Ken Banh

Professor Warner

ENGL 112B

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***Sword in the Stars: A Once and Future Novel***

By Cory McCarthy and A.R. Capetta

**Author(s)’ Websites:** <https://vcfa.edu/faculty-staff/cory-mccarthy/> and <https://vcfa.edu/faculty-staff/a-r-capetta/>

 

*(Cory McCarthy) (A.R. Capetta)*

**Author Bibliography**

Based in Vermont, the duo of Cory McCarthy and A.R. Capetta met each other while studying at Vermont College of Fine Arts for their MFAs, later marrying. McCarthy possesses a degree in screenwriting, and a BFA/MFA in creative writing. Capetta, in addition to having a degree in theater arts, writes academic work on the science of storytelling. Both seasoned novelists are members of the LGBTQ+ community and work as writing instructors.

**Book Summary**

The close-knit party of 22nd Century freedom fighters consisting of Ari, Gwen, Jordan, Lam, Val, and the wizard Merlin time travel back to the time of the legend of King Arthur in the hopes of retrieving a chalice to finally defeat the overwhelming power of the Mercer corporation in the present. In their foray into the past, the team must not only survive the experiences in the past, but also have to take care not to radically alter the events of history. However, trouble ensues as Gwen’s pregnancy rapidly progresses and Ari is forced to take on the mantle of Lancelot. Chief among their issues is Merlin growing younger with every use of his magic, and having to confront his more feral past self. As the group's odds grow more slim, they give it their all, learning in their adventures what heroism, fate, change, and family truly means.

**Three Representative Quotes**

**Quote #1:**

“‘You and me both, I’d say. Although how I envy your great height, Sir…?” Shit. She’d forgotten to think of a decent moniker. Ari gave Arthur a slight smirk…The proffered word crystallized. Not a word; a name. “Lancelot,” Ari said, surprised to find that it left her mouth as lightly as any truth. Gwen’s eyes flew wide. “I am Sir Lancelot.’” (31).

**Analysis:**

The face to face conversation between Ari and King Arthur is a scene filled with tension as the time displaced Ari needs to progress her mission of stealing the chalice without blowing her cover. Initially, Ari and her team held not tampering with the past as a major consideration, but ultimately they have little choice but to play along and be a part of the legend of King Arthur. This quote sets the stage for how the time travelers will have to operate in the distant past and its people. In other words, they are writing their own fates as they know it. Additionally, this excerpt also shows the bold and quick thinking nature of one of the leads of the story, Ari.

**Quote #2:**

“Merlin crouched down, head in his hands, stomach suddenly tight. He’d made it worse. He was always making things worse. He was Arthur’s downfall…But now keeping Gwen and the baby safe from this monster was all that mattered. Merlin didn’t need to make peace with his past. He needed to stop the person he used to be from harming his future.” (189-190).

**Analysis:**

Merlin’s battle with his old self reveals just how dastardly he was a person originally. Old Merlin is portrayed as cold and possessing a one track mind, a contrast from the morally guided Merlin that is able to think beyond his own personal goals. The confrontation also reveals an important quality within Merlin, that he has the capacity to change himself for the better. He realizes that aspect to its fullest extent by literally fighting himself. On top of that, there is a clever bit of irony going on, as the wiser Merlin is the one stuck in the teenage body instead of the typical elderly frame.

**Quote #3:**

“Nimue laid a hand over her heart. A whirlwind of magic started up, time pushing at Merlin, trying to age him prematurely. He could feel his skin prune, his hair shoot longer. He sang and reversed it; she screeched and he sprouted gray hairs. They were fighting now, but for the first time they were matched… Nimue had done terrible things. So had Merlin. But he’d been given a chance to get better—a chance that she was never given. To change this story, really change it, he had to finally break this cycle.” (322-324).

**Analysis:**

The ultimate battle between Merlin and Nimue is not only a clash of magic, but also ideas. Nimue challenges the concept of heroism found within the male dominated stories found throughout history. Merlin’s response of admittance is a culmination of his development as a person. No longer a bloodthirsty old man, he wisely extends an olive branch to Nimue to create true peace. At the same time, this scene also reinforces the theme of teamwork/family found throughout the book. At the end of the book, the efforts of multiple characters is what leads to an ultimate victory instead of a lone warrior saving the day at great costs.

**Use In the Classroom**

I’d hesitate to use this book in the classroom due to this book being the latter half of a duology of books. However, the book is written in a way where it is still possible to understand the characters and their motivations even without knowledge of the first novel. If I were to use this book in the classroom, I’d prepare a brief overview of the first novel’s major events before diving into this book and the legend of King Arthur. I’d consider this a good work to teach for the topic of LGBTQ+ due to the main cast being heavily tied to it. In addition, the messages on morals within the story are a worthy discussion for teenagers as they change from their younger selves, but also into adults. Since the book also counts as fantasy, I could see it being an option alongside the likes of *Harry Potter*.

**Application of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning*: Chapters 4-8**

***Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences (Making Life Choices, Facing Violence or Abuse, and Living through Family and Relationship Issues)***

* Characters like Ari, Gwen, and Merlin still are affected by the death of a family member (Kay).
* Merlin chooses to reach out to his lifelong enemy, Nimue, deciding to help her live a better life by breaking her out of a miserable cycle rather than killing her.
* The couple of Ari and Gwen experience the birth of their child, and briefly become parents. Additionally, they also have to deal with losing Kairos rather quickly
* All the main characters have to deal with a feeling of separation by distance and time
* Ari, Jordan, and Merlin have to fight to protect themselves and others from harm
* In the present time, Ari and Gwen’s people are under threat by the Mercer corporation. On top of that, in the past they live in a hostile environment where their identities are less likely to be accepted, and women are seen as lesser.

***Chapter 5: “Books about Facing Death and Loss”***

* The group is still affected by the death of Kay, still reminiscing on memories with him. Ari in particular had a hallucination of Kay when he was still alive, displaying signs of lingering shreds of grief.
  + Teenagers can relate to the loss of a loved one, especially a brother and a lover
* Ari must deal with the knowledge that she is going to die very soon
* Jordan has a close encounter with death after being shot with an arrow, and Gwen watches as Ari commits suicide by impaling herself.
* Nimue witnesses and brings upon death to her old settlement through magical means

***Chapter 6: “Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”***

* Multiple characters are LGBTQ+
  + Ari and Gwen are lesbian, Merlin and Val are gay, and Lam is non-binary
  + Merlin is the biological son of a heterosexual pairing (Kay and Gwen), and familial son to two mothers
  + Young adults can be introduced to queer identities and relationships, possibly even relating to them
* The Middle Ages were an unwelcoming place to minorities
  + LGBTQ+ characters are aware that they cannot express their true sexual identities in public while stuck in the past. On top of that, Ari has to hide her true gender from the public eye. Students might relate to the act of concealing their true identities.
  + Jordan is restrained and prevented from battling against a besieging dragon simply because she was a woman
  + Nimue is prevented from practicing with a sword due to her father, and her downfall is a response to being discriminated by a patriarchal society. She responds to her oppressors by condemning her former home’s population to death, and expresses a lifelong resentment toward male heroes.
  + Students will learn about the discrimination that plagued the Middle Ages
* The team are initially conflicted on how much they want to involve themselves in the legend of King Arthur

***Chapter 7: Books about Survival and Courage***

* Ari, Jordan, Gwen, and Merlin all bravely enter into dangerous situations where they are expected to get into a fight.
* Together as a team, the main characters push through to victory against the massively powerful Mercer corporation upon returning back to their time
  + Teaches students the importance of having friends to rely on when going through something difficult
* Merlin expresses renewed confidence by the end of the story, charging head first into Nin’s territory to battle her

***Chapter 8: Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable***

* The book centers around the folklore of King Arthur and his knights
* Merlin is based off the mythical character of the same name, he is also user of magic alongside his rival Nimue
* Time travel via portals is a heavily used power within the narrative
* People being able to change is a theme heavily hammered in the story through the character of Merlin

**Text Complexity**

**Quantitative:**

**Dale-Chall:**

Score: 38.1

Reading Difficulty: Average - Slightly Difficult

Grade Level: 7-8

Age Range: 12-13 years

**Lexile Range:**

810L - 1000L

**Qualitative:**

Structure: The story alternates between the third person omniscient perspective of the main characters, primarily focusing on Merlin and Ari. Both characters have the same main goal, but diverge in what they experience in the past. Ari maneuvers the politics of King Arthur and Gwen, while Merlin often comes to blows with his old self and the ever present Nin.

Due to time travel shenanigans, there are times where Merlin hops through different points in time, and large amounts of time pass for the characters (from between Middle Ages to Present). In addition, due to King Arthur being an already completed story in the real world, the authors play with established canon by using the events, but twisting it in unpredictable ways.

Language Convention and Clarity: The language used is accessible to a young adult audience. A majority of the cast of characters are seemingly around the teenage years range, with the exception of Merlin who is thousands of years old, but is mentally affected by his decreasing physical age. Characters express bouts of love and frustrating experiences in ways that would be familiar to a teenager. Swear words and LGBTQ+ terminology are occasionally used throughout the novel.

Knowledge Demands: Familiarity with the legend of King Arthur, Merlin, and the Middle Ages is somewhat recommended to better understand some aspects, but the novel does a good job at explaining or implying information. Awareness of LGBTQ+ terminology, usage of pronouns, and relationships would be a bit helpful at keeping track of the main cast’s identities. There are also scenes that are sexual in nature between pairs, and fantasy violence is common throughout the book.

Levels of Meaning: On the surface, the book is a time travel adventure where a group of friends/family goes back in time to take a treasure in order to defeat a villainous corporation in the future.

On a deeper level, the novel contains themes of being able to change into a better person, and breaking fate even when it seems set in stone. On top of that, it tackles the idea of personal identity, as well as the cyclical nature of conflict.