



THE LEFT-HANDED BOOKSELLERS OF LONDON

GARTH NIX

October 2020

ISBN 9781760631246

Format: Paperback

Recommended for 14-99 year olds

Summary

In a slightly alternate London in 1983, art student Susan Arkshaw is looking for her father, a man she's never known. But before she can question her first suspect, he's turned to dust by the prick of a silver hatpin in the hands of the mysterious Merlin St Jacques, a young left-handed bookseller on a quest of his own. When Susan joins forces with Merlin, she is quickly drawn into the secret business of magical booksellers tasked with policing the legendary Old World wherever it intrudes on the New World.

As Susan tracks down her father and Merlin searches for the Old World entity who killed his mother, they find their quests strangely overlapping. Worse still, their investigations begin to attract unwanted attention from enemies of the Old and New Worlds. With time running out and the society of booksellers in grave danger, Susan and Merlin must race to find out the truth about their parents and prevent the release of the hordes of the mythic past.

In this pulse-pounding and laugh-out-loud expedition to the world of magical booksellers, Garth Nix crafts a unique fantasy that blurs the boundaries between reality and mythic legend.

Themes

Fantasy • adventure • power • quests • magic • myths and legends •
destiny • London • history • good vs evil

Author style

Garth Nix once again proves he is a master of the fantasy genre in this quirky tale of magical beings who, when they are not policing dangerous creatures rising from the depths of the Old World, make a living as booksellers in an ever-so-slightly alternate 1983 London.

Much of the book's fun is to be had finding the varied and subtle ways that Nix has changed this version of London. There's an alternate Margaret Thatcher undoing the work of the UK's first female Prime Minister, Clementina Attlee, and references to the star of the TV show *The Sweeney*, Denise Waterman, to name just two examples.

Adding to the book's charm are the poems of every type (limerick, free verse, blank verse etc) opening each chapter and setting the tone for what will happen next in the story.

But most importantly, *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London* has all the attributes beloved by fans of the author: intriguing fantastical characters, great dialogue, roller-coaster action and adventure on an epic scale.

Suggestions for discussion and classroom activities:

Prologue

Read the prologue of *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London* and consider the following questions: a) What tone did the prologue create? b) Were you hooked to continue reading the story? c) How did the prologue help you understand the world in which the events of the story take place?

Poetry

Why do you think Garth Nix decided to open each chapter with a short poem?

Did these poems enhance your reading of the novel? If so, how? If not, why not?

After finishing the novel go back and choose a poem that appears in the book as an example of a limerick, free verse, blank verse, and one other form of poetry.

Characterisation

Clothes and physical attributes play an important role in quickly establishing characters in *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London*.

Make a list of the things we can surmise about Susan from the very first description of her:

Susan Arkshaw, who had turned eighteen years old as of two minutes ago, was striking rather than immediately attractive, with her vibrant black eyebrows in stark contrast to her closely razored head, the stubble dyed white-blonde. She wore a 1968 Jimi Hendrix Summer Tour T-shirt given to her mother fifteen years ago by a roadie. The T-shirt was big enough to serve as a nightdress, because she was not tall, though very wiry and muscular. (Page 1-2)

Make a similar list from the first description of Merlin:

A slight young man with long fair hair, wearing a pre-owned mustard-coloured three-piece suit with widely flared trousers and faux alligator-hide boots with two-inch Cuban heels, stood over the much older man on the leather couch. (Page 6)

Choose another character from the novel and find a description of their clothes that tells you instantly about the sort of person they are.

Gender

'Um, have you changed?' asked Susan doubtfully, 'Into a woman I mean.'

'No,' said Merlin. 'That kind of shape-shifting takes some time, and we have to go to Silv...go somewhere special to do it. But I like to wear a nice dress from time to time anyway.' (Page 44)

Merlin St Jacques is equally comfortable in men's and women's clothes and has considered shape shifting to become a woman at some point in his past. Why do you think Garth Nix decided to make Merlin gender fluid? Did you enjoy the novel more for this decision? If so, why so? If not, why not? What other novels or films feature a gender fluid character?

How else has Garth Nix played with gender in the novel? [Hint: look closely at the TV show references.]

Literary Theory

Briefly explain the concept of 'The Hero's Journey' to your class. (A pattern of narrative identified by the American scholar Joseph Campbell that appears in drama, storytelling, myth, religious ritual, and psychological development, and is outlined in the following link: http://changingminds.org/disciplines/storytelling/plots/vogler_structure.htm). Now ask your students to see if they can match as many of the steps described in the article to the characters and events of *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London*.

Essay - Genre Studies

Would you agree with the author's description of *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London* as a 'thriller/fantasy hybrid'? In your essay detail the core elements of both genres and find examples from the novel to support or discount this description.

Literary Analysis

White blanketed the windows, thick as if cotton wool had been plastered on in an instant.

Only the low, sad groan of stressed metal and composites and the sound of a piercing, high-pitched alarm. (Pages 333-334)

What literary techniques has Garth Nix used in this excerpt to heighten the horror of the scene? In your answer make sure you highlight examples of simile, personification, imagery, rhythm and repetition.

Comprehension Exercise:

Write a paragraph to explain your understanding of the following terms:

- Left-Handed/Right-Handed Booksellers
- Sippers
- The Greats
- Cauldron-Keepers/Born
- Ancient Sovereigns

Epilogue

Why do you think Susan was surprised by her mother's reaction to the news about her father?

In what way did the epilogue bring closure to the story for you?

Cover:

After reading *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London* turn to the cover of the novel. Consider the title and cover design. Ask students why they think the designer and publisher decided to use that particular mix of font, colour, illustration and composition. What mood is evoked by the cover and is this an appropriate mood for the novel that follows? Devise an alternate title for the novel and design a new cover.

A word from the author

'The basic idea for *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London* first bubbled up when I was on tour in the United Kingdom for my book *Goldenhand*. I was signing books at the Ocean Terminal Waterstones bookshop in Leith, the port of Edinburgh, and I noticed the bookseller who was helping us was left-handed. I idly commented on this and he said, "we're all left-handed here." I replied something like "ah, the special left-handed booksellers of Leith."

'On the rest of that tour I started thinking about left-handed booksellers and how they might be special, and I made a few notes about a secret society of booksellers, without going into what they might actually do or why they would be secret. A few years later, with a change of location from Leith to London for greater scope, I started to write the book, and discovered my booksellers had the difficult task of policing the mythic world which underlies our own.

'I set in in a slightly alternate 1983 for instinctual reasons I can't really explain, other than that was the year I first went to the UK and it felt like the right milieu for the story.

'While the book is an adult/YA crossover, and a kind of thriller/fantasy hybrid, I think the basic feel owes a lot to those children's fantasy novels I read growing up where a secret, magical world co-exists with the ordinary world we know. Books like *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* by Alan Garner, *The Dark is Rising* by Susan Cooper and many books by Diana Wynne Jones.

'As for Susan, Merlin and Vivien, my main characters, I knew very little about them when I started, and got to know more about them as I needed to know it. This seems to be pretty much how I always work. I discover my characters through the story, rather than developing them ahead of time.'

Garth Nix

About the author

Garth Nix has been a full-time writer since 2001, but has also worked as a literary agent, marketing consultant, book editor, book publicist, book sales representative, bookseller, and as a part-time soldier in the Australian Army Reserve. Garth's books include the Old Kingdom fantasy series: *Sabriel*, *Lirael*, *Abhorsen*, *Clariel* and *Goldenhand*; SF novels *Shade's Children* and *A Confusion of Princes*; and a Regency romance with magic, *Newt's Emerald*. His novels for children include *The Ragwitch*; the six books of The Seventh Tower sequence; The Keys to the Kingdom series; and *Frogkisser!* which is being developed as a film by Fox/Disney. His short fiction includes more than 60 published stories, some of them collected in *Across the Wall* and *To Hold the Bridge*. His most recent novel is *Angel Mage*. He has co-written several books with Sean Williams, including the Troubletwisters series; *Spirit Animals Book Three: Blood Ties*; *Have Sword, Will Travel*; and *Let Sleeping Dragons Lie*. More than six million copies of Garth's books have been sold around the world, they have appeared on the bestseller lists of *The New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Bookseller* and others, and his work has been translated into 42 languages. He has won multiple Aurealis Awards, the Ditmar Award, the Mythopoeic Award, CBCA Honour Book, and has been shortlisted for the Locus Awards, the Shirley Jackson Award and others.

