



Hawk of May

Gillian Bradshaw

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An award-winning author finally gives voice to Arthur's greatest warrior

Tutored in dark magic by his mother, the beautiful, infinitely evil sorceress Morgawse, Gwalchmai doubts his path in life. But the isle of immortals calls him on a quest as a warrior of the Light...and seals his destiny as the hero of King Arthur's Britain. Framed by historical realism, Gillian Bradshaw expertly weaves convincing magical elements into her fantastic tale of Gwalchmai, the *Hawk of May*.

Hawk of May Details

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From Reader Review Hawk of May for online ebook

Terry Calafato says

3,5*

Nice reading. A different view of the story.

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

I can always depend upon Bradshaw for a good story grounded in history with appealing characters. If I'm not rating this higher... Well, when it comes to Arthurian works, she has really tough competition--even if you leave aside acknowledged classics of literature by Mallory and Tennyson. There are two basic approaches, the historical and pure, often anachronistic fantasy, with works often distinguishing themselves by how they mix the two. I have two favorites in the subgenre. Mary Stuart in her Merlin trilogy takes a more historical approach, although to my best recollection, it had a hint of fantasy, but more in the vein of Mary Renault where if you squint you could see rational explanations--plus, she's an outstanding, lyrical writer. My other favorite is T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and that's definitely unabashed fantasy that doesn't pretend to be set in a Dark Ages that still remembers Rome. And White's prose would please even finicky consumers of literary fiction. It's a moving, wonderfully written story (The basis for the musical *Camelot* and for Disney's *The Sword and the Stone*.)

Bradshaw's work is definitely that rare entity, the historical fantasy. There is dark magic, light magic, human sacrifice, the world of faerie, magical swords and horses. There are also references and quotations from classical works of antiquity and the dark ages and an obviously well researched attempt to create a plausible historical setting. The writing flows very smoothly--it's effortless reading, and her Gawain (Gwalchmai or "Hawk of May") is an appealing first person protagonist. Someone struggling to turn away from darkness, and to convince others he's changed as well. It was a diverting, entertaining read. But in terms of the Arthurian works I've read--and I've read tons of them--its just not in the first rank. Good enough though, I'll be reading the next work in the trilogy. So I'd say this just misses a fourth star.

Ambre says

I really disliked this book. I love both historical fiction and fantasy, and have really enjoyed other Arthurian books, so why did this one rub me the wrong way?

I think it was because, in an effort to create the "warrior of light," this author took a path I thought we had long abandoned, of old ways and old gods being a darkness needing eradication. Students of history know, of course, that this is what happened- that pagans were considered witches and heretics and even as recently as the 19th century, witches were burned at the stake, even for such evil acts as practicing herbal medicine. I really thought that we had learned enough about those times to not glorify the practice.

Anyway, it started off bad for me and just got worse. I gave up before finishing. I don't do that very often, but this author does not understand the history of the British people. Also, she seems to have mixed up the Britons and the Bretons.

Ugh. This author wrote a great forward about using the old tales to create the magic in her book and I was really looking forward to it. However, having somehow read the history without understanding it, instead she has cast the old Gods as the darkness and the new religion as the light, with the Sidhe somehow supporting what was actually the brutal extermination of a religion.

I will keep reading in the hope that she redeems herself, but at the moment I am ready to throw the book out the window. I understand the concept of fiction of course, and understand that the Arthurian legends were written from a Christian point of view. However, to claim to have added historical accuracy while doing the opposite is obnoxious and self serving.

Sue Smith says

King Arthur's rise to power - it's what makes England what it is in so many ways. The overcoming of darkness and petty feuding between rivaling 'mini' kings to be united, together, under one man - one king - and the light.

This is a lightly veiled intro into Christianity actually. I don't really remember seeing Arthur's story that way, but it is. And - truth be told - this book isn't about Arthur per se. It's about another character - Sir Gawain - and the complicated story of how he came to be the man he was and how that story fit into Arthur's life and times.

It's also a look at how a past power of faith collides with what is now a present one. So it is both familiar and strange, and that makes it a great story to read. Somehow I was under the impression that this book was a stand-alone (don't ask why - probably because I didn't hear about it first on Goodreads!). So I was mildly surprised to come upon the first few pages of the second book of the trilogy at the end of this one! But glancing back I can see why it has to be. Although this story is concluded, you know the whole story isn't. So it will be onwards with the next book.

All in all this is a great adventure book. It took me some time to get over the names and keep the characters straight - and I'm still unsure of some of them regardless of continually wrapping my head around the letters. But that really is neither here nor there as there are really only a few that you're interested in. I like to keep the terrain in my mind, so there was a map of sorts at the front side of the book for reference - although I thought it could have been larger and better illustrated. It's pretty weak. Considering this is not an imaginary place but the early times of Britain, and I am not a scholar on all things historical on Britain (despite extensive reading of fictional stories that is), it would have been nice to have a better bloody map to track the 'where' of the 'who'. But that's a personal pet peeve and if you just let it go and go with the flow, the story is fine. It certainly has a spiritual feel to the story which, as noted before, I wasn't expecting. Certainly was expecting the mythical aspect of it - as King Arthur really is that - but not the spiritual. It lent a fresh way to see it for me and I didn't find it unpleasant.

Onwards with the second book!

Christine says

Not the book for me. Too many battle scenes and too many allusions to religion.

Lynne Pennington says

I have mixed emotions about this book. Generally speaking, I love anything Arthurian, which this book certainly is. All of the major characters are here, or most of them anyway. The story is good and Gawain (who is the main character) is likable. But I suppose my biggest criticism is one that would be a big plus for many people, there is too much fantasy here for me. I like my Arthurian historical fiction to more history and less fantasy. On the other hand, this is the first of a trilogy by an excellent author, so I will most likely give the next installment a try.

Azar says

An Arthurian fantasy from the point of view of Gwalchmei (later named Gawain), this book caught my eye in a used bookstore because it is one of the few recent books I've seen to draw almost entirely upon the earliest Welsh versions of the legend, although some elements from later stories are incorporated for familiarity's sake by the author's own admission. Nevertheless, what that means is that many familiar faces are missing--there is no Lancelot, and so far at least no Merlin--and certain traditional elements are missing--for example, Gwalchmei, not Arthur, weilds Caladfyllch [sp?] (Excalibur). This was hardly a deterrent for me, though, as I have long been fascinated by the early Welsh forms, and this also weaves in a good bit of Celtic history and mythology (Maelgwyn, Lugh, CuChulainn [sp?], the Sidhe) to create a very believable (if not 100% accurate for the sake of dramatic license) vision of 5th century Britain and Arthur's kingdom as it might actually have been.

Pam Baddeley says

This is the first in a trilogy by Gillian Bradshaw, retelling the Arthurian legends. As with some other retellings as far back as Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Lantern Bearers* and *Sword at Sunset*, written in the late 1950s/early 1960s, the story is set against post Roman Britain where the (former Celts, now British) have splintered into rival kingdoms and are fighting off waves of invasion by the Saxons, who have taken large parts of the country and settled there. The Saxons are not content with their holdings but are continually raiding into British areas and taking more and more land.

The British are nominally ruled by a High King, Uther Pendragon. One of his illegitimate sons, Arthur, is a superb leader and has honed Uther's war band into a fighting unit greater than any other, but no one expects him to become High King when Uther dies, and the rival kings are prepared to fight each other for the honour.

Gwalchmai (Hawk of May, his original Welsh name, later known as Gawain in the legends) is a young boy growing up in the Orkneys when the story opens. He is not much of a warrior and is therefore a disappointment to his father Lot and his elder brother, Agravain. His consolation is the admiration of his younger brother Medraut (Mordred), and his horsemanship. He starts to teach himself the fundamentals of a cavalry combat style that Lot and Agravain disdain. Then he is steered towards a scholarly path when their mother, Morgawse (Morgause) begins to teach him Latin. However, this turns out to be her way of inducting him into the ways of Dark sorcery.

Morgawse hates her father Uther Pendragon and half-brother Arthur and will stop at nothing to kill them, even if it means destroying the last chance for Celtic Britain to resist the Saxon invaders. When Gwalchmai discovers that she resorts to human sacrifice, he rebels, but is too late to save Medraut whom she has also secretly indoctrinated. Far from being repulsed, Medraut revels in the dark magic so Gwalchmai has to escape alone. His mother sends a demon in pursuit, but the powers of Light come to his aid and whisk him off to the Celtic Blessed Isles where he meets Lugh, the sun god, in the Hall of the Sidhe. Lugh tells him that he isn't in fact a god, although something more than a man, but is an incarnation of the Light. His time is nearly over as another is taking his place. Although not overtly stated, it is obvious that Christ is meant.

He gives Gwalchmai a magic sword, known in the legends as Excalibur – so in this version, it is Gawain who has the sword rather than Arthur – and sends him back. Three years have passed in a single night and Gwalchmai is now a fully grown seventeen year old warrior, who has developed great fighting skills. His goal is to join Arthur's war band, as Arthur is the leader of the Light's faction, but he must face many obstacles before he can do so, not least Arthur's utter rejection of him.

A lot of the book deals with the conflict between Dark and Light with capital letters. Although the Dark seems exclusively associated with pagans - Morgawse and a Saxon sorcerer whom Gwalchmai encounters - the Light is associated with Celtic religion also, in the shape of Lugh and the Sidhe. Taliesin, the legendary poet of Welsh legend, features, and there are references to the Irish stories of Cuchulainn, the mighty hero. Also, not all the Christians in the story are 'good guys' - the monks at Ynys Winris (Glastonbury) are greedy and they overcharge travellers for meagre lodgings, so the situation is not as simplistic as it might appear.

Although in this story it is Morgawse who is the sorceress who has tricked her half-brother Arthur into sleeping with her, and gives birth to his nemesis, this is not against canon as there are versions where Morgause as she is usually known takes this role rather than Morgan le Fay/Morgaine.

My main problem with the story is that it suffers from pacing problems. In the beginning, Gwalchmai is young and is confined to his home island so we learn about the events in mainland Britain as a retelling of facts he has learned. The pace picks up once he escapes, and some of the characters are quite well defined such as the leading ones in Arthur's war band, but quite a lot of the action is skipped over in summary. A few battle sequences are evoked to some extent, but because Gwalchmai becomes a berserker – someone who operates without thought under battle rage – a lot of this is fairly sketchy also. Basically, I found the story plodding and rather dull so that it was a chore to finish it.

I think also that it falls between two stools. A lot of the book is pseudo historical - the Dark Ages is not a period with a lot of documentation - but there is also the strong supernatural/religious/allegorical element of the Light versus Dark conflict. That doesn't really fit with a story that tries to be grounded in the possible experience of what it was like to fight against the Saxons - who include real historical characters such as Cerdic. For me, the writer doesn't quite pull off the mix of these two elements.

Finally, the book wasn't helped by some major misprints - not just the odd missing word or letter, but there was a whole paragraph scrambled. This in a traditionally published book in 1981 is quite odd.

Ozymandias says

There are two basic types of Arthurian stories: the high fantasy ones that embrace the anachronistic plate-mail wearing knights with all the wizardry and magic and the ones that attempt to impose a more accurate sort of historical framework on them, usually focusing heavily on the Saxon invasions that the English versions of the legends conveniently left out. This book attempts to do both, which is enough to make it

uniquely different from either. This is an ahistorical but not entirely implausible attempt to recreate the fifth-century Britain where the real Arthur would have lived, complete with tongue-twistingly difficult Welsh names and a mass of squabbling British kingdoms trying to hold off the encroaching Saxon invaders. It also includes a lot of high fantasy, with magic swords and faeries and demons and a struggle for the soul of the world as Arthur heroically fights for the Light against the encroaching darkness. It does so, however, without most of the more anachronistic characters (late French troubadour creations such as Lancelot, Galahad, and, most disappointingly, Merlin).

In all honesty, I rather wish the magic had been toned down dramatically. My favorite "historical" Arthurian story is Bernard Cornwell's *Warlord* trilogy (best books he ever wrote), which feature much mysticism (including Merlin as a scene-stealing lecherous old druid) but nothing which can't be explained away as extreme coincidence or guided imagination. I think that level of magic is pretty much perfect for the more realistic setting. But here we get Morgawse as a full-blown witch queen, along with the intentionally incestuous Mordred parentage and a lot of spells and incantations. In one section we actually seen Gawain (err. . . Gwalchmai) transported to the Sidhe realm to converse with the sun god in a magical palace. These mystical components work well in the original legends because the air of reality is already so thin that it's not much of a stretch to bring in dragons and the like. Here, the magic seems to run counter to the efforts to be otherwise realistic.

The theology (for lack of a better word) is also somewhat odd. The magic system of the universe is a manichean-esque dualist one, with the forces of Light arrayed against the forces of Dark. This doesn't seem to have anything to do with the Christian faith. This uncomplicated good/evil divide is a surprisingly poor fit into the Arthurian mythos. You'd think that a legend so keenly focused around the importance of being a good king (the king is the land and the land is the king) and the struggle of noble Christian knights against servants of demons and their own baser natures would adapt easily to this sort of take. But by removing Christianity from the equation (Gawain is a pagan) and replacing their clear eschatological message with a much vaguer one about preserving Roman civilization (which Gawain has also never known) the book leaves the nature of "the Light" rather amorphous and ill defined. All we're given is examples of evil acts that fall under the category of "the Dark", but what exactly is the nature and desires of these two sides? The book perhaps avoids dwelling on the question too deeply because it seems too cheesy, yet that boat had already sailed when you visited the realm of the faeries. It needed greater thought and consistency. Magic, curiously, seems pretty confined to the realm of the Dark. In the original tales, magic was more neutral a force, with evil wizards such as Morgan and Mordred, but also heroic ones such as Merlin. Here, anyone who practices magic falls firmly in the evil category. Gawain is given *some* supernatural help, but mainly in the form of Caledwch (Excalibur), which is curiously his now rather than Arthur's. There's also a bit of prophecy and such from the bard Taleisin. Casting spells or enchantments can only be done by those serving the Dark. Honestly, this book could really have benefitted from a Merlin or Merlin equivalent, if only to deflect questions about magic and rationalize the Light/Dark ideology.

The book is otherwise quite realistic, though I question most strenuously the sense of scale. There's no way a king from the Orkneys could be closely connected with and leading campaigns down in southern Britain. Still, that's a part of the mythology. Great care has been taken to make the political situation a believable one. Arthur's a great leader, but he's not superhuman. He starts the novel as just one of several petty warlords seeking to become the next Pendragon. Unfortunately, this is a prime example of a case where the supernatural elements are allowed to overwhelm the historical ones. Rather than watching Arthur's rise, we hear all about it secondhand from all the way up in the Orkneys where Gawain is mostly focused on learning to be a sorcerer (though still, what he's learning is kept very vague). Action scenes and battles are very well described, feeling gritty and realistic while never shirking the emotional journey involved.

Having read almost all of Gillian Bradshaw's other works I have to say that this (her debut novel) doesn't feel much like the rest. The narrative is a straight political/military account, except when it's being a supernatural one, and Gawain's right in the thick of it. I'm accustomed to her more slice-of-life stories, heavy on

worldbuilding details, but this is a straight adventure with a focus on action. It also feels a lot less stilted than her later writings, perhaps a benefit of the anachronisms the story allows her. The story generally flows naturally, for all that I often wished we were being shown somewhere else. Characterizations are as good as ever, with the relationship between Gawain and his family members particularly strong. Overall I liked the book, though I hope for more from the sequels now that some of the more boring exposition is out of the way.

Bryce Lowry says

For me, this book is a dream come true. Finally, someone with a penchant for history as an author of an Arthurian tale! Gillian Bradshaw sets this book about Gawain in 6th Century Britain, shortly after the withdrawal of the Roman Empire from the islands. Some of the characters in this series were even real kings of the kingdoms that existed in that region and era. She draws from the rich and diverse cultures of the lands in ancient Britain, and uses older versions of the names we hear in Arthurian legend. For example, the book is about Gawain, but his Irish name, Gwalchmai, is used.

The story is dark, but this allows more contrast when characters engage in heroism. Gwalchmai is chosen by Light to be a warrior for its cause, and he sets out on a quest to leave the Orkney isles and find Arthur, his would-be warlord in Britain. Highly recommended.

Star says

Gwalchmai (which means Hawk of May) is the second son of Morgawse and Lot of the Orcades. He just wanted to fit in - but he couldn't be a warrior to make his father proud, so he turned to his mother's sorcery. However, the magic his mother wields is like nothing he imagined and he remains unable to protect that which he holds most dear. Until something changes one night and he heads off to find Arthur - his uncle and High King.

This is a very different take on Gwalchmai's story. I've read a lot of Arthurian literature and there hasn't been too much told in detail about his life before (that I can recall). The boy who will be called Gawain is a typical child, who wants to fit and be loved by his family. He doesn't always understand what that will take - since he's not part of a regular family - but a royal family.

Overall I liked the story. The one thing that distracted from the story is the fact that it was a very uncorrected proof copy and I had to puzzle out exactly what was meant at times. This is the first of a trilogy and I think you'll find this an enjoyable read.

Down the Long Wind series: Hawk of May (1), Kingdom of Summer (2), In Winter's Shadow (3)

Dan Schwent says

Gwalchmai ap Lot, the middle child of Morgawys and Lot, learns sorcery from his mother to make up for his short comings as a warrior. However, his mother's sorcery is seething with Darkness and Gwalchmai flees the Orcades, set on joining Arthur's warband. Before making it to Britain, he stays in Lugh's domain for what ends up being three years, acquiring the sword Caledwylch and horse Ceincaled. Will Arthur accept him,

knowing who his mother is?

I've read a fair bit of Arthurian fantasy over the years. Forget Lancelot and Guinevere, my favorites have always been the boys from Orkney, or Orcades, in this case. Gwalchmai, Gawain in most tales, is an interesting character, close to his younger brother Medraut and contemptuous of his older brother Agravain. His journey from outcast to young sorcerer to berserker warrior is well done, an interesting metamorphosis. He can feel his heartbreak when Medraut goes down the dark path, as well as when Arthur mistrusts him. This story takes place just after Arthur is crowned emperor so he's still uniting Britain, making it a nice change of pace since most stories have Camelot already established and Arthur more as scenery than a character.

One of the more interesting aspects of this book is that Bradshaw draws the story primarily from its Welsh and Celtic roots. Gwalchmai is linked to CuChulainn on several occasions.

I'd recommend this to any fan of Arthuriana with a few hours to kill and break from the usual Arthur trappings like Merlin, Lancelot, and Guinevere.

Nikki says

Hawk of May started rather slowly, and I found myself reading only a little each day, but once I got to about the middle of it, it was much more absorbing. It's an interesting take on the legend, set while Arthur is still establishing a kingdom, with more ties than is usual to the older Celtic myths and legends, including CuChulainn. So far there's been no sign of the now traditional Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur love triangle, or Lancelot the super perfect knight. Gwalchmai is Gawain, basically, though I was pleased to find he wasn't portrayed as quite as much of a lout as the Gawains I've been coming across recently. I was also pleased that it had a likeable -- flawed, but likeable -- Agravain: so often he's awful. The kinder portrayal of Medraut (Mordred) as a sweet boy twisted by his mother, Morgawse, is interesting, too.

The idea of serving the Light, of Arthur's cause being that of the Light, isn't new at all, of course. Still, it was dealt with interestingly here -- with Arthur bowed down by his own darkness, and so unable to see the Light in Gwalchmai. With both of them having ties to the darkness, even, ties that won't let go. I liked that Arthur was more of a character than he sometimes is... that he was less of a cypher than he often is. He's not some perfect, lofty king, here -- he's good, even great, but he makes mistakes, just like anyone else.

It's not exactly a quick read, I think -- it's best not read at a gallop, but savoured. That's how I read it, anyway. It's a bit different to a lot of the stuff that's around, which is all courtly romance and whatever.

Jessica says

I thought this was an interesting take on Arthurian legend. It was the first Arthurian book I've read with a strong Arthur character that thinks for himself instead of being told what to do by advisers. I got bogged down with all of the strategy details, but I loved the imagery Bradshaw used. As this was her first book, and she wrote it at a young age, I expect the rest of the series will be better.

Janice says

I liked this book very much. It's the first part of a retelling of the story of King Arthur's knight Gawain. There's just enough magic (a horse from the Undying Lands, Taliesin the bard, time spent Elsewhere, etc.) to be interesting, but not enough to overshadow the story of the people.

Gawain has a troublesome family. His mother is a sorceress who's embraced dark magic, and tries to bring Gawain along with her to the dark side. She's an adamant enemy of Arthur. Gawain escapes her clutches at the last moment, but another brother is not so lucky. Gawain then decides to become part of Arthur's cohort, whether Arthur wants him or not. And Arthur doesn't, at least at first.

This is the story of how Gawain becomes part of Arthur's war band. It's lovely.
