

SHADOW SKYE TRILOGY



THE BURNING SWIFT

DISCUSSION GUIDE

With references to *The Good Hawk*
and *The Broken Raven*



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BOOKS

THE BURNING SWIFT

JOSEPH ELLIOTT

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Burning Swift, Elliott's final novel in the trilogy, is a grand and sweeping conclusion to this reimagined Dark Ages fantasy. With Sigrid's warning of impending attack, Agatha and Jaime must once again seek ways to protect their home, this time from the united forces of Konge Grímr and King Edmund, who are determined to wipe out all Scotians. Outnumbered, unprepared and bitterly divided, the clans of Skye must come to terms with their history, to save any chance of a future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Elliott is a writer and actor, well-known for his work in children's television including CBeebies series "Swashbuckle" and CBBC sketch show "Big Fat Like". His commitment to serving children with special education needs was instilled at a young age: his mother is a teacher trained in special needs education, and his parents provided respite foster care for children with additional needs. He has worked at a recreational centre for children with learning disabilities and as a teaching assistant at Westminster Special Schools. The heroine of his debut series, the Shadow Skye trilogy, was inspired by the many incredible children he has worked with, especially those with Down's syndrome. Joseph lives in London. Say hello to Joseph at @joseph_elliott.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Burning Swift is the continuation of the story started in *The Good Hawk* and continued in *The Broken Raven*. Despite its historical context, it explores many themes entirely relevant to today's audiences, most notably Special Education Needs and Disability, and LGBTQIA+ acceptance, but also ostracism, the effects of warfare, poverty, familial pressure, and more. Care should be taken to have information to hand to explore these subjects sensitively. Discussion leaders should be confident in navigating the relevant information, terminology and sensitivities, and be prepared to support or signpost towards support where required.

This guide focuses on *The Burning Swift*, but draws from the first two novels as well – familiarity with all three is recommended, though many of the questions that follow apply equally to all books, or just the last.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started:

To begin with, it may be worth recapping the first two novels and discussing ground rules if members of the group have not read them. The expectation is that all will be familiar with the trilogy, however it may be worth establishing any gaps in the knowledge of members, or any spoilers from previous novels that members may wish to avoid.

Once established, ask what members liked about the book. Would anyone like to expand on their answer? How did *The Burning Swift* make anyone feel? What were the responses to particular scenes, or characters?

1. Skye

'We pass under the archway and the island explodes around us: vast plains, thick with prickly heather and wild gorse, fringed with dark forests of towering evergreens.' — p.38

Have a look at a map and some photographs of Skye. (There's a map at the beginning of the book, too.) Why does anyone think this is where the novel is set? Look at the crossing to mainland Scotland – does this affect how anyone remembers the journeys to and from the island? What might life have been like for the islanders? Think about the weather, the conditions, the clothes they wear – would anyone like to have lived in this time?

2. The Good Hawk - Agatha

'...I am a hawk. I am good at seeing things.' — p.85

Agatha has Down's syndrome, in a world long before it was known as such. Why does Elliott set his novel in this time, and what does that mean for Agatha? What did anyone in the group think of the character Agatha? How is she written? What difference does it make reading from her perspective? Ask the group to imagine if she were written in the third person – how would this affect the way they read the novel? In what way is Agatha 'the Good Hawk'?

3. The Broken Raven - Sigrid

'I thought about havin it done over the top of my raven, to cover it up, but I've decided I like that one the way it is. It may not be perfect, but it's part of who I am.' — p.383

What does it mean for Sigrid to be the 'broken' raven? The Deamhain and Scotians are traditionally opposed to one another, so why does she do what she does in the novel? How is she different from other Deamhain? Look at the language Sigrid uses; how does Elliott create a sense of character through language and slang?

4. Jaime

'I need the sword; it's helping me bury all the wrong thoughts and sick feelings that refuse to go away. It makes me strong.' — p.60

What does Jaime most want in the novel? What does he lack? Discuss how his life in his clan compares with the lives of the Bó Riders. Particularly in *The Burning Swift*, what is the significance of his blood magic sword? Does he need it in order to be strong? Together, re-read Cray's story of the burning swift on page 277 – is Jaime the burning swift? Why?

5. 'Heroism'

'I was being the hero and he was being the coward so I am the right one.' — p.23

Agatha wants to 'be the hero' for her clan; Jaime must overcome his fear; Sigrid travels alone across Britain to warn strangers of an impending attack. What does anyone think 'being a hero' means? Who is 'heroic' in the novel?

6. Blood magic

"Blood magic is stronger when the sacrifice is made by someone else." — p.35

'...blood magic is the darkest of all magics – and the most likely to corrupt.' — p.137

Why is blood magic so important in the books? What does it do? Why is it so powerful? Look at these two quotations together – why are they important to the book? Is Jaime right to make his sword stronger through blood magic?

7. Birds

"Thank you," she says. "Raven." A raven is a type of bird. I know that.' — p.21

Why do members of the group think all three novels carry different bird names? What is the significance of these birds? You could discuss the society and mythology within the books, or look at any mythology associated with these birds. You could even research them as part of your discussion, e.g., in Norse mythology Odin's ravens represent memory and thought and Sigrid can see something once and easily remember it.

8. Disability

“Nothing’s wrong with my— face,” I say. “I am b— beautiful— actually.” — p.89

Discuss how disability is portrayed in the novel. How does Agatha see herself? Does having Down’s syndrome stop her from achieving anything in the book? What about Konge Grímr? How does being blind affect him? Does it stop him, or make him any less of a threat?

9. Language

“Konge Grímr has a *sgàil*,” he says. “The most powerful ever created.” — p.273

‘She’s the most *hek ríkka* horse in the whole world.’ — p.49

Talk about the language Elliott uses throughout the books. What effect do the non-English words have on the reader? You might want to look up the meanings of words like *deamhain*, *sgáilean*, *dùth*, etc. What about the different dialects, for example, how does Sigrid’s speech differ from Jaime’s? What effect does this have?

10. Power

“But the monarchy’s the will of Øden,” I say, shocked at the thought of him challengin our god.’ — p.120

What did readers think of the portrayal of Britain in the novels? Where does power lie? In Elliott’s novels, the threats come from the *sgáilean*, blood magic, monsters and creatures, etc., but also from versions of real threats – Vikings, the invading English, other clans, etc. Which is the greater threat? How is power maintained in the novel? Can readers draw any comparisons with other stories, or even with modern day life?

11. Acceptance & kindness

‘It’s a plea rather than an attack. It’s all I can do.’ — p.328

‘I want to talk to her and say hello to be kind. I’m good at being kind.’ — p.18

Ask readers to think about the qualities in the novel that help to save and unite the clans, and defeat the two kings. You might want to think about Jaime’s speech on page 210, or the conversations between Sigrid and Mal-Rakki, or the values that Agatha holds most dear. What do readers think Elliott is suggesting? What do group members think the most valuable characteristics are in the novel? Try to find examples of each together.

12. Modern day reflections

“The problem with tradition is that it can be dangerously stubborn. But what do I know?” — p.135

Does setting *The Burning Swift* in the early Middle Ages allow Elliott to explore ideas relevant to society today? If so, how? Discuss the similarities and differences between the ways, customs and cultures in Elliott’s novels, and modern-day cultures and problems in society.

