

# THE MIDDLE AGES

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, European civilization entered a period of decline. Much of the knowledge of the Classical world was lost during the early chaotic period historians once referred to as the Dark Ages. We now call the period between the fall of Rome and the rise of the Renaissance (in about the fourteenth century) the Middle Ages—literally because they fell between the Classical and Renaissance periods. During the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church dominated the social and political scene and was responsible for what education there was. Throughout the Middle Ages, poverty was widespread and life for the average person was very difficult—much harsher than it had been in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Education was a luxury, and few people could read or write. Books were extremely rare and expensive, for they had to be hand copied on costly parchment. A single bible could take as long as three years to produce, and in many medieval libraries the books were chained to the desks to discourage theft. As it was in the Classical world, the oral tradition was the principal entertainment for most people. Local storytellers and professional bards (the famous wandering minstrels) recited stories and poems for eager audiences.

What stories did they recite? Biblical stories were among the most popular—both Old and New Testament—and so were the stories of the lives of saints of the church. The

lives of saints were used to set examples for young people. In addition to religious tales, nonreligious—secular—stories were also popular. The romantic tales of the legendary King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table or of the great heroes Roland (from France) or the Cid (from Spain) or even Beowulf (from the Norse) surely thrilled many children—and adults, for, as in the Classical period, children and adults shared a common literature. The exciting battle scenes, powerful heroes, and wondrous enchantments of these romances made them very popular—and many remain so today.

Children's versions of these tales are easy to find. Rosemary Sutcliff's *Dragon Slayer* (1976) is a retelling of the old English epic, *Beowulf*, and she has also retold the legends of King Arthur and his knights in *The Light Beyond the Forest* (1979), *The Sword and the Circle* (1981), and *The Road to Camlann* (1981). Some of the Arthurian stories have been transformed into modern picture books, as in Selma Hastings's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1981). Barbara Cooney's picture book, *Chanticleer and the Fox* (1958), adapted from Chaucer, is a retelling of a favorite medieval trickster tale about Reynard the Fox. Many of the stories from this period are exciting narratives that have become an indelible part of our society. Our entire reading experience is enriched if we know the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Jonah and the whale, and the tower of Babel—side by side with those of King Arthur and Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere.