

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Black Fox of Lorne

by

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Book Information

Marguerite De Angeli, Black Fox of Lorne
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Interest Level: MG

This is the story of twin Norwegian brothers, Jan and Brus, during a time of war in Scotland.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Countries/Regions, Norway; Countries/Regions, Scotland; Wars, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Alan MacDugal Gavin's young nephew, who hates his uncle and befriends Ian and Brus

Began Mor a Scottish chieftain who lures Harald and his men to his castle and kills most of them

Brus a thirteen-year-old Norse boy who is forced to serve Gavin Dhu but schemes with his brother to overthrow him

Gavin Dhu a Scottish chieftain of Lorne who murders Harald and schemes with the English against King Malcolm of Scotland

Harald Redbeard the twins' father, a noble Norseman whose teaching serves them well during their ordeal with Began and Gavin

Jan (Ian) Brus's identical twin, who often changes places with his brother and remains dedicated to avenging their father's death

Murdoch Gow a kind armorer in Gavin's service who shows loyalty to Malcolm and helps the boys defeat Gavin Dhu

Vocabulary

chain mail flexible armor made of metal links

dirk a knife or dagger

laird the master of an estate with land

loch a lake or an arm of the sea

rune a character from an ancient alphabet, sometimes believed to possess special powers

soothsayer one who is able to see or predict the future

talisman an object believed to bring the bearer special powers or protection

thrall a condition of servitude or imprisonment

Synopsis

As the story begins, Norseman Harald Redbeard has decided to leave his native land and travel with his wife, twin sons, and servants to seek a new home in England. During preparations for the journey, Harald speaks to the fair-haired twins, Brus and Jan, about the need to be cautious and cunning in the face of enemies and how they should use their identical looks to their advantage.

Harald's advice proves valuable over the weeks after Harald's three ships leave Norway. A few days into the journey, a storm separates Harald's ship from the others and Harald's company is shipwrecked on the "Winged Isle" off the coast of Scotland. The twins' mother is assumed drowned. Brus, Jan, and their father escape unhurt but, almost immediately, they are challenged by a local chieftain, Began Mor, who invites them to a feast at his castle that very evening. Harald warns that there is no reason to trust the stranger and instructs the twins to separate in order to deal with what may come.

Harald's instincts are correct. Began Mor's men attack Harald's group and throw them over the sides of the castle. Brus, who stayed behind outside the castle gates, finds his father alive but badly hurt. He takes him to a cave but, after going for water, he returns to find his father murdered and his jeweled family talisman stolen.

Brus must bury his grief because Jan is being taken by Gavin, Thane of Lorne, to his castle as his prisoner and animal keeper. Brus keeps just behind the party as they make their way to Dundugal, Gavin's castle. The twins keep in touch using secret signals developed in their childhood. They switch

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places often and, for a while, no one knows that there is more than one young Norseman.

After the party reaches Gavin's castle, Jan, now called Ian by the Scots, finds a few friends among Gavin's party, including the kindly armorer named Murdoch Gow and Gavin's nephew, Alan MacDugal. From these and other members of the party, the boys learn about Gavin's cruel nature and his disloyalty to Malcolm, the King of Scotland. Ian and Brus, both living inside the castle, change places often and find themselves adopting some of the ways of their Scottish hosts.

Events come to a head when word reaches Dundugal that Malcolm wants all clans assembled to fight the English. But even as Gavin travels to assemble the clans, he is making secret plans to meet the English and betray Malcolm. As the assembled clans camp on the way to meet the king, Ian and Brus decide they must travel to the king's castle at Edin's Boro to warn him of Gavin's plan. Murdoch Gow and many of the other men are also prepared to overthrow the cruel Gavin. Before the night is over, they kill Gavin's ally, Began Mor.

After Ian reaches the king's castle, he is overwhelmed to find that his mother, thought to be lost at sea, is alive and serving as handmaiden to the queen. There is little time for a reunion, however, as Ian's tale is told to Malcolm, and he rides with the king to intercept Gavin.

The king's men surprise Gavin and catch him in the act of conspiring with the English at Abington Cross. Malcolm orders the men to kill Gavin and rewards the twins with their mother's freedom and the lands formerly held by Began Mor. As the boys return to the king's castle to reunite with their mother, they declare for the first time, "We be Scots."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At the end of the story, Brus and Ian declare "We be Scots!" What happens during the course of the story to make them feel this way?

They are treated kindly by many Scots, including Murdoch Gow and Alan MacDugal. They swear allegiance to King Malcolm of Scotland and receive lands from him. They also adopt the Scot's Christian religion.

Literary Analysis

Why does Harald feel little resentment toward the brothers who took over use of his fields in Norway? What does this show about how property was inherited in ancient Norway?

Because he was a foster son and not a blood relative of his father, it was understood that he was not entitled to the family lands. He accepted the situation and even felt unworthy to receive the family talisman his foster brother offered to him.

Inferential Comprehension

Brus and Jan (Ian) are identical in looks and stature, but the author shows that there are many differences between them. What are some of the things that make Brus and Jan different?

At the beginning of the book, the author shows how each boy has different skills and preferences; Jan (Ian) likes to carve the runic letters, while Brus is better at hunting. Later, it is Ian who has the talent for singing battle sagas, while Brus shows a gift for understanding animals. Ian also more readily accepts the God of the Scots, while Brus is more skeptical.

Constructing Meaning

In what way is Gavin of Lorne like a "black fox"?

Gavin is dark in physical coloring as well as in character. He is cruel, untrustworthy, and disloyal. Like a wily fox, he schemes for what he wants.

Teachable Skills

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Understanding Characterization Harald brings the jeweled talisman from his homeland as a token of power and a hope for good fortune. Even in our own times, many people keep various objects for "good luck." Ask students to bring in their own "talisman" or one belonging to their families. Ask for volunteers to show their good-luck charm to the class and describe its origin and history.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The ancient Norse people used the runic alphabet to communicate. In addition, many of these runes were believed to have special powers. Have students research the runic alphabet of ancient Norway. Ask each student to use the alphabet to write his or her first name.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Ian and Brus are called upon to sing songs about the past or recent battles they had witnessed. Some of these songs are like poems because they rhyme and also use some symbolic language. As a small-group project in the classroom, ask each group of students to take one of the poems sung by the twins and write out the meaning in paragraph form using modern English.

Responding to Literature Brus and Ian have the strong conviction that they must avenge their father's death by destroying Black Gavin. Initiate a class discussion on the topic of revenge and punishment. Do the students agree that it is up to the sons to seek revenge for a father? How have the ways of punishing wrongdoing changed since the time of this story, over 1000 years ago? Is modern justice "better" than justice in Brus and Ian's time?