

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The White Stag

by  
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### Book Information

Kate Seredy, The White Stag

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The Huns and Magyars migrate from Asia to Europe, where they hope to find a permanent home.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Continents, Asia; Continents, Europe; Folklore/Fables/Myths, Folklore/Fables/Myths (All)

### Main Characters

Alleeta the gentle and beautiful wife of Bendeguz; she dies after she gives birth to Attila

Attila the fierce and ruthless son of Bendeguz, who leads his people to the promised land after years of fighting

Bendeguz the strong son of Hunor and father of Attila; he loses his wife because he challenges Hadur

Damos the prophet who foretells the coming of Attila; the gift of prophecy makes him blind

Hadur the god who tells Old Nimrod's people to search for the promised land

Hunor the fiercer of the two sons of Old Nimrod, and the father of Bendeguz; he and his brother lead their people on a search for their promised land

Magyar the gentler of the two sons of Old Nimrod; he leads his people with his brother

Old Nimrod the father of Hunor and Magyar; he sacrifices his horse to gain guidance from Hadur

Tünde and Cilla the two Moonmaidens who are captured by Hunor and Magyar and become their wives; Tünde is the wife of Hunor and the mother of Bendeguz

White Stag the ephemeral guide that helps the people of Old Nimrod find the promised land

### Vocabulary

**averted** turned away, avoided

**elusive** difficult to find or catch

**prophet** a person who tells the future or speaks on behalf of a god

**scourge** literally a whip or, figuratively, someone or something that causes pain or punishment

**smote** hit, struck

**tumult** the noisy commotion of a crowd

### Synopsis

In the mountains of Altai-Ula in Asia, Old Nimrod, the mighty hunter, is once again waiting by the tribal altar for his sons, Hunor and Magyar, to return from their journey. The two men had left their people months before when they followed a mysterious White Stag to the west. Hadur, the god of Nimrod's people, had led them to their present land many years before. Now, however, there are no longer any animals to hunt for food or to sacrifice to Hadur.

On this evening, Nimrod mourns the hunger of his people and sacrifices his faithful horse Taltos on a burning altar to appease Hadur's anger. A great storm follows, and a fire burns a broad path to the west, terrifying the people. Then Hadur reveals future events through a series of eagles that appear overhead. The first eagle dives into the flames of the altar, signifying that Old Nimrod will soon die. The next two eagles represent Hunor and Magyar, who will assume leadership and guide their people further west in the quest for their promised land. The next eagle represents another leader, and the last eagle, the largest of all and having red wings, symbolizes Attila, the great leader who will be feared among the nations of the earth and will lead his people into their promised land.

At that moment, Hunor and Magyar return from their long journey. They carry game with them, and after a great feast is prepared, they explain how the White Stag led them to a land of plenty. Old Nimrod commands his sons to lead the people to this land. With that, Old Nimrod dies. The people bury him

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that night and set out the next morning. Hunor and Magyar lead the people to the new land beside a blue lake, which becomes a temporary home on their way to the promised land. There they prosper and grow in numbers.

One day after a long hunt, Hunor and Magyar spot the White Stag again. They follow it into a dense forest and become lost in the darkness. The White Stag leads them to a pair of beautiful Moonmaidens, who are magical fairies. Hunor and Magyar lead the maidens back to the camp, where Damos, a young boy, says that he saw an eagle and a white heron merge into a single white eagle that became as red as blood. After Damos reports his vision, he becomes blind, signifying that he is now a prophet. An old warrior interprets Damos's prophecy as the union of the Moonmaidens with Hunor and Magyar.

Hunor and Magyar do, in fact, marry the Moonmaidens, whom Damos names Tünde and Cilla. A year later, a son is born to Hunor and Tünde. He is named Bendeguz, the White Eagle. By the time Bendeguz is ten, he is skilled at riding horses and hunting. After the tribe spends fifteen years at the lake, though, wild game becomes scarce, and once again the people are hungry. Hunor and Magyar command the people to pack up and move west. The people agree, but they leave their camp as two separate tribes because over the years a gradual rift has developed between those who are loyal to Hunor and those who are loyal to Magyar.

The two tribes leave Asia and enter Europe, where they meet fierce resistance from its inhabitants. The less aggressive Magyar wants to lead his tribe north to avoid conflict as much as possible. But Hunor, with his son Bendeguz, leads the tribes directly west. Surrounded by hostile enemies, they fight battle after battle.

One night in his encampment, Bendeguz is wandering restlessly when he encounters Alleeta, a beautiful slave girl who is singing an ancient song of Bendeguz's people. The words of the song mention the White Eagle. When he reveals that he is the White Eagle of her song, they realize that her

people, the Cimmerians, are related to his. Bendeguz frees the Cimmerians from their captivity, and Bendeguz and Alleeta marry, bonding the two ancient peoples.

Soon a harsh winter comes, and Alleeta, pregnant with her first child, grows very ill. Tensions mount between the Magyars and Huns, as the followers of Hunor are called. Standing on the altar dedicated to Hadur, the frustrated Bendeguz publicly challenges Hadur to reveal an explanation for the suffering of his people. Damos the prophet rebukes him for his foolish words. Then a whirlwind strikes the altar and hurls Bendeguz's sword into the air, where it appears as a red eagle and disappears into the western sky.

At that moment, Bendeguz hears that his son has been born but his wife has died. The boy, named Attila, is called the Red Eagle. Bendeguz is bitter over his wife's death, and he vows that he will teach Attila to be a ruthless warrior, "the Scourge of God." Stirred by his rage, Hunor determines to continue west on a rampage through Europe. The Magyars, however, refuse to continue, so the two tribes separate forever.

By the time Attila is fifteen, he has become a warrior and now takes his father's place as leader of the army. When Attila is twenty-five, his army, followed by enemy soldiers seeking revenge, approaches the Carpathian Mountains. Attila sends scouts to search for a way across the mountains, but they find none. Just as the enemy approaches and Attila's tribe faces certain death, the White Stag reappears and leads the people through a hidden pass in the mountains. The enemy is blocked by a blizzard and loses the trail.

On the far side of the mountains, Attila and his people find a land of plenty. As the people gather around the new altar they have built to Hadur, a young girl approaches Attila. She trips and cuts her hand on a sharp object buried deep in the ground. Attila pulls out the object and realizes at once that it is the sword that was hurled from the altar on the day of his birth. The presence of the "sword of

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Hadur" confirms that this is indeed the promised land that they have sought for many generations. Attila the Conqueror, King of the Promised Land, vows to Hadur to protect and hold this land for his people.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How does Attila react when the journey of his people is halted by the Carpathian Mountains?

*At first Attila is determined to get past the mountains, and he sends scouts to find a way. When the scouts are unsuccessful, Attila becomes discouraged. He begins to doubt the guidance of Hadur and feels trapped by the enemy armies pursuing them. He is filled with desperation until the White Stag leads him and his people through the pass.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why can this story be classified as a myth?

*This book about the Hungarian people displays many characteristics of the myth tradition. The story has human heroes, supernatural beings like Hadur and the Moonmaidens, and extraordinary events. Also, the story is one that explains how Hungary was settled even though experts say that historical evidence does not support this tale.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

What causes Attila to become a ruthless warrior?

*First, Attila is destined by Hadur to become a warrior leader. Second, the death of Attila's mother causes Attila to be raised without tenderness or love. Last, he learns to love war at an early age by accompanying his father into battle.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why did Bendeguz call his child "the Scourge of God"?

*Bendeguz considers Attila the Scourge, or whip, of God for two reasons. First, Attila is the warrior who will ruthlessly lead the Huns through the challenges necessary to reach the promised land. He is, therefore, a scourge because he will cause great suffering in the lands he passes through on the way to his goal. In addition, Bendeguz's beloved wife dies immediately after giving birth to Attila. For Bendeguz, this represents a personal scourging from Hadur for doubting his god.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** This story is a tale about the Hungarian people. Tales about a culture, while not necessarily factual, can reveal a great deal about the character of its people. Have the students read other tales from this country and have them explain in a report what general traits, qualities, and customs of the Hungarian people they have learned from their reading.

**Comparing and Contrasting** In the foreword, the author of this story says that historians believe the events in this story are not based in fact. Have the students read a history of the Huns and compare it to the story in this book. Have the students create a chart outlining the similarities and differences.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** When Bendeguz hears Alleeta singing about the White Eagle leading her people to the promised land, he realizes the song refers to him. Have the students write their own songs about one of the events in this story. Students should try to incorporate imagery from the story in their songs.

**Understanding Characterization** This story has many distinct and colorful leaders. Have the students create a poster that sums up the character of each of these leaders. Students should identify specific character traits which can be used to describe these leaders rather than

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events that occurred during their leadership.