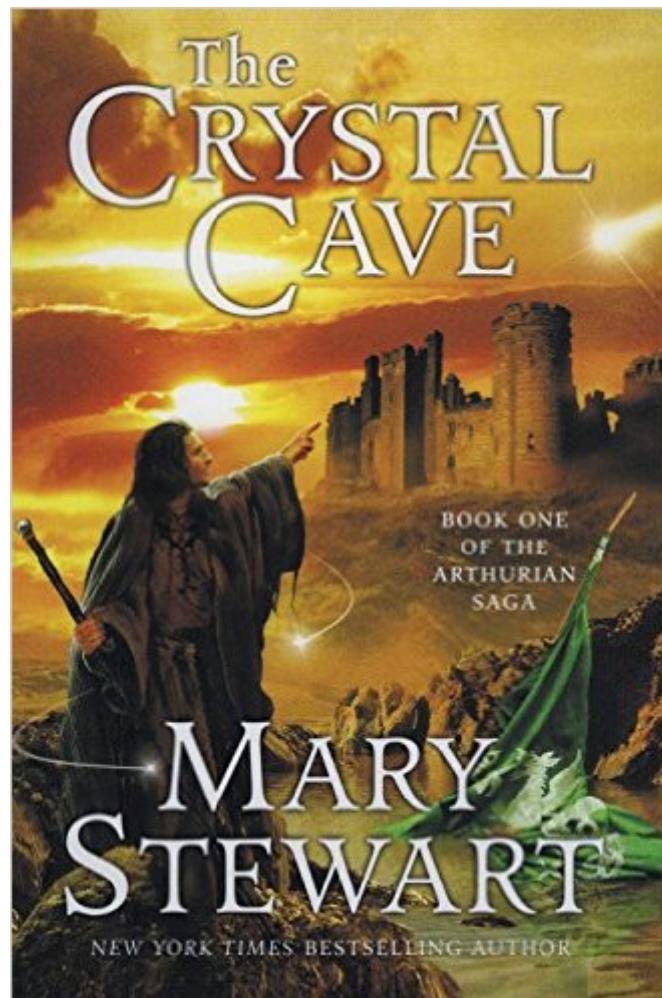


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The Crystal Cave (The Arthurian Saga, Book 1)



Synopsis

Born the bastard son of a Welsh princess, Myrddin Emrys -- or as he would later be known, Merlin -- leads a perilous childhood, haunted by portents and visions. But destiny has great plans for this no-man's-son, taking him from prophesying before the High King Vortigern to the crowning of Uther Pendragon . . . and the conception of Arthur -- king for once and always.

Book Information

Series: The Merlin Series (Book 1)

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Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (389 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

A long time ago, I read Mary Stewart's Merlin Trilogy, which consists of three books: The Crystal Cave, The Hollow Hills, and The Last Enchantment. I had last read the trilogy back in the mid-1980s, back when I was in high school. So, recently I turned back to these old favorites, and found myself enjoying the tale once again. Here's a brief background of the story, without spoiling it too much for potential readers. England is suffering under fractured leadership following the departure of the Romans, some time before. England is broken up into several small kingdoms, with a High King to hold them all together, and to try to repel the Saxon threat already encamped on the shores. Into this time, Merlin is born, the bastard child of a local princess. The trilogy tells the tale of his life. In the first book, Merlin is first a small boy in Wales, where he finds his tutor in magic and the gods and medicine, and is touched by the prophecy which will shape his whole life's work. He flees Wales, for his own protection, and his subsequent actions inexorably lead to the conception of a child: Arthur, the future High King. In the second book, Merlin is charged by both the High King, Uther, and his god to keep Arthur in his care, and to train him for his coming challenges. The story

closes with Arthur assuming the mantle of leadership, following the passing of Uthur. In the third book, Arthur and Merlin work to end the Saxon threat, found Camelot, and close with Merlin's final destiny, as he had long since foreseen...almost. The tale is told in the first person: Merlin. In this fashion, the story feels personal in a way that few other Arthurian fantasies ever have.

What I liked in particular in Mary Stewart's "The Crystal Cave" is that she keeps the dialog sufficiently neutral that we can forget the implied translation from the "original" Anglo-Saxon or Celtic tongues. So often in historical novels people use idioms that are absolutely of the modern day, and it has an instantly jarring effect. One thing that stands out from some of the reviews is how our general literary background knowledge, not to mention our attention span, may have diminished in the thirty-odd years since she wrote (unless things were the same back then?) More than one review talks of Merlin's boyhood exploration of the hypocaust as exploring "tunnels" under a "castle" or "fortress," even though Stewart takes pains to describe it as a large "country house." They have never heard of the typical graceful Roman villa with its underfloor hot-air central heating channeled from a wood furnace - via the hypocaust that Merlin crawls through - and its beautiful mosaic floors. When the King says to Camlach "We've never had the furnace on since you left" that's one of the many indications of what happened to the highly civilized Roman ways when the central empire fell, and in the outer provinces the "barbarians" like Merlin's folk took over. They could have had a comfortable house all winter, but instead they built open fires in the middle of the mosaic floors, griming the Roman pillars with soot and cracking the mosaics, as Stewart so clearly describes. The bathhouse was out of use - Camlach's wish to have a bath after his travels was "your damned Roman fashion" and water was heated over the courtyard fires instead of in the Roman central boiler-room. These were basically rough people camping out in the remains of an advanced civilization.

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