

NAXOS

AudioBooks

COMPLETE
CLASSICS
UNABRIDGED

T.H. White

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

Read by **Neville Jason**



CD 1

1	The Sword in the Stone	0:31
2	Chapter 1	6:13
3	So it was decided.	7:28
4	The Mews was one of the most important parts of the castle...	6:42
5	Chapter 2	5:52
6	The night fell still...	5:36
7	There was a clearing in the forest...	6:45
8	The Wart went over to the tree...	6:31
9	Chapter 3	6:30
10	Merlyn had a long white beard...	6:44
11	The Wart was so startled...	7:00
12	The vanity-glass vanished...	7:17

Total time on CD 1: 73:18

CD 2

1	Chapter 4	7:35
2	Chapter 5	6:24
3	People in those days had rather different ideas...	6:09
4	They crossed the courtyard...	6:45
5	The Wart was on an even keel now...	5:15
6	Mrs Roach held out a languid fin...	5:08
7	The Wart looked, and at first saw nothing...	6:40
8	Chapter 6	6:09
9	Kay was frightened by this...	6:28
10	The gore-crow hastened to obey...	6:58
11	The Wart knew he was probably going to be killed...	6:35
12	Instantly Mother Mim was framed in the lighted doorway...	6:40

Total time on CD 2: 76:53

CD 3

1	It ought perhaps to be explained...	7:57
2	Chapter 7	6:36
3	The day was cooler than it had been...	7:04
4	While this incantation was going on...	5:27
5	Sir Grummore Grummursum was cantering up...	6:39
6	With a blood-curdling beat of iron hoofs...	7:38
7	King Pellinore hurriedly sat on his victim's chest...	6:58
8	Chapter 8	6:08
9	'What a shame that they should be kept prisoners...'	6:11
10	The darkness became watered with light...	6:40
11	All the hawks...	6:31

Total time on CD 3: 73:56

CD 4

1	'Life is blood...'	7:26
2	Chapter 9	5:58
3	There seemed to be no sensible reply to this.	5:30
4	The Wart was still staring at his tutor's chair...	6:16
5	Chapter 10	7:03
6	They went to the man cautiously...	7:02
7	At the moment he was lying on his back...	5:24
8	The Wart thought it was time to ask...	6:27
9	Chapter 11	6:04
10	After the staff lecture...	5:37
11	It was about compline...	6:12
12	They were close to the castle...	5:45

Total time on CD 4: 74:52

CD 5

1	Chapter 12	6:39
2	The Wart did not know quite how to put it...	6:46
3	She waved her apron at the sergeant...	7:20
4	Chapter 13	5:50
5	Some people say that snakes are deaf...	6:49
6	'I know some history' said the Wart...	5:10
7	He was timid, ruminant and harmless...	7:14
8	Once upon a time...	8:01
9	Chapter 14	4:56
10	This is what the letter said...	6:05
11	Another thing was the riot...	5:11

Total time on CD 5: 70:09

CD 6

1	Chapter 15	5:45
2	William Twyti was called for...	6:46
3	Chapter 16	5:55
4	He weighed between ten and twenty score...	7:03
5	Wart had lost the panicky feeling...	7:45
6	In a small bushment the grim boar stood at bay...	6:01
7	So King Pellinore was bent over the dead beast...	5:55
8	Chapter 17	5:32
9	'Another thing I like about them,' said the Wart	5:54
10	'Well, you know quite well,' said Merlyn...	5:28
11	Chapter 18	5:47
12	'Do you like it?' asked the owl...	6:23

Total time on CD 6: 74:21

CD 7

1	It was a long and terrible journey...	4:43
2	People don't think of trees as alive...	8:01
3	The Wart watched...	8:10
4	Chapter 19	5:40
5	Being invisible is not so pleasant as it sounds...	6:19
6	They had become interested in this discussion...	7:44
7	'I think that was a very good wreath...'	7:59
8	There was a distant noise...	7:43
9	Chapter 20	5:23
10	The education of any civilized gentleman...	6:39

Total time on CD 7: 68:29

CD 8

1	Chapter 21	5:13
2	The call sounded from far away...	5:34
3	'I don't want to hear it any more...'	5:27
4	With these words...	6:41
5	The old gentleman scratched about...	7:14
6	Chapter 22	7:26
7	King Pellinore closed his eyes tight...	6:49
8	Chapter 23	6:12
9	When he got to the inn it was closed.	6:26
10	A snake slipping easily along the coping...	6:05
11	Chapter 24	6:06

Total time on CD 8: 69:21

Total time on CDs 1–8: 9:41:19

T.H. White

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

The Arthurian legends are England's great epic, as full and embedded a part of the cultural heritage as the Greek myths, with the same imaginative hold as Biblical tales or Shakespeare's plays. The stories were originally collected and written by Sir Thomas Malory, and published in 21 books in 1485. These tales of chivalrous knights undertaking brave challenges, of a noble king bringing egalitarianism, honour and decency to a land governed by brutishness and violence, have served as political and personal metaphors ever since. They have inspired poets, playwrights, film-makers, composers, artists, social commentators, mystics and New Agers of every hue. The search for Arthur's final resting place, the possibility of his reappearance and his historical authenticity are argued with exactly the same passionate dedication by his followers as those of other faiths.

Thomas Hanbury White (1906-1964) was by no means the first person to take the tales and turn them into something else; but few have had such a broad and thriving appeal. *The Sword in the Stone* in particular became a template for a new telling of the iconic tale of the young Arthur finding himself king by innocently pulling Excalibur from its lodging, with Disney turning it into a hugely successful animated film in 1963.

But as with all retellings, White's books are as much about the author and his times as they are about their sources. He was born in India to mismatched parents, whose various personal traits combined to create a troubled son – his father was an alcoholic, and his mother seems to have imposed such affectionate strictures on him that he was unable to be comfortable with women thereafter.

He was a profound naturalist, deeply involved with observing nature, as well as hunting, shooting and fishing it, who served as a teacher after completing his own education at Queen's College, Cambridge. He had already started writing while a student, and continued as a teacher, eventually dedicating himself to writing and naturalism from 1936. Often reclusive, he spent the Second World War in Ireland as a conscientious objector. He was also a medievalist, and this mixture of personal insecurity, love of nature, angry concern as war loomed over Europe and his feeling for the past were all brought together in *The Once and Future King*.

Talking animals, endearing magicians, terrifying witches, broad slapstick, jousts, feasts and splendour are all certainly in place; but these works are by no means fantastical children's fiction. White was exorcising (perhaps just exercising) some of his personal demons – there is, for example, a deal of cruelty in the books; he was using a kind of reverse anthropomorphism to indicate how man should be more like the animal kingdom – or at least should look to it for examples;

and he was giving the old stories a dark and pertinent edge as a global war approached and dictatorship threatened the world. As the story progresses, it moves from being a panegyric over the lost innocence and knowledge of an earlier age, to a reworking of Greek tragedy, and finally to a polemic against man's short-sighted belligerence and doomed political systems.

The first book is ostensibly about how Arthur became King, but most of it sees him being brought up in a rural world that owes much to White's notions of an ideal childhood. Here, the young Arthur learns the ways of animals and the ways of nature; how to be honest and brave; and he gets the opportunity to talk to animals as one of them, thanks to the interventions of his tutor, the magician Merlyn. The second develops Merlyn's teachings on the issue of Might vs. Right, and sees the invention of the Round Table; but also introduces the theme of the sins of the fathers being visited on their sons. Arthur's birth was the result of vicious and tragic circumstances, and he himself has unwittingly committed incest. The third

book is about Lancelot and Guenever – their love for each other despite Lancelot’s unattractiveness, Lancelot’s attempts to prove himself in the quest for the Holy Grail, and the earliest warnings of the destruction of what Arthur has created. The fourth sees the climax of these various plot-lines, as Arthur’s incestuous sin comes to haunt him and his court, and in the process threatens not just the end of his reign, but also the essence of what he and his knights had been striving for – a peaceful nation where justice was valued above force, where the spirit was fed as well as the body, and where Man recognised his place in the natural world, and treated it accordingly. The fifth book is a kind of anti-war dream sequence (though Merlyn would dispute that) in which Arthur is harangued by his old tutor about the gross failings of humanity, and given a chance to examine different political systems in the thin disguise of observing ants and geese.

White was not just offering a reworking of the Arthurian legend. He clearly had his own deeply personal, as well as broadly social and political, issues

to place in the context of a lost world of grace and humanity. What gives these books such depth, however, is not just the plot or the underlying implications of the storylines (strong as they all are); nor is it their place in epic, fantasy or Arthurian legend. It is partly the characters – honest, steadfast Arthur; passionate, self-hating Lancelot; cold, driven Mordred; the outstanding Merlyn, absent-minded, humane and fallible, but always invaluable putting things into perspective. It is partly of course the imaginative strength of the author, bringing such worlds as medieval tournaments, ants’ nests, court life, boar hunts or battlefields alive with vivid detail. It is partly, too, the unashamed brio with which White describes the food of the time, or the intimate features of feathers of a particular bird, or the slightest aspect of hunting, heraldry or armour; or his unapologetic use of terms that were obscure when he wrote them, and have all but disappeared now. White was not condescending to a childish audience, but taking every reader with him into Arthur’s more-than-mythical kingdom to see what it stood for, how it failed and what we can

still learn from it.

The Sword in the Stone is a welcome to Gramarye, or Merrie England, or the mythical past of Britain as reimagined by White. At the castle of the kind and good Sir Ector, set in an enormous clearing of a still more enormous forest, he is discussing with his typically (if anachronistically) clubby friend Sir Grummor Grummursum what to do with his son Kay and his ward, known as the Wart. Clearly, what they need is a tutor of some sort. And the boys find themselves by chance under the tutelage of one Merlyn, a captivating magician living his life backwards, who realises he has a duty to teach these two well – and one of them in particular.

Through a series of adventures that involve being turned into animals, a hungry witch and a meeting with the real Robin Hood, Merlyn instructs his young charges in the ways of the world, and with lessons of a broader wisdom, too. But his teachings seem aimed principally at the Wart, something Kay begins to resent – after all, Kay is to become a full and proper knight, and the Wart can only hope to be his squire. But there is good

reason for Merlyn concentrating his efforts on the Wart, as they discover when, after hearing of the King's death, they all go to London to a grand tournament. The King had no heir, and a rightful one must be found by testing the mettle of those knights who wish to take on the role. To prove themselves, they must pull a sword from an anvil resting on a stone...

A note on the text

This version of *The Once and Future King* comprises all five of T. H. White's Arthurian tales published in three sections (*The Sword in the Stone*; *The Witch in the Wood* and *The Ill-Made Knight*; and *The Candle in the Wind* and *The Book of Merlyn*). The first three books were originally published separately between 1938 and 1940; the fourth was added when the first collected version of the stories – titled *The Once and Future King* – was published 1958. But as White's vision of the broader purpose of the story developed, he wanted to add *The Book of Merlyn* to the collection; and also began making other textual changes. However, he was unable to complete this general revision before his death in 1964. His revisions, in their unfinished state, placed some sections of the final book (*The Book of Merlyn*) into *The Sword in the Stone*, cutting some of the original book to accommodate them. However, these sections were not removed from their original place in *The Book of Merlyn*, and as a result there was substantial repetition.

In this audiobook version, these repetitions have been removed, and Madam Mim, Galapas the giant, the dream of the trees and the dream of the rocks have been reinstated; but Arthur's first meeting with Morgan le Fay (which White introduced to replace a sequence about meeting cannibals) has been kept. This allows *The Book of Merlyn* to have its full weight in the collection, maintains some of the most memorable and endearing characters from the original first book (*The Sword in the Stone*), but at the same time allows a major character to make her appearance in an earlier section of the book, and thus prefigure her later role.

Notes by Roy McMillan



Neville Jason trained at RADA where he was awarded the Diction Prize by Sir Johnielgud. He has worked with the English Stage Company, the Old Vic Company and the RSC as well as in films, TV and musicals. He is frequently heard on radio. His readings for Naxos Audiobooks also include *Remembrance of Things Past*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (unabridged), *The Castle of Otranto*, *Far From The Madding Crowd*, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and *Freud, A Very Short Introduction*.

Credits

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