

Refusing the Voyage in Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain*

2018 will mark the 50th anniversary of Lloyd Alexander's *The High King*, the Newbery Medal-winning fifth and final book of the Prydain Chronicles, one of the few well-known American high fantasy series for children. The books have never gone out of print, and devoted readers continue to pay tribute through fan works, including an ongoing fancomic adaptation. Studies on Prydain have focused primarily on its use of Celtic myth, and Alexander's work and reception are past due for new critical approaches.

The coming-of-age journey of Taran, Assistant Pig-Keeper, is characterized by misadventure, heartbreak, and the deconstruction of his heroic fantasies, culminating with a message that giving one's self to humble service is the greatest possible feat of heroism. In *The High King*, Taran is rewarded for his sacrifices with the chance to voyage across the sea to the land of eternal life, but he refuses the gift because he feels he owes a debt to the dead to toil on, to revitalize the war-torn land. He offers a new, painfully earned definition of heroism: "a farmer or a king—every man is a hero if he strives more for others than for himself alone" (238). However, this statement of equality exists in tension with the fantasy trope of the "Chosen One"; a prophecy promptly reveals that Taran's choice marks him as the true High King of Prydain.

Taran's epiphany mirrors Alexander's own realization, as a young soldier meeting his hero Gertrude Stein, that "art and literature ... [are] the work of real women and men who live in the real world" ("A Gift" 49). For Alexander, art, like heroism, is the product not of inimitable creative paragons but of hard, unromantic toil. Against the background of epic quests and heroic archetypes, Alexander strives to mythicize the humble devotion to service that, for him, gives both art and life its meaning. What's more, this ideal is vindicated through the responses of fan artists and writers who, like Taran, choose to express their gratitude by digging into the land of Prydain, instead of sailing away.