

Book Links

BOOKS AND AUTHORS:
TALKING WITH GERALD MORRIS
BY ROB REID

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Talking with
Gerald Morris



For the last two decades, Gerald Morris has been one of the most reliable and successful chroniclers of Arthurian legends for young people. His 10-volume series, dubbed the *Squire's Tales*, has been consistently well reviewed as fun yet dramatic retellings that blend the traditional stories with original plotlines and characters. He followed these books for upper-elementary through middle-school readers with another Arthurian series—the *Knights' Tales*—aimed at a slightly younger audience. Morris is a pastor of a Methodist church in Wausau, Wisconsin, where he says he writes “children’s novels to support his ministry habit.”

BKL: *How did you initially come to embrace the Arthurian stories and add new versions to the body of work already out there? Did you originally intend your versions to be aimed at a young audience?*

MORRIS: I discovered Arthur in college. I never really cared for the Arthurian stories I happened upon as a child—all of which were based either on Malory (who is sometimes brilliant, sometimes dull, and, far too often, just silly) or, even worse, on the sanitized version of Malory that filtered through Tennyson. They were prim and noble and two-dimensional and preachy. But as a sophomore English major, I read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and found to my surprise that this Arthurian romance was a nearly perfect story. That led me to take a class in Arthurian literature, where I discovered the equally masterful *Parzival*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach. Those two works were my primary inspiration. I began taking notes for what I conceived as a trilogy of Arthurian novels for children. And, yes, I always intended the books to be for younger readers. As I say, I got through childhood without ever meeting a really good Arthurian story, but even if I had, I doubt it would have occurred to me to wonder if the stories had been sufficiently retold. No good story has ever been told enough, and no single version can ever exhaust a great story’s potential.

BKL: *The Squire’s Tale books were published on a fairly regular schedule of about one book per year. What was your writing routine while you creating the series?*

MORRIS: In general, I set aside two days a week for writing. For a couple of months, I read, researched, and outlined. For another few months, I wrote my first draft. Then I revised and rewrote for

another month before sending it off. Each of my Arthurian novels took seven or eight months to write. Then, usually, once I had sent it off, I started work on a non-Arthurian book while I waited for my editor at Houghton to send me her revisions. The non-Arthurian book was invariably rejected about the time that I got the rewrites back on the Arthurian book. I would do those and then start the next in the *Squire’s Tales* series. Sometimes a book would take longer. *The Ballad of Sir Dinadan* had a great first two chapters and then four colossally dull and confusing ones. I scrapped chapters 3 through 6, redid my outline, and started over at the beginning of chapter 3. That book, I recall, took 15 months to write.

It took me six years to find a publisher for the first volume, and when I did, one of the revisions I had to make was to divide my original book into two. Having recently lost my job when a short-term teaching contract ended, I threw myself into writing. I went back to Malory and started rereading. Over the next 10 years or so, I had a variety of regular jobs. Some were full time, but most were not. I actually needed my writing income to survive, which is great motivation to write.

BKL: *In one of your author’s notes, you mention the influence of your readers on your writing.*

MORRIS: I remember that note, and it was a gesture to one of my readers, but it was perhaps misleading. A reader, Sarah, had written a letter to me, outlining the story she wanted me to write, which would include a warlike young lady, also named Sarah. When I began outlining *The Princess, the Crone, and the Dung-Cart Knight* and was working on a warlike young lady, I remembered that letter and named my heroine after her. The plot of the book itself had nothing to do with reader Sarah’s suggested plot (in fact, it was built on the framework of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*), but I had at least taken the name from her letter. I still had Sarah’s original letter with her address, so I sent her a copy of the book when it came out, along with a note of thanks and a photocopy of her original letter from some four years earlier. But, as a general rule, I write what I want to write without much attention to readers’ requests or complaints, like those from a young lady who wrote me in shocked disapproval to say that she had started one of my books but had to put it aside, “because you used language! And you—a pastor!” I never did figure out what it was that she had taken such strong exception to.

BKL: *Where did the character of Terence come from? You state elsewhere that he is the real hero of the series. Why is that?*

MORRIS: I meant to tell the old Arthurian cycle from the perspective of Gawain, the knight who had begun my own interest in Arthurian legend and whom I considered much maligned by later tradition. However, since I planned this series from the beginning to be for young readers, I worried that my audience might find little to appeal to them in stories entirely about an adult knight. At a certain level, all books for young adults are

about the process of growing up, which is hard to achieve when your main character is already an adult. So I invented a young character who would accompany Gawain. One of the first and most extensive rewrites I had to do on the first book, in fact, was to move Terence to the front. My editor felt that the story was still too much about Gawain and that it needed to center on Terence instead. A whole new plot had to be introduced and woven into the first book to achieve this end. By the way, this is also why, after the second book, I switched to other main characters in subsequent books. Terence was pretty much grown up by the end of book two, and thus less interesting. So in each succeeding book, I had either to invent another character (Piers, Sarah, Luneta) or find a minor character in the story I was retelling that I could promote to starring status (Lynet, Dinadan, Beauflis). I like to see characters grow up.

BKL: *You and your publisher are done with the Squire's Tale series. How did this decision come about?*

MORRIS: Well, my source material was finite. I knew from the beginning how the Arthurian saga ended, and although I didn't do anything as impressive as to plan the whole series out from the start, I had enough of an idea where it would inevitably go that I was always building toward that end. I managed valiantly to hold off the necessity of dealing with the end of Camelot for a while, mostly by discovering hitherto unknown minor romances that I could retell, but even those gave out eventually, so there I was.

BKL: *How did the decision to write the Knights' Tales series originate? Do you know how long this series will be?*

MORRIS: As I saw the Squire's Tales series winding down, I began casting around for something else to do. So far, all I had managed to sell were books in the same series. I needed to start something else before I wrote myself out of a job. For several years, I had been doing school and library presentations in which I would tell a story. Sometimes, though, I was invited to speak to classes of children who were too young to read my books, so I had developed a story to tell those classes, a broadly comic and loud version of a brief episode in Malory's "Sir Lancelot and the Falcon in the Tree." I decided to write that out and see if it would work as an illustrated children's book. It might have, but it was suggested to me that publishers were always looking for easy chapter books for early readers—for the Magic Tree House set. Could I expand that story with three or four others? So that resulted in *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot the Great*. Once I got my foot in that door, I began combing the Arthurian corpus for stories that I had rejected for the Squire's Tales series, either because they were too young or because they just didn't fit.

BKL: *You have a wonderful grasp of humor, and you use it extraordinarily well in your stories. Do you consider yourself a funny guy? How do you go about incorporating humor in these legends?*

MORRIS: I don't like books that don't make me laugh, at least sometimes. *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment* are two of the best books I have ever read, and yet I have never been tempted to go back to them. I have read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a dozen times. I wouldn't necessarily say that I am a "funny guy." I'm certainly not an Oscar Wilde sort of wit. But humor is a necessary part of how I see and deal with the world, an integral part of who I am. It comes out in my sermons, too. But I don't work at it. I don't know if you have ever noticed this, but the harder you try to be funny, the less successful you will be.

BKL: *Why are readers still interested in the Arthurian stories today?*

MORRIS: It isn't just Arthur. It's story itself. Greek myths. Plot. In the twentieth century, enraptured with our own self-awareness, we experimented with novels in which nothing happened or in which the things that happened were insignificant to the novel. What mattered was the presentation, or the psychological character, or the phenomenological exploration of various perspectives. And some of those books have been genuine masterpieces (e.g., *Absalom, Absalom!*). But what we have often misplaced is the pure love of story, the narrative in which things actually happen and those things that happen actually matter. Such narratives often seem simplistic compared to the intense internal dramas of modern novels, but the art of telling a narrative is no less demanding, no less artistic. That's what Arthur is all about. It is story, pure and simple, honed by centuries of retelling. I took liberties with it in the minor details—the characters, the dialogue, and so on—but I kept the stories.

BKL: *Do you plan to write and publish any non-Arthurian stories?*

MORRIS: I have written nearly as many non-Arthurian books as Arthurian. None have been accepted. Some, I've realized, are just not very good. Others I still believe in and have not given up on. But for whatever reason, I've never found any takers. I still write.

Sampling Morris

The Squire's Tale Series

The Ballad of Sir Dinadan. 2003. 256p. Houghton, \$16 (9780618190997); paper, \$6.99 (9780547014739); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547349848). Gr. 5–9.

The Legend of the King. 2010. 304p. Houghton, \$16.99 (9780547144207); e-book, \$16 (9780547504858). Gr. 6–9.

The Lioness and Her Knight. 2005. 352p. Houghton, \$16 (9780618507726); paper, \$6.99 (9780547014852); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547530000). Gr. 6–9.

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Parsifal's Page. 2001. 240p. Houghton, paper, \$6.99 (9780547014340); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547349527). Gr. 5–8.

The Princess, the Crone, and the Dung-Cart Knight. 2004. 320p. Houghton, \$17 (9780618378234); paper, \$6.99 (9780547014807); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547349909). Gr. 6–9.

The Savage Damsel and the Dwarf. 2000. 224p. Houghton, paper, \$6.99 (9780547014371); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547349398). Gr. 5–8.

The Squire, His Knight, and His Lady. 1999. 240p. Houghton, \$16 (9780395912119); paper, \$6.99 (9780547014388); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547529844). Gr. 5–9.

The Squire's Quest. 2009. 288p. Houghton, \$16 (9780547144245); e-book, \$16 (9780547414997). Gr. 6–9.

The Squire's Tale. 1998. 224p. Houghton, \$16 (9780395869598); paper, \$3.99 (9780618737437); e-book, \$3.99 (9780547348766). Gr. 5–9.

The Quest of the Fair Unknown. 2006. 264p. Houghton, \$16 (9780618631520); paper, \$6.99 (9780547014845); e-book, \$6.99 (9780547349978). Gr. 5–8.

The Knights' Tales Series

The Adventures of Sir Balin the Ill-Fated. Illus. by Aaron Renier. 2012. 128p. Houghton, \$14.99 (9780547680859); e-book, \$15.99 (9780547680880). Gr. 3–5.

The Adventures of Sir Gawain the True. Illus. by Aaron Renier. 2011. 128p. Houghton, \$14.99 (9780547418551); paper, \$4.99 (9780544022645); e-book, \$14.99 (9780547573847). Gr. 3–5.

The Adventures of Sir Givret the Short. Illus. by Aaron Renier. 2008. 112p. Houghton, \$15 (9780618777150); paper, \$4.99 (9780547248189); e-book, \$4.99 (9780547417417). Gr. 3–5.

The Adventures of Sir Lancelot the Great. Illus. by Aaron Renier. 2008. 96p. Houghton, \$15 (9780618777143); paper, \$4.99 (9780547237565); e-book, \$4.99 (9780547529868). Gr. 3–5.

Rob Reid's latest book is *Silly Books to Read Aloud* (2013). Contact Rob and follow his blog, *Heart of a Child*, through his website, at www.rapnrob.com.

Common Core Connections

In the Classroom: Select one (or more) of Morris' novels and write down vocabulary words associated with medieval times. Here are some possibilities: *apprentice, bard, cesspit, chivalry, fief, forsooth, gauntlet, guild, joust, quest, serfs, squire, troubadour, and vassal*. Determine their definition through the context of the story and then use a dictionary to confirm. Have students work these words into everyday modern language. Instruct them to write a one-page essay about an ordinary day: morning routine, attending school, postschool activities, evening routine. Insert as many medieval terms into the narrative as possible to help show the differences as well as the similarities of people from that era to today's modern-day person. This exercise will also show how humor transcends time, something Morris excels at demonstrating.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.4.4c.** Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

In the Classroom: Develop a readers' theater script from a scene from one of Morris' books. Readers' theater is similar to acting out a scene, but the actors have minimum movement and use their scripts. It is especially good for older students to develop a scene, practice it, and then present it to younger students. Look for scenes heavy on dialogue. Split up longer narrative parts and give those to multiple actors to keep the script lively. A good scene can be found in *The Lioness and Her Knight* at the end of chapter 9. Begin with the sentence, "The path took them through quiet forests and over barren heaths." Rhience and Luneta are traveling and come upon a series of rude peasants who shout insults at them. They eventually learn that the lord of the land requires his vassals to discourage travelers. There are five character parts, and the narrative can be edited and split between two to four readers. For more tips on staging readers' theater, visit Aaron Shepard's website (www.aaronshp.com/rt/Tips.html).

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.7.** Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.4.4b.** Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.

In the Classroom: Even though the Arthurian legends are associated with traditional fantasy, the times in which they took place were real. Research different aspects of the Middle Ages, particularly the occupations and experiences of the common folk. Start with the Newbery Award-winning book *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*, by Laura Amy Schlitz. The author created monologues showing the perspectives of all walks of life during thirteenth-century medieval England. A similar village with its occupants may have existed near fabled Camelot. Schlitz includes a bibliography of other print sources to assist with the research of the times. After students have read one of Morris' titles, have them read *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* individually or aloud and then discuss which details of life in the Middle Ages they've learned from both texts.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1.** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.4.** Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

In the Classroom: Several popular characters from the traditional Arthurian legends, such as Arthur and Gawain, appear in many of Morris' books, as do lesser-known and sometimes original young characters, such as Squire Terence and Sarah (from *The Princess, the Crone, and the Dung-Cart Knight*). Make character charts showing which characters appeared in which titles of the 10-volume Squire's Tales series. Some characters appear in several titles, and students can study the growth of the characters as they move from story to story.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.9.** Compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters (e.g., in books from a series).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3** Describe in-depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).