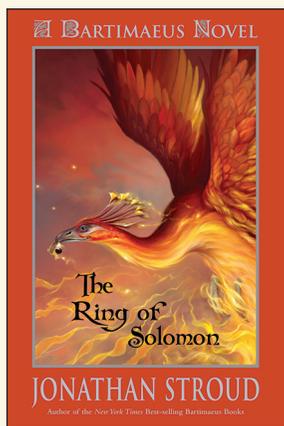


This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and children's author. Visit her Web site, www.tracievaughnzimmer.com, to find hundreds of guides like this one.

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DISCUSSION GUIDE
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About the Book

The Ring of Solomon is a prequel to the three books originally published as the Bartimaeus Trilogy: *The Amulet of Samarkand*, *The Golem's Eye*, and *Ptolemy's Gate*. It follows Bartimaeus during his legendary encounters with King Solomon. Throughout the original trilogy, Bartimaeus continually boasted about his many exploits across recorded history, not least his service at Solomon's court. I thought it was high time we uncovered the truth about this sorry episode, which takes place in Jerusalem in 950 B.C.

King Solomon the Great, ruler of ancient Israel, is universally admired and feared thanks to an all-powerful magic ring, which he can use to command vast armies of spirits. One of his slaves is Bartimaeus, who (typically) is none too pleased about it, but things only get worse for him when he meets Asmira, a young Sheban girl sent to Jerusalem on a secret and deadly errand. Featuring an all-new setting, one or two old acquaintances, and Bartimaeus at the height of his powers, *The Ring of Solomon* is the most action-packed Bartimaeus book so far.



Discussion Questions

- 1 Throughout the book, the narrative point of view alternates mainly between Bartimaeus's story (told in first person) and Asmira's story (told in third person). Why do you think Stroud chose to narrate the novel this way? Which point of view did you enjoy more?
- 2 What makes Bartimaeus so likeable, even though he thinks we (humans) are as stupid as dust mites? Why do you think Stroud chose an antihero to be the main character of his book? Is Bartimaeus a reliable narrator?
- 3 While Bartimaeus frequently insults the human race, every now and then he expresses nostalgic admiration for human civilizations and cities of the past, such as Eridu. What does Bartimaeus hate about humans? What does he like? Do you think his judgments are fair?
- 4 Bartimaeus takes many different physical forms throughout the book, from a handsome young spear-bearer to a pygmy hippo in a skirt. Discuss the conditions under which Bartimaeus changes form. Why does he most often choose the handsome Sumerian form? Why do you think Faquarl often appears as a bald, squat, potbellied Nubian?
- 5 If you were a djinni, which human form would you most often take? Explain your decision. Which animal form would you most like to take? What monster or mythological creature?
- 6 Bartimaeus and the other djinn have an interesting relationship on Earth: sometimes they are ordered to work together, and other times they are ordered to kill one another. How does this affect their feelings toward one another? Do you think djinn interact differently in the Other Place?

- 7 In the novel, all of the djinn are male. Why do you think this is so? Do you think female djinn exist in the Other Place? Do you think djinn are capable of feeling love, or is love a human emotion only?
- 8 In the nation of Sheba, the ruler is always a queen, and her personal guards are always female. Do you believe this is a wise tradition to uphold? What strengths do women have as rulers and warriors? What weaknesses might they have?
- 9 Would you rather live in Jerusalem under Solomon's rule, or in Sheba under Balkis's rule? Explain your choice.
- 10 Asmira is tasked by the Queen of Sheba to undertake a long, dangerous mission. Asmira never questions her queen, and, in fact, feels honored by the queen's request. Do you think Asmira's loyalty is admirable, or do you agree with Bartimaeus that Asmira is as much of a slave as he is?
- 11 In what ways are Bartimaeus and Asmira alike? In what ways do they differ? By the end of the book, how have their feelings for each other changed?
- 12 King Solomon claimed to use his powerful ring only for the good of his kingdom. Do you think this is true? Do you think Solomon used the ring wisely? Do you think Solomon could have been a great ruler without the ring?
- 13 King Solomon in the book is based on the real King Solomon who ruled Israel from 971 to 931 B.C. Research the real King Solomon, then analyze the ways Stroud characterized the fictional King Solomon by weaving together previous elements of history, lore, and legend.

Projects

Reading

Good readers always make predictions as they read. At the end of key chapters write a prediction on a sticky note about what you think may happen next. (Remember: predictions are often wrong—and readers wouldn't stick around unless they were surprised!)

Writing

Create an interview with Bartimaeus, and then answer the questions in his unique voice (with footnotes, perhaps?).

Art

Create a piece of art that best represents the Ring of Solomon. You can use any media that you like, but explain your choices in a brief artist's statement.



About the Author

Jonathan Strood was born in Bedford, England, and grew up in St. Albans. He always had a burning desire to write a full-length work of fiction that he would have wanted to read when he was younger, and so after graduating from York University he embarked on a publishing and writing career in the game book and non-fiction department at Walker Books. He moved to Kingfisher Publications to edit children's nonfiction, and for a time juggled working with writing; but Jonathan is now a full-time writer.

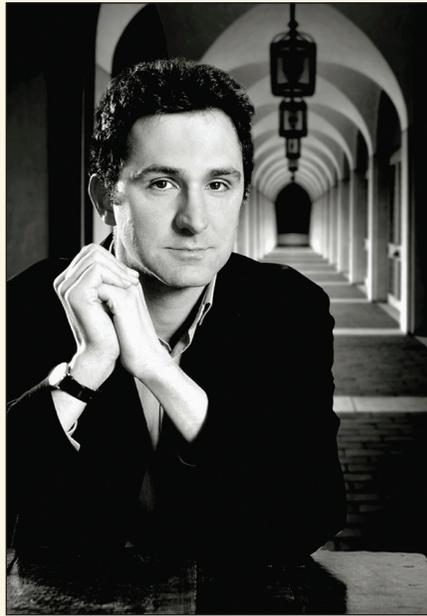


Photo by Rolf Marriott

Q&A with Jonathan Strood

1 Did you always plan to go back and tell one of Bartimaeus's early stories?

By no means! When I wrote the original three books, I was absolutely sure that Bartimaeus' adventures would stop at the end of the trilogy. It seemed like the ideal space to tell the tale—long enough to really flesh out the created world, but short enough to have a definite, overarching structure. And it *was* just right—for the story of Bartimaeus and Nathaniel, the young magician who summons him. Nathaniel's story arc is central to the trilogy, and comes to a definite conclusion at the end of book three, *Ptolemy's Gate*. I was keen after that to work on different projects, and it wasn't until a year or two had gone by that it occurred to me that there might be more life left in my irascible djinni.

The thing is that throughout the original trilogy, Bartimaeus lost no opportunity to boast and brag about his adventures across five thousand years of existence, from ancient Mesopotamia to modern times. By his account he'd hung out with many of the most impressive monarchs and magicians in history, been responsible for innumerable famous buildings, and was the victor in countless battles. I suddenly realized that it would be possible to go back to one of these early tales, and find out whether he was telling the truth—and also that by making it a prequel, I wouldn't be compromising the integrity of the first three books. This was an attractive notion, because Bart's voice—sarcastic, witty, rude, energetic—is very good fun to write! So I chose one of Bart's most vaunted claims (that he spoke with King Solomon) and decided to see what *really* happened. . . .

2 The Bartimaeus trilogy is set in modern times—was it very different to write in a historical setting?

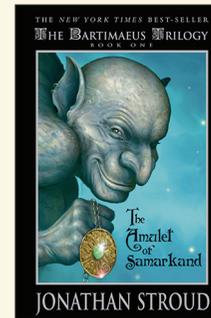
Well, it was important to me that the new book *was* rather different, because I didn't want to just copy what had gone before. The original trilogy is based in London, which I know well, and that knowledge had helped ground the fantasy nicely. But for *Ring of Solomon* I decided to set events in and around Jerusalem in 950 B.C. . . . and this took me a bit outside my comfort zone! The good thing about choosing so distant an epoch is that it's already somewhat legendary, which gave me lots of room to maneuver. Solomon appears in the Bible, of course, and in the Koran, and there are all sorts of archaeological records that give fragmentary insights into life in the Levant so long ago. This was all useful when I was doing my preliminary research, but once I got writing I was happy to create an "alternative" Jerusalem, just as my "London" of the first books had been a fantastic echo or reflection of the real one. It's nice to embed facts or familiar references into the text where possible, because this helps make the background seem more three-dimensional, but ultimately it's all about creating an invented world.

3 Bartimaeus “speaks” with footnotes in all of his stories. Do you find it more fun to write that way?

It certainly IS good fun! The footnotes have always been a vital component of his voice, right from the first day when I began writing chapter one of *The Amulet of Samarkand*. I was speaking in the guise of this ancient, acerbic djinni, who’s mightily annoyed to be summoned to Earth yet again by a no-good magician kid, and I wanted to get over something of his feeling of effortless superiority to humans in general. It struck me that an excellent way of communicating this was for him to give extra information in the form of footnotes—he thinks he’s far cleverer and more knowledgeable than all his readers, so he shoves in all this extra data to prove it. But I soon discovered that footnotes were incredibly versatile things. It allowed Bart to get in this extra info, yes, but it also gave him the opportunity of throwing in all sorts of dodgy gags as well. It meant that he could undercut moments of great gravitas by giving us a cheesy one-liner, or conversely add depth and seriousness to a lighter scene. It’s a way of demonstrating his playfulness, and his difference from the human characters. It would get a bit much if the whole book was like this, so I try to balance the energy and zest of his narration by alternating him with third-person chapters that are more coolly detached. I think this gives the books a good blend of tone and rhythm.



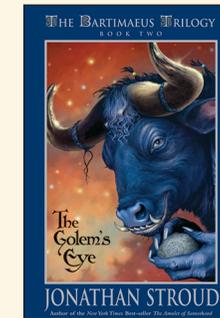
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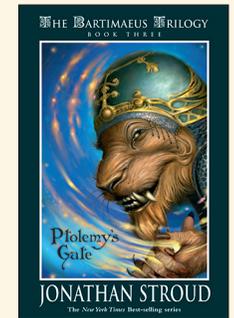
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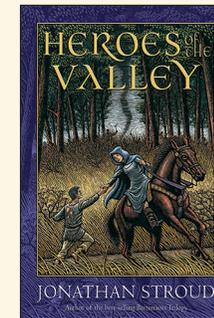
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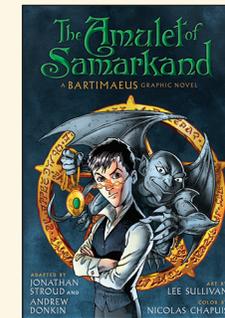
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