

## Notes for Podcast: "Mythago Wood," by Robert Holdstock

This short story was later turned into a novel and Holdstock eventually produced a whole series of novels and novellas set in Ryhope Wood. If you enjoyed this story, there is a lot more to read. Holdstock is held by some critics to be the equal of Tolkien in style and imagination.

This story is told in first person in a somewhat 19<sup>th</sup> century style, though it is set right after WWII. As I have said before, a good storyteller keeps the reader asking questions and reading along for answers. As each question is answered, more questions arise. In this story, the reader's question throughout is "What is going on here?" The first person narration is ideal for this situation. We never know more than the viewpoint character, who also wants to know what is going on.

Our narrator, Steve, describes being drafted and sent to France. He is troubled that his father is so wrapped up in his studies that he does not seem to be worried about his safety going off to war. Clearly, they have a troubled relationship. He tears a page from his father's notebooks as a memento of his father. That page provides our introduction to the mystery of Ryhope Wood.

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The family home, Oak Lodge, sits at the edge of a small remainder of the primeval forest that once covered much of England. While Steve remains in France, his father dies. His brother, Christian, writes often, but after a letter in which he describes marrying a girl named Guiwenneth, there are no more letters. Eventually, Steve returns to Oak Lodge, where his brother has been living. As he approaches the house, he stops to look at the mill pond. He is surprised by his brother, who he thinks is not really glad to see him. When he asks about their father, Christian says that their father tried to kill him multiple times. He asks about Guiwenneth, but Christian tells he only that she is gone.

We have a number of questions here. Why is Christian not happy to see his brother? Why did their father try to kill Christian? What happened to Guiwenneth?

It also seems that Christian has begun to continue the study of the forest that their father was obsessed with.

They begin to remember strange occurrences during their boyhoods, strange figures appearing at the edge of the forest, their father returning from the forest with an arrow wound. Christian wants him to read their father's notebooks, but Steve is not ready. Christian finally says that he must go to into the forest. While he is gone, Steve meets his first mythago, a man with a dog who wants food. When he later describes this encounter to Christian, he identifies the mythago as Cuchulainn, an Irish hero. The dog leads Steve to the grave of Guiwenneth. The body has an arrow in its eye.

Now we are beginning to get answers to some of our big questions.

If you have not yet read the story you should stop the podcast here because there are spoilers.

The forest generates an "oak vortex" that, combined with a human mind, generates "mythagos" which are archetypal heroes from the past. Some of these are ones we recognize, such as Robin Hood. Humans in crisis need heroes, imagine them, and create them in story and song. The psychology of the

story is Jungian, in which humans have a “collective unconscious.” In this view, we have memories that are shared with our ancestors, memories that are not our own individual memories. A human mind attuned to the forest begins to generate mythagos, which have bodies, but cannot escape the forest, or cannot last long if they do. Some mythagos are primitive and dangerous.

The father was trying to find the primary, most primitive mythago, the Urscumug.

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It turns out that he was successful, though he might not have known it. Christian is chased by it, and may not escape.

Steve asks Christian why he wants to continue his father’s work and raise the Urscumug.

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Questions:

1. The father wants to kill Christian because of his relationship with Guiwenneth, a mythago apparently created by the father’s mind. Guiwenneth is shot by another mythago and dies when Christian brings her outside the vortex. Christian thinks that the forest will regenerate another Guiwenneth mythago, so he continues to search for her in the forest. Is this a real relationship? Can Christian marry a mythago?
2. Though Christian finally admits that his real motivation for venturing into the forest is to find Guiwenneth, his first answer is that he is trying to learn about the earliest times of man. Is this a good reason for studying the forest? Could we learn about the early history of our species by resurrecting mythagos of ancient heroes? If you lived near such a wood, would you explore and study it as Christian does?
3. Holdstock has been compared to Tolkien. What do they have in common? How are they different? Is Holdstock as good? Why or why not?