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Sword Song



Synopsis

Sword Song is the swashbuckling story of Bjarni, a Viking swordsman. Banished from his home for a murder he didn't intend to commit, Bjarni takes up a new life as a mercenary. He journeys from England to Dublin, and then to the islands off the west coast of Scotland. There he meets the man who is to shape the course of his life for years to come, a life that will lead him from boyhood to manhood--fighting among the clan chiefs from the west coast of Scotland in feuds as bitter and bloody as can be imagined. Discovered among her papers after her death in 1992, Sword Song is a fitting capstone to Rosemary Sutcliff's marvelous career as one of Britain's premier authors of historical fiction.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For all the rough edges in Sutcliff's posthumously published novel, it nonetheless brings far-off times, peoples and places vividly to life. As the story opens, 16-year-old Bjarni Sigurdson is banished for five years from Rafnglas (for killing a man who kicked his dog), a Viking settlement in the Lake Country of present-day England. Bjarni becomes a mercenary swordsman, first shipping out to Dublin with a merchant, then attaching himself to various historical Viking leaders as they raid, fight and carouse (the Norsemen drank a lot of ale) through the Hebrides, Orkney Islands and northern Scotland. Shipwrecked in Wales, he is rescued by and in turn rescues the healer Angharad, whom he ultimately brings home to Rafnglas as his bride. A foreword notes that Sutcliff always wrote her books in three drafts, and that she was midway through the second for this novel when she died in 1992. Perhaps that explains why this third-person retelling of Norse Atlantic sagas

at times seems curiously detached and episodic, in marked contrast to the smoothly paced first-person narrative of *The Shining Company*, published two years before her death. Studded with dashes and ambiguous pronouns, the sentences are often Jamesian in length and a glossary is sorely lacking (though there is a nicely detailed map). This may be best suited for more mature readers, but adolescents, especially boys, will likely identify with the protagonist, whose hot temper is his worst enemy, and fans of Viking lore will not be disappointed. Ages 10-up. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Grade 7 Up-Exiled from his home for five years, 16-year-old Bjarni Sigurdson is forced to support himself by becoming a mercenary. Although he is young and untried, he sells his sword service first to Onund Treefoot and later to Thorstein the Red, Norse chieftains who have settled in the islands west of Scotland. With his black dog Hugin in tow, the young man learns the ways of the sea and of warfare as he follows these men in battle and in peace. After five years, he decides to return home, but is cast ashore during a violent storm for one final adventure. The action-filled plot develops coherently and is less episodic than those of many journey tales. Bjarni is an appealing, well-rounded character whose growth and development keep the story focused. His early experiences are those of an adolescent, as he chases after Onund's enemies. Thorstein is involved in more serious matters, making treaties and establishing settlements, and Bjarni, too, becomes more reflective, considering his behavior and his future plans. Sutcliff wrote historical fiction as if she lived it, and this book is no exception. Particularly interesting is her portrayal of the coexistence of the old religion of the Norsemen and that of the White Christ. Although the author did not complete the final draft before her death, this is a well-crafted story that will appeal to sophisticated readers. In places the language is slightly less polished than usual, and Bjarni's final adventure is not as well integrated into the plot as the earlier ones, but still, this is vintage Sutcliff. Barbara Scotto, Michael Driscoll School, Brookline, MA
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This is a very well-crafted book. Altho it's classed as a young adult book, don't let that stop you from reading it as an adult. There's a lot of subtlety in the characters and setting that make it gripping for an adult reader. One of the best things about it is how authentic both the literary voice is, and the characters themselves are. Sutcliff restrains herself from editorial comment, sly juvenile humor at the expense of the characters, and from victimizing her characters by making them speak anachronistically to comment on OUR time from THEIR time. All things that Bernard Cornwell and so many others are very very guilty of. She also respects her characters as people. She respects

their time as "just another time and place" without judging it or commenting on things we don't really want to know. In short, her voice as author is itself in character with the time, and you feel like SHE was there, and that you just happen to be reading it a 1000 years later. It reminds me of actual Viking / Nordic sagas in its dry humor, sparse dialogue, and quick action. Also, there aren't endless paragraphs about nature, just enough to give you a feel for the place and the season. It's a pity that more of this type of work isn't written, but read it for yourself as most libraries carry it.

Rosemary Sutcliff writes fantastic historical fiction

Impeccable research as always by Rosemary Sutcliff. This is a "Young Adults" book but I enjoyed it as much as I ever did when young. I felt "transported back" and enriched by it.

I bought this book as part of a home schooling curriculum for my ten-year-old son. Although the book is recommended for young adults, my son reads on a much higher grade level than most of his age group. That being said, he still wanted this to be a duet read; I would read for a while, then he would. It's a challenging read, but well worth the effort. We had been studying Vikings in our history lessons, and I chose this book as the companion reading for these lessons. It really brought home the tumultuous, often violent, and complex times of the Viking world. I highly recommend it.

I helped my twelve year old choose this book to read. He found it humorous when I started reading it. "It's a book for Young Adults", he said. That was funny for several reasons, including the fact that he considers himself a young adult. The book really is not just for kids. This is the first exposure I've had to Sutcliff. I was very pleasantly surprised to find the high quality of her writing to be focussed on kids. This tale, wonderfully written, tells of a young man and a bad decision. It is a terrible decision in which someone dies. The treatment of the murder is very light. That may be the one criticism that I have for the story. Today, of all days, our kids need to know the very serious consequences of their actions. The setting of this story is far removed from our own, and is probably the way it would have been. Through the life events and challenges resulting from the accident, Bjarni becomes a man. He learns the hard way how to do just about everything. This forging process helps him to grow physically and mentally. This is a good story. There is a little death, a little love, and a lot of life.

It has been seven years since I first read a Rosemary Sutcliff novel, *The Eagle*, and that book has

remained one of my favorites to this day. I've always meant to read her other works, and at times in the past I would pick one up, only to read a chapter or two and then set it aside when school projects overtook me. I found this book by chance in the school library, checked it out, and read it in under a week. Sutcliff's writing has the ability to engage the reader from the first page. *Sword Song* is about Bjarni's life as a mercenary and his internal conflict of loyalty versus freedom. He is often unsure of where to go, and many times he was torn between the desire to stay and the call to adventure. It is not difficult to spot the elements indicating the book was mid-revision: there are portions that needed polishing and a few loose ends not neatly tied. However, these flaws are overshadowed by wonderful vivid descriptions, timely pacing (in comparison to the slow beginning of *The Eagle*), and a satisfying end to a good adventure. Sutcliff is particularly adept at incorporating vocabulary suitable to the setting of her novels. Many times I had to look up lingo (keep a dictionary at hand) and then discover the etymology is Scottish or British or Scandinavian origin. Some examples: garth, dreich, sark, wadmal, haar, among others. As an avid enthusiast of linguistics, I appreciate her command of diction. And as an aspiring novelist writing a historical fiction in a similar setting, I was interested to see how Sutcliff approached the Viking world of the British Isles. It's clear Sutcliff researched her material and knew it well; her description immersed me in the world of the Vikings and other peoples inhabiting the Isles, and I felt as though I were actually trudging along beside the main character. This book is not perfect, and probably not the best of Sutcliff, unfortunately due to the timing of her death--I will need to read more of Sutcliff's works to see how they compare. But in the array of Viking adventure novels on the market, this book stands out as a well-researched and (overall) well-developed story. Recommended for any fan of Vikings, action adventure, historical fiction, well-written books, or just a good story.

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