

Journey to Layamon

Stephen Curtin

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In the captivating fable Journey to Layamon, children in a magical land prepare to face a threat to their environment.

In Stephen Curtin's enchanting fantasy novel *Journey to Layamon*, a magical setting's powers are put in danger because of a villain's selfishness.

At eleven, Hanna is at last old enough to begin her annual travels to mysterious Layamon, which waits just beyond the mountains. She teams up with a fellow first-time traveler, Nono, who's also a newcomer to her village. Though Nono's impulsiveness often gets them into trouble, the two form a close bond. In time, they become successful adventurers together, acting as "guardians" of Layamon and learning to balance "cautious" generosity with incisive "daring." Along the way, they meet talking animals, encounter sentient vegetation and natural formations, and learn about the history of Layamon. Overshadowing the excitement of discovery is Morgalderon, a vengeful man who's plotting to steal Layamon's forest out of greed.

Its first half made up of episodic adventures, the story is creative and captivating when it comes to its worldbuilding. It lingers on Hanna's first sighting of Layamon's natural grandeur: it boasts a "deep, oval shaped bowl of a valley with mountains all around" and a central lake fed into by a waterfall where "veils of mist rose up, and two small rainbows shimmered in mist." This is circled by "an unusually colorful forest" with "thousands of green, purple, red, gold, and blue trees." The atmosphere is both idyllic and miraculous, and Hanna and Nono spend picturesque days sailing on the lake, seeking out stunning caverns inhabited by a "mischievous" bat, and venturing through the door to "*anywhere*," which allows them to visit unfamiliar, faraway lands of varying climates and to make diverse friends.

Upholding the sylvan charm of Layamon are the eccentrics whom Hanna and Nono befriend. They receive the protection and guidance of three beaver brothers, who save them from an encounter with wolves; elsewhere, eagles give them a soaring aerial ride. Also prominent is the presence of sleepy but wise Elephant Rock, the solid, immovable guardian of Layamon whose concentrated storytelling divulges Layamon's mystical history. The eventual return of Morgalderon is delayed in this mix, though his emergence drives the book's second half, which switches from lush worldbuilding to the excitement of the strategic deployment of magic.

The playful prose evokes the magic of the land with its artful deployment of rhymes and poetry. Recalling their first conflict with Morgalderon in the past, Elephant Rock remembers Fairy Queen Nirveena weaving an iconic protective spell through song: "Sleep well, unwelcome you, / While I with drops of this, my flowery brew, / Shall seal your lids, each eye to close, / 'Til sunbeams light and dance upon your nose." Elsewhere, though, the prose becomes moralistic and pedantic in tone, as when the beavers advise the children, "If you swim hard against your disagreement, both of you can get to the other side just fine."

Two children helped along by the magic of friendship and nature feel a burgeoning sense of environmental responsibility in the coming-of-age fairy tale *Journey to Layamon*.

ISABELLA ZHOU (September 1, 2024)

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