



# The Cuckoo Tree

*Joan Aiken*

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When Dido Twite sets foot back on English soil, more mischief awaits. As her friend Captain Hughes recovers from a carriage accident, Dido stays at the Dogkennel Cottages and meets the odd inhabitants of Tegleaze Manor: strange old Lady Tegleaze, her nephew, Tobit, and his wizened, witchy nurse, Sannie. Soon suspicious things happen. A priceless miniature is stolen. Tobit is framed and then kidnapped. A twin sister is found. And when Dido catches a glimpse of her rascally father in Petworth, she is sure she's in the midst of another Hanoverian plot. Can she get to London to warn the king and save St. Paul's Cathedral from sliding into the Thames?

## The Cuckoo Tree Details

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## Leslie says

Dido Twite has another adventure. This one is more engaging than *Nightbirds on Nantucket*, although even more fanciful. An urgent message pertaining to the coronation of King Richard IV is delayed when the carriage is upset, leaving injured Captain Hughes in an even worse state. Dido looks for aide at the Tegleaze Manor, and finds an array of strange characters. Tobit, the Tegleaze heir, will come of age prior to the coronation--but he is framed for robbery, which prevents his inheritance of the famed Tegleaze luck piece. The luck piece is stolen, though, to fund a plot to prevent the coronation of King Richard and send all his supporters to the bottom of the Thames. They fight off the Hanoverians, two witches intent on returning to Tiburon, and even--briefly--Dido's father with the help of the Gentleman: Yan, Tan, Tethera, Methera, and Pip.

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## Chris says

Our young heroine, Dido Twite, has finally returned to England after years away in "furrin parts overseas" but instead of a calm steady progress from the south coast to London, her place of birth, we find her hurtling in a death-defying dash -- in the dark -- on a mission of the greatest urgency. When the carriage-and-pair she and her fellow passenger, Captain Owen Hughes, are travelling in is stranded in the middle of nowhere after an accident, she is precipitated into an adventure involving conspiracies, inheritances, smuggling, witchery and, of course, danger.

Naturally this is almost everything that one expects to find in one of Joan Aiken's *Wolves Chronicles*, but we also hope we'll encounter friendship, loyalty, bravery, honesty and resourcefulness, especially when we know that Dido is involved. She'll need all those virtues in this further instalment of the alternate history series in which the Hanoverian monarchs are the pretenders to the British throne rather than the Stuarts.

In addition, for Aiken fans there's the draw of knowing that much of this story is set in a corner of the world Joan knew very well -- part of the South Downs now in West Sussex, on the road running northeast from Chichester towards the historic town of Petworth. Not only can we feel the genuine sense of place that comes with a novel set in real locations but also the emotional connections the author may have had for here -- albeit with frequent dark shadows obscuring our view.

There are rather a lot of those dark shadows. What reason could anyone have for stopping urgent dispatches getting to London before the new king's coronation? Why do the Gentlemen whom Dido meets after the accident conceal their identities? Who are the sinister old biddies associated with the mysterious Tegleaze Manor? Who exactly are the two strange youngsters connected with this patch of Sussex countryside? Why are Miles Mystery's mannikins causing unease in Petworth, and why does Dido find the tunes played by a hidden oboist oddly familiar? And how is an elephant instrumental in helping thwart a dastardly plan to slide St Paul's Cathedral and its congregation into the Thames?

To say much more would be to reveal too much of the ins and outs of this involving fantasy. The story has a forward momentum which is scarcely held up by the usual cast of several dozen characters with which Aiken peoples the chronicles. Lovers of literature will appreciate turns of phrase such as this, plucked at random, of a teenager's "sad smile, like a wind-ripple over a field of long grass"; while those with a penchant for detail

and references will also enjoy cryptic allusions to Russell Thorndyke's Dr Syn novels, the image of the coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers and the coincidence of title and publication date of Charles Dickens' first novel, among many other examples.

At the heart of *The Cuckoo Tree*, as with many of Joan Aiken's novels, lies love. Dido Twite has been aching to get back home after voyaging around the world for a number of years on wild goose chases, her principal concern being to reconnect with people who showed her care and affection. Will it be her father, or someone else in her depleted family? Or will it be the young man who nursed her through an illness and who kindly gave her rides on his donkey?

*All of a sudden she felt lonely -- almost choked with loneliness. Tobit's got Cris, she thought, and Cap'n Hughes has his boy Owen, but who've I got? Such thoughts were not sensible, she knew . . . But all the hospitality in the world is not the same as having someone of your own.*

Does she get someone of her own, or will she forever be the cuckoo in the nest? Perusal of *The Cuckoo Tree* will point the way.

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### **Michael Fitzgerald says**

This seemed to be kind of a rehash of earlier books in the series (Battersea, Nightbirds). It was ok, but nothing special. I would rate it higher if those other books didn't exist. The start of the book was largely realistic, so I nearly forgot how outlandish these books can get. I think I liked the second half more.

I didn't feel that the somewhat abstract pen-and-ink Susan Obrant illustrations served the book well. I believe the British edition was illustrated by Pat Marriott and the cover, at least, looks really good.

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### **Daniela Kraml says**

I think this is one of the best wolves books, as it's scary but not so bloody as some of the later books. Also it's sad, but equally hopefully, and it has the right amount of drama and wonder. I just love it!

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### **Sarah Smith says**

The Cuckoo Tree is a quirky book with characters that are surprisingly unique. The main character, Dido, has just disembarked from a merchant ship and is on her way by stagecoach to London with "her captain" where he is to deliver a message of highest urgency ahead of the upcoming coronation. The coach overturns, and not by accident. Cast up in the middle of nowhere, Dido seeks help from a moldering manor house and launches an adventure that involves highwaymen, scurrilous lawyers, scheming old hags, the heir to a priceless item, and a blind farmer.

I've read this book three times and each time I catch onto something new. This last time, it dawned on me that the old hags were from the caribbean. My recommendation while reading: Lots of the dialog is in dialect, so when reading make sure that you read it aloud--at least in your mind.

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## **LHbooks says**

Another fine installment with all of the Aiken trademarks. The first time I've read it, so maybe I enjoyed it less than if it had been revisiting something from childhood. The language continues to delight.

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## **Fantasy Literature says**

After her light-hearted adventures on the island of Nantucket in the previous installment in Joan Aiken's Wolves Saga, Dido Twite comes up against darker enemies once she reaches English soil once more. At the end of the last book, Dido left Nantucket with Captain Hughes, who since then has become rather ill. When the carriage they're riding in overtips thanks to a dodgy cabby-driver, Dido goes for help and soon finds herself in the company of more weird and wonderful acquaintances — so many in fact, that they add up to more than all of the previous books put together!

Finding shelter for Captain Hughes thanks to the Tegleaze Manor House and its inhabitants (the spoilt young heir Tobis, the matriarchal and domineering Lady Tegleaze and the strange, creepy Tante Sannie) Dido soon suspects the makings of another Hanoverian plot to usurp the British throne and ... Read More:

<http://www.fantasyliterature.com/revi...>

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## **Jackie "the Librarian" says**

Dido Twite is traveling with Captain Hughes with information about a plot against the King. Their carriage overturns, injuring Captain Hughes and stranding them at the Dogkennel Cottages. Dido tries to find a trustworthy messenger to take the message on to London, but instead she meets witches and shady dealers, a plot to disinherit Tobit, the nephew of Lady Tegleaze, and even her own rascally father, but little help for her plight.

She must resort to the Wineberry boys, honorable local smugglers, but when even they are infiltrated she takes matters into her own hands. She travels to London by elephant in time to thwart a fantastic plot involving putting St. Paul's Cathedral on rollers and sliding it into the Thames during the King's coronation. This fantastic tale gets weirder and weirder, and would appeal to fans of Lemony Snicket's books. However, the British dialect used, and the length will make it daunting for less adept readers.

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## **Judy says**

I seem to be reading this series entirely out of order, as they come to hand. (An added element of excitement perhaps.) They have long been on my to-read list.

It's an amazing book from the point of view of plot. How people come up with complex plots like this, I find hard to imagine. Perhaps they're not so complex, but the way they are written, giving us little bits at a time in a certain order, makes them seem very complex. Either way it's darned clever.

And I've never met so many villains in the one place! Jeepers!

Dido is a terrific female protagonist for an enjoyable read. In one sense she is less interesting than some other great characters in kids' fiction; she is unafraid of anything or anyone and she's an entirely resilient, intelligent, resourceful character. So there's no tension created by the possibility that she will make the wrong decision, say the wrong thing, chicken out of a challenge. She's practically indestructible. And according to the everyman theory of hero types, I suppose we can't all identify with her because of her very fearlessness.

But... it's a nice change to be reading without the head-slapping 'oh...no! Not again!' feeling you get when reading about more fallible characters. There's certainly enough stacked up against Dido in this story to make up for the lack of any internal challenges.

And Aiken's very wry series of pseudo-historical calamities are funnier, the more you encounter. Those Hanoverian conspirators will do ANYTHING!

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### **Peter says**

Dido Twite is a great heroine, all mouthy action, sharp elbows and ideas, and this is the first of the series I've read where she's the main character, but I didn't enjoy this nearly as much as my other two forays into Joan Aiken's many books - The Wolves of Willoughby Chase, and Black Hearts in Battersea – which I thought were both brilliant. Somehow the plot here is not as strong, it feels as if there's too much beginning and not enough end, because the denouement has brilliant possibilities, but is dealt with rather fast. Also the biggest disappointment for me in the book, there were no wolves, despite the fact the book starts with a big coach crash and Dido spends most of the time wandering round the countryside. It still has a lot of fun stuff though - including another of those outlandish and nefarious villainous plots that the baddies in Joan Aitken always seem to come up with.

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### **Kirsten says**

The adventures of Dido Twite continue in this installment of the Wolves of Willoughby Chase series. Dido is back on British soil, but a carriage accident strands her in the middle of nowhere. Now she must evade the clutches of two sinister witches and the evil Miles Mystery, while she attempts to deliver a message to the King and foil a heinous assassination attempt. Fortunately, she has assistance in the form of goodhearted smugglers, who are willing to leave off their business of smuggling perfume and corkscrews in order to save England.

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### **Elizabeth Brush says**

Dido and Simon reunited, my ship before I even know how to ship....

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## **Kristy Christensen says**

Not my type of book with witches and spells, etc. but it did have a plot and an ending so if you are into that sort of plot, you may like it.

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## **Vishaka Rajan says**

This book was actually the first one I read from this series, back when I was about 9 years old. I absolutely loved it and I loved its sequel, Dido and Pa. This book is what sparked my interest in the whole series and I'm so happy to get the chance to read it now in the correct order! I wanted to know if, after reading about all of Dido's other adventures, whether my opinion on this novel would be different or not ... so here is my review:

Once again, we are in for a wacky adventure. Every time Dido had a remark or thought about something, I couldn't help but laugh - she is just that funny and sarcastic of a character. There's quite a bit of witchy magic going on in this novel, which was super fun to read about. This novel was a bit darker than Dido's time on Nantucket, but I really liked that because it gave it a bit more depth. Of course, depth doesn't mean that this novel was more serious; if anything, the story was even wackier than any before it! We have the presence of an elephant again, which was something that I just didn't understand, and didn't like as much, but overall, this story was just as fun to read as every other one in the series. After rereading this book, I think it is still one of my favorite novels in this series! Now, time for the next one!

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## **Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says**

An okay read I guess but not as riveting as some--I had to start it twice, and I put this book down for several weeks and read other things, which is never a good indication in my case. Owen's father, captain of the *Thrush* that took Dido home from New Bedford to London turns up again, this time wounded and ill. Reminiscent of the scene where Dido and Pen nurse Capt. Casket back to health, isn't it? But this time there's a mansion, two mysterious kids, a couple of witches and a whole handful of Hanoverians in the mix, not to mention "Gentlemen of the Road."

It could have been a cracking good read, and was for awhile, but the whole thing about the plot against the Coronation just got sillier and sillier. I found myself skimming the last 20 pages or so just to finish it. The ending was simply chopped off short.

I've heard that the rest of the Wolves Chronicles aren't quite as good as the first few. I gave up on *The Stolen Lake* and I see I'm not the only one. Shall I move on to *Dido and Pa*, or quit while I'm ahead? Answers on a postcard.

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## **Peter Jones says**

'Wildly imaginative' are the words frequently used to describe Joan Aiken's plots and that description could not be bettered with respect to this mad but endearing story set in a little known part of West Sussex with all

the correct local names. Dido Twite is a wonderful, individualistic, strongly intrepid character and her vocabulary is as rich as any of her fellow characters in the story! Joan Aiken's rural characters speech is superb! Very glad to have been introduced to this story and to now having absorbedly read it. (Thanks, Grace for lending it to me)

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## **Massanutten Regional Library says**

**Christopher, Central patron, June 2018, 5 stars:**

A delightful book. I have enjoyed watching Aiken characters evolve. I also appreciate her skill with language.

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## **Books Kids Like says**

Captain Hughes and Dido Twite return to England with a dispatch revealing a Hanoverian plot to kill Davie Tudor-Stuart on his coronation day. In a coach accident, Captain Hughes suffers a broken leg and concussion. Dido stays with Lady Tegleaze and her grandson, Tobit, at Tegleaze Manor until she knows that Captain Hughes is out of danger. While there, she meets the lady's lawyer Colonel Fitzpickwick, Tante Sannie, and Mrs. Luggage, the conspirators bent on killing the future king. Knowing that Davie Tudor-Stuart's fate is in her hands, Dido sends the dispatch to London by way of a profiteer named Yan but she soon learns that the conspirators have planted a spy on Yan's boat. Dido follows them. She is captured by Colonel Fitzpickwick and rescued by Lord Soop and his elephant, Rachel. Dido and Rachel catch up with Yan and discover that the spy, Mrs. Luggage's rat, has eaten most of the dispatch. Dido rushes to London to deliver the message herself and foil the evil plot.

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## **Josephine says**

Despite being labeled "Wolves, #6" this was the fourth Aiken wrote; I think that discrepancy threw me when I came back to these books after having devoured them as a child. Not surprisingly, her writing style changed over the years, and it shows in these later Wolves books. (Or why there's still a debate about the order in which one should read C.S. Lewis's Narnia books: publication order or internal-chronology order.)

I don't like these later books quite as well as I do/did the first three, though I don't know if that's because I came to them as an adult (out of the intended audience age range) or because of the changes in authorial style.

The first three were fairly realistic. Well, realistic allowing for the fact that they're set in an alternate history, wherein the throne of Great Britain is occupied by, not the Hanoverians but the Jacobites; George is the pretender and James the King. The later Wolves books seem a bit more woo-woo than the earlier ones--more supernatural events and sub-plots.

Also, the first two sequels picked up with a secondary character from the previous book, Simon for *Black Hearts of Battersea* and Dido for *Nightbirds on Nantucket*. I'll admit that Dido was my favorite character: smart-alecky, smart and street-smart, tough as nails but ultimately honorable. Yet...I can't help wondering



about some of the secondary characters in the later books: Dutiful Penitence, Chris and Tobit, your choice.

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### **Jane says**

I want to BE Dido Twite. What a she-ro she is. Everything Indiana Jones faced - rats, spiders, snakes, spies, treachery, magic - Dido does it better.

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