



RANGER'S APPRENTICE

By JOHN FLANAGAN

Teaching support kit

By Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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Visit www.rangersapprentice.com.au for news and information about the Ranger's Apprentice series, including quizzes and games.

(This Teaching Support Kit is adapted from the full House of Legends Teaching Support Kit written by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright, with information on other Random House Australia fantasy series, available at www.houseoflegends.com.au.)

TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

Rangers Apprentice by John Flanagan

Ranger's Apprentice is a fantasy series set in a version of medieval Europe. It can be read by ages 10 and up, and is particularly suited to ages 10 to 14.

John Flanagan says he based his Ranger's Apprentice series on 'a collection of short stories originally written to encourage the author's son to enjoy reading. The series is alive with action—battles, boar hunts, inhuman enemies and loyal friends. It's exciting and fast moving. Humorous at times, spine chilling at others. Involving, always. Best of all, the characters ring true and quickly establish themselves in the reader's imagination.'

The series website at www.rangersapprentice.com.au provides information including the biography of the author, interactive map, extra material on the Ranger Corps and the characters, quizzes, games, book trailers, and lots more.

There are eight books published in the series so far, with *Book 9: Halt's Peril* being released in November 2009.

Book 1: The Ruins of Gorlan is considered in these notes.

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING FANTASY

Fantasy is a form of speculative fiction which is often said to 'define the indefinable'. As a genre it has very strong links with, and is informed by, traditional literature forms such as folk and fairy tale, myths and legends. Fantasy's many varieties and sub-genres enrich its appeal. These include science fiction, epic fantasy, magical realism and alternative fantasy.

'Fantasy is a genre that uses magic and other supernatural forms as a primary element of plot, theme, and/or setting. The genre is usually associated with the overall look, feel and themes of the European Middle Ages (including architecture, dress and technology), while the actual setting is often a fictional plane or planet where magic and magical beings are commonplace.' (Wikipedia)

Writers of reality often dismiss fantasy as 'escapist fiction', but those who write and read fantasy counter such criticisms. They consider fantasy necessary to our being able to engage with life's challenges – and see it as a way of 'heightening' reality. Susan Cooper, the creator of *The Dark is Rising* sequence, says that, 'The material of fantasy is myth, legend, folktale; the mystery of dream, and the greater mystery of Time. With all that haunting our minds, it isn't surprising that we write stories about an ordinary world in which extra-ordinary things happen.' (Cooper, S., 1987, p. 44) Margaret Mahy agrees that she writes about 'the extraordinary in the ordinary.' Susan Cooper adds: 'Once upon a time, humankind wasn't ashamed of the fact that it also needed fantasy. The stories were a normal part of everybody's life.'

(Cooper, S., 1987, p. 44) Without imagination, Ursula Le Guin once said, adults 'would grow up to be eggplants' (quoted in Cooper, S., p. 45).

Fantasy writing is about approaching universal truths via abstraction and metaphor. It's an attempt to express the inexpressible. Philip Pullman, creator of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, says: 'Fantasy for me is just one of many ways to say something truthful about what it's like to be alive. That's the subject of all fiction, really.' (Weich, Dave 2003)

Critics have argued and theorised about the 'essential' features of fantasy. Jane Mobley asserts that **Magic** is an essential ingredient, featuring (a) a power either benevolent or dangerous, or (b) which describes 'a certain human wilfulness in the face of the unknown' (Mobley, 1987, p. 253). However, John Flanagan's *Ranger's Apprentice* series does not actually feature magic at all.

Fantasy narratives transport the reader from the real world by showing that there is potential for good and ill at every turn. They are all about journeys; all about the possibilities of freedom and power; all about human nature's struggle with loss and renewal.

Question: Can *Ranger's Apprentice* still be considered fantasy when it doesn't include magic? Why/why not? What else makes it fantasy? Does it have magical aspects?

PLOT SUMMARY OF *BOOK 1: THE RUINS OF GORLAN*

'His mother died in childbirth. His father died a hero. Please care for him. His name is Will.' (p. 10)

When the orphaned Will is not selected on Choosing Day as a Craft Apprentice by the Craftmasters, as his four wardmates are, he is totally crushed. He has always dreamed of becoming a knight like the father he has never seen, and is devastated when Castle Redmont's Battleschool rejects him. Instead he finds himself apprenticed to Halt, the mysterious Ranger whose uncanny ability to move unseen is thought to be the result of black magic. Reluctantly Will begins his training, which proves to be more interesting than he had envisaged. Together he and Halt set out on a desperate mission to prevent the assassination of the King. And Will finds that the Ranger's weapons – a bow and arrow, a mottled cloak and a stubborn little pony – are not so useless after all. Will fights several battles and eventually realises that his life's dream isn't what he'd thought it was.

CREATION OF A SECONDARY FANTASY WORLD

This series is set in a Medieval/fantasy locale called the Kingdom of Araluen, ruled by King Duncan, loosely based on the United Kingdom and Europe, which is divided into fifty fiefdoms, governed by barons, and protected by Rangers. The Baron Arald resides over one of them from Castle Redmont, near the Tarbus River and Wensley Village (pp. 52–3). Will is a ward of this state and his fellow wards are each apprenticed to people in the area. Meanwhile, in the Mountains of Rain and Night, the former baron of Gorlan, Lord Morgarath, returns to the Ruins of Gorlan, his former fiefdom, to plot his revenge. The year is 643, which is earlier than medieval times, for this is an 'alternate' history.

- This setting is physically imagined for the reader in **maps** contained in the books and on the series website.
- The world is **protected by the Rangers**, who were founded over one hundred years ago in King Herbert's reign (p. 62). Herbert is known as the 'Father of Modern Araluen' for banding 'the fifty fiefs together into a powerful union to defeat the northern clans' (p. 64). The fifty Rangers are the lawkeepers, who provide intelligence re potential threats (p. 66).
- Since there is no magic in this fantasy world, **the author must create fantasy elements which are out of the ordinary**, and which therefore may be real, or may not be, such as the Rangers' ability to become invisible. Halt recognises that Will has the skill to move unseen, and takes him on to train him further.
- **The medieval times are evoked by lots of adventure and real fighting, but with a fantasy edge.** So that while **real detail** is offered in the coverage of **Archery and Swordsmanship**, it's enhanced by the addition of the **imagined troops and weapons** used in the battles. Creatures of fantasy include the **Wargals**, Morgarath's platoon troops of misshapen creatures, 'with features that were halfway human, but with a long brutish muzzle and fangs like a bear or a large dog' (p. 2) and the **Kalkara** (p. 4) which are 'somewhere between an ape and a bear, that walks upright' (p. 205); they have eyes which can paralyse people with fear: 'Some people call it magic ... it's more likely a form of hypnotism' (p. 207).

Activity: John Flanagan says on his website that: 'I'm occasionally asked if I borrowed the term Ranger from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. In fact, I was influenced by the US Army's World War II Rangers – the equivalent of the British Army's commandos – and by the legendary Texas Rangers, a group of lawmen who originated the formula "One riot, one Ranger." It's a concept that seems to sum up the qualities and abilities of the Araluan Rangers.' Who do these troops remind you of most?

FANTASY TROPES, CONVENTIONS AND ARCHETYPES

The Ranger's Apprentice series include some fantasy **Tropes, Conventions** or **Archetypes** such as:

- **The Quest** – in *Book 1: The Ruins of Gorlan*, Will and his master Halt are sent on a mission to stop the Kalkara.
- **The Journey** – Will's physical journey is his mission to stop the Kalkara, but his emotional journey is equally important: his initial desire to become a knight; his disappointment at becoming a Ranger's apprentice instead; his gruelling training; and his eventual realisation that he is best suited to, and enjoys, the life of a Ranger.
- **The Hero Tale** is a source constantly providing material to be explored or subverted in modern fantasies. The Hero (or Heroine) is pitted against the Villain in many tales, and is often an unlikely hero whose powers are only gradually revealed.
- **Trial or Imprisonment** is integral to fantasy. In *The Ruins of Gorlan*, Will is undergoing a trial in learning the skills of a Ranger, and he is expected to pass a test at the end of the year. In later books in the series imprisonment features heavily, when Will is taken captive by the Skandians and becomes a slave.
- **Task/Test:** Will is sent back to Castle Redmont to summon back-up forces (p. 233). (The idea of a test is also subverted since Will finds that his first duties are housework and cooking in order to prove his worth as a Ranger.) He also must face off against a rampaging boar. His first meeting with his horse, Tug, is also a test, as Will learns to listen to the warnings Halt gives him.
- **Trickery:** Piece of paper given by Halt to the Baron containing information about Will (pp. 33–4) is another device, which proves to be a test of whether he'll rise to the bait and try to steal it. Much of the perceived mystery of the Rangers is also achieved by what could be called trickery.
- **Forest:** Will slips away to the forest for comfort from his disappointment (pp. 36–7). Much of his training takes place in the forest.
- **Special Powers Invested in Tools or Weapons:** Halt gives Will the bow, the knives and the pony named Tug with which to protect himself (see Ch 10).

Question: Discuss the novel's plot as an example of the Quest.

Character, motif and plot are intimately connected in fantasy, and the **Stock Characters** of fairy tale, eg wolf, wicked stepmother, Cinderella, or the villain, appear in countless tales and series.

Ranger's Apprentice features some of the 'classic' fantasy character motifs:

- **Unlikely Hero:** Will is like King Arthur; he's small and unimpressive in stature, and he's not selected on the Choosing Day because others have more strength. The strengths he discovers in himself are unexpected – he finds that his tree-climbing skills are useful, and his ability to blend into the shadows, for instance.
- **Orphan's Journey in Search of 'Lost' Parent:** Will is left on the steps of the ward building with a note (p. 10). Will is an orphan who thinks his father was a brave knight in the war against Morgarath fifteen years ago. His master, the Ranger Halt, becomes like a parent to him over the course of the series.
- **Guardian or Mentor:** Halt fulfills this role in the series – usually appearing gruff and a hard task master, Will learns that Halt also has a softer side.
- **Helper:** Initially enemies after growing up together in the Ward at Castle Redmond, Will and the warrior apprentice Horace become friends in the course of *The Ruins of Gorlan*, and Horace becomes an essential part of the series.
- **Villain:** In *The Ruins of Gorlan* Morgarath is quickly established as the villain – hidden away in the mountains, plotting an attack on the Kingdom that exiled him. It is Morgarath who sends the deadly Kalkara into Araluen to kill Morgarath's enemies.

ACTIVITY: Examine the **Archetypes** that are used in fiction and film and their historical underpinnings. For example, *Star Wars* contains many classic features. Luke Skywalker is a hero figure, 'a protagonist on a hero's journey' who must resist forces that try to make him aggressive, in order to discover his true self. Darth Vader is an archetypal father figure in the same tradition as the Greek Sky Father gods. His attempts to destroy his son are related to age-old stories of father/son conflicts. George Lucas was greatly influenced by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Fontana Press, 1993) when he brought the story to the screen. See also Jean Shimoda Bolen's *Gods in Everyman: A New Psychology of Men's Lives and Loves* (Harper and Row, 1989) or Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (Michael Wiese Productions, 1992). Then attempt to isolate these archetypes in the Ranger's Apprentice series.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

This fantasy series contains no magic but uses the medieval setting to explore themes [See **Creation of a Secondary Fantasy World** above].

Theme	Key Quotes	Activities
Heroism:	<p>'His father, he knew, had died a hero's death. So it made sense to create a picture of him as a hero – a knight warrior in full armour ... As a warrior, his father would expect him to follow in his footsteps.' (p. 11)</p> <p>'But you can't be him. Why, the Ranger Halt is as tall as two men – and as broad. A giant of a man, he is!' (p. 146)</p>	<p>Question: What makes a hero? What is bravery? Who decides that a person is a hero? Why does Halt refuse to take any credit for the battle which saved Araluen?</p> <p>Question: We often falsely equate bravery with size and strength. What heroes do you know of who are the opposite of this stereotype? (Eg Mother Teresa of Calcutta.)</p>
Bravery:	<p>'He was one of the few people who had noticed Horace's original, instinctively courageous action.' (p. 164)</p>	<p>Question: Is bravery instinctive to only a few people or are we all capable of it, in defence of those we love or respect?</p>
Orphans and Self-Identity:	<p>'at least you know who you are' (p. 13)</p> <p>'I wanted to be a warrior, sir,' (pp. 49)</p> <p>'It was a warm sense of belonging, as if somehow, he had arrived home for the first time in his life.' (p. 198)</p>	<p>Activity: What does Will discover about himself once he becomes a Ranger?</p>
Choosing a Career:	<p>'You asked to if you could train as a warrior, It was your wish to become one of my knights and I refused you ... Now I can rectify that mistake.' (p. 269)</p> <p>'I am a Ranger, My Lord.' (p. 271)</p> <p>'It is possible, of course,' said Halt quietly, 'to want two different things at the same time.' (p. 275)</p>	<p>Question: What if Will had become a Knight?</p>
Friendship:	<p>'Horace, we may have fought in the past,. But I don't hate you. I never hated you.' (p. 161)</p>	<p>Activity: Discuss the various friendships formed by Will in the novel.</p>
Apprentice and Mentor:	<p>'Halt is my master, sir, and he's in danger. My place is with him.' (p. 242)</p>	<p>Activity: Compare the mentor/pupil relationship between Halt and Will to that of Brom and Eragon in <i>Eragon</i> or Roland and Pagan in the <i>Pagan Series</i> by Catherine Jinks; or Lord Otori and Takeo in the <i>Otori Trilogy</i> by Lian Hearn.</p>

Bullying:	'But he promised himself that, first chance he got, he was going to make someone pay for the humiliation he was undergoing.' (p. 109)	Question: Is Horace's response to the bullies typical? How would you have responded? Do you consider that Horace is a bully towards Will in the beginning of the book? How did you feel about him then, and what changed your mind?
Mind Power:	'So, not expecting to see anyone, he failed to do so.' (p. 37)	Question: Is this real magic? The sleight of hand that plays on peoples' propensity to see or not see something?
Work Yields Results:	'This is no grand castle. If we want to eat food here, we have to cook food here.' (p. 62) 'Will tended to skip over less exciting tasks like map reading and chart drawing' but Halt reminds him that: 'You'd find these skills would become a little more important if you were planning a route for a company of heavy cavalry and forgot to mention that there's a stream in the way.' (p. 79)	Question: How much of becoming a great spy or soldier is made up of routines and boring training?

CHARACTERS

Will, the orphaned hero: Small and wiry, 'Will's wit was as agile as the rest of him' (p. 9). We are given a hint as to his true nature, first in that he 'had developed within him the skill of moving across seemingly open space without being seen' (p. 37) and then in the secret note (p. 45). He is born to be a Ranger. But he wants to be a warrior (pp. 48–9). He's agile and inquisitive, but it's his honesty which Halt admires most (p. 69).

Halt, the Ranger and Mentor to Will: The first time Will sees him without his cloak he's surprised by his size, for the description equates him with Will in that he's small and agile with 'whipcord strength' (p. 54).

Gilan, Halt's previous apprentice: He's a cheerful and capable Ranger who is a loyal companion.

Baron Arald, the Lord of Redmont Fief: Big man who brooks no nonsense (p. 16) from his servants and has a sense of humour.

Horace, former wardmate or Will: He's accepted by the Battleschool and proves to be a solider with very special powers (p. 88) which are observed by Sir Rodney and by the drillmaster, Sir Karel. But he's bullied there by Bryn, Alda and Jerome (p. 75). 'But naturals were few and far between ... It became not so much a skill as an

instinct to them.’ (p. 103); his aggressive nature is finally tamed when he finds his place as a soldier and best friend to Will.

Morgarath, Lord of the Mountains of Rain and Night: Evil and ruthless.

Others: Will’s other former Wardmates: **George (Legal profession):** Has a mind suited to legalities; **Alyss (Diplomat):** Calm and elegant, Will is discovering an attraction for her; **Jenny (Cook):** cheerful and good-natured; **Martin, secretary to Baron Arald:** A man who likes to wield his influence; **King Duncan; Old Bob.**

Question: Who is your favourite character and why? See the character notes and illustrations on the Ranger’s Apprentice website, www.rangersapprentice.com.au.]

NARRATIVE GENRE, LANGUAGE, STYLE & STRUCTURE

- **This fantasy also has elements of the Mystery/ Crime novel.** When the death of Lord Northolt, the old king’s supreme commander, is reported and queried by Halt (pp. 59–60), this is one of the first examples of the way in which Halt expects Will to discover clues as part of his intelligence work in order to deduce the nature of the Lord’s death.
- The novel is **neatly structured** by both a Prologue and an Epilogue. The **Prologue** sets the scene here for Morgarath in the Kingdom of Rain and Night to establish a quest or mission to become King, as backdrop to Will’s personal quest. Morgarath seeks to regain control of his old fief, Gorlan, and the Kingdom of Araluen. The Epilogue ties together the missing Will’s past, for Halt reveals his parentage and his own link to Will’s parents. **Question:** How many aspects of the plot are revealed in this Prologue? Make a list of all the important points. The Epilogue allows the author to tie things up neatly. What things are left to be resolved in future novels?
- To make this world **‘immediate’ in tone** the author allows himself **anachronisms** such as having his characters addicted to coffee. **Question:** What examples of contemporary language can you find in the novel? (Note that coffee hadn’t been brought to Europe in medieval times. What other examples can you find where the author has introduced alternate history elements to the story?)

COVERS

Activity: The series has been sold into more than twenty other countries, and has been packaged in a variety of ways. (You can find some of the different covers at John's website, www.rangersapprentice.com.) Examine the covers for Book 1. Then design your own.

Question: The original covers of the Australian series were photographic, lending a contemporary and immediate feel to the series despite its arcane subject matter. Does this influence your reading? Ask students to compare the original covers with the new covers, which are illustrated. (See below.) Which do they prefer? Which character looks more like the Will in their imagination? Why do you think the publisher chose to give the series a new look?



(New and original Australian covers of *The Ruins of Gorlan*.)

Activity: Maps of Araluen are included on the website and in the books. Study them and then try to locate trails for the journeys which Will undertakes in the novels.

Activity: Draw the castle from clues in the novel.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Books 2 to 8 continue the series.

Books 1 to 4 cover the first two years of Will's life as a Ranger, from his initial recruitment as an Apprentice Ranger, through his pivotal roles in battles with the renegade Lord Morgarath, the Kalkara Assassins, the Skandian Sea wolves and the fierce Temujai riders from the Eastern Steppes.

Books 5 and 6 are set a few years later, and describe Will's first assignment as a fully fledged Ranger. Sent to a Northern fief to investigate rumours of sorcery, he uncovers a planned attack by the fierce Scotti warriors from Picta. Several old friends from previous books assist him as he attempts to unmask a traitor and foil the Scotti plans.

Book 7 is actually out of chronological order. It's set after Book 4 and a few months before Book 5. It's set in the desert land of Arrida, where Erak, Oberjarl of the Skandians, is being held prisoner. Will, Halt, Horace, Gilan and Evanlyn set out on a rescue mission. It's full of action and adventure: fights, pitched battles, a horse race, a sandstorm in the desert. Plus you'll meet two interesting new characters.

Books 8 and 9 begin a new adventure when Will, Halt and Horace go to investigate a false religious cult.