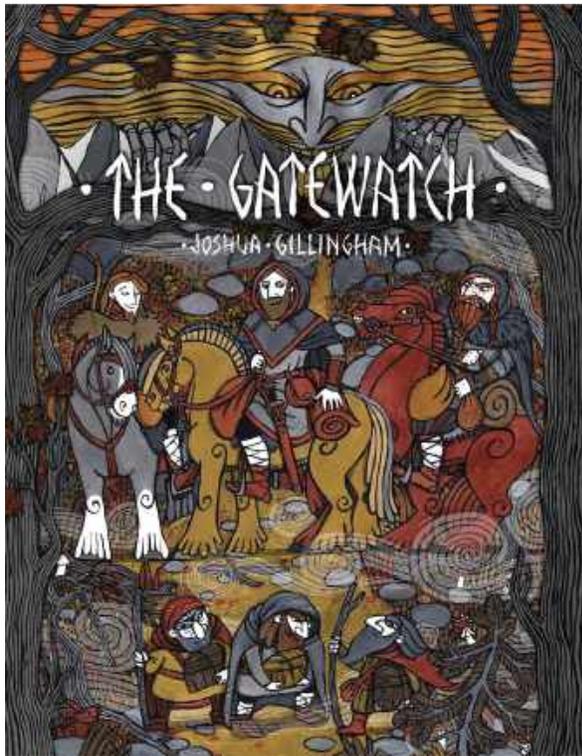

CROWSNEST BOOKS

Teacher's Guide



The Gatewatch

By Joshua Gillingham

Young Adult Fantasy Adventure

Ages 13+

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Introduction

*One hundred ways there are to kill
A troll if you possess the skill
And yet a thousand ways to die
For those who have a mind to try*

-Proverbs of the Greyraven

Welcome to *The Gatewatch*, a young adult fantasy adventure inspired by the Norse Myths, the Icelandic Sagas, and the unforgettable landscape of the Rocky Mountains. Here myth, history, and imagination fuse together in Torin's quick-witted troll-hunting saga written for young adult readers.

This *Learning Guide* is designed for use in Grades 7 to Grade 9 and is a free teaching resource for anyone who wishes to explore the Norse myths, Viking history, or Icelandic poetry through a novel study in their classroom. The text itself is rich with references to the Norse Myths, those ancient stories told by Scandinavian cultures all over Northern Europe and across the Atlantic during the time period now referred to as the Viking Age. The characters encountered in the novel reflect the traits and habits of historical Vikings, most specifically the real-life Vikings described in a semi-mythic collection of accounts known as the Icelandic Sagas. Of utmost importance to Icelanders, as well as to all Vikings of that age, was poetry and so for that reason Icelandic verse forms and poetic riddles feature heavily throughout the story. For those who enjoyed teaching *The Hobbit*, *Harry Potter*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia* and would like to infuse their course with exciting new Canadian material, *The Gatewatch* offers a fresh fantasy world to explore.



Rationale

Choosing which novels to teach in any given course is a difficult decision given the breadth of choice. Here I have outlined a rationale for teaching *The Gatewatch* for students, teachers, and administrators.

For Students: *The Gatewatch* is a quick-paced troll-hunting adventure filled with excitement, danger, and harrowing decisions.

Torin Ten-Trees is ready to do what all young people in the realm of Noros must do when they come of age which is travel to Gatewatch to fight trolls. However, when a troupe of meddling dwarves throws him and his closest friends off course they end up in the clutches of the trolls themselves. There they learn something terrible: an ancient giant from the far North has crowned himself king of the trolls and plans to destroy The Gatewatch in one terrible, decisive assault. After some quick thinking and a narrow escape from the troll's underground prison it is a race back to the surface to warn others about the impending attack. Along the way they'll need the help of the mysterious dwarven Mastersmith and all the luck the gods will grant them. However, before they can save all of Noros from the wicked Troll King they need to answer one simple question: how much are they willing to sacrifice to defeat him?

For Teachers: *The Gatewatch* is a fresh platform to explore the Norse myths, Viking history, and Icelandic poetry in your classroom.

Mythology is a core component of most middle year curricula and its exploration in the classroom can be enhanced through a supporting narrative like *The Gatewatch*. Viking history enjoys a fair bit of popularity but with that comes many misconceptions and misrepresentations. At their worst these misrepresentations are used for nefarious political ends; in light of this fact, it is extremely important for students to learn about Viking history in a classroom context where archaeological facts, historical objectivity, and an attitude of inclusivity are emphasized. Finally, learning poetic forms distinct to

specific cultures, such as the celebrated Japanese *haiku*, can be among the most memorable learning experiences for students. A style of ancient Icelandic poetry is used in *The Gatewatch* to recall the history of the fantastic world just as Icelandic poets, known as *skalds*, recited mythological events and told of famous Vikings through similar forms. While phonetic and linguistic differences between English and Old Norse make it difficult to emulate *skaldic* styles such as *dróttkvætt*, *málabátt*, and *fornyrðislag* exactly, a description of a close approximation that students can use to explore these forms is given in the preface of the novel as well as in this *Learning Guide*.

For Administrators: *The Gatewatch* is a fiction novel by a Canadian author with a specific socio-cultural focus and themes that are relevant to students' growth as individuals and as citizens.

Students today are so drenched in online media that it is often difficult to feel like it is even possible to 'win the battle' against corrosive messages on social platforms, in popular music, and from certain brands. However, students who observe relatable characters overcoming great adversity in a memorable narrative are better equipped to face whichever specific challenges they face in their own lives. By watching the characters in *The Gatewatch* learn what it means to take a stand against evil, to be brave, and to be a loyal friend students will bolster their own ability to stand up for what is right, to take risks for a worthy cause, and to recognize what it means to support those you care about. Beyond these themes there are important conflicts throughout the novel that reflect pertinent challenges in today's society. For example, the main characters encounter a troupe of dwarves early in the novel and assume many malicious things about them based on preconceived stereotypes they have about dwarven culture. However, they are later rescued by two dwarves and soon befriend them. In doing so they learn that their assumptions about dwarves were not accurate and as a result they fervently defend their new friends against other characters who continue to discriminate against them. While it is easy to sling positive slogans and put up posters that encourage diversity, significant cognitive change on the subject of diversity sometimes requires a more focussed experience where students are immersed in the transformation alongside fictional characters as in this story. As a final note, the landscape of *The Gatewatch* was inspired by the Rocky Mountains and will seem strangely familiar to anyone who has spent time in Jasper or Banff. Canadian students spend most of their time reading books written by non-Canadian authors and published outside of Canada, and students outside of Canada rarely encounter Canadian fiction. I am proud to share that *The Gatewatch* is a work of fiction produced on Vancouver Island and distributed by a Canadian publisher, namely Crowsnest Books of Toronto.

Possible Objections:

- Use of magic and reference to a quasi-pagan pantheon
- Consumption of mead, wine, ale and spirits
- Violent battle scenes involving monsters and trolls
- The death of one of the central characters at the hands of the Troll King



Plot Summary

The Gatewatch

By Joshua Gillingham

Torin Ten-Trees grew up listening to his father tell stories of The Gatewatch around the fire. These tales of brave men and women defending the wild borders of Noros against monstrous trolls inspired him to join their ranks. Now he and his two closest friends, Bryn and Grimsa, set out to become trollhunters themselves.

An encounter with swindling dwarves and the sight of ghostly apparitions on their way mark only the beginning of their troubles. Once they arrive, a young woman named Wyla challenges them to a contest of drinking, racing, and riddles. After a raucous evening they learn that she is the daughter of Captain Calder, the grizzled leader of The Gatewatch. The next day, despite several warnings, they join her and a few other recruits on an ill-advised adventure. By the time night falls they are all lost in the wild woods beyond the town of Gatewatch.

When Wyla, Bryn, Grimsa, and the other recruits are captured by a pair of crafty trolls, Torin is their only hope for rescue. He follows the cruel creatures to a secret troll gathering. There he learns that an ancient giant from the North has crowned himself king of the trolls and means to destroy The Gatewatch. In a desperate attempt to free his friends, Torin challenges the self-proclaimed Troll-King to a duel of riddles. When the giant cannot answer the final riddle, Torin and his whole company are thrown into prison deep underground.

With the help of two imprisoned dwarves they escape to Myrkheim, an underground city ruled by the mysterious dwarven Mastersmith. This Mastersmith reveals that the ghostly apparitions they saw on the way to Gatewatch are the spirits of trolls turned to stone long ago. He warns them that this Troll-King means to resurrect the ancient troll horde when he marches on Gatewatch. The Mastersmith then gives them a chunk of Sunblaze, a rare metal that reacts with water to produce white light like the sun that will turn the trolls back to stone.

The company races back to Gatewatch only to find they have been branded deserters. From prison stocks they argue their innocence and warn that the Troll-King is on his way. Captain Calder refuses to listen and soon the troll horde attacks Gatewatch. In the chaos of the battle the company escapes. Torin, Grimsa, Bryn, and Wyla chase the Troll-King up the mountain to where the ghostly apparitions had appeared before. They see the giant restore life to the stone-frozen troll horde. At the last possible moment they are able to trigger the Sunblaze and set off a burst of white light. All the trolls are turned to stone and only the Troll-King, that ancient giant, is left to contend with.

The struggle against the Troll-King is bitter and Bryn, Torin's closest childhood friend, is slain. Torin, Grimsa, and Wyla manage to overcome the Troll-King together and save The Gatewatch from wreck and ruin. In the final scene they mourn their friend and feast over their hard-fought victory.

Pre-Reading Activities

Who Were the Vikings?

'Viking' is a term that refers to a diverse group of people who lived in Northern Europe during what is now called the Viking Age (750 C.E. to 1100 C.E.). Their expertise in boat building, their knowledge of seafaring, and their keen appetite for adventure spurred the Vikings to fame and infamy across the world. From Russia to England to France to Ireland to Constantinople to Iceland to North America, the influence of the Vikings spread across the globe and the cultural impact of their exploits are still recognizable today. Learn more about these raiders, traders, and farmers from prolific educator and Youtuber John Green in his [*Crash Course World History: The Vikings!*](#)

What Is Norse Mythology?

Before the adoption of Christianity many people in Northern Europe worshiped a pantheon of pagan gods whose stories are related to us through the Norse myths. The primary sources for our knowledge

about the Norse myths are the *Poetic Edda*, a loose collection of Old Norse poems by an unattributed author, and the *Prose Edda* which was compiled by Icelandic Snorri Sturluson shortly after 1200 C.E.; since these were written down long after the adoption of Christianity there is much debate around what was actually believed or practiced by the Vikings and what was inserted or adapted by translators to suit a Christian audience. Explore the Norse pantheon with this online instructional resource from teacher and author [Zachary Hamby: *Norse Mythology or the Tales of North Men*](#). Also see *A Quick Overview of Norse Mythology* at the end of this Learning Guide (p. 51).

What Are Some Unique Elements of Scandinavian Folklore?

Scandinavian folklore originated in countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland. In many of these folktales heroes such as *Askeladden* (i.e. ‘The Ash Lad’ or ‘The Lazy Boy Who Sits By The Fire’) encounter evil trolls and must outwit them to save their families and win fame. Many other intriguing creatures are found in these narratives such as the sometimes helpful (but mostly troublesome) *nisse* who is most mischievous around Christmas time and the wealthy *huldur*, or ‘hidden folk’, who live underground and can be identified only by their tails. The remarkable landscape of Scandinavia also features prominently in these stories: towering fjords and jagged mountains, dense forests and turbulent seas, lofty alpine fields and wild hills covered in frigid snow. For a vivid visual interpretation of these imaginative folktales study John Bauer’s illustration [The Princess and the Troll Sons](#) and Theodor Kittelsen’s oil painting [The Ash Lad and the Troll](#).

How to Use the Learning Guide to The Gatewatch

The *Learning Guide* is written as an instructional support to be used in part or as a whole when teaching *The Gatewatch* in the classroom. As every teacher has their own instructional style this guide has been designed for flexibility; each teacher should include, omit, or adapt each section of this resource to suit their specific needs. For each chapter this *Learning Guide* provides the following:

- A Student Journal Entry Prompt
- A Pre-Reading Warm-Up Discussion
- Five ‘As You Read’ Comprehension Questions
- A Reflective Follow-Up Activity (Teacher’s Guide Version Only)
- A Related Resource for Extended Activities (Teacher’s Guide Version Only)

The author is happy to provide the *Learning Guide* to educators free of charge. Any resources external to this document remain the property of their original creators and should be attributed if used.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 1: Ascent

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #1: Tell of a time you went on a big trip. Were you anxious or excited? What did you have to pack? Did you forget anything important or did anything go wrong unexpectedly?

Warm-Up

Take a look at the map of Noros at the beginning of the book. Which locations sound most interesting to you? Which places do you want to know more about?

As You Read

1. Who are the three companions travelling up Shadowstone Pass?
2. Where are they headed and why are they going there?
3. Who do the companions encounter on their way up the path?

4. Why does Grimsa not trust the company they meet on the road?

5. What treasures do the companions choose from the treasure chests?

Follow-Up

Which character do you think you would get along with best: Torin, Bryn, or Grimsa? Why?

The companions disagree about whether or not they should trust the *nidavel*. Would you have voted to take a treasure in exchange for a horse or would you have refused to trade? Why?

Teacher Resource

The Viking's World - [The Top 10 Must-See Places in Norway](#)

The myths of the Vikings were strongly influenced by the landscape of Scandinavia, particularly the towering mountains, wandering fjords, and rushing rivers that can still be seen in Norway today. Visit the homeland of the Vikings through the camera lense of Morten Rustad as he lists his top ten photography locations in Norway.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 2: Arrival

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #2: Song lyrics are one of the most common forms of poetry today. What is your favourite song? Write down any lyrics you can remember by heart.

Warm-Up

Did you know that Vikings were obsessed with **poetry**? Viking poets, known as *skalds*, had many intricate verse forms that challenged them both artistically and mentally as they told the epic tales and ancient myths. These *skaldic* verse forms were highly respected and anyone who could craft fine verses would be richly rewarded by Viking chieftains and kings. Even Odin, the leader of the Norse gods, wanted the Mead of Poetry so badly that he hatched an elaborate plan to steal it from a giant.

Where do we use **poetry** in today's society?

As You Read

1. What do the companions realize about Drombir's cup?
2. Why does Torin wake up after he falls asleep in Shadowstone Pass?
3. Describe the creatures that the companions encounter among the rubble and the bones. You may describe the creatures with a sketch instead of a paragraph if you wish.

4. Why do the companions decide to hide the treasures they received from the *nidavel*?

5. When the companions finally reach Gatewatch they are stopped by a watchman. Why does the watchman check their eyes?

Follow-Up

In the Viking Age, as with most of human history, people commonly drank alcoholic liquids because the alcohol would kill harmful bacteria that could make them sick. While the alcohol levels of these liquids were usually very low people still experienced the chemical effects of alcohol on their body.

Thanks to science we know much more about the effects of alcohol on the body today. For example, we now know that alcohol is both a **diuretic** and a **depressant**. Research what these terms mean and give definitions below.

Diuretic -

Depressant -

What negative effects of alcohol do the companions experience after they overindulge in fire mead?

Teacher Resource

A Crash Course in Icelandic Poetry (Learning Guide, Page 53)

Read *A Crash Course in Icelandic Poetry* aloud as a class or individually. Then compare the rules in the article to *The Battle of Gatewatch* as recited by Torin in Chapter 2: Arrival.

As a challenge, have each student write one verse of *skaldic*-style poetry using these poetic rules.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 3: A Feast in Fjellhall

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #3: Even though most Canadians primarily speak English or French we often borrow words from other languages even though we do not speak them! Find a partner then brainstorm a list of words that you regularly use from languages that neither of you are fluent in.

Warm-Up

The characters have finally reached Gatewatch and are approaching Fjellhall. *Fjell* (f-YELL) is a Norwegian word. Guess at what it means and then look online to find out if you were correct!

As You Read

1. Who stops Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa from entering Fjellhall?
2. Where are they sent to before they are allowed back into Fjellhall?
3. What proverb does Grimsa quote about busy people? What proverb does Bryn quote in response? Who do you agree with?



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 4: Mead & Mayhem

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #4: The Vikings believed that in Valhalla, the hall of fallen warriors, there was a goat that could be milked to give endless amounts of mead and a boar that would come back to life after being eaten every day. If you could have a limitless supply of any food, what would it be and why?

Warm-Up

What is mead and how is it made? What makes it different from wine or beer and how was it important to Viking culture?

As You Read

1. How does one of the newly arrived recruits insult Torin? What about this do you think Torin finds insulting?
2. What do each of the three companions declare that they are best at after Wyla challenges them?
3. How was the tie between Bryn and Wyla settled? Would you have settled it differently?
4. How does Grimsa cheat in his contest with Wyla?

5. Wyla does not solve Torin's riddle. What do you think the answer could be?

Follow-Up

Vikings believed in magic and feared it greatly. One of the ways a Viking could show his or her intense dislike for another person was to raise a *Níðstǫng* (A Scorn Pole) in the direction of that person's house. Historically this took the form of a tall pole with a horse head mounted on the top and curse runes carved into the wood. Occasionally this practice pops up in modern day Scandinavia, such as when an [Icelandic farmer raised a Níðstǫng](#) against his neighbour (using a goat head) for accidentally driving over his puppy. After introducing the *Níðstǫng* to the class discuss the following questions:

- How do people publicly protest or show their dislike of someone in today's society?
- What are appropriate ways of showing discontent in a public way?
- What are inappropriate ways of protesting? How could these be destructive or dangerous?

Teacher Resource

Egil's Saga - [The Icelandic Saga Database](#)

Viking poets, known as *skalds*, often used their creative energy against their enemies or rivals. One of the most famous *skalds* was Egil Skallagrímsón whose exploits are recorded in *Egil's Saga*. A free translation of an incident where a *Níðstǫng* (curse pole) was raised by Egil against the famous Viking Erik Bloodaxe can be found in the Icelandic Saga Database. To find out what led to Egil being outlawed and why he raised the *Níðstǫng*, read [Chapters 59 & 60](#).



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 5: Untested

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #5: Do you usually perform well in stressful situations or do you freeze up? Describe a time that you succeeded or failed under pressure.

Warm-Up

Creatures, both real and imagined, played a significant role in Viking culture. Viking ships, called *drakkar* (dragon) in Old Norse, had large decorative dragon-head prows which were removed when approaching friendly villages as a sign of peace. Certain warriors called *berserkers* (bear shirts) were famous for their trance-like battle rage in which they could do things like chew the metal rim of a shield without feeling pain. *Ulfhednar* (wolf coats) wore wolf skins instead; according to some legends like *The Saga of the Volsungs*, they were able to transform into actual wolves when they wore the cloaks.

What are some creatures that appear in the urban legends and modern myths of today?

As You Read

1. Why do Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa rush out the door of Fjellhall as soon as they wake up?

2. Who do the companions find in Stonering Keep and what are they doing?

3. Describe the test that Captain Calder has devised to determine who is brave enough to join The Gatewatch.

4. After the trial is over, Almveig gives very specific instructions to the recruits. What does she tell them and what will happen if they fail to follow her orders?

5. When Captain Calder and Almveig leave, Wyla and Torin get in a brawl. What are they fighting about and how do they resolve their quarrel?

Follow-Up

Wherever Vikings travelled they gained a reputation as fearless warriors. This was because the Vikings believed that they could only go to Valhalla, Odin's glorious feast hall, if they died bravely in battle. Those who died of old age or sickness were doomed to go to the gloomy realm of Nilfheim instead. There Hela, a zombie-queen who was half dead and half alive, would rule over them from her hall that had walls which dripped with snake venom. The myths also tell of a dragon called Nidhogg who would chew on the unfortunates who ended up there. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Vikings preferred to live bravely and die in battle than to suffer until the end of time in Nilfheim!

Every culture has its own idea about what happens after death. Choose an ancient culture from somewhere around the world and research what they believed about death and any possible afterlife. Present these ideas individually or in pairs to your classmates in a short, verbal summary.

Teacher Resource

[What Is It Like to Be in a Shield Wall Battle? - Modern History](#)

One of the most famous formations used by Viking raiders was the shield wall, though the Vikings were not the first to use such a formation. Vikings used round, lightweight shields and stood in a line to block enemy arrows and push the enemy back. The Roman army was famous for another shield formation called *testudo* (Latin for 'tortoise') formation which used square shields instead of round shields. Hear what it is like to be in a Viking shield wall and learn about an ancient Viking battle technique called the 'Boar's Snout' from Jason Kingsley, host of Modern History.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 6: Frostridge Falls

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #6: Tell of a time that you had to work with someone with whom you did not get along. Were you able to work out your differences or did the conflict spoil the project?

Warm-Up

In the Viking Age children did not take on the family name of their parents as we do today. Instead, children took their father's first name followed by '-son' or '-daughter' as their last name; this is called a patronymic naming system. For example, one of the most famous outlaws in Viking history was Erik the Red who was outlawed from both Norway and Iceland before settling in Greenland. His son, Lief Eriksson, became famous after he sailed to North America, which he called Vinland (Grape Land or Wine Land). The surname 'Eriksson' signifies that he is the 'son of Erik'. In some cases children would take their mother's first name instead of their father's; in that case it is called matronymic.

This practice continues in Iceland today. Some of the most famous [CrossFit®](#) athletes are from Iceland and have been named with this system. Anni Thorisdottir came in first place for female athletes in both the 2011 and 2012 CrossFit Games. Who do you think she is the daughter of?

What would your last name be if you grew up in the Viking Age?

As You Read

1. Who decides to come along with Torin, Bryn, Grimsa and Wyla?

2. Does Gavring think it is a good idea for the recruits to leave Gatewatch? Why does he let them through the East Gate?

3. Wyla takes Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa up to Frostridge Falls. What hidden secret does she reveal when they arrive?

4. All seems to be going well for the companions until something unexpected happens. What happens and why is everyone so upset?

5. By what route does Torin suggest they could return to Gatewatch. Do you think it will work?

Follow-Up

Choose one character from the following list, and then write a retelling of how they ended up getting stuck on the top of Frostridge Falls as told from their perspective: *Wyla, Grimsa, Asa, Leif*.

Teacher Resource

[Thor's Journey to Utgard](#) - *Overly Sarcastic Productions*

In “Chapter 6: Frostridge Falls,” Wyla speaks of giants from the far North. The Norse myths feature many stories of such beings, perhaps the most entertaining being Thor’s Journey to Utgard. This translation, by history and mythology educators Overly Sarcastic Productions, humorously relates the tale of Thor and Loki’s misadventures in the land of the giants.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 7: Trolls

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #7: Tell of a time that you were tempted to do something wrong but you resisted. Afterwards were you glad that you did not give in to the temptation? Why or why not?

Warm-Up

Trolls are the definitive villains of Scandinavian folklore. Cruel and greedy, these creatures are famous for looking like natural objects such as hills, rocks, or trees. According to these stories any troll will turn to stone when it is exposed to sunlight. Author, translator, and professor J.R.R. Tolkien references this feature of Scandinavian folklore in his famous novel *The Hobbit*, where one of the characters tricks a group of dangerous trolls into arguing until sunrise when they are turned to stone.

How is the modern use of the word ‘troll’ different from its use in Scandinavian folklore?

As You Read

1. What does the company of recruits come across on their way back to Gatewatch?

2. What sort of trap is set for them and who gets caught?

3. Describe the trolls that Torin sees as he hides behind a stack of barrels.

4. The creatures decide not to eat the recruits they have captured. Why?
5. Torin hatches a plan to kill one of the trolls. Why does it fail?

Follow-Up



Many iconic land features in Norway refer to the trolls of Scandinavian folklore. The most famous is **Trolltunga** (The Troll's Tongue) which is located on the western edge of the Hardangervidda plateau. **Trollveggen** (The Troll Wall) is another famous location that attracts rock climbers and base jumpers as it is the tallest vertical rock face in all of Europe.

Trolltunga

Research a local land feature in your area that has a name related to a legend or is named after someone famous. What is the story behind how it got its name?

Teacher Resource

[The Story of Askeladden and the Troll as translated by Camilla Christensen](#)

Camilla Christensen provides a translation of one of the most famous tales of Askeladden in her online blog [Legends of the North](#). Read the story aloud as a class and then discuss how the 'Ash Lad' uses his smarts to outwit the troll.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 8: The Trolting

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #8: There are many different ways for groups of people to make decisions when disagreements arise. Tell of a time that you were in a group that disagreed about something and describe how a decision was made about what to do.

Warm-Up

The Viking Age Icelanders had no king but instead held an annual gathering in a place called *Thingvellir* (The Gathering Field) for a legal and social event called the *Althing*. Here all free folk would gather to barter and trade, to visit and play, and to settle legal disputes according to a set of common laws. These laws would be recited by the Lawspeaker each year and legal cases that had been left unresolved over the winter would be presented and decided by a group of powerful chieftains from all over Iceland. Smaller local assemblies, called *things* or *tings*, would occur throughout the rest of the year for the same purposes.

Compare and contrast this legal system with the judicial and legislative system in your country.

As You Read

1. What is the Trolting and where does it happen?

2. Describe what Torin sees at the Trolting.

3. What fate awaits Torin's friends at the Trollting?

4. In a desperate attempt to save his friends, Torin calls out from where he is hiding. What does he say and why does he say it?

5. What are the terms of the *bardagi* between Torin and Ur-Gezbrukter?

Follow-Up

In the Norse myths, riddles are often used as a narrative way to recite knowledge about the world. In one particularly informative exchange, Odin travels to the land of the giants to challenge Vafthrudnir to a duel of wits. Each one asks the other a question about the origins of the world. For the Vikings who listened to this story, it would have been a mini-history lesson according to the Norse worldview.

In [*The Influence of Norse Mythology in "Riddles in the Dark"*](#), Erin Nordhof relates this famous exchange between Odin and Vafthrundnir to another famous battle of wits in fantasy: the riddles of Bilbo and Gollum. After reading the article, do you think Odin's last question to Vafthrudnir is fair?

Teacher Resource

["Wild-Goose Chase: History in Medieval Icelandic Law" by Tamás Reinicke](#)

The set of Icelandic laws recited by the Lawspeaker each year at the Althingi were set down in writing in a book called *Gragas* or the Grey Goose Laws. Some of these laws have been highlighted in Viking-themed TV shows, such as the History Channel's *Vikings*. In this scholarly article, Tamás Reinicke analyses the original sources and archeological challenges of working with this text.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 9: A Game of Riddles

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #9: Riddles have fascinated people for centuries. Either record a riddle you know of, find a riddle online, or create a riddle of your own. Don't forget to include the answer!

Warm-Up

Here is a riddle to warm up your brain: *What runs up and down all day yet never moves?*

Can you guess the answer? *A Staircase*

As You Read

1. The riddles in this chapter take a specific poetic form. Describe this form briefly using one of the riddles as an example.
2. According to the traditions of the giants, what must happen after three riddles have been answered?

3. Explain the custom of the giants after six riddles have been answered.

4. Besides Torin's friends, who are the other two prisoners being held captive by the trolls?

5. What byname (i.e. nick-name) does Ur-Gezbrukter give Torin at the end of their *bardagi*?

Follow-Up

In the Viking Age, especially in the Icelandic Sagas, bynames were a popular way to identify famous characters: Erik the Red, Hakon the Good, Grettir the Strong, Aud the All-Knowing, and Ketil Flatnose are just a few examples. Bynames can be praising or insulting, inspired by physical features, or related to where an individual comes from. Create a byname for yourself and describe why it is a good fit for you.

Teacher Resource

[*Can You Solve Odin's Riddles? from Medievalists.net*](#)

The Norse god Odin was famous for his riddles. In *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrik*, Heidrik is tricked into a contest of riddles with Odin who has entered his hall in disguise. Try as a class to answer the riddles from the saga as presented on Medievalist.net or have students split up into groups and compete to see which group is the wisest of all!



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 10: To Myrkheim

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #10: One of the most exciting and challenging things about travelling is interacting with different cultures. Tell of a time that you encountered a culture different from your own.

Warm-Up

The longships made by the Vikings allowed them full access to the highway of the ancient world: the sea. As a class, investigate [this map](#) of routes taken by Norse explorers during the Viking Age. Make a list of all the different cultures that the Vikings would have interacted with.

As You Read

1. How do the prisoners escape the dungeon below Fanghall?
2. What do the two *nidavel* suggest after the company escapes?
3. How are the underground caverns lit?

4. Who surprises the company at Nori's well?

5. What is Bari famous for?

Follow-Up

Wherever the Vikings went, they brought their culture and customs with them. In many of the places where the Viking raided or traded, they eventually settled permanently. In every case these Viking immigrants integrated with the local culture, adopting some new customs and retaining some of their old ones.

Describe a cultural tradition or practice from your family that comes from outside modern North American culture. What significance does this hold for you, and why does your family keep this tradition or practice alive?

Teacher Resource

[Viking Voyages - An Interactive Map from ScienceNordic](#)

This interactive map from ScienceNordic (Authors: Morten Revn, PhD & Mette Friis-Mikkelsen) highlights the main travel routes of the Vikings. Place students into groups and then assign them to delve deeper into the cultural impact of Viking contact in each area. Each group can report their findings as a short multimedia presentation or an informative visual graphic.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 11: Secrets at Supper

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #11: One of the most exciting parts of experiencing a foreign culture is getting to try new foods and exotic flavors. Describe a meal that you had that was from a culture other than your own. Did you like it or was it not for you?

Warm-Up

Scandinavians are famous for some pretty foul dishes. In Norway, Sweden, and Finland the dish *lutefisk* (white fish soaked in lye) is a key part of a traditional Christmas dinner. In Iceland is an even more stomach-turning dish called *hakarl*; this particularly pungent platter is made of fermented shark meat!

Have you ever tried a meal or a recipe that might make other people cringe?

As You Read

1. Describe the underground city of Myrkheim.

2. Who greets the company as they approach Brok's house?

3. What does Torin think he sees when he is sitting in the baths?

4. Summarize the story that Bari recites during dinner.

5. What does Brok reveal after dinner that makes Wyla so angry?

Follow-Up

The customs of the *nidavel* seem strange to Torin and his company. Based on the experience of the characters in this chapter write a short *Travel Guide to Myrkeim*. Be sure to include a description of the city, information about the language and the location, and examples of cultural customs.

Teacher Resource

[Norwegian Lefse Recipe from *Sons of Norway*](#)

The most iconic Scandinavian recipe is probably Norwegian lefse (*lehf-seh*). This traditional dessert is made with potatoes and is similar in style to French crepes. Usually served with butter, sugar, and cinnamon, lefse is sure to be a hit with anyone who has a sweet tooth. Many other Scandinavian dessert recipes are available for free from the *Sons of Norway* website.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 12: The Mastersmith

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #12: Have you ever been given a strange gift? Tell of a time that you received a gift that you were not sure what to do with or a gift that you did not really want.

Warm-Up

When we think of occasions for giving gifts in North America we might think of birthdays, Christmas, or Valentine's Day. However, in the Viking Age chieftains and kings had to give gifts to their followers all year-round to secure their loyalty. These could take the form of gold and silver, of weapons or armour, or of huge feasts that could last several days such as the *Jul* (y-OOL) feast in winter. Failure to provide such gifts was seen as a sign of weakness, of incompetence, or of stinginess.

In contrast, giving gifts to people for political gain (i.e. bribery) today is illegal in most countries. Compare and contrast the leadership system of the Viking Age to how democratically elected candidates seek and maintain positions of power in North America.

As You Read

1. Who is gone when the company gathers for breakfast?

2. Describe what the Mastersmith looks like.

3. How does the Mastersmith answer Torin's final riddle to Ur-Gezbrukter?

4. What gifts does the Mastersmith give the company?

5. According to the Mastersmith who are the Watchers?

Follow-Up

At the beginning of this chapter Wyla charged off without consulting the rest of the company. Did she do the right thing? Either defend her decision or explain why she should have acted differently.

Teacher Resource

“The Treasures of the Gods” from
Reaching Valhalla: Tales and Sagas from Norse Mythology

American teacher and content creator Zachary Hamby is an innovator in teaching literature and myths to middle grade and high school students. In his publication *Reaching Valhalla: Tales and Sagas from Norse Mythology* there is a short play titled “The Treasures of the Gods.” This short script tells of how Loki tricked the dwarves into crafting the most treasured items in Norse mythology, including Thor’s famed hammer, *Mjolnir*. If you choose to use this resource then select students to play each character listed at the beginning of the script for “The Treasures of the Gods” and do a dramatic read-through. Afterwards, discuss the role of the dwarves in Norse mythology as told through the short play and summarize what unique skills and abilities they were famous for.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 13: Scorched Beards

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #13: We usually rely on our friends and family if we need assistance, but every once in a while we may receive aid from an unexpected source. Relate a story of how you helped a stranger or of how a stranger helped you.

Warm-Up

In books and movies Viking men are often depicted as having wild, unruly beards. However, archeological evidence suggests that Vikings were very particular about their hair. Combs and brushes are common items found in excavations of Viking households and were used by both men and women to maintain a regular hair-care routine. In some cases Vikings had hair memorable enough to earn them a byname, such as the Danish king Sven Forkbeard or the Norwegian king Harald Finehair.

What do we associate beards with in today's culture?

As You Read

1. What parting gifts does Brok give the company before they leave Myrkheim?
2. Who decides to go searching for Wyla?

3. What type of gathering does the search party stumble upon?

4. Describe the creatures that the company sees.

5. Who have the creatures taken as prisoners?

Follow-Up

Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa swore a kin oath with Wyla back at Frostridge Falls. Although Torin is tempted to give up the search, Bryn insists that they push on despite the danger that might lay ahead.

Do you think it is ever justifiable to go back on a promise or should promises always be kept?

Teacher Resource

*Haraldsbaugen and the Statue of Harald Finehair**

One of the most epic stories in all of Viking history is that of Harald Finehair, the first King of Norway. His signature hairdo came as a result of an oath he swore to a young woman by the name of Gyda. When Harald asked Gyda to marry him, she said she would not do so until he had made himself king of all of Norway. As a sign of his oath to do just that, he swore to not cut his hair until he had succeeded. Ten years later he had conquered most of what we consider to be modern Norway; he finally got to cut his hair and marry Gyda. In Haugesund, Norway (where the author's family is from!) there is a monument and a statue of this iconic figure; the links above provide a quick glimpse at these reminders of Harald's historic impact on Norway.

**Photo Credit: Ólafsson (Instagram: @horda_hersir)*



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 14: A Narrow Door

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #14: At some point in our lives we will have the unfortunate experience of being treated unfairly. We may also have the opportunity to ‘get back’ at the person who cheated, lied, or stole something from us. Recount a time when you had a chance to get revenge but didn’t, or when someone else had a chance to get revenge on you but decided not to.

Warm-Up

In the Norse myths, the gods kill a giant named Thiazi for stealing the apples of eternal youth. Thiazi’s daughter Skadi demands compensation from them for killing her father. In a strange turn of events Odin offers Skadi any husband she wants from among the gods, but she must choose him from seeing only his feet. Skadi hopes to choose Balder, the beautiful god of light, but instead ends up picking the feet of Njord, lord of the sea. The marriage is not particularly successful and eventually Skadi returns to the mountains and Njord to his ocean home.

What are some ways that people today are compensated for wrongs done against them?

As You Read

1. Who helps the companions escape the *skrimsl* attackers?

2. Where do the companions find Wyla?

3. Why did the *nidavel* lock Wyla up?

4. What weapon is Bryn given and why is it given to him?

5. Where does the company arrive at the end of the chapter?

Follow-Up

Though Bari and Drombir are both *nidavel* they could hardly be less similar. Compare and contrast these two characters and identify key differences in how they treat Torin and his company as well as how Torin and his company thinks of them.

Teacher Resource

[“The Mead of Poetry” as retold by William R. Short on *Hurstwic.org*](#)

In fantasy works such as JRR Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy dwarves are depicted primarily as ‘good’ characters. In the Norse myths dwarves are much more devious and seen as some of the most vile creatures in existence. Two such dwarves are Galar and Fjalar who crafted the famous Mead of Poetry with a mix of deception, magic, and murder. Not to be outdone, Odin participates in a deception of his own to secure the mead for himself and the gods of Asgard. Find out more in author William R. Short’s retelling of the story of The Mead of Poetry.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 15: Familiar Places

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #15: What is the place you go to when you need to relax? Do you hide away at home or do you like to go outside and enjoy nature? Do you visit a friend or go to a restaurant? Give descriptive details about what makes this place special to you.

Warm-Up

In Iceland the high level of volcanic activity leads to an abundance of natural hot springs. Vikings would build rock enclosures around these hot water sources to create outdoor hot tubs. The compiler of the Prose Edda, Snorri Sturluson, was famed for his love of lounging in his own personal hot tub, which can still be visited at his historic residence of *Snorrastofa*. Others who prefer a more modern experience might visit the world-famous springs at Iceland's Blue Lagoon.

As few North Americans have natural hot springs in their backyard, we must find different ways to relax. How do you unwind after a stressful day?

As You Read

1. Where does the company find themselves when they reach the surface?
2. What does Bari do to punish Drombir for his treachery?

3. Why does Wyla leave the rest of the company when they arrive in Gatewatch?
4. What crime are Torin and his companions charged with?
5. What happened to the other recruits who did not get lost at Frostridge Falls along with Wyla, Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa?

Follow-Up

An ancient saying goes like this: *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. This means that if someone does something to you then you have every right to do it to them. Do you think that the companions should punish Drombir for trapping them atop Frostridge Falls and trying to ransom Wyla? If not, why not? If so, what punishment do you think would be appropriate?

Teacher Resource

[“The Viking Social Structure” from Norse Mythology for Smart People](#)

While Viking laws are often praised by modern historians for being more progressive on issues like women’s rights and freedom of speech in comparison to other medieval laws, there were still aspects of Viking law that we might see as very unjust. For example, Viking inheritance laws specified that all property of a Viking family would pass to the oldest son. Some have blamed this particular aspect of Viking culture for the havoc wreaked on Europe during the Viking Age; younger brothers and sisters may have gone off raiding because there was no opportunity for them to inherit wealth from their families. Learn more about the social structure of Viking culture through [this article](#) from *Norse Mythology for Smart People*.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 16: Luck Turns

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #16: Tell the story of a time when you told the truth but someone did not believe you. Did you convince them that you were being honest or did they continue to think you were lying?

Warm-Up

The Vikings believed that the fate of each person was woven by the Norns, three mysterious women who sat at the Well of Urd (Fate) at the base of the World Tree Yggdrasil. This meant that each person's fate was already determined and so whatever happened to them was meant to be. Philosophers call this belief *fatalism*, the belief that everything is predetermined.

In opposition to fatalism is the concept of free will, the idea that everyone is free to choose what to do with their life. Would you consider yourself a fatalist or do you believe in free will? Why?

As You Read

1. Why does a fight break out between the company and the Greycloaks?

2. What does Captain Calder threaten to do if Torin does not tell the truth?

3. How does Torin plan on convincing Captain Calder that they are not deserters?
4. What angers Torin when Wyla is brought down to the prison to join them?
5. What punishment is given to the company by Captain Calder?

Follow-Up

In a place such as Gatewatch the military structure of the Greycloaks provides services similar to policemen in cities today. From Almveig's point of view, write up a short crime report about why she is apprehending Torin and his company. Include important details from the story as told from her perspective.

Teacher Resource

[The Binding of Loki - Fireside Telling by Skjalden](#)

The infamous Loki, both beloved and loathed by the other gods, at last exhausts their patience and goodwill after the death of Balder. Following an eventful chase Loki is bound to a rock deep underground where he will stay until Ragnarok, the Viking apocalypse. There a venomous serpent is tied above his head so that its poison drips down and burns his face. For the duration of his imprisoned exile his loyal wife Sigyn holds a bowl to catch the venom. It is said that when the bowl fills and she moves aside to empty it, the poison once again burns Loki; it is his roar of anger at the pain of this venom that causes earthquakes to happen. Hear the full fireside rendition of this tale from the Youtube storyteller Skjalden.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 17: The Drums of War

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #17: Fear is a powerful feeling. Tell of a time when you were really scared. Was your fear well-founded or did the threat turn out to be nothing at all?

Warm-Up

Vikings had their own set of laws that governed how criminals should be punished. One of the worst sentences for any Viking to receive was outlawry. Outlaws had to flee the country because they had no rights, and anyone could kill them without punishment. Further, no one was allowed to speak to an outlaw or help them in any way or they themselves could also be declared outlaws. Sometimes outlawry was declared for a set period of time and sometimes it was for life. Many of the saga heroes, such as Erik the Red and Grettir the Strong, were outlawed at different points in their life.

What is the worst punishment one could receive in today's day and age? What sorts of crimes might cause someone to get sentenced?

As You Read

1. Why does Asleif help the company escape the stocks?

2. Which of the eight towers along the western wall does the company decide to defend?

3. Describe the attack on the tower that the companions fortified.

4. How did Torin manage to slay a troll?

5. Who was in the stone tower when it toppled over?

Follow-Up

One of the reasons that the wall is so worn down is because Captain Calder believed that the Greycloaks would grow lazy if they had a big wall to hide behind. Now that Gatewatch is under attack, Torin and his company find themselves wishing they had a more formidable barrier to keep the trolls out. Do you agree with Captain Calder's decision to not maintain the wall or do you think that was a mistake? Why do you agree or disagree with his decision?

Teacher Resource

[The Great Heathen Army and The Danelaw from Extra Credits](#)

The Great Heathen army was a massive force of Scandinavian warriors who ravaged the east of England for over a decade beginning in 865 AD. Led by the sons of the celebrated Ragnar Lothbrok, this army managed to topple three of the four kingdoms that existed in England at that time. A significant portion of eastern England then became known as The Danelaw as it was ruled by these Viking invaders who settled in the region. Many of the place names in England today are derived from this period of time and can be identified with endings such as *-by* (e.g. Whitby), *-thorpe* (e.g. Copmanthorpe), and *-kirk* (e.g. Omskirk). Learn how a certain treaty between Alfred of Wessex and the Viking chieftain Gurthrum led to the creation of The Danelaw in this video by Extra Credits.

3. What happens when Captain Calder challenges Ur-Gezbrukter in Stonering Keep?

4. What news does Bari bring the companions?

5. How will Torin, Grimsa, and Wyla catch up with Ur-Gezbrukter?

Follow-Up

Of all the gods in Norse mythology, none has a more terrible temper than the mighty Thor. Known as the God of Justice, the Son of Odin, and the Lord of Thunder, most of those who ignite his far-famed anger are vanquished with a single swing of his enchanted hammer *Mjolnir*. Helene A. Guerber recites the tale of Thor's vengeance upon the bragging giant Hrungrnir in [this animated video](#). After listening to her rendition of this myth create a visual representation of the duel between Thor and Hrungrnir.

Teacher Resource

[“The Last March of the Jomsvikings” from *History Time* \(3:45 - 23:10\)](#)

Of all the fearsome bands of Vikings portrayed in history, perhaps none are as celebrated and as revered as the Jomsvikings. The Jomsvikings were a warrior brotherhood that lived and died by a strict warrior code. In their seaside fortress they trained together and were famed for challenging the authority of the Danish and Norwegian kings. Find out more about these legendary warriors, including the far-famed Thorkel the Tall, in this video from History Time.

3. What do the companions witness when they reach the top of Shadowstone Pass?

4. How do the companions plan on using the Sunblaze to defeat the trolls?

5. What event fuels Torin's blood rage as he charges at the Troll King?

Follow-Up

The most famous horse in all of Norse mythology is Sleipnir. The story of its birth is interesting as the trickster god Loki transformed himself into a mare (a female horse) and gave birth to the magical horse as its mother before giving it to Odin as a gift. Sleipnir's hooves are like the rumble of thunder and it is said that no horse can run faster than Sleipnir because it has eight legs instead of four. One of my favourite images of Sleipnir comes from the artist and illustrator Helena Rosova who also painted the cover art for *The Gatewatch*. Find one of her many depictions of this magnificent creature (pictured with Odin, his ravens, and his wolves) [here!](#)

Teacher Resource

[The Death of Balder as told by Dr. Jackson Crawford](#)

No event in Norse mythology is more tragic than the death of the god of light, Balder the Beautiful. Learn how Balder met his fate and what part Loki had to play in his death through this in-depth mountain side telling by Dr. Jackson Crawford, one of the most prominent professors of Icelandic history in North America today.



The Gatewatch - Learning Guide

Chapter 20: The Burning Pyre

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Journal Entry #20: Everyone processes tragic experiences in different ways. Describe a time in your life when you tried to comfort someone who was grieving. How did they respond to your support?

Warm-Up

When a Viking died in battle it was said that Odin would send his Valkyries, fearsome warrior women, to ride down to the battlefield and carry the bravest among them back to Valhalla. There the fallen warrior would feast and train with all the other Vikings who had fallen bravely in battle to begin preparations for Ragnarok where Odin will make his last stand.

Research the death customs of an ancient culture to find out what they thought happened to people after life, and then share your findings with the class.

As You Read

1. Who finds the companions after the Troll-King is defeated?

2. How do the companions carry their fallen friend back to Gatewatch?

3. What nick-names are given to the companions after the other Greycloaks hear what happened?

4. What do the people of Gatewatch prepare for that evening?

5. What do the companions see in the night sky over the burning pyre?

Follow-Up

Bifrost, also called ‘the shimmering rainbow bridge,’ is the magical road between the nine worlds of Norse mythology. While it is popularly depicted in comic books and in movies as a rainbow it is much more likely that the *aurora borealis*, or the Northern Lights, inspired this iconic element of Norse mythology. This wonder of nature can be seen year-round in both Norway and Iceland. Photographer Johannes Kormann from Sweden was featured in National Geographic for [this stunning photo](#) of the Northern Lights as the Vikings would have seen them. Write a visual description of the Northern Lights for someone who has never seen them before.

Teacher Resource

[Viking Burial Customs and the Up Helly Aa Festival in Scotland](#) - Promote Shetland

Historical sources point to several different customs for burials after a powerful Viking died. Perhaps the most iconic is a burial at sea, where the Viking is laid in a boat with treasures and weapons. The boat is set afire as it drifts out to sea. Many important Vikings, both men and women, were also buried in earthen mounds with all the weapons, treasure, and supplies they would need in the afterlife. In Lerwick, Scotland a yearly celebration called the Up Helly Aa Festival recreates a traditional Viking burial by burning a ship in the middle of town. Take a quick tour of the 2018 event with [this video](#) from Promote Shetland.

Wrap-Up Activity: The Heroic Journey

Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) was an American professor and author who studied literature and mythology. He found an intriguing pattern in the themes and events of great myths across many different cultures throughout history. Campbell’s conclusion was that all great stories follow a universal pattern which he identified through the twelve stages of “The Heroic Journey.” Almost any great book, play, or movie will have strong elements of these twelve stages and many writers (myself included!) use Campbell’s “Heroic Journey” as a guideline for crafting powerful stories.



Image used under Creative Commons

Compare Torin Ten-Tree’s adventure in *The Gatewatch* to Campbell’s “Heroic Journey” as shown in the infographic on the previous page. Can you match the twelve stages to specific events in the story?

1. The Ordinary World	7. Approach
2. The Call to Adventure	8. Ordeal
3. Refusal	9. Reward
4. Mentor/Helper	10. The Road Back
5. Crossing the Threshold	11. Atonement
6. Tests, Allies & Enemies	12. Return

Compare the events in *The Gatewatch* that you chose for the “Heroic Journey” to those chosen by another group. Identify any similarities and discuss differences.

Were there any stages of the “Heroic Journey” that you felt were not clearly present in the story? Which stages were these? Did anyone else in your group disagree?

Myths & Sagas Related to the Novel by Chapter

Chapter	Norse Myth* (M) or Viking Saga (S)
Chapter 1: Ascent	M - The Creation
Chapter 2: Arrival	M - The Mead of Poetry
Chapter 3: A Feast in Fjellhall	M - The Lay of Thrym
Chapter 4: Mead & Mayhem	M - Thor's Journey to Utgard
Chapter 5: Untested	S - The Saga of the Volsungs
Chapter 6: Frostridge Falls	M - Loki's Flyting
Chapter 7: Trolls	S - The Saga of Arrow-Odd
Chapter 8: The Trolting	M - The Lay of Harbard
Chapter 9: A Duel of Riddles	M - The Lay of Vafthrudnir
Chapter 10: To Myrkheim	M - Otter's Ransom
Chapter 11: Secrets at Supper	M - The Lay of Hymir
Chapter 12: The Mastersmith	M - The Treasures of the Gods
Chapter 13: Scorched Beards	S - Njal's Saga
Chapter 14: A Narrow Door	M - The Necklace of the Brisings
Chapter 15: Familiar Places	S - The Saga of Grettir the Strong
Chapter 16: Luck Turns	M - Loki's Children & the Binding of Fenrir
Chapter 17: The Drums of War	M - The War of the Aesir & the Vanir
Chapter 18: Blood & Steel	M - Ragnarok
Chapter 19: Between Pale Peaks	M - Thor's Duel with Hrungrnir
Chapter 20: The Burning Pyre	M - The Death of Balder

**The names of the Norse myths are given according to their titles in Kevin Crossley-Holland's translation.*

A Quick Overview of Norse Mythology

At the beginning of the world there was nothing but an empty gap between two realms: a land of seething fire and a world of frigid ice. In that emptiness, called Ginnungagap, the fire melted the ice so that a primordial slurry of watery ash dripped into the void. While the fire was unbearably hot and the ice was frigidly cold, the middle of Ginnungagap was as temperate as a cool summer day.

The first giant to emerge from the melting ice was Ymir and his spawn soon spread out across the land. Wherever the Aesir came from, they did not like the giants. In fact, the sons of Bor decided that the evil giants had to be dealt with, so they killed the giant Ymir and tore him to pieces. From his skull they crafted the sky, from his eyebrows the towering mountains, and where his blood ran came the waters that now rush out to the sea. Upon their victory the eldest son of Bor, Odin himself, heralded the beginning of the golden age of the Aesir, who one day would be called gods by men.

At the center of it all stood an enormous ash tree called Yggdrasil, the World Tree, whose branches held the nine realms. Asgard, the land of the Aesir, is the fairest of all with wide green fields and crystal clear lakes of azure blue. Midgard we know best for it is where humans dwell. Jotunheim is the land of the giants and many myths recount tales of Thor's adventures there. In Muspelheim fire giants roam through fields of steaming geysers and smoking cinder; none of those giants is more terrible than mighty Surt with his flaming sword. Vanaheim is the land of the Vanir whose magic is known and feared throughout all the nine realms; in fact, it is the birthplace of beautiful Freya and bountiful Frey. Near that place is Alfheim, the home of the mysterious light elves of which little is said or known. The realm of Nidavellir is dark and full of crafty dwarves who are busy at their smithies or dreaming of golden hoards. Last, Nilfheim is the land of the dead; it is a place of shadow, suffering, and shame ruled by Hela whose face is half that of a beautiful young woman and half that of a long-dead rotting corpse.

In Asgard Odin looks over all nine realms from his high seat in Valaskjalf. Every day he sends his ravens Huginn and Muninn (Thought and Memory) to fly out and bring news of all that happens. Thor is often out fishing for monsters or fighting giants, but can also be found feasting and drinking with Sif, his wife whose hair is strands of gold, and his friend and future enemy Loki, the devilish trickster. Freya and Frey are twins from Vanaheim who were at one time prisoners in a war between the Vanir and the Aesir. Freya is a fearsome goddess known both for her unmatched beauty and her prowess in battle. Frey does not take after his sister's violent habits but rather presides over all that grows and secures each year's harvest. Idunn cares for the tree which produces golden apples that give the Aesir their immortality, although at one time she was abducted by giants and the gods nearly died of old age. Finally, Heimdall stands guard at Bifrost, the shimmering rainbow bridge between worlds, and will blow his trumpet Gjallarhorn when he sees foretold signs of the coming of Ragnarok.

Vikings hoped to live bravely and die in battle so that they would be chosen by the Valkyries, warrior women who selected the finest warriors who had fallen. Half of those chosen would go to Odin's Hall of Valhalla to feast and train for Ragnarok; the other half went to Freya's hall, Sessrumnir, to do the same. The souls of cowards, liars, and those who died of old age would drift into the gloomy world of Nilfheim. There a mighty dragon called Nidhogg would chew on their corpses while Hela, queen of the dead, sat in her dreary, dim-lit hall that dripped drops of snake venom from its rafters.

All was well in the nine realms until the death of Odin's son Balder, the god of light. His mother, Frigg, had made all things swear never to hurt Balder in any way. She secured promises from fire and ice, from steel and iron, from stones and water, from beasts and from men. One thing she forgot: the seemingly harmless shrub we call mistletoe. Loki, jealous of Balder's popularity, hatched a plan to get Balder's blind brother Hod to throw a mistletoe spear. When the spear struck Balder, he fell down dead. Following the death of the god of light the nine realms began to fall into chaos.

In the end the gods and the giants will face each other in one final climactic battle: Ragnarok. The enormous wolf Fenrir will devour Odin before the beast is slain by noble Vidar. Both Thor and Jormungandr, the world serpent, will be each other's doom as they grapple in this final fray. With mighty roars the warriors of Valhalla and Sessrumnir will charge the undead legions led by Hela after Loki and Heimdal die on each other's blades. Bifrost, the shimmering rainbow bridge, will be shattered and all nine realms will be consumed with raging fire.

Long after the fires of Ragnarok have cooled the World Tree, Yggdrasil, will bloom once again. From the folds of its bark will emerge two people who had been spared the destruction of that final battle. Green grass will grow over the ruins of the Aesir's once mighty halls and there the world will be born again. And so a new story will unfold in what we can only assume is an endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth among the nine realms under the World Tree.

While there are many retellings of the Norse myths, I have found none as helpful and insightful as Dr. Kevin Crossley-Holland's translation (included in the list of resources for further reading). For a more approachable telling I would suggest Neil Gaiman's recently released book, *The Norse Myths*. For those who really want to grapple with the quagmire of historical sources and the labyrinth of conflicting accounts there are the original translated documents: the loose compilation of historical texts collectively referred to as the Poetic Edda and Icelander Snorri Sturlurson's Prose Edda.

A Crash Course in Icelandic Poetry

Based on Peter Hallberg's publication 'Old Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse' from 1975

History presents the Vikings (accurately or otherwise) as ruthless raiders, seafaring traders, horn-helmeted heathens, and ferocious fighters. However, one of the most enviable traits of a Norse hero at the height of the Viking Age is regrettably overlooked today: skill in poetry.

In a Viking's mind the sword lay next to the spoken word. Wielding words with skill was as important as wielding a blade; a clumsy phrase could lead to more bloodshed than a misplaced sword stroke. If injury was intended then every Viking knew that a well-crafted insult aimed at an enemy could fly farther and sink deeper than any hand-fletched arrow. Intelligence could be measured by one's ability to interpret poetic riddles and, for those seeking glory, a deed enshrined in verse would outlast the richest treasure. Therefore, no study of the Viking Age could be complete without considering their poetry.

Translated verses of famous Viking *skalds* (poets) such as Egill Skallagrímsson and Kormákr Ögmundarson bear little resemblance to what most people today would consider to be poetry. Modern song lyrics and traditional Western poems are primarily defined by **rough syllabic consistency** and **end-rhyme** between lines.

By contrast, the *skaldic* poetry enjoyed by Vikings centered around **internal rhyme** and **alliteration** instead. Both of these were made easier by the fact that Old Norse as a language has less phonetic diversity than modern English. Since there are literally fewer sounds within the language it was much easier to find rhymes and to alliterate in Old Norse. *Skaldic* poetry also featured over one hundred distinctive structured verse forms, each of which had its own strict set of rules. One of the most popular forms was *dróttkvætt*, also known as 'court metre'.

While it is nearly impossible to recreate court metre within the English language, I will give an approximation of my own making based on a set of five *dróttkvætt*-like rules.

1. Each verse should consist of four lines
2. Every line must have exactly six syllables
3. Odd lines must have one case of full-rhyme (shown in *italics*; e.g. 'wave' and 'gave')
4. Even lines must have one case of half-rhyme (shown in *italics*; e.g. 'cut' and 'bit')
5. Every pair of lines must have triple alliteration occurring twice in the odd line and once in the even line (shown in **bold**; e.g. 'sword', 'sea', 'sailed')

With those five rules in mind, here is an example (from Chapter 2: Arrival) of how they can be applied and what, with a great stretch of the imagination, Viking verse might have sounded like.

To Gatewatch **through** **the** pass
There *in* between pale peaks
Arrived to *drive* **at** last
All threat of trolls *from* **home**

Sunset **done**, **dusk** settled
Dark shapes stirred, rocks shifted
In **gloom** loomed figures **great**
Long grey silence breaking

Attempt to construct a verse of your own with these five rules, and you'll find it a synapse-stretching task. However, a *skald* would not consider the verse above to be *dróttkvætt* at all as it does not strictly follow the additional rules of the form. In conversations with doctoral students of Norse literature, I have heard these *skaldic* forms described as 'hyper-complex' with 'draconian rules'; however, Viking Age *skalds* were famed for being able to improvise such forms on the spot.

In addition to these challenging structural complexities, *skalds* were famously known for their use of a unique poetic device known as a *kenning*. *Kennings* were metaphorical phrases that alluded to Norse myth and culture. For example, the 'whale road' is a *kenning* for 'the ocean'; the 'sea of swords' is a *kenning* for 'battle'; and 'Freya's tears' is a *kenning* for 'gold'. The best *skalds* might employ a double *kenning*, a reference to a reference. A phrase like 'the venom of the battle snake' employs the *kenning* 'battle snake' for 'sword', presumably making its 'venom' a *kenning* for 'blood'. Therefore, by saying 'the venom of the battle snake' the *skald* simply means 'blood'. While triple or even quadruple *kennings* may have existed, scholars such as Peter Hallberg declare that the intimate knowledge of Norse culture and *skaldic* traditions needed to decipher these *kennings* make them practically inaccessible to the modern reader.

The poetry of the *skalds* then becomes not only an epic demonstration of linguistic acrobatics but a nearly sadistic interweaving of *kennings* that may all but conceal whatever meaning was originally intended. Modern scholars share the frustration of interpreting these poems with ancient Vikings who themselves could often make little sense of the *skald's* riddling verses. However, that which we can translate and understand gives us a glimpse of a culture that, despite its harshness, had a keen ear for quality verse and a fascination with vexing riddles.

Author Interview with Joshua Gillingham

Q: Have you always wanted to be a writer?

A: Well, I've always been a storyteller. I first found my voice as a writer through songwriting as a solo folk artist then as part of a Celtic music group. Of all the songs I wrote the most popular were always those with a strong narrative. Through songwriting I learned to love the sound of words, how sentences could flow into one another, and how to craft a story to stir emotions in those listening. In writing *The Gatewatch* I drew upon this experience through the verses and riddles, but was challenged with the task of telling a story in prose that was much longer and more complex than could be told in a single song. At its heart, I believe being a writer is about telling great stories and so I view this progression from being a songwriter to writing novels as the next step on my journey as a lifelong storyteller.

Q: What inspired you to begin writing your novel? Did you draw from personal experiences?

A: Sometime in my early twenties I was struck by an inexplicable need to know where my family came from. After digging through whatever family ancestry records I could get ahold of I was able to trace back several strands of the family tree to Scandinavia and the British Isles. Viking heritage looms heavy over much of that region and so it was no surprise that in reading historical materials from those places I encountered the Norse Myths. For some reason these stories of the northern gods and goddesses, of the nine realms beneath the world tree, and of the monstrous creatures found therein affected me deeply. My writing of *The Gatewatch* was, in part, an effort to process these stories on a personal level and capture their profound effect for other readers.

Q: Which aspects of the writing process come most naturally to you?

A: I have a very active imagination. For that reason, there are always far more stories bouncing around in my head than I have time to write. However, in the last few years I have been able to focus my creative energies enough to commit them to larger projects such as *The Gatewatch*. That energy also fuels my dogged persistence which, as any writer will tell you, is the creative equivalent of duct tape; it keeps everything together, even if just barely. I also enjoy connecting with and engaging the larger community of writers, academics, podcasters, and fans of Norse Mythology and Viking history. I think the benefit of this connection as part of the writing process is often overlooked by authors who want to write alone in their home office behind a locked door.

Q: Which aspects of the writing process present more of a challenge? How do you overcome them?

A: Some days sitting down to write a story is like riding a mythical eight-legged horse over the plains of an enchanted world. Other days it is like pulling your own teeth out with a pair of rusty pliers. For many years I struggled to push through the 'teeth-pulling' stage but have since realized the reward of

doing so. For writers or artists who find themselves stuck in the mud I suggest adopting a strict creative schedule and, more importantly, sticking to it. The easiest thing to do when things get hard is to walk away and though easy feels good it gets you nowhere. Fighting through the difficult sections, key by key or stroke by stroke, is the only way to break through to the other side.

Q: Do you have a writing routine, and if so, what does it look like?

A: My writing schedule is very structured. I write for about an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon as that fits around my other job. Also, I write Monday to Friday and typically avoid writing on the weekends. I find that breaking up my writing into small sessions allows me to process what is happening in the story and to plan out the next stages. That way I rarely get stuck or run out of ideas. This has also been an excellent way to train my mind to get right to work; while I used to sit around for half an hour or so before producing anything worth keeping I can now sit down and start typing right away. The regularity of this schedule also helps me track the twists and turns that drive the plot forward.

Q: Do you have any quirky writing habits, such as a favourite snack or music playlist?

A: There is no place I'd rather write than in a cosy cafe over a steaming cappuccino. However, I have recently taken up the challenge to write in whatever environment I find myself in. Whether it is waiting for the bus in the rain, on ferry rides between Vancouver and Nanaimo, or while on hold with our internet provider, I force myself to sit down and write. Of course, it is more difficult to stay focussed in those situations but, as a writer, it has been a very beneficial habit to develop. Now I can take advantage of any place as a writing space regardless of how uncomfortable, noisy, or damp it is.

Q: From where do you draw your inspiration for your vivid characters?

A: The Gatewatch is inspired by the Norse Myths so many of the characters in the book are based on mythological figures. Anyone familiar with the myths knows that the relationships between the gods are anything but harmonious; wherever they are trouble is never far behind. This potent mix of personalities is fertile ground for conflict and provides numerous opportunities for humorous exchanges. For example, Torin, Bryn, and Grimsa are inspired by Odin, Loki, and Thor. Torin's obsession with riddles, Bryn's sly charm, and Grimsa's insatiable thirst for ale all derive from their mythological counterparts. For readers interested in mythological stories that were particularly influential to The Gatewatch I suggest Thor's journey to Utgard, Odin's encounter with the giant Vafthrudnir, and Loki's role in the forging of the gods' treasures.

Would you like Joshua Gillingham to visit your classroom in person or virtually?
Send an author visit inquiry to josh@crowsnestbooks.com to check availability and scheduling.

Resources & Further Reading

Title	Author/Translator
<i>The Norse Myths: Gods of the Vikings</i>	Trans. Dr. Kevin Crossley-Holland
<i>The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes</i>	Trans. Dr. Jackson Crawford
<i>Norse Mythology</i>	Trans. Neil Gaiman
<i>From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths</i>	Dr. Heather O'Donoghue
<i>Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths</i>	Nancy Marie Brown
<i>Beyond the Northlands: Viking Voyages and the Old Norse Sagas</i>	Dr. Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough
<i>The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrun</i>	Trans. JRR Tolkien
<i>Beowulf</i>	Trans. Seamus Heaney
<i>Laws of Early Iceland, Gragas I & II</i>	Trans. A. Dennis, P. Foote & R. Perkins
<i>Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway</i>	Trans. Lee M. Hollander
<i>The Saga of Grettir the Strong</i>	Trans. G.H. Hight
<i>The Saga of Arrow-Odd</i>	Trans. Gavin Chappell
<i>Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks (The Saga of Hervör & Heidrik)</i>	Trans. Christopher Tolkien
<i>Old Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse</i>	Peter Hallberg
<i>Norwegian Folktales</i>	Peter Christen Asbjørnsen & Jørgen Moe
<i>The Half-Drowned King</i>	Linnea Hartsuyker
<i>The Long Ships</i>	Frans G. Bengtsson
<i>Odd & the Frost Giants</i>	Neil Gaiman