Mystical, mythical and marvellous, ‘The Saga of Erik the Viking’ is an episodic adventure story with an emphasis on the honourable and brave rather than the historical. An easy read with a strong male character, though some vocabulary will need explaining.
Overview for teachers

Context .................................................................................................................. 3
• About the author
• What’s the story about?
• Themes to look out for

Literary techniques ................................................................................................. 4–8

Characters
• Erik
• Erik’s men
• Anti-heroes

Setting

Narrative techniques

Structure

Language

Special feature
• Literary tradition of legendary sagas

Activities for children

➤ Before reading ........................................................................................................ 10–11
Ideas for getting started – Engaging with the world of the novel
• Social and historical context
• Debate
• Pictures and objects
• Facts

➤ During reading ....................................................................................................... 12–17
Stopping places – Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques
1 End of The Old Man of the Sea
2 End of Thorkhild and the Starsword
3 End of How Erik and Thangbrand were Tested
4 The end of The Spell Hound
5 End of The Land where the Sun goes at Night
6 The end of the novel

➤ After reading ......................................................................................................... 18–19
Create and imagine – Developing a personal response to the novel
• Oral storytelling
• Where would you like to explore?
• Make your own Viking ship
• A band of heroes
This is the tale of a Viking warrior who lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago. His name was Erik. His ship was called Golden Dragon, and its figurehead was a fierce monster carved out of wood, and covered with gold leaf.
About the author

The multi-talented Terence ‘Terry’ Jones was born in Colwyn Bay, Wales on 1st February 1942 and moved to Surrey, England when he was four. In 1961 he attended Oxford University, initially to read English but ‘strayed into history’ instead.

While at Oxford, Jones became involved in the university theatre scene and met Michael Palin. They began writing comedy sketches for various BBC light entertainment shows before forming the groundbreaking Monty Python in 1969 with John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam and Graham Chapman. Jones co-wrote, performed in and directed some of the Python films as well as more recently directing Erik the Viking (1989) and The Wind in the Willows (1996).

In addition to this he has written and directed an opera, written books and presented documentaries on medieval and ancient history and, on top of all this, has been an enormously successful children’s author. The Saga of Erik the Viking is his most famous children’s book and won the Children’s Book Award while Michael Foreman’s illustrations were commended for the Greenaway Medal.

What’s the story about?

Erik, a Viking warrior and leader of men, one day declares to his wife and fifteen-year-old son that he must voyage to find the land where the sun goes at night...and, man of his word, so he does! Journeying on their beloved ship, the Golden Dragon, Erik and his valiant crew encounter problem after problem in the form of mythical creatures, dangerous monsters and animals, perverse magic, bad weather, attempted mutiny and even Death himself!

Though each problem brings with it a varying degree of fear, doubt and despair, Erik, with the assistance of his invaluable friends, Thorkhild, Sven the Strong and Ragnar Forkbeard manage to overcome their difficulties to finally reach the land where the sun goes at night. It is a fertile land of plenty, but inhabited by what Erik and his men mistakenly believe to be hostile monsters - a view promulgated by their own fear. Aggression and bloodshed ensues and it is Thorkhild who, throughout the story is able to see what the others can’t, reminds the men that they should pay heed to the most magical and powerful Starsword who sings that ‘it is the deeds men do and the knowledge that those deeds are good’ is all that should drive people and not the covetous desire for land and riches. He convinces Erik and the men that though the monsters were scary and ugly to look at, it does not make it right for us to kill them or to steal their land away from them’, adding that the ‘terrible roaring in our ears may have been words of friendship in their mouths...they may have been giving us the golden moon, only we too frightened to see’.

With a new wisdom, respect and understanding of what is precious and true about life, Erik and his men return home on the Golden Dragon. The return journey is not without incident either as Erik rescues his father and is in turn rescued by his now grown son. Finally, he bestows on his family the only four gifts he has brought back: air, fire, earth and water. The most precious gifts anyone could hope for.

Themes to look out for

• Bravery
• Nature of fear
• Loyalty
• Resolve
• Honour
Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative

Characters

There is no description of what characters look like in the story, neither is there any explicit detailing of feelings. Jones either lets us infer or leaves this up to our imagination. Instead, the characters are presented by what they say, do or how they react.

**Erik**

Oozing natural leader qualities, Erik is a self-assured, determined optimist. He walks ‘boldly’ and frequently uses the modal verbs ‘shall’ and ‘must’ emphasising his certainty, decisiveness and authority. He epitomises the romantic idea of a Viking: adventurous, intelligent, honourable, loyal and chivalric. As such, he is well respected by his men, particularly the other named Vikings in the story who share his qualities. However, he is also depicted as human rather than superman. As the journey progresses, he does feel fear and he does have doubts and his leadership is challenged. However, with the help of his loyal friends and a hefty dollop of cunning, he manages to triumph against those who would defeat him and proves that there is more to leadership than brute strength.

**Erik’s men**

Excepting the named few, Erik’s crew are a fairly pessimistic bunch who regularly need geeing up by him. Thorkhild is the most standout character of the named men, appearing most often and possessing a cunning equal, if not superior, to Erik. He also possesses the ability to see and sense things that the other men cannot - a sixth sense you could say. Even when Thorkhild is blinded, he still manages to ‘see’ what is morally right and important and Erik listens and takes heed.

**Anti-heroes**

All the anti-heroes in the book (and there are many of them!) are all similarly depicted as ‘strange’ or ‘a dim shape’ or ‘black shape’ when they are first introduced, creating a sense of unease for the reader. Some are often heard before being seen, adding to the suspense and giving them an air of mystery. As they come into view their villainy can take the form of a formidable murderous dogfighter, a spell that needs to be broken, or tricks from the Old Man of the Sea that need to be foiled. The anti-heroes provide opportunities for our heroes to prove themselves in different ways each time until they become a more fully realised personality.
The Saga of Erik the Viking is a fast-moving collection of twenty-seven sagas, or stories, bound together by the overarching idea of finding the land where the sun goes at night. Each of the individual stories has a predictable structure: a problem quickly arising, an expressed pessimism and doubt, confronting the problem with a sprinkling of magic, trickery or clever thinking and finally, success! Each of the foes are introduced as either a dim shape, a blackness or a strangeness, arousing the reader’s interest each time as to what Erik and his men will face next. The structural uniformity gives the young reader an opportunity to predict what might happen next, offering plenty of scope for imaginative discussions as to what this next foe or landscape might look like and what the men might do to overcome it. It also means they can read the story safe in the knowledge that Erik will always survive.

Language

The Saga of Erik the Viking is a simple straightforward story that portrays physical rather than emotional imagery in a non-elaborate style. The noun phrases generally relate to colour, strangeness or size: ‘strange craft’, ‘pitch black night’, ‘great grey wolf’, ‘great yellow teeth’ or ‘the snow was deep’. The common reference to size helps to reinforce the immensity of the problem the men must overcome.

As there is an emphasis on action in the story, it is no surprise that highly descriptive and precise verb phrases appear in every chapter. They can show great effort, for example when the men ‘struggled...slipped and fell’ as they tried to climb the formidable Wolf Mountain. They can show the fearful qualities of an enemy, for example in Erik and the Great Bird the bird ‘screched...and wheeled round in the sky and swooped low’. They can also show the action of the elements, for example in The Three Wonderful Gifts ‘the snow swirled and the wind roared’. Later in the same chapter, ‘the wind bellowed, and...the blasting waters that tore at her decks like a giant’s hands, snapping the timbers and snatching at the two men who lay on board’. Not only is the choice of verbs wonderful, but the personification and simile in this example help to amplify the power of the weather even further.

The author’s use of comparative adjectives also helps to give a sense of action and movement as well as creating anxiety. When the men are at the Edge of the World, the ‘roaring got louder and louder. And the seas started running faster and faster...’ helping to create a sense of growing of panic at the uncontrollable elements.

With no particular outstanding punctuation or sentence structure, the Saga of Erik the Viking is a mix of complex and simple sentences depending upon whether the author wants to explain or describe setting, character or action. Exclamation marks are used in dialogue rather than narrative to highlight the urgency, worry, surprise and wonderment of the men in response to their adventures. Ellipses are commonly used as a suspension point in both narrative and dialogue, urging the reader to wonder what will happen next.

**Narrative techniques**

The collection of sagas are told in the third person with, on the whole, little interference from the narrator. In fact, the narrator only addresses the reader three times in the whole book: two questions and an explanation in the final sentence that the sagas Erik and his men told on their return are the ones ‘you have just been listening to’. The narrator prefers instead to set the scene, present the action and describe physical features of character and place. Characters’ thoughts and ideas are shared in their dialogue rather than in the narrative. However, as the action is told from Erik and his men’s point of view the reader is encouraged to side with them. This works out morally well for the reader for most of the book as each foe has been guilty of wanting to harm Erik and his men. This all changes when they describe setting, character or action. Exclamation marks are used in dialogue rather than narrative to highlight the urgency, worry, surprise and wonderment of the men in response to their adventures. Ellipses are commonly used as a suspension point in both narrative and dialogue, urging the reader to wonder what will happen next.

**Setting**

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters’ experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress

Although the settings may differ in the story they all possess an element of hostility and danger. For example, the sea is often rough and ‘boiling’, the sky is dark and has ‘lightening forked across the heavens’, the rocks are ‘wild’, the mists are ‘thick’. There is snow and ice mountains that the men must struggle against with all the fortitude they can muster. Some of the settings are more mystical and magical where beneath the ordinary lies the extraordinary and fantastical, though ultimately perilous. Beautiful music is in fact a spell to lure men to their deaths, the Talking Valley is fascinating and wondrous, though its aim is to nefariously keep the men captive. The settings present as much a problem to be overcome as the anti-heroes do.

**Structure**

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader’s interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise

- Cause conflict and distress
- Have its own culture and values
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Reflect characters’ experiences
- Be a backdrop to the action

**Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should**

With no particular outstanding punctuation or sentence structure, the Saga of Erik the Viking is a mix of complex and simple sentences depending upon whether the author wants to explain or describe setting, character or action. Exclamation marks are used in dialogue rather than narrative to highlight the urgency, worry, surprise and wonderment of the men in response to their adventures. Ellipses are commonly used as a suspension point in both narrative and dialogue, urging the reader to wonder what will happen next.
Special feature

Literary tradition of legendary sagas

Written in Old Norse during the 13th and 14th centuries, legendary sagas or ‘ancient sagas of the Northern Lands’ were prose or poetic narratives based on Icelandic and Nordic oral traditions with a mythical, historical or legendary subject. Heroic in nature, they are generally set in Scandinavia or other parts of the Viking world and depict voyages, battles, migration and family feuds wrapped up with elements of myth and fantasy. The hero is often a composite character, a synthesis of Viking ideals and chivalry whose valiant exploits against dwarves, trolls and dragons help define his personality. They are a romantic, idealised picture of a long ago past and remain an influence on literature today.

The word ‘saga’ originates from the Norse language and means ‘story’ or ‘what is told’
Before reading

Ideas for getting started
Engaging with the world of the novel

Social and historical context
What do you know about Vikings? Find out what you can. How did they live? What did they wear? Where were they from and where did they travel and settle? What were Viking ships like? What were their beliefs? What weapons did they use? What impact did the Vikings have on your country? Did anything you found out surprise you?

What are sagas? Find out which countries or cultures are well-known for their sagas.

Debate
What does it mean to be brave?
Are we a more or less brave society now?
What kind of person do you think you have to be to be an explorer?
Is it something you could do?
Is there such a thing as magic? Why do some people believe in magic?
Where does fear come from? What are you most afraid of and why?
Why do people fear different things?
How do you feel about the unknown?

Pictures and objects
Look at a selection of Michael Foreman’s coloured plate illustrations for the book and discuss what clues they give to the type of book you are going to read. What do you think is happening in each scene?

Look at a picture of a Viking helmet, sword and shield and think how you might feel wearing these items.

Explore pictures of a Viking ship and describe how you would feel if you saw the ship coming towards you? What do you like about the ships? How were they made?

Facts
Find five facts about Terry Jones.
Find five facts about Michael Foreman, the illustrator.
What is a saga?
What is a legend?
Where did Vikings come from?
Find at least 10 Nordic words that are used in the English language.
Things to discuss

Character: What more is revealed about Erik in this section? What do you admire most about him? Erik says a lot and does a lot, but the writer does not directly present his thoughts and feelings. Instead he shows him ‘gazing into the darkness’ (p.9 and 29). Why do you think the writer does this? Look at those two sections and decide what Erik must be thinking at feeling at that moment in time.

What do you think of his men?

Which is the scariest character in the story so far?

How is Freya and her enchanter father presented?

How are the Dogfighters presented? How do they compare to all the other foes Erik and his men have met so far? Who has appeared the most dangerous?

Structure: What patterns do you notice within each chapter? Do you like the story more or less for its predictability? Why do you say that?

The Dogfighters are first presented through the reactions of others. How did this make you feel about them? Is this the best way to create a sense of dread? Look back through the stories. How else does the writer create a sense of dread and fear?

Language: Highlight when the word ‘strange’ or ‘strangest’ is used. What do you notice? Why do you think the author keeps repeating this word? How does the word make you feel when you hear it?

What do the long sentences in Erik at the Enchanter’s Court suggest about their search? (p.38)

Look at the words used to describe the Dogfighters - what they look like, how they sound. What do they have in common?

Themes:

Story: How is the violence in this section of the story presented? Which part scared you most? Who is your favourite Viking?

Which trick or escape did you think was the cleverest? Why?

What power do you think the Starsword has? How do you think the Starsword became so special? Do you think Thorkhild will get to hold it again? Why do you think that?

You could...

Make a note of all the magic that has been used in the story so far. Discuss which piece of magic you found the most interesting. Which bit of magic did you find the most entertaining or imaginative? What role do you think magic plays in this story? Does the large amount of magic in the story add to or take away from your enjoyment? Do you believe these magical events can happen? How successful is the magic? Who does it end up working for?
Things to discuss

Character: What more do you learn about Erik and his leadership skills in this section? Is Erik a good character? Why do you say that? Choose a bold action Erik makes and think about what you would have done in his place.

What do the words and phrases used to describe the great grey wolf suggest about him?

Who was your favourite character in this section? Why?

What details or passages helped you picture the characters most? Which character appeared most frightening? How were they described?

What details or passages helped you picture the settings in this section most? What was good about the way they were written?

Narrator: Did you notice anything different about the narration in this section compared to the other sections?

For the first time in the story, the narrator directs a question at the reader. (p.63 and again on p.82)

Did the narrator’s questions make any difference to how engaged you felt with the story?

Prediction: While you were reading A Hard Question, what did you imagine was behind the door? How surprised were you to see that it was a young girl? Whose opinion of the girl did you side with, Thorkhild or the others? Did your opinion change as you continued to read the chapter? If so, when and why?

Story: Look back at The Three Wonderful Gifts. What would you wish for today, tomorrow and yesterday?

What do you think the moral of the chapter Wolf Mountain is?

Do you think the Law of the Wolves is a good one? Why do you say that?

Which was your favourite story in this section? What did you like about it?

You could...

Look back at all the problems Erik and his men encountered in this section. At what point in each chapter are they revealed? Underline the language the writer uses to highlight the difficulties the men have in trying to overcome the problems. Which words, phrases or passages give you the greatest sense of their difficulties?
Read to the end of
The Land where the Sun goes at Night
Focus on...
• Changing emotions towards the characters

Things to discuss

Character: What was your impression of Kobold? What did the writer say to make you think that? Did your feelings about Kobold change at any point in the story?
Did you ever believe Erik was in any real danger in the story? Why do you say that?
What do you think the men have learned during their voyage?
What is your impression of Erik at the end of the book?
What is your impression of Thorkhild at the end of the book? Why do you think he had to lose his sight?
Who was the most intriguing character?
Of all the things the characters did, what did you approve of and what did you disapprove of?
Viewpoint: With whose eyes did you see the story? Did this change at any time?
Setting: In what ways was the Edge of the World presented? Is it what you imagined?
What was your impression of the Land where the Sun goes at Night? Is it what you expected?
Theme: In The Land where the Sun goes at Night, Thorkhild states that though the ‘creatures were indeed hideous to behold, and more terrible than any foe we have met before. . .[it] does not make it right for us to kill them or to steal their land away from them’. How far do you agree with this statement? What does this statement tell you about Thorkhild?
Story: What did you find most intriguing in this section of the story? Why?
How do you think the story will end?

You could...
List the characters you have met in this section of the story and write down how you felt for each of them. Explain how perhaps your feelings changed at different stages of the story. What did the writer do to make you feel differently towards the characters?

Read to the end of the novel
Focus on...
• The ending of the story

Things to discuss

Character: Did you ever believe Erik was in any real danger in the story? Why do you say that?
What do you think the men have learned during their voyage?
What is your impression of Erik at the end of the book?
What is your impression of Thorkhild at the end of the book? Why do you think he had to lose his sight?
Who was the most intriguing character?
Of all the things the characters did, what did you approve of and what did you disapprove of?
Viewpoint: With whose eyes did you see the story? Did this change at any time?
Setting: In what ways was the Edge of the World presented? Is it what you imagined?
What was your impression of the Land where the Sun goes at Night? Is it what you expected?
Theme: In The Land where the Sun goes at Night, Thorkhild states that though the ‘creatures were indeed hideous to behold, and more terrible than any foe we have met before. . .[it] does not make it right for us to kill them or to steal their land away from them’. How far do you agree with this statement? What does this statement tell you about Thorkhild?
Story: What did you find most intriguing in this section of the story? Why?
How do you think the story will end?

You could...
List the characters you have met in this section of the story and write down how you felt for each of them. Explain how perhaps your feelings changed at different stages of the story. What did the writer do to make you feel differently towards the characters?
Create & imagine
Developing a personal response to the novel

Oral storytelling
Make up your own saga. You will need a hero, a voyage, a setting where something doesn’t seem quite right, a harmful anti-hero, a problem and an idea as to how the hero overcomes the problem. After you have got all this clear in your mind, as a saga is originally an oral tradition, tell your saga story to a friend. Don’t use notes! Your friend must then tell another friend, who tells another who tells it back to you. How much has changed? What are the pros and cons of oral storytelling?

Where would you like to explore?
If you could travel anywhere in the world (including under the sea or outer space) where would you go? Collect photos and information about that place and try and persuade others in your class to join you on your voyage. How will you convince your friends to join you?

Make your own Viking ship
From the description of the Golden Dragon and from photos and illustrations of other Viking ships, make your own mini-Viking ship. What materials will you use? Is it sailworthy?

A band of heroes
Create a band of heroic figures by drawing around the outline of a partner on a large sheet of paper. Add powerful features to your hero, some heroic personal qualities and a strong name. Display your band of heroes and include them in a piece of improvised drama or a story/saga.
Memorable quotes

‘You fool!’ cried the green Enchantress, who now looked a million years old. ‘How could anyone tell you what you wanted to know when you yourself didn’t even know what it was you wanted to ask!’

‘Are these men with the heads of dogs?’ said Erik. ‘Or dogs with the bodies of men?’ And secretly each of his companions felt sick with fear.

Then they shook hands and the old Enchanter gave Erik and his companions three boxes. ‘Inside each is a precious gift,’ said the old Enchanter. ‘The first is for today. The second is for tomorrow. And the third is for yesterday. But do not open them until you truly have need of them.’

‘One hair on my head is cold but that is all.’

But even as he spoke, a dark shape rose up in front of them out of the mist. It was a great grey wolf – as tall as a man.

‘We are comrades. Just as this rope around our waists binds us together, so our friendship binds us one to the other with an invisible bond that cannot be broken…’

‘I do not know what it is I fear…but I feel something unearthly is amongst us.’

‘Death is waiting for his game of chess.’

‘I am not your leader because I have the strongest arm for the bow, or the mightiest sword, or even the bravest heart, but because you have learned to trust my judgement, and know that even when I am wrong I speak for the good of us all and not for pride.’

‘Our deeds are our gold, Our quest is our goal.’
Then they celebrated with a feast. And long into
the night Erik and his men took turns to tell these
stories that you have just been listening to.
‘Narrative thrust, imaginative resourcefulness and wit…’

Times Literary Supplement

‘Terry Jones is a natural storyteller and this is a rollicking story.’

Good Book Guide