

The Keys to the Kingdom
Garth Nix

A normal young boy stumbles into a magical world which he is expected to save. That is the premise of *Harry Potter*, the most popular story of our time, and countless other books and movies and shows. It is also the premise of Garth Nix's seven-book YA series *The Keys to the Kingdom*. But Nix's world is wild and imaginative in ways that make *Harry Potter* look tame, and is a reading experience quite unlike anything you have encountered before.

I'll do my best to set the stage. In *Kingdom*, the center of the universe is a magical world called "the House"; Earth and the rest of existence as we know it are referred to as "Secondary Realms"—in other words, we are non-essential. We survive only so long as the House survives. Not all is as it should be, though: the Architect, creator of the House, left behind a Will which was violated and broken into seven pieces by the Trustees of the House. These are the villains of the series, the Morrow Days (whose names also provide the titles for the books: *Mister Monday*, *Grim Tuesday*, *Drowned Wednesday*, *Sir Thursday*, *Lady Friday*, *Superior Saturday*, and *Lord Sunday*). The Trustees have each seized a portion of power and retreated to their respective domains within the House—the Lower House, the Far Reaches, the Border Sea, the Great Maze, the Middle House, the Upper House, and Lord Sunday's private demesne, the Incomparable Gardens.

As the series begins, the Will of Architect (which embodies itself in various sentient forms) chooses twelve-year-old Arthur Penhaligon as the Architect's rightful heir, destined to defeat the Trustees, reunite the seven pieces of the Will, and fulfill the last wishes of the Architect—which, notably, are a mystery. Each book focuses on Arthur's confrontation with one of the Morrow Days, and his quest to defeat them becomes more urgent with each entry; a wave of Nothing (a destructive substance which consumes everything it touches) is eradicating the House—and thus, the entire universe—and Arthur is becoming increasingly less human as he uses magic to combat his enemies. The quick tempo of the series is irresistible.

One of my favorite aspects of *The Keys to the Kingdom* is how deeply steeped it is in religion, mythology, and history. The name "Arthur Penhaligon" brings to mind Arthur Pendragon, or King Arthur as he is more commonly known; the Architect is a thinly-veiled (scratch that—translucent) reference to the Judeo-Christian God; each of the Morrow Days is afflicted with one of the Seven Deadly Sins (Monday with sloth, Tuesday with greed, Wednesday with gluttony, Thursday with wrath, Friday with lust, Saturday with envy, and Sunday with pride); and memorable characters such as the Old One, the Mariner, and the Piper draw their inspiration respectively from Prometheus, the titular character in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and the Pied Piper of Hamelin. *Kingdom* is drenched in literary and cultural influences, and the story becomes infinitely more rich as a result.

It is the ending of this series—which I found disappointing—that ultimately convinced me to review and recommend it. I know, that doesn't make much sense. But let me explain. The final novel, *Lord Sunday*, concludes in what can only be described as a confrontation with God, a philosophical conundrum that forces the reader to reckon with everything that is implied by art and religion. It is challenging and, in some ways, disturbing. I was blown away by just how far Nix takes things in this finale, and disappointed only in that he didn't take them all the way. That said, *Kingdom's* ending is unquestionably bold, and makes the series as a whole worth reading.

Garth Nix is one of the most inventive storytellers working today, and *The Keys to the Kingdom* is a testament to his talent. Even though the series does not quite come together in its final moments, it is sprawling and ambitious and unforgettable, an underappreciated gem of YA literature. Few authors are as fearless as Nix, and reading his work is always a pleasure.

Reviewed by Aaron Larson