

Ann Curry, one of the top correspondents for NBC news, notes that *The Once and Future King* is her “favorite book of all time. It’s more than the story of King Arthur—it’s really about the greatness that is possible in even the lowliest regarded person.” Opinions on this classic vary from “I’m so glad I read this book,” “It’s my absolute favorite ever!” to “I never want to see it again.” You will likely be somewhere in between, but read it you will, for two reasons. **One**, the majority of British literature is based on the concept of the *Arthurian hero*. **Two**, it’s the only modern British novel you’ll read in our semester of Brit Lit—and instead of cramming it into a few weeks and shortchanging the rest of the syllabus, you may read it leisurely over this summer.

You will run into words you don’t know, new concepts, characters you may dimly remember from Walt Disney, and even fantastical creatures endemic to the Middle Ages. You aren’t expected to comprehend everything in a novel of this size, but attempt to come away with an **understanding of the importance of the hero to British literature, the saga of Arthur, and the writing style of T. H. White**, who spun this version of the tale. Section one tells of Arthur’s education from the great necromancer Merlyn. He learns to live within the skin of fish, bird, and beast. In the second, Arthur consolidates his kingdom, establishes the Round Table, and, along the way, inadvertently runs into his evil half-sister. In the third, the ultimate knight, Lancelot, falls in love with Arthur’s wife, and Arthur’s hopes for the Round Table crumble. The final section finds the Round Table in shambles as Arthur awaits what he knows will be his last battle. He fears his dream is dead.

When Harry Potter pulled the Sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat, J. K. Rowling was paying homage to the legend where young Arthur pulls a magic sword from a stone, revealing himself as the rightful king of England. The musical *Camelot* is based on this book, and Disney adapted the first part into *The Sword in the Stone*. Even the Python Boys have had a go at the legend, though some bits are quite different than you find in White! Use these to help understand the novel, to stay interested, or as relief from the book’s length. But you absolutely **must read the book itself**. Why? One, it’s worth it. Two, you deserve to know about Arthur. Three, it’ll give you a writing reference point for the rest of your life.

A book of this length demands that you keep notes, whether in a journal, notebook, or folder. There is a list of allusions/definitions online which might help you; google it. Personally, I would keep a character list, a time-line of plot events, allusions to themes you see developing, and questions or comments. If you think you can remember all those things without notes, you are better than I, as I am *still* taking notes on this novel. You **must** purchase the book, so if you’d rather sticky note it, turn down corners, and underline like mad, feel free, but that’s not the same as the practice of actually writing down thoughts, quotations, and comments. You can read with a friend, alone, or in a small group—or wait until the very last week and drive yourself crazy. **Bring the book and your notes to class on day one, because we will begin working with it then.**

New York Times critic Orville Prescott writes: “*The Once and Future King* is a glorious dream of the Middle Ages as they never were but as they ought to have been, compounded of fantasy, farce, fable, parable, fairy story, and wonderfully learned lore about falconry, boar hunting, jousting, archery, birds, beasts, and fishes. There are also great and little magics, mythological monsters, knightly battles, and horrible wars.” This is a great book—so allow yourself to enjoy each little scene, and don’t be surprised if you like it ☺.