cooper portrayed this character with some complexity. There was a reason for his choices, and even though I did not agree with them, I understood them.

The weakest link in the book is Cooper's almost tautological portrayal of the villain -- this vague entity called The Dark. What is it? Who is The Rider? The Light is Good and the Dark is Bad, with no intermediate dusk. No yin-yang, either. (Cooper is also tautological in another sense -- her redundancy when discussing the Dark, which is coming, yes it's rising, yes it's gaining power).

**Writing:** Such a pleasure to read Cooper's descriptions. I felt like I could feel the icy cold floods, hear the rooks croaking overhead, see the light blazing in the dim church. For example, I loved her opening portrayal of the dreary farmyard, just before Christmas:

“The snow lay thin and apologetic over the world. That wide grey sweep was the lawn, with the straggling trees of the orchard still dark beyond; the white squares were the roofs of the garage,

the old barn, the rabbit hutches, the chicken coops. Further back there were only the flat fields of Dawson's farm, dimly white-striped. All the broad sky was grey, full of more snow that refused to fall. There was no colour anywhere.”

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### **Melissa McShane says**

12/15/16: More of my Christmas reading. This time, I'm struck as I never was as a teen how very bleak Cooper's universe of Light and Dark is. The Old Ones, for all they come from human families (presumably, if Will Stanton is representative) are not even a little bit human, and Light and Dark clash in ways that care nothing for individual men and women. Their battle isn't for the sake of human salvation, it's for things and forces far, far beyond human concerns. This becomes most evident in *Silver on the Tree*, but it comes up repeatedly through the sequence. And I'm not sure anymore that I like that. Merriman Lyon says noble things about man's gift of free will, but that comes at the end, after he's already displayed a more dismissive attitude toward the ordinary humans in the story. So this time, I'm conflicted.

12/22/15: A lovely afternoon's re-read. One of the things I love about it is its depiction of a large family; I'm the oldest of nine children and this always comes off as very believable to me. The contrast between the very small concerns of an 11-year-old boy and the very large concerns of the last of the Old Ones, tasked with a great quest, makes this story come alive.

Read 12/18/11: I always like to re-read this around Christmastime. It's one of my all-time favorites.

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### **Nikki says**

I suspect that the books of this sequence are among the most beautiful I've read. I get that feeling especially with this book. The tone here has changed already from the Blyton-esque kids-on-a-great-adventure of the first book, and the character is different accordingly. It's almost a bildungsroman, for all that we only see less than a month of an eleven year old boy's life.

One of the main things I love about this sequence, particularly from this book on, is the characterisation. Where Simon, Jane and Barney were simplistic but also realistic in the first book, Will is now much more layered. Literally. There's a part of him that's a boy, and there's a part of him that's ancient and ageless, and in this book he's got to learn to balance the two, use the two, keep them separate where he can. In my opinion, this is beautifully done. One minute he's standing with the Lady and Merriman, fighting back the dark -- the next, boy like, he's making mistakes through over-enthusiasm. At first he cannot accept that he's not just an ordinary boy, and then he's playing tricks with his new-found powers. At the end, he acknowledges that sometimes he wishes he could just be an ordinary boy, but not always.

It's not just Will, though. Despite it being a short book, you catch glimpses of so many characters who are worth thinking about, and yet Susan Cooper never loses focus either. The Stanton family are particularly well-drawn, in my opinion. There's so many of them that you can't get a fully-rounded picture of any of them, but you still feel as if maybe you've been to tea with them a couple of times -- or I do, anyway. I feel like I'd like to date Paul, I'd want to hit Mary, I'd antagonise James, I'd... It's wonderful how Susan Cooper shows us so many characters and makes us care about them, so briefly and succinctly.

The writing, of course, I think is lovely. I whisper it aloud to myself. There are some beautiful images and scenes -- the Doors, for example, and the appearance of the ship, the signs... I love the way Susan Cooper writes.

I've read reviews where people felt that nothing happened in these books. I find that hard to understand -- there's moments of real brooding menace, real magic, but I think people who are expecting swordfights and high fantasy in that sense are going to be disappointed. Ultimately, the sequence concludes that the battle against the Dark is fought in men's hearts. That, in some ways, is not a "satisfying" conclusion -- yet it's a realistic one, and that's something I like.

Reread in December 2009. The bit that struck me most this time, somehow, was the dead king who carried the Sign of Water. Beautiful.

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## **Jon says**

3.5 stars

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## **Dorothea says**

I loved this book very much in my early teens. Unfortunately it was a disappointing re-read. The imagery is still very beautiful, but I now find the worldbuilding unsatisfying.

It suffers from the unquestioning existence of Good and Evil labels. The Good are good because they are born that way. Merriman, the protagonist's teacher, places great emphasis on the burden of being for the Light, which I now find disturbing, not noble: their burden is that they have to be misunderstood by the ordinary people about them, and especially that they have to sacrifice the people about them. This includes memory-wipes to protect from what the Good deem unilaterally to be too much knowledge, and also the changing and endangering of ordinary people's lives, mandated by the rules of the magic that the Good serve. In the end, as with many fantasy stories, the Good side seems to be good based mainly on poetic associations -- light, Christmas, warmth.

The Evil are said to become evil by choice. This might give some opportunity for interesting, humanizing characterization of the evil characters, but it does not in the case of the "Rider" (who is marked as evil mainly by the sinister feeling he produces in the protagonist) or of Maggie Barnes, who is the only character in the book to express any sort of sexuality, and who is referred to dismissively by the eleven-year-old protagonist as "the girl."

\*spoiler\*

The one character whose choice of evil we do get to see is the Walker. We learn that he was an orphan, Merriman's liege man who loved him like a father. Because of their bond, he was chosen to be part of a spell protecting the Book of Gramarye. Using this spell, when Merriman retrieved the Book for the protagonist, he used the Walker's life as collateral. The Walker was shocked to realize that Merriman was willing to risk his death, and decided to betray him. Even though Merriman (in godlike fashion) understood how the Walker would choose, he cursed him to continue to help the side of Light by carrying one of its symbols for

hundreds of years, living as a tramp and never being allowed even to die.

Besides seeing this situation as weighted against the Walker, on this reading I realized that the story is also assigning moral value to feudal loyalty. It would have best helped the Light if the Walker had accepted that it was right for Merriman to use his life for his cause. Instead he wanted to be Merriman's moral equal -- as Merriman puts it, "he loves as a man, wanting proof of love in return." But in the morality of the story, Merriman and the Light are too great to be able to relate to the Walker with equality; what they take from him is different from what they give to him, and when he protests that the taking is too much, they give him misery.

Other parts of the story also promote this idea of traditional, hierarchical relations. Most explicitly is the later episode in which the Dark is assailing the village with winter storms and the local gentrywoman offers to shelter everyone in her hall. The protagonist's father's refusal to take his own family there is presented as stubborn, prejudiced pride which has to be overcome. Then, the scene of the villagers gathered around the aristocrat is one of appropriate protection, beautiful and harmonious.

These things are mostly subtle, but they align the old, patriarchal social order with the Light -- another unfortunate tendency common to many fantasy stories.

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## Lightreads says

The one of my heart. But not entirely a book of childhood. Unlike the rest of the series, this one is layered all through young adulthood for me. I read it countless times as a wee thing, of course, but it was also my book on a horrible flight home from Oxford after Trinity Term, and what I read the week I retired my first guide dog, and what I read in tiny pieces in the month after I lost my eye. Looking at that list is one of those foreheadslap moments where you notice that narrative refrain isn't something that happens only in fiction. This book recurs in my life the way *Greensleeves* recurs in the book. This is a book of departing for me, a book of loss. Which is not surprising, since that's kind of what it's about.

It's true there isn't much of a story here. It has this treasure hunt quality to it, where Will shows up somewhere and magic happens and then he gets a prize. There's this one part where Will beats back the Dark by being a coat rack. Straight up, he stands still and holds up the signs and waits. And this is textually celebrated as extraordinary, because the Old Ones have always needed their minds to beat back the Dark, but now they have *things*. I stopped reading there and blinked a lot, because you just don't see formulations like that in fantasy, and it was confusing because I remembered this book as being so much about the mind.

That's because it's not about the quest. It's about Will. And it's *all* about his mind. He has this beautiful, sad, double-voiced narration. One voice is eleven and content with life, and then afraid and delighted by magic in turns. And the other is the Old One, the overnight adult who alienates Will from his family and community. Coming into power -- and into symbolic adulthood -- is a process of endless loss for Will (though of course it doesn't really ramp up until *Silver on the Tree*). This is the only book in the series to take place at home; all the others are on holiday. It has to be at home, because you have to be home to lose home.

So of course I read it in times of loss. But not in the expected way. I loved Will as a child, fiercely and without reserve, like a totem. There was something hopeful to this sad, sad book. It's like Will reading his book of magic within this book and being granted power through reading -- that's what I wanted, and a little of what I got. That a child could be lifted out of childhood by knowing (and by reading!), that adulthood

would come and take me into a new world, and even if it wasn't always a kind world, I would have power there and it would be mine and I could find my people.

And hey, look, here you guys are.

Anyway. There's a whole hell of a lot more going on here, with Merriman's bitter lesson (through loss, of course) that mortal men will break if trusted too well, used too hard. And the connected tidbit that I don't really have anything to say about yet, but I want to flag it for myself, because I will need it later I think: that a person must be born to the Light to be of it, but that the Dark is a thing any man can choose.

Onward to *Greenwitch*.

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## David says

*Originally read: 1979*

My absolute favorite series as a child. One of these days I need to reread it. (**ETA:** see below.) A bit like Harry Potter, but darker in tone (and of course, Will Stanton predates Harry Potter by decades). A shame that Hollywood's treatment of this classic book was so epically bad. It should be noted that while technically this is book two in the series, the saga really begins here, with *Over Sea, Under Stone* being a prequel of sorts.

## Reread: 2013

I first read this book when I was ten years old, and though I have held it in my heart as one of my favorite books ever, I only just reread it for the first time in decades.

Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* features Will Stanton, last of the Old Ones (and no, we're not talking about Lovecraft Old Ones). On his eleventh birthday, he learns that he is a being of great power who is prophesied to "bring the circle to a close," ending a cycle of battles between the Light and the Dark that has been waged for thousands of years. Mentoring him in his quest is one of the most ancient and powerful of the Old Ones, a stern yet compassionate old wizard named Merriman.

Sound familiar? Yes, perhaps this series was why, many, many years later, I took to Harry Potter despite being long out of the target age range for those books.

In my opinion, Susan Cooper is an *enormously* better writer than J.K. Rowling. Whereas Rowling's worldbuilding is a creatively zany hodge-podge of random fairy tales, mythological critters, and pun-Latin spells. Cooper's is a carefully constructed reinterpretation of English myth. There is tons of lore even in the first book, from the obvious Arthurian references to the men out of time cursed to wander the world forever, to the Wild Hunt. And on a prose level, Cooper just writes better than Rowling too. Her imagery and especially her poetry is far more artful.

That said, this is ultimately a rather dark and gloomy tale, even if the good guys win; there's very little of the fun and light-heartedness of Harry Potter, no secondary characters who become best friends. Will Stanton's quest is mostly made up of tasks he must perform on his own, and his introduction to magic and the power of the Old Ones is not an entrance into a fantastic world of wizardry, but the realization that he's now an eternal

warrior whether he likes it or not, and he's also been forever set apart from his family and everyone else he knows.

For a book targeted at young readers, it's pretty heavy stuff. There is of course not much direct violence (though there is death), and the good guys are always good, the bad guys unambiguously bad. (Though one character, a traitor who turned to the Dark, is as tragic a figure as Gollum, and far more sympathetic.) But this isn't fun times with wands and owls. It's freezing storms blanketing all of England and sinister rooks and as much scary stuff as you can throw at a preternaturally-aged eleven-year-old boy.

I really liked *The Dark is Rising* upon rereading it, though to be honest, I would probably rate it only 4 stars if it were my first time reading it. While in my opinion a better work of literature than most juvenile fiction, including that really famous one with the Johnny-come-lately boy wizard, it does lack that indefinable quality of joy and fun that I guess made J.K. Rowling the richest woman in England and not Susan Cooper. It's really a classic of children's fantasy literature, though.

I will continue my reread of this series.

**Warning:** A few years ago, Hollywood made a movie called *Seeker: The Dark is Rising*. **Do not see this movie!** It is awful. I cannot describe how awful it is. Even aside from the book it's supposedly based on, it's just terrible and brainless (one of my few 1-star ratings on Netflix), but when compared with Susan Cooper's book, it is truly painful to watch. Susan Cooper deserved the J.K. Rowling treatment, and what she got was a dumbed-down Americanized piece of crap that bombed, deservedly, at the box office.

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