

Book of the Three Dragons

Kenneth Morris

Cold Spring Press 2004 [1930]

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2008 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

In a famous 1973 essay "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie", on fantasy style, Ursula Le Guin praised J.R.R. Tolkien, E.R. Eddison and Kenneth Morris, using excerpts from *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Worm Ouroboros*, and *Book of the Three Dragons*. Morris has remained relatively unknown, however, even compared to Eddison, and *The Book of the Three Dragons* has only become widely available following its recent reissue by Cold Spring Press.

Book of the Three Dragons is loosely based on the medieval Welsh stories in the *Mabinogion*. An introduction involves the Wonderful Head of Bran the Blessed and the theft of three magical items. Five stories then follow the hero Manawyddan in his efforts to regain those items: overcoming the thief Tathal Twyll Goleu, forging magical weapons of his own, fighting the Dragon of the Seven Conflicts, harrowing Gwiawn Sea-Thief, and saving the magical Valley of Gorsedd Arberth and undoing the spells of the sorcerer Llwyd ab Coelcoed. The final chapter, first published in this edition, tells of the reign of Manawyddan's son Pryderi.

The plots of these stories are somewhat stylised, with formulaic repetition, and lack real tension or drama. What drives them is the storytelling and the language, with lively invention and some humour.

"Manawyddan, striding forward, saw the barren hills so desolate in front of him, and the dreariness of the fine, eternal rain of Uffern; and he thought of the golden gorse abloom where the south-west wind wanders over quiet mountains, and of the bees' murmur among the gorse-bloom of Wales; and made delicate pennillion of these things, and sang them in such a way that you would have thought, there in abominable Uffern, that it was on the slopes of Moel Hebog you were, or dear knows, perhaps on Eryri. Before the fingers of the Thief were well on the harpstrings to counteract him, he must stay and listen to this miraculous Welsh singing again, and be wistfully envious, on account of it, of the beauty of Wales. And the stone warriors trembled, and a motion of life quivered in their limbs and a little haze of thought in their minds; they remembered

that there was adorable beauty somewhere, and the Cymraeg spoken among its mountains; they half perceived the shame that had been imposed on them."

The Book of the Three Dragons was first published in 1930 and thus predates the works of Tolkien. It won't appeal to fantasy fans with a narrow view of the genre, but it should be appreciated by those who enjoyed *The Silmarillion* or the works of Lord Dunsany.

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