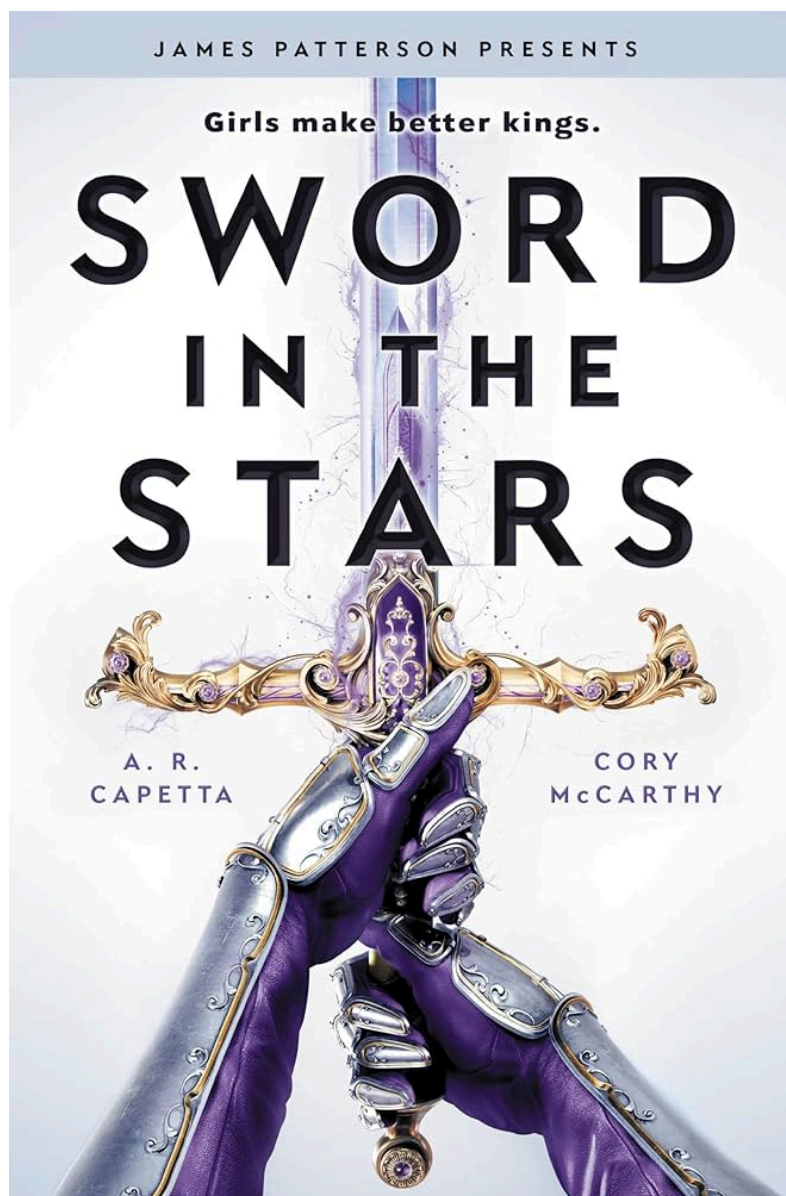Jaena Jaug
ENGL-112B, Sec 01
Dr. Warner
28 October 2024

Sword in the Stars (Once & Future, #2) (2020)

By A. R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy

About the Authors:

Image Sources: https://www.grantravesia.es/autores/a-r-capetta/,

https://www.thenovl.com/novl/2-authors,

https://www.harpercollins.com/blogs/authors/cori-mccarthy

Co-Authors' Website: https://onceandfuturestories.com/

A. R. Capetta (left; all pronouns) is a critically acclaimed author whose work consistently centers on LGBTQ+ characters, weaving them into worlds filled with magic, mystery, and adventure. Known for novels like *Echo After Echo*, *The Lost Coast*, and *The Brilliant Death* series, Capetta's stories explore the complexities of queer identity and relationships in imaginative settings that challenge genre norms. Her partner, Cory McCarthy (right; he/they), is also a highly regarded author whose young adult novels prominently feature LGBTQ+ protagonists navigating themes of self-discovery and resilience. In works such as *Breaking Sky*, *You Were Here*, and *Now a Major Motion Picture*, McCarthy explores the nuances of queer identity and love, often through adventurous and emotionally charged narratives. As members of the LGBTQ+ community, both authors strive to infuse their works with diverse, authentic characters, ensuring that queer readers see themselves represented in the stories they tell.

Summary of the Novel:

Sword in the Stars by A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy is the sequel to their original novel *Once & Future*, which reimagines the legend of King Arthur in a science-fiction, LGBTQ+-centric setting. In order to stop the villainous Mercer Corporation, a galaxy-wide organization threatening the universe's future, Ari Helix–the reincarnated King Arthur–and her diverse party of companions must travel back in time to the Middle Ages as they embark on a heist to steal the Holy Grail from the original King Arthur. Along the way, Ari struggles with her identity as a modern lesbian and hero, while Merlin, her backwards-aging wizard-mentor grapples with his identity while confronting his ruthless older self. This novel subverts traditional Arthurian lore with a blend of medieval fantasy and science fiction, centering on queer characters who navigate diverse relationships–both with others and with themselves.

Analyses of Summative Quotes:

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Quote 1:

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"'Imagine,' [Arthur] said, 'that you are no one … Power is the worst kind of loneliness'" (92, this and all further quotations in this section are taken from *Sword in The Stars* by A. R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy).

Unbeknownst to Arthur, who is portrayed here as a 14-year-old boy, Ari is his reincarnation from the future–Arthur's reflection on the isolating burden of power becomes significant not just in the context of his leadership, but in how it connects across time to Ari, the modern reincarnation of him. As Ari picks up his words and expands on the responsibility to listen to the voices of the oppressed, she highlights how the burdens Arthur faced in the past still

resonate with her in the present. This moment humanizes Arthur by showing his vulnerability and emotional exhaustion, while also illustrating the continuity of struggle and responsibility across different incarnations of the same soul. The connection between Ari and Arthur, separated by time yet united by the same overwhelming pressures of leadership, becomes central to the novel's critique of the romanticized hero's journey, portraying power not as a path to greatness, but as a lonely, exhausting duty to others. Additionally, this passage speaks to teens by emphasizing the importance of finding comfort in others through shared experiences, showing that even when their lives feel isolating, they can rely on others for support and strength.

Quote 2:

"'I'll kill the child if I must' … 'We are not the same person,' Merlin whispered, a revelation that hit him with all the subtlety of a power chord. 'We're *not*'" (190).

This quote marks a pivotal moment in Merlin's character arc and in the novel's central theme of confronting one's past self. As Merlin reflects on Old Merlin's willingness to sacrifice a child to protect King Arthur, he realizes that he has changed–he is no longer that "horrible wretch" willing to commit unspeakable acts for the sake of duty. His whispered revelation that the two are not the same person represents a profound moment of growth, as Merlin finally acknowledges that he is not the man he once was. This shift from ruthless pragmatism to moral clarity–which is reflected by his refusal to consider harming a child, even to save Ari, the reincarnated Arthur–highlights the novel's exploration of transformation and redemption. This moment symbolizes Merlin's break from his former self, and reinforces the novel's broader

theme that facing and accepting one's past is crucial to growth; the story stresses that people can always reinvent themselves for the better, and they are not the past versions of themselves.

Quote 3:

"'Go back!' Merlin shouted, waving them off … It was time to take down this ancient nightmare" (220).

In this intense moment, the confrontation between Merlin and Old Merlin encapsulates the novel's exploration of facing one's past while highlighting the importance of friendship and support in that journey. Merlin's astonishment at having friends willing to stand between him and his "sordid past" signifies a crucial turning point in his character development: their presence reinforces that he is not alone in his struggle against the remnants of his former identity. The battle between the two versions of Merlin is not just a physical confrontation, but a symbolic one; their confrontation represents the ongoing internal struggle to overcome the darker aspects of oneself. The solemn gratitude in Merlin's whispered "thank you" as he hands off the baby to Gwen highlights the weight of this moment, marking not just a physical rescue, but an emotional liberation from his past. This scene illuminates the novel's message that confronting one's history is not a battle one should face alone; instead, it is a collective effort, where the support of friends can help individuals reclaim their identities and forge a brighter future.

Bibliographic resources on the writer's style, craft, endurability, or related topics to the author and/or the author's writings:

Capetta, A. R. *The Brilliant Death*. Penguin, 2019.

The Brilliant Death by A.R. Capetta fits into her literary project because it follows a similar exploration of identity–particularly through the lens of gender fluidity and transformation–which is also central to *Sword in the Stars*. In both novels, Capetta uses fantasy elements and focuses on how societal expectations, especially around gender, can be subverted and reshaped. Capetta's style often blends magical realism with richly developed, inclusive characters, allowing readers to engage with deep questions of self-discovery, family, and personal power.

Kennelly, Savannah. "2 Authors, 7 Questions: A. R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy." *The NOVL*, 2 June 2024, www.thenovl.com/novl/2-authors-7-questions-a-r-capetta-and-cory-mccarthy/.

This interview gives greater insight into the collaborative writing and thought process behind *Sword in the Stars*. Cory McCarthy shares his long-standing desire for a female King Arthur, a figure often missing from traditional literature, and the frustration with the lack of stories featuring women wielding swords. The idea eventually came to fruition through collaboration with A.R. Capetta, leading to the creation of a fresh retelling of the Arthurian legend–this interview reveals how both authors sought to fill a literary gap with an inclusive, gender-bending narrative, reinforcing their commitments to subverting traditional myths and creating empowering stories for underrepresented identities.

"Diversity and Inclusivity in *Once & Future*." YouTube, uploaded by Oneworld Publications, 3 Jun. 2020, youtu.be/0kRjYt0s1HE?feature=shared.

In this interview with A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy, the authors discuss their purpose

behind *Once & Future*, focusing on creating a narrative that embraces diversity and inclusivity.

Capetta highlights her intention to tell a story where characters' identities–particularly regarding

gender, sexuality, and race–are not the central conflict; instead, the challenges the characters face

are from broader societal and cosmic forces, emphasizing that diverse characters can exist within

heroic and adventurous narratives without their identities being a source of struggle. This

approach aligns with both authors' literary style, in which inclusivity is seamlessly integrated

into fantastical worlds.

How This Novel Fits Best in Chapters 4-8 in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning:*

Chapter 5: "Books about Facing Death and Loss"

- Facing Death: Throughout the story, Arthur confronts the reality of death as the use of his
  magic threatens to age him backward to a stage where he loses his memories. This
  predicament forces him to reflect on his life and the important people in it–he must wield
  his magic to protect them, even at the cost of his own life.
- Dealing with Loss: The narrative is deeply influenced by the deaths of Ari's moms and
  her brother: she experiences flashbacks of them throughout the novel, illustrating how
  unresolved grief can haunt individuals and influence their present.

Chapter 6: "Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions"

- Identity: The novel delves into Ari's identity as a reincarnation of King Arthur,
  challenging traditional gender roles and expanding the legend with a diverse, queer
  protagonist navigating the expectations tied to this legacy.

- Discrimination: The novel offers extensive commentary on the restrictive gender norms of the Middle Ages, which is illustrated by how its characters are forced to conform to medieval societal expectations, as female characters are forced to disguise themselves as males in order to pursue roles as knights.

- Struggles with Leadership Decisions: Ari grapples with the immense pressure of leadership, facing difficult decisions about how to honor her identities while fulfilling the expectations of her role in a patriarchal society.

- Queer Representation and Struggles: The book centers on characters whose identities challenge heteronormative structures, illustrating the difficulties of finding acceptance and defining oneself in a world hostile to difference; particularly, as they navigate the limitations imposed by gender norms.

Chapter 7: "Books about Courage and Survival"

- The novel critiques traditional notions of heroism, showing that real courage often means surviving the demands of authority, protecting the vulnerable, and standing up against systemic injustice, not just wielding power.

- With time-travel at its core, the novel presents characters navigating survival in both futuristic and medieval settings, requiring adaptability and perseverance across different contexts.

Chapter 8: "Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable"

- Allegorical Elements: The characters' struggles against the Mercer Corporation can be seen as an allegory for the fight against systemic injustice, encouraging readers to draw parallels with their own experiences of discrimination and power dynamics.

- Fantasy: The novel creates a unique blend of futuristic technology and medieval elements, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a fantastical universe that challenges the boundaries of genre and expands the possibilities of storytelling.

Quantitative Analysis:

Page Count: 369

ATOS: 7.00

Lexile: HL740L

Dale-Chall: 7.32

Flesch-Kincaid: 7th grade

Overall, I would recommend this novel for 11th-12th grade students for its consistent use of profanity and sexual references.

Qualitative Analysis:

Structure:

- Duel POV; chapters alternate between Ari's and Merlin's third person limited POVs
- Linear plotline; time travel causes the setting to be nonlinear; however, the story/plot remains linear

Language Conventionality and Clarity:

- Language is simple and easy to understand

- Words are easy to understand with few exceptions (e.g. oubliette, chalice)

Knowledge demands:

- As this is a sequel, reading the first novel, *Once & Future*, is highly recommended–this novel implements references, established characters/villains, and established relationships from the previous novel, and the story can be very convoluted without the prior knowledge of the first novel.

- Basic knowledge of the legend of King Arthur; familiarity with Merlin and Guinevere

- Basic understanding of the social climate of the Middle Ages; for example, their societal view of women

- Some knowledge of modern pop culture can be beneficial, but not necessary to read and understand the book

Levels of Meaning

- **Surface-Level Meaning:** The story follows Ari, a reincarnation of King Arthur, as she navigates a fantastical adventure filled with magic, battles against oppressive forces, and the quest to protect her friends and loved ones.

- **Deeper Meaning:** The novel explores themes of identity and the struggles against societal norms, particularly regarding gender, as characters confront the expectations placed upon them while grappling with personal loss and the responsibilities of leadership. At its heart, the story emphasizes the complexities of power and sacrifice, illustrating how true heroism involves confronting one's own vulnerabilities, honoring the memories of those lost, and finding strength through community and resilience in the face of adversity.