



THEY CAME ON VIKING SHIPS

Jackie French

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Teaching Notes

Written by Christine Sarandis

SYNOPSIS:

This is the story of a Scottish wolfhound called Snarf and his owner, Hekja. When Vikings raid Hekja's village she and Snarf are captured by Freydis Eriksdottir, daughter of the infamous Erik the Red, the founder of the Viking Greenland colony, and half sister to Leif Erikson, usually credited with 'discovering' America. Hekja becomes a thrall, a slave, in Greenland, but fiery determination wins the admiration of her mistress. When Freydis leads an expedition to Vinland in what is now North America, Hekja and Snarf go with her. This page-turning story is set against an historical backdrop and the book is both fascinating and historically informative.

Ages 10-14

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

For a more detailed author profile and a full list of books by Jackie French, please refer to the back of the novel.

Jackie French is a full-time writer, who lives in the Araluen Valley, NSW. She had received over 40 awards, including the 2000 CBC book of the Year and UK WOW! Award for *Hitler's Daughter*, the Aurealis Award for *Cafe on Callisto* and ACT Book of the Year for *In the Blood* in 2004. Her books for children also include *Somewhere Around the Corner*, an Honour Book in the CBC Awards, 1995; her successful picture book *Diary of a Wombat* was named an Honour book in the 2003 CBC Awards and the ABA Book of the Year. In Australia, it also won the Young Readers' Award and the KOALA Award for Best Picture Book, the COOL Award, Young Australian Readers' Award, KOALA Award and Nielsen BookData, Book of the Year. In the USA, it was awarded the Benjamin Franklin Award, Notable Children's Book, Favourite Picture Book of the Year, Cuffie Awards, the KIND Award and was number two of the 'Best 20 picture books for 2003'.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

For historical information relating to the novel, please refer to the author notes at the back of the text and the Web addresses at the end of these notes.

These Teaching notes are divided into the following sections:

Studying the novel

- Some questions to explore before reading
- Characters and character analysis
- Themes
- Setting
- Questions and discussion points on the chapters (These questions are intended as a guide only and should be addressed after reading the novel. It is suggested that students might focus on two chapters each or work in pairs and then share some of their answers with the class.)

The novel and beyond

- Writing Topics
- Activities
- Further reading
- Websites of interest

STUDYING THE NOVEL:

Some questions to explore before reading:

- How do the students respond to the book cover?
- Do they find a photographic cover more evocative or appealing than an illustrated one?
- After observation and discussion of the jacket photograph, what sort of person do the students think Hekja might be?
- When the students read the caption on the front cover of the novel, do they have any ideas about how the story will unfold?
- After reading the blurb to the students, find out what most arouses their interest in the book?

Characters: The chief, Bran - the chief's son, Tikka, Hekja, Ma, 'Riki Snarfari' or Snarf - the Mighty Rover, Raina and Reena - the chief's daughters, Janna, Hekja's best friend - Branna, the Viking raiders, Erik the Red, Erik's dog - 'Bright Eyes', Freydis, Thorvard, Leif, Finnbogi, Helga Mordsdottir - Finnbogi's wife, Hikki, Gudrun, Snorri the Skald, Erik's youngest son - Thorstein Eriksson, Olaf Njalsson, Arknel the Strong Hand, Conlan the Irish thrall, Sigrun, Gunnhild, Thrand Eglisson, Bjarnin Herolfsson, the Skraelings - the native people of Vinland.

Of these, Freydis, Leif, Erik, Finnbogi and Thorstein are based on historical characters. Hekja and Hikki are mentioned as Scottish runners in the Icelandic Sagas. Their clothing is described there but nothing more is known about them.

Character analysis:

Write a brief description (about 100 words) of two of the following characters as if you were describing them to someone who had not read the book, trying to include physical as well as personality attributes: Hekja, Snarf, Tikka, Hikki, Snorri and/or Freydis.

Have the students compare their descriptions with those of their peers.

Themes: Witchcraft, friendship, loyalty, exploration and discovery, treachery, story-telling through song, slavery, isolation, trade and settlement and adaptation.

Setting: Hekja's homeland in Denmark, Vinland, Greenland, Norway, Iceland and Sweden

Study the map in the front of the book and discuss the route the Viking travellers may have taken. Research the distances travelled.

Questions and discussion points on the chapters:

Chapter One

- *"When a witch gives you a True Name, it sticks."* Discuss the opening line of the story in the context of Tikka naming Snarf, and later events in the book. (also see pp 9, 13-14)

Chapter Two

- How was Snarf injured and what were the circumstances which led to Hekja owning him?

Chapter Three

- Discuss Hekja's family situation - Consider the loss of her brothers and Pa. (also see p 21)
- Why do you think Ma agreed to let Hekja keep the injured pup? (See pp 14)
- In this chapter, we are introduced to Hekja's running ability. Consider the importance of this skill in relation to her future value for the Vikings?
- What did Tikka want from Hekja in return for helping to cure the pup? (also see p 20)
- Of what did Tikka's 'magic' consist?
- List the reasons Tikka told Hekja that the pup would be useful.

Chapter Four

- Hekja and Bran – Despite their mutual attraction, why was a marriage between them inconceivable?
- What part did Bran play in Snarf's recovery?
- In this chapter, Hekja sings for the first time since Pa's death. What is the significance of this?

Chapter Five

- Summer – a time to take the cows to pasture and go a-milking – a task for the girls of the village; this year, as Hekja is twelve years old, she goes with the girls for the first time – in Hekja's society, this is a right of passage – how does this compare with the life of twelve year old girls today?
- *"After four summers of milking you were judged a woman, and could marry, with some of the cheeses you made up on the mountain as your dowry."* This would make the marriage age of girls about sixteen years. Discuss.
- Make a list of the different chores undertaken by the male and female members of Hekja's village.
- *"No other girl in the village had a dog. Dogs were for men."* Discuss.
- How and why did Hekja's relationship with Snarf cause a strain between her and the other village girls?
- One of Hekja's problems on the mountain was Snarf's hunger. How was this resolved? (see Chapter 6)

Chapter Six

- How did Snarf's new-found independence in finding food help Hekja?
- List three reasons the girls on the mountain treated Hekja with disdain? (see p 31)
- Describe Hekja's feeling of isolation and loneliness on the mountain.

Chapter Seven

- Two important issues appear in this chapter: the girls' discuss the possibility of raiding Norseman and Snarf has an encounter with a wolf. (Both of these factors have repercussions later in the novel.) Discuss.

Chapter Eight

- After Snarf killed the wolf, he became a hero among the girls on the mountain. What impact did this have for Hekja?

Chapter Nine

- When the girls first noticed the ships, why did they question their presence?
- What was Hekja's explanation?
- Why did Hekja go down the mountain alone after seeing the ships and did she act on impulse, out of bravery or fear or a combination of the three?

Chapter Ten

- Hekja witnessed the violent attack on many of her fellow villagers including Ma and Bran. How did she process this treachery?
- How did Snarf save Hekja from being murdered?
- Hekja became a thrall (slave). Under what circumstances did she come under Freydis' ownership and why did Freydis want her? (see pp 55 and 91)

Chapter Eleven

- Hekja saw Finnbogi, still with her mother's blood on his shirt. How did she deal with this?
- Try and put yourself in Hekja's shoes – she is suddenly alone with no family, is traumatised by what she has witnessed, surrounded by strange people, a foreign language and no idea about what the future holds. Discuss.
- As the Viking ships left the harbour, Hekja saw Tikka in the distance waving – this is the last she will see of her homeland for a long time. Why do you think the author included Tikka at this point in the novel?

Chapter Twelve

- In this chapter, Hikki is instructed to teach Hekja the language and the ways of the Vikings. What were some of the things Hikki told Hekja about their current status and their prospects for the future?
- What are Hikki's aspirations? (see p 145)
- Why did the Viking ships land near Hekja's village and where were they heading?
- What did Hikki say to Hekja about Snarf that made her fearful?

Chapter Thirteen

- During a wild storm, Hekja and Snarf are thrown overboard. What did Hekja think about as she was tossed around in the sea and from where did she draw her energy?

Chapter Fourteen

- Which words does the author use to create strong imagery of the ship in the fog?
- Snarf sniffs an iceberg and successfully leads Freydis' ship out of danger. How might this improve his life and Hekja's?

Chapter Fifteen

- Make a list of the changes that occur after Snarf proves useful as an iceberg spotter.
- What factor prevented Hekja from feeling the fullness of her personal grief?
- Why do you think the author countered Hekja's pride in Snarf's ability to sense an iceberg with Freydis' determination to own and rename him 'Ice Nose'?

Chapter Sixteen

- According to Freydis, why did her father, Erik the Red, name the land he discovered Greenland? Discuss.
- What did Hekja see as a hindrance to her plans for escape? (see also Chapter Eighteen)
- How did Freydis' mother die?
- How do you think Freydis felt upon learning that Leif beat her home? Discuss.

Chapter Seventeen

- What part did Gudrun play in helping Hekja adapt to her new home?
- *"So far, Greenland was better than [Hekja] had hoped."* Why?

Chapter Eighteen

- Why did Freydis say: *"I think I may have won more than I realised when I captured you from my brother."*?

Chapter Nineteen

- In this chapter, why did Hekja relive the horror of the Viking attack on her village?

Chapter Twenty

- What did Hikki say about Hekja when they were told to take a message two days sailing distance north of the farm?
- How did Freydis threaten Hekja in relation to the run and do you think she would carry out her threat?

Chapter Twenty One

- How is Hekja's will to survive and prove herself revealed?

Chapter Twenty Two

- How and why did Hikki and Hekja's relationship change in this chapter?

Chapter Twenty Three

- Gudrun repeatedly warned Hekja about men, especially in relation to their drunkenness. What was Hekja's response in this instance?
- Which statement proves Hekja's pride in who she is and where she comes from? (see p 132)
- After the bargain over the dead thrall, why do you think Snorri changed his mind about wanting Snarf?
- What is Freydis' challenge in this chapter and why do you think her challenge was accepted despite the fact that she is a woman?

Chapter Twenty Four

- Hekja was initially excluded from the Yule feast. Why does the author again juxtapose Hekja's sense of self-worth with reminders of her status as a thrall?

Chapter Twenty Five

- What reason did Hekja give Snorri for wanting to keep her singing secret from Freydis and the other Vikings?

Chapter Twenty Six

- Erik the Red died and was buried along with his ship and belongings. Why do you think some ancient civilisations utilised this practice?
- What was Freydis silent after her father's death?

Chapter Twenty Seven

- After Erik the Red's death, what major change occurred in the novel?
- What was Freydis' challenge and how did the other men respond to it? (also see chapter Twenty Eight)

Chapter Twenty Eight

- How did Finnbogi meet Freydis' request in relation to her expedition?
- Where is it revealed that Hekja may be developing feelings for Snorri?

Chapter Twenty Nine

- Before leaving Greenland, what did Freydis do to help ensure Hekja's loyalty?
- Why was leaving Gudrun difficult for Hekja?
- Do you think Freydis was satisfied that Leif understood her need and desire to go a-Viking?
- What did Hikki hint at in relation to his and Hekja's future?

Chapter Thirty

- During the voyage to Vinland, why was Hekja confused by her feelings toward Snorri?
- Why did Hekja feel that it was Snarf who really discovered Vinland?

Chapter Thirty One

- What diminished Hekja's excitement upon arrival in Vinland?

Thirty Two

- Why did Freydis stiffen upon finding Finnbogi had beaten her to Vinland?
- What made her most angry about his presence?
- Having ordered Finnbogi to leave the long houses Leif had given her, Freydis proved that she would not bow to Finnbogi's attempted dominance. How might this impact on the future of the colony in Vinland?
- Which incident inside the long house cemented Freydis' position as a leader over and above her husband, Thorvard?

Thirty Three

- What happened as Hekja and Hikki were leaving the village to explore Vinland?
- What did Hikki ask Hekja in an attempt to clarify her feelings for Snorri?
- Following a swim and conversation with Hikki, how did Hekja feel about her past and her family?
- After hearing Hekja sing, what did Hikki say to her about her ability?

Thirty Four

- Why did Hikki and Hekja risk their lives to follow the Skraelings?
- How did Freydis decide to approach the Skraelings and why was her approach different from explorers of the past, including her father Erik the Red?

Thirty Five

- What did Hekja find impressive about the way Freydis dealt with the Skraelings?

Thirty Six

- Vinland is a land of plenty. Discuss and compare with Hekja's former homeland.
- As a colony began to develop in Vinland, how did Hekja feel about her new life?

Thirty Seven

- Why did Freydis call for a feast?
- In this chapter, both Hikki and Snorri suggest that Hekja partner them one day. What caused Hekja's confusion?
- It is noted that the Skraelings are no longer coming to trade. Discuss the possible reasons for this.

Thirty Eight

- During the Skraelings attack, Hikki is killed and Snorri injured. Describe this scene in your own words.
- After reading p 242, discuss Freydis and Hekja's dramatic action during the Skraelings' attack and how it impacted on their fellow Norseman?

Thirty Nine

- What did Hekja recall in order to assess Snorri's chances of survival after the Skraelings' attack?
- Hekja's status is again elevated in this chapter. Discuss.
- What is Hekja's 'gift' to Hikki upon his death? (see p 246)
- Which word did Snorri use to describe Hekja's bravery after the attack?

Forty

- Upon the birth of her son, Erik Thorvardsson, what did Freydis say to her husband and why?
- What action did Freydis take to secure greater loyalty from Hekja?
- How did Hekja react?
- Read footnote 43 and discuss.

Forty One

- What did Freydis and Hekja find when they visited Finnbogi's camp?
- How had Finnbogi's capture of some Skraelings impacted on Freydis' camp? (also see Chapter Forty Two)
- What proposal did Freydis offer Finnbogi?

Forty Two

- After leaving Finnbogi's camp, what prediction did Freydis make regarding their future safety in Vinland? Discuss.
- Freydis hints at a plan. What might it be?
- Which of the two choices available to Freydis' camp do students think is the most feasible? Explore the opposing outcomes.

Forty Three

- Hekja is betrothed to Snorri. What might her future hold and where do you imagine they will make their home?

Forty Four

- According to Hekja, how did the battle against Finnbogi unfold?
- What is a battle "*without a legal challenge*"?
- Why was it important for Hekja to ascertain Snorri's past battle behaviour?
- What important fact did Hekja learn about Snorri's heritage?

Forty Five

- Hekja and Snorri are married. What do you think their wedding would have been like?
- How did the attack on Finnbogi's camp impact upon Hekja's feelings about Vinland and her future there?
- Hekja, Snorri and Snarf sail forth to Snorri's home in Norway. Do you think Hekja will find contentment as a traditional wife and how might she be received by Snorri's family?

Forty Six

- In her mind, what was Hekja's final vision of Freydis? How does this compare with Hekja's early impressions of her?
- How do you think Hekja may have felt upon learning that Bran had survived the Viking attack?

THE NOVEL AND BEYOND:

Writing Topics:

- Hekja and the chief's son Bran are unlikely to ever marry despite their mutual attraction. Discuss.
- Hekja and Snarf are like best friends. From your own experience or another person's perspective, describe the emotional relationship between dogs and humans.
- Hikki and Hekja are bought together by their skill in running. Why did the Vikings have runners and why was this skill so important?
- Hekja demonstrates extreme bravery when she leaves the mountain to warn the people in her village about the approaching Vikings. Find other examples of Hekja's bravery and describe how that bravery is expressed.
- Outline the possible reasoning behind the author's decision to end Ma's life before Hekja is captured. How might the novel have been different she had lived?
- Freydis and Hekja have some unusual characteristics for women of their times. Describe the ways in which they are similar and different and compare this with your own aspirations for the future. (Consider the question - Are women in our society more equal to men that they were in the distant past?)
- Write a short descriptive passage after investigating the concept of *True Names*.
- Snorri and Hekja are admired for their musical ability. In those days singers were part pop stars, part historians and part newspaper. Compare a singer in the year 1000 with one today.
- How do footnotes enhance the reader's understanding or enjoyment of the book?
- Write a diary entry for Hekja after her capture as she ponders her future as a thrall.
- Freydis was an extraordinary explorer. Why do you think her brother has been remembered but Freydis has been almost forgotten?
- Look up the history of Scottish wolfhounds. Do you think the dog on the front cover really looks like Snarf?
- Find out what happened to the Viking colony in Greenland. What is life in Greenland like these days?
- Where did the word Viking come from? (It's not as ancient as you may think.)

Activities:

- Make a diorama of a Viking scene e.g. Freydis' farm (see pp 94-96 for a description)
- Research the appearance and dimension of the Viking ships and then draw a ship like the one Freydis sailed.
- Make a small scale fabric costume like the ones Freydis and Hekja might have worn. (see the Web address www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/women_01.shtml)

- Reread the descriptions of the Viking housing, inside and out, and explore your impressions through illustration. (see pp 94-96) Do the same after reading the description of the Skraelings on p 211.
- Read the description of Vinland as Freydis' ship sails in to land (see Chapter Thirty One) – using watercolours, paint your impressions of the scene the author depicts.
- Subsistence farming – make a list of the kind of foods the Vikings ate and compare their subsistence way of life with our modern one (see pp 146-147)
- Research another female from the past who conquered a traditionally male pursuit.
- Review the songs in the novel and choose one to study. Describe how it relates to an incident or tells a story about what has occurred. Alternatively, make up a short song about one of your own important life experiences.

Further reading:

NON FICTION TITLES

Vicious Vikings by Terry Deary. Horrible Histories Series

Make This Viking Settlement by Iain Ashman. Usborne Cut-Out Models Series. *This book makes a scale model of a Viking village similar to the trading town of Hedeby.*

Gods and Heroes from Viking Mythology by Brian Branston. The World Mythology Series *A collection of 28 Viking myths and legends - Includes an illustrated family tree of the major Viking Age gods and goddesses, an index, and a guide to the symbols in the illustrations.*

The Everyday Life of a Viking Settler by Giovanni Caselli. The Everyday Life Of ... Series. *The story of a young boy named Egil, his everyday life on a 900's Danish farm, and the travellers' tales his Viking-trader father tells him.*

Who Were The Vikings? by James Chisholm and Ryan Struan. *This book is full of tiny, detailed drawings that you have to examine as closely as a "Where's Waldo?" book or you'll miss really funny and educational stuff. This book answers questions that kids really ask, like, "What kind of toilets did the Vikings use, and why didn't they freeze their rumps off?" There are also good line drawings of clothes, artifacts and activities. While the text is geared for an older child, this book captivates younger children when read aloud, and the detailed drawings encourage little children to make up their own creative stories about the pictures.*

The Vikings by John D. Clare ed. Living History Series

In this book, the illustrations are photos of excellently costumed people, equipped with reproductions of Viking artifacts. A brief look at the world of the Vikings, examining their culture, society, shipbuilding techniques and voyages, Viking explorations in Greenland and North America, and more. Children's lives and activities are not overlooked in this book.

The Norse Myths by Kevin Crossley-Holland

This is an excellent beginning book for older children and adults alike who want to learn about the myths and legends of the Norse. The writing style is well-suited to reading the tales aloud to smaller children as well.

Usborne Illustrated Guide Norse Myths and Legends by Cheryl Evans and Anne Millard.

The information packed into this book serves as an excellent introduction to the Norse myths and legends.

The Icelandic Sagas

These are the ancient Viking stories, though they were still written a couple of hundred years after the events happened. Read Erik's Saga and the Greenland Saga and compare the two different accounts of the same events.

FICTION TITLES:

Leif's Saga: a Viking Tale by Jonathon Hunt

Adventures with the Vikings by Linda Bailey

Out of the Dark by Welwyn Wilton Katz

Viking Magic Series by Anna Ciddor

Book list and descriptive information courtesy of www.vikinganswerlady.com

Websites of interest:

www.greenland-guide.gl/leif2000/history.htm

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/women_01.shtml

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings

www.canadahistory.com/sections/eras/Firstcontact/graenlendingasaga.htm

www.canadahistory.com/sections/eras/Firstcontact/eirikssaga.htm

www.canadahistory.com/theskraelingsattack.htm

www.livinghistory.com.au/serv05.htm

www.vikinganswerlady.com