

Beside the Ocean of Time Study Guide

Beside the Ocean of Time by George Mackay Brown

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Plot Summary

Beside the Ocean of Time is set in the Orkney Islands, on the fictitious island of Norday in the mid 1930s. First published in 1994, the novel follows Thorfinn Ragnarson, a boy whose imaginary adventures take us back in time to important moments in the history of the island. Bored with school, he is thought to be lazy and idle by his sisters, the schoolteacher, and others on the island. Thorfinn imagines himself accompanying a variety of characters on battles, quests, and other adventures in ancient times. Large sections of the text are made up of these adventures, narrated in a style similar to how myths are narrated in the ancient storytelling tradition.

One main storyline follows Thorfinn's childhood on Norday Island in the 1930s. It continues into his adolescence and early adulthood during the second World War. The narrator describes the simple village life with its crofts (farms), fishing, gossiping villagers, and quiet, daily life. Life on the island revolves around the land, the sea, the church, and the pub at the inn.

Thorfinn is disliked by the schoolteacher, Mr. Simon. Thorfinn takes history lessons and retells episodes from the island's history, as he plots these imaginary travels. He travels back in time to accompany a Swedish Viking ship, as it navigates through the Dneiper River in the eastern Baltic. With the crew, he travels to the kingdom of Byzantium. The group of travelers barely avoid being murdered at the court of prince Boris in Russia, but continue on to the Black Sea and then to the Emperor's court. It is here, that they are put into service as part of his personal guard.

In the next adventure, Thorfinn casts himself as an assistant to the Knight, Sir James MacTavish. The two travel south by horse to take part in the Scottish Battle of Independence at Bannockburn in 1314. Later, Thorfinn accompanies his school on a trip to visit the remains of a broch, an ancient stone tower. He imagines his next adventure, this time, as a poet/songwriter living in a Celtic village in the Dark Ages several thousand years BC. He writes a song to commemorate the building of the broch on Norday Island and honors the chief who has it erected. The brochs, built throughout the Northern Islands, protect them from invasion.

Thorfinn also tells the story of Jacob Olafson, who has recently died. Jacob grew up as a crofter. Thorfinn describes the man's life, including the highlights such as his disappearance on the day of his sister's wedding and his return from Canada ten years later, bringing with him a Native American wife.

Thorfinn grows from childhood into adolescence in the main storyline. A stranger comes to the island to visit the minister and the narrator describes quite a lot of the island's recent history through a description and explanation of the various reverends that have lived at the manse. The mysterious visitor is the current minister's sister, Sophie. Her presence is important to the island and though some islanders dislike her, she plays an important role in Thorfinn's life since she encourages him to be a writer.



Meanwhile, Thorfinn's father, Matthew Ragnarson, has been bringing up his son and three daughters alone at the farmhouse called Ingle. Tina Lyde, a local woman, attempts to win her way into Matthew's heart by bringing small gifts of homemade baked goods. Thorfinn's sister, Ragna, refuses to accept Tina into the household and sends the woman away, telling her she should never return to Ingle. Matthew does invite Tina to become part of the family. Thorfinn accepts her, as he joins her and his father for a meal she has prepared.

On the day of Ragna and Tina's argument, Thorfinn rides out to a hillside overlooking the island and tells the story of the arrival of the press gangs to the island. When recruiting officers arrive, looking to press young men into military service, the young men of the island go into hiding and outwit the press gang. During the islanders' celebrations, Thorfinn witnesses a group of Seal people dancing on the rocks by the edge of the sea. He takes a Seal woman as a wife and brings her home to Ingle, where she is accepted by his father, but resented by his mother. Thorfinn and Mara have many children, but eventually she disappears one day returning to her people.

Thorfinn leaves the island when a giant military operation transforms the island. Almost overnight, the military has destroyed both the land and the community. During the second World War, Thorfinn is captured and sent to a German prison camp, Stalag 29B. While he is there, he begins to write fiction. He sends novels to be published, with the help of a German officer, who lends him a typewriter and the Red Cross, who forwards the manuscripts to a publisher in London. While imprisoned, Thorfinn writes historical romances. The reader will recognize that the stories that Private Ragnarson writes are in fact, the same stories previously narrated in the novel.

After the war, Thorfinn returns to the deserted island of Norday. During the war, most of the fertile land and productive farmland was destroyed to make room for an enormous aerodrome used for defense against German attackers. Almost overnight, the entire community was changed, with large groups of workers, machinery, and concrete destroying the once placid and pastoral island. Thorfinn returns to Norday after several years spent living a wild and experienced, rich life in Edinburgh. After writing numerous romances, the author tries a different approach and writes a novel about "the impact on a primitive simple society, close to the elements, of a massive modern technology." This book brings him great success, but Thorfinn chooses to leave Edinburgh and return to live a simple life on the deserted island where he grew up. He returns to Norday, committed to living off the land and sea. Sophie joins him. The novel ends with the couple walking along the shore by the ocean, discussing how they will work the land and raise a son, who will be a poet.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

As the novel opens, we are introduced to Thorfinn Ragnarson, the central character in the novel. Thorfinn is thought of as lazy and idle by the townspeople, particularly by the red-faced and impatient school teacher, Mr. Simon. The novel opens with this line: "Of all the useless boys who ever went to Norday school, the laziest and most useless was Thorfinn Ragnarson" (p. 1). The story is set some time in the mid 1930s, though the author does not specify this at the beginning of the novel. Thorfinn lives with his father Matthew, who is a crofter (a tenant farmer) and his three sisters: Inga, Sigrid and Ragna. The first chapter also introduces Isa Estquoy and several other village women, who gather at the general store and post office where Isa works. The village women share news and their opinions about the other villagers. Most islanders agree with the general view that Thorfinn is a lazy schoolboy. However, Isa gives Thorfinn the benefit of the doubt and does not share this view. He does not steal candy from the store like other boys his age.

Throughout the novel, Thorfinn transforms history lessons into vivid, imaginary journeys. In the journey presented in this chapter, Thorfinn is an Orkney boy accompanying a skipper named Rolf Rolfson and his crew of Swedish Vikings on the ship, the *Solan Goose*. The members of the crew have been outlawed from Sweden for looting and disobeying the king. They voyage first to the land of Rus to meet with the Russian leader, Prince Boris and then to Byzantium to meet the Emperor there. When the Swedes arrive in Russia, they bring iron ore as a gift to Prince Boris and are greeted with hospitality. Rolf Rolfson and his men are lodged for four nights and given generous amounts of meat and ale. Thorfinn is in charge of keeping watch at night and overhears the prince and his bodyguard, Illyich, plotting to have the Swedes killed after drinking the Russians' strong beer at a feast the next night. When Rolf Rolfson hears this information, he puts his own plan into action. At the feast, the men only pretend to drink the beer, while a harpist plays melancholy music meant to accompany the Vikings' deaths. However, the Vikings do a surprise attack first, leaving none of the Russians alive except the prince and the harpist. It is said, that the prince and the harpist become poor travelers, crossing the countryside and the mountains to sing and beg for a living.

Rolf Rolfson takes over the leadership of what used to be the prince's land and after two years, passes his power on to one of the group members named Grettir. Thorfinn again, accompanies the skipper and his group on the *Solan Goose*. This time, they go down the Volga River. They come to an orchard and take some fruit, leaving payment with some of the frightened villagers. Next, the travelers come to a mill. They hope to eat some bread for a change, but the miller warns his fellows by blowing a horn. The Vikings are attacked by Cossacks, (soldiers on horseback), and must retreat and continue on their way. The Cossacks sing in victory along the shoreline as the sailors continue down the Volga until they reach the Black Sea.



When they arrive in Byzantium, the crew is greeted warmly by a commander sent by the Emperor. After nearly a week, the sailors are allowed to enter the imperial palace and they are impressed by the grandeur of the place, despite the poverty outside the gates. Thorfinn and his companions are invited to stay and work as part of the Emperor's own groups of guardsmen, the Varingers. Though they are treated well at first, they are expected to work hard under rough conditions. The Vikings become bored and never do see the Emperor himself. Some of the crew, particularly a man named Solmund, grumble about their fate, but Rolf Rolfson is resigned to living out his life here in the Emperor's service. Thorfinn is able to escape when the Earl Rognvald of Orkney and Bishop William of Orkney arrive on an official visit to the Emperor. Thorfinn catches a ride on the ship, *Saint Magnus*, and arrives home with seven silver pieces that Earl Rognvald has given him.

In his real life in the 20th century, Thorfinn awakes after having dozed off to sleep in the bow of his father's boat. His sisters call him for tea, a snack in mid-afternoon, and again remind him that he is a useless, lazy boy.

Chapter 1 Analysis

"Thorfinn woke up from his dream of the Volga and Byzantium, humped in the bow of his father's yole. He surfaced slowly through eight and a half centuries."

This citation sums up what happens in the first chapter of the novel. Thorfinn's imagination has taken him on an adventure with Swedish Vikings, ancestors of the people who live on the Orkney Islands in the present day. Thorfinn's ability to tell colourful tales is not recognized by the people around him. Though his stories retell episodes in the history of the island's people, the other islanders believe him to be useless and lazy. Mr. Simon, the schoolteacher, does not think that Thorfinn will succeed at anything. His sisters, the other women on the island, and even Thorfinn's own father, agree that Thorfinn is idle and useless. The only person who has a good word to say about Thorfinn is Isa Estquoy, who says that he is a good boy in comparison with others who steal candy from the store.

In the 20th century, village life on the Orkneys begin to change. Older traditions and customs are threatened by new technologies, changes in society, and changing values. For hundreds of years, history was passed down as an oral tradition, handed down from generations by stories and myths. These stories and oral histories were continually retold and embellished by the storytellers. In Thorfinn's time, however, history is taught in school and by history books. Thorfinn is alone with his storytelling abilities. He has no audience to listen to his interpretations of the boring, history lessons he sits through in school. Ironically, he is often criticized for not paying attention in history class and for being lazy, when in fact, he has been casting himself in stories set during some of the most important times in the islands' history.

The theme of value and worth is introduced in this chapter. The symbolic exchange that takes place when the Vikings leave money along the way is important. Primarily, this



shows that the travelers are fair and just. They are willing to pay for the items they take, such as the fruit in the orchard. This contrasts with the stereotypes often associated with Vikings, which depict them as power hungry and violent, who pillage and loot. Rolf Rolfson is fit to rule the land of Rus because of the fairness in his nature. The symbolic exchange of money is also tied to the question of value in art and storytelling. After the prince has betrayed the travelers by plotting their murder, he accompanies the harpist in a journey into the mountains. Rumor has it that they must sing and recite their stories for money and shelter, relying on the charity of strangers.

Thorfinn's journey with the Swedes in search of adventure and riches is part of a long storytelling tradition that would have originally been passed down my memory from generation to generation of storytellers. This story follows in the tradition of epic, adventure stories that often feature a hero's travels to foreign lands. Many of the great epics in the literary tradition follow a similar structure. This part of the narrative can be linked to some of the most important works of literature in the Western canon, such as Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Virgil's *The Aeneid*. Even more relevant, is the first recorded British epic poem *Beowulf*. This poem, celebrating the adventures and exploits of a Swedish hero, was recorded in written form in approximately 1000 AD. Thorfinn is linking himself to this literary tradition by beginning with this story as Thorfinn's first adventure. Throughout the novel, Thorfinn will struggle to create. He will also struggle with his identity as a storyteller, working this out both in his daily life and in the fiction he events.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The chapter opens with Thorfinn thinking about how boring his history lesson was earlier in the day. Mr. Simon taught the class about the Battle of Bannockburn, taking all the enchantment out of the story by writing long lists of names and dates and having the students memorize and repeat the facts from the lesson.

Thorfinn then accompanies his father to the smithy, where men gather in the evenings. The villagers discuss politics and tell stories. This evening, while the villagers go about their business, the blacksmith is shoeing a horse.

After several of the men present their political views, James MacTavish, the innkeeper, begins a longwinded and passionate speech about the island's history and the importance of Scottish independence. While he is talking, Thorfinn falls asleep, resting against his father's shoulder. The innkeeper's voice, along with the horse being shod, contribute to Thorfinn's next imaginary adventure.

This adventure takes place in 1314 AD, just before the historic battle at Stirling Castle, where Robert the Bruce led the Scots in their battle for independence against the English. Thorfinn is the squire to a knight called Sir James MacTavish, who is as proud and full of himself as he is in real life. The two adventurers leave the island and cross Pentland Firth, making their way south to where the battle will be fought. Along the road, they meet a man named Uisdean, who is brewing whisky on a mountainside. The travelers' stop for a meal at a monastery. The monks chant and bless the travelers as they leave. Again, as in the first chapter, the travelers' leave money for the meal and hospitality they have enjoyed. Next, Thorfinn and the knight come upon a group of tinkers, who are laughing and shouting as they make their way along the road. Three of the tinkers are vaguely threatening to the travelers', and in a rage, Sir James MacTavish gets down off his horse, Seamus, and swings his axe around. The young tinkers run off laughing.

After this, the travelers reach a series of mountain passes and are hit with a period of poor weather. Sir James is impatient and the old horse does not want to move. Thorfinn's more gentle approach works and the trio move on. High on a mountain pass, the travelers' reach a fork in the road. Despite Thorfinn's misgivings and the horse's hesitancy, Sir James decides they will take the dangerous and snowy mountain pass instead of going down into the pinewood. All three stumble and struggle in a snow bank. Luckily, a shepherd rescues them and invites the travelers' to his hut for whisky and warm porridge. Sir James becomes drunk and becomes even more egotistical, bragging about his friendship with the rich and powerful. In the morning, however, he wakes with difficulty and has a terrible hangover. Despite this, they continue to the town of Perth.



At the busy market in Perth, they buy supplies and watch the preparations for war. The road becomes busier, as soldiers hurry south to make it to the battle in time. Unfortunately, Seamus stumbles and falls, blocking the road. The Earl of Mar approaches in his carriage and orders the horse to be dragged out of the road and killed since it is an inconvenience and he is eager to get to the battle. One of his horsemen carries out this deed and Thorfinn sleeps by the side of the road that night, aware of the birds and animals that will come to feed on the horse's carcass. From where he is, Thorfinn can see the campfires of the English and Scottish armies a distance away, facing each other on two opposing hillsides.

When he awakes, there is a dead silence and Thorfinn assumes it is the silence before the battle. In fact, the battle is over and Sir James MacTavish is nowhere to be found. Thorfinn has slept through the battle of Bannockburn. He watches as a group of women carry a dead soldier up the road. Several of them are weeping and mourning. Other soldiers carry the treasures and spoils of the war with them. This time, all the travelers are heading north, back home and away from the battlefield. Most of the soldiers, however, are not on the road home, but are pursuing the English army, which is retreating to the south.

Thorfinn catches a glimpse of the Earl of Mar returning with a young hostage, the Earl of Penzance. From the side of the road, he sees them in the Earl's carriage laughing and sharing a drink. Soon a monk passes by, looking for the dying, so that he can give them a final blessing. He talks with Thorfinn and they stand together listening to the bells of Stirling Castle, as they ring three times, signifying that the Scottish leader, Robert the Bruce, has gained control of the castle and has succeeded in taking it from Sir Philip Mowbray. The bells ringing means victory for Scotland.

Thorfinn wakes up from this adventure and is back in his regular life where he has dozed off to sleep while the horse has been shod in the smithy. The men of the village rouse themselves from the bench and go off to have a drink at MacTavish's pub. Thorfinn is relieved that James MacTavish, the man he has cast as a knight in his story, is unharmed. Thorfinn and his father return home to Ingle, where Tina Lyde is waiting with small presents of homemade baking for Thorfinn's father. Thorfinn does not have time to do his homework and goes straight to bed.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter continues to emphasize the difference between history, as it is taught, and an episode in history, as it might have been lived by someone witnessing some of the important events in the country's history. We also see, though Thorfinn does not realize it at the time, how the sounds of the blacksmith's shop have made their way into the boy's dreams. While describing Sir James MacTavish, Thorfinn describes his rusty armour and casts the horse, Seamus, in an important role in the story. The clanging of Sir James' axe when he frightens off the tinkers and the passage where Seamus is dragged to the side of the road and killed are also likely linked to the sounds drifting in to Thorfinn as he sleeps.



The people that they meet along the road south through Scotland represent what Thorfinn imagines to be the typical citizens of that period in history. There is a whisky maker, monks, traveling tinkers, and a shepherd, who knows nothing about the names "England" and "Scotland." In fact, several peasant characters in Thorfinn's stories know only the mountain or immediate environment where they live and have never heard of the rulers or names of countries and territories. These people represent the ancient folk culture of the Scottish people. Individuals live simple lives, where politics and national boundaries have little or no significance whatsoever.

Until very recently, most people in the world had only their immediate concerns to worry about. Their daily work involved hunting or farming, providing food and shelter for themselves and their families. Only a few would have status and luxuries like those that the Earl of Mar possesses in this story, with lands, servants, a carriage, and horsemen. The Earl of Mar is shown to be impatient and selfish, ordering Sir James's horse to be killed simply because it is temporarily in the way. The dead horse is a symbol for the suffering caused by those in power, who abuse the rights they have been given over the common people. The ruling class was for the vast majority of the country's history, elite. When the Earl of Mar returns from battle, he is accompanied by the Earl of Penzance, who is supposedly being held hostage for a large, ransom fee. Thorfinn sees the two clinking glasses and celebrating a cause to doubt the young Earl's status as an endangered, political prisoner. Instead, the ruling class continue their lives of luxury during times of war, untouched by the suffering and sacrifices of the common people.

The theme of independence is an important one in Scottish history and resurfaces often in the novel, particularly in this section. Originally tribe-based, a line of monarchs emerged in the early Middle Ages and gained power in the centuries that followed. During the Roman invasions in the first century AD, the tribes who inhabited North of Britain pushed back the Romans, inspiring the construction of Hadrian's Wall. Though a series of monarchs ruled over Scotland in the Middle Ages and the tribes eventually unified to be ruled by one king, the people retained a strong sense of independence. In particular, the monarchy to the south, became an increasing threat to Scottish rulers and particularly dangerous to the Scottish people. The Battle of Bannockburn, part of the ongoing tensions raging at the time between England and Scotland, was an important victory for the latter country.

Also worthy of note, is the straightforward use of symbols throughout the chapter. The dead soldier being carried away on a stretcher by weeping women represents the losses of war and the misery that results. The knight in his slightly rusty armour, putting on a show of strength to frighten the young tinkers away, represents the brave, but self-important knights in the chivalric tradition. The monks and peasants giving the travelers hospitality along the way represent the kindness of the Scottish people and the importance and benevolence of the religious orders.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Every Sunday morning, the Ragnarsons' go to church. It is known as "the kirk" in the local dialect. Thorfinn accompanies his family and often nods off to sleep during the sermon, waking up every so often when his sisters pass around a bag of candies. One Sunday, Thorfinn is moved by a sermon in which Reverend Hector Drummond quotes a passage from the Old Testament in the Bible. The reading (p. 48) is about the work humans are to carry out in the world and God's will working in the lives of men.

As they leave the church, Thorfinn's father hears that old Jacob, the fisherman has died. On his way home from school the next day, Thorfinn walks by the graveyard where Jacob's grave is being dug. The next part of the narrative, as the chapter heading indicates, follows Jacob Olafson's life through all its stages, from birth until death.

Thorfinn does not feel any extreme emotions about old Jacob's death, but he does feel that the old man was a steady presence on Norday, as much a part of the island as the rocks, seashore, and other physical features of the place. Several years earlier, Thorfinn had run an errand up to Smylder, the croft, where Jacob Olafson lived. This would be the last interaction he would have with the old man. Along with the groceries that Isa Estquoy asked him to bring from the store, Thorfinn had brought a package wrapped in newspaper, most likely a bottle of rum. Surprisingly, Jacob was kind to Thorfinn when he delivered the groceries and paid him a shilling for bringing the supplies from town. Until the end of his life, Jacob lived alone with his daughter and on the last visit, Thorfinn heard her calling from the back room just before he departed. As Thorfinn sits in the graveyard, he remembers these details about Jacob Olafson and the narrative that follows is all about Jacob's life.

First, it is the morning sunrise and the newborn child that is safe in his cradle, taken care of by his mother. Jacob cries and the narrator wonders if it is "grief for the marvellous country he has left" (p. 52), the place the baby has left in order to come into this life on earth.

Next, the sun has risen and Jacob is a boy, running and playing in the fields of his father's farm. His sister calls to him, since it is time to milk the cow. The boy is part of the land and has chores to do on the farm. Below the seashore, he sees Angus, the beachcomber moving about and looking for what has been swept onto the beach after the last storm.

The sun rises and it is Jacob's last day at school. His father suffers from rheumatism, now known as arthritis, and his parents expect Jacob to help on the farm full-time. Jacob, however, is more interested in going to the sea and goes instead to help his Uncle Archie. The two fish all summer on Archie's boat, the *Scallop*.



Now the preparations are made for Jacob's sister, Madeline to marry Jock Seatter, the blacksmith. Jacob is supposed to be the groomsman and carry the ring at the ceremony. However, Jacob disappears on the day of his sister's wedding, not being heard of again for many months. The next winter, Jess, "the tinker wife", tells the family that she saw Jacob getting on a Hudson's Bay company ship bound for Canada the day he was supposed to be at his sister's wedding. Mrs. Olafson and her husband will die before Jacob returns to the island ten years later, bringing with him his wife Rena, a Native American from the west coast of Canada.

When they arrive at Smylder, the croft is in a state of serious disrepair since Madeline has been living with her growing family at the blacksmith's and Smylder has been empty since the deaths of Jacob's parents. Jacob and Rena work hard to clean up the farmhouse and make a living by farming the land. Rena is very shy and seems to be unhappy, but she learns how to fit into the lifestyle expected of her as a crofter's wife. She has a baby girl, but Rena dies shortly after giving birth. Jacob continues to farm the land, but does not take very good care of the farm. Instead, he spends as much time as possible on his boat. His heart is still set on the open sea and he dreams of leaving to become a sailor.

When Jacob's daughter, Janet is grown, she takes care of him. Jacob enjoys their isolated existence and discourages young men from talking to his daughter, for fear they will court her. When he is older, Jacob goes on one last sea voyage on a trawler, a fishing ship bound for Iceland. The tough few weeks that he endures puts an end to his fantasies of going back to a life at sea. Jacob lives out his last years being cared for by his hard-working, but sharp-tongued daughter and dies on a spring morning at eighty years old. He was on the beach next to his boat, the *Scallop*.

Thorfinn is awakened from his reverie by the sound of the gravedigger at work on Jacob's grave. He thinks about how his life had barely begun and how he has much to enjoy in the years to come. He hears Albert Laird, the carpenter at work on Jacob's coffin as he walks home. Tina Lyde is waiting with baked goods as a present to Thorfinn's father, but Thorfinn tells her to leave the family alone. He believes his family is self-sufficient and he rejects Tina's attempts at winning over his father.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter departs from the kinds of boyhood fantasies Thorfinn has created in previous chapters. In this chapter, Thorfinn imagines Jacob Olafson's life in its entirety. Thorfinn does not cast himself in any role inside this story. This section of the narrative has a distinct tone. Most of this chapter is narrated in a very simple and direct style. We can almost imagine the storyteller sitting nearby and narrating the story of Jacob's life. This section opens with the lines:

"See, there he is, the new-born child, in his little
ship of time, his cradle. It is early morning□sunrise□



the ship and solitary voyager have been cast on to this island, out of the vast eternity" (p. 52).

The citation above introduces two important symbols that are used in this chapter and are important to the book as a whole: the ship sailing on the ocean of time and the sun making its rounds, representing the different phases of a human life. The cradle and the grave, both made of wood, are vessels that bring a person in and out of this world. The natural phases of the sun's journey from sunrise to sunset are used to represent the cycle of a human life, as a person journeys from birth to death.

Thorfinn describes how he will miss Jacob's presence. The boy has come to view the old man as a permanent part of the island, like the rocks or other physical features of the place. Jacob's life becomes a symbol of the natural cycle of a man's life, possible in a simple culture, such as that of the Orkney islanders. Although it is not always an easy or a happy life, Jacob does the best he can, claiming his independence by leaving the island for ten years to work and travel in Canada. He returns to the island with a wife. Not much about island life has changed in the time he has been gone.

Jacob and Rena are able to fix up the farm again and fit back into island life. The ease with which they can return home and continue with the traditional way of life contrasts with the destruction of the ancient crofts in Chapter Seven. This is illustrated when the aerodrome is built for defence in preparation for war. The island is changed for good almost overnight. This chapter is an important parallel to the last two chapters in the novel, since Jacob and Rena can reclaim Smylder quite easily from a decade of disrepair. In the final pages of the novel, Thorfinn and Sophie return to the island and renew their commitment to living from the land and sea, much as Jacob and Rena have done. However, Thorfinn and Sophie face much more desolate landscape and will have to toil alone to restore life and culture to the now deserted island.

Another minor story line that is linked at the end of this chapter is that of Matthew Ragnarson and Tina Lyde. The latter often appears in the evening with gifts of food or homemade goods as a present for the Ragnarson family. The children are rude and disrespectful towards Tina, as they can sense that she is interested in their father. The storyline concerning Matthew Ragnarson and Tina Lyde is carried through well into the novel, adding suspense and the potential for a romantic or domestic union between the two. We also see the independence and feistiness of the Ragnarson children. Thorfinn and his siblings are never kind to Tina. Repeatedly, the children claim they are self-sufficient and happy as they are, needing neither a mother, nor another woman to replace her.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter opens with the image of the sea eroding a stone structure that is located on the seashore at the edge of the ocean. This circular stone structure is a mystery to Thorfinn and he wonders what it could have been. His father does not know, but guesses that it may have been a Celtic church or a lighthouse.

At the general store, the island women comment on Mr. Simon's lady-friend, Miss Cameron, who is also a schoolteacher. While they are there, Albert Laird, the carpenter arrives and makes small talk with the ladies. They joke about who the recipient will be for the cradle he is making. This reminds Isa Estquoy that Albert makes both cradles and coffins in his workshop. She stops the conversation short and completes the transaction for his purchases. Mr. Harcourt-Smithers, the "laird" of the island arrives and the other ladies leave the store. Mr. Harcourt-Smithers spends summers on the island and winters traveling on cruise ships, generally living a life of luxury. Usually, his granddaughters spend the summer with him on the island. On this occasion, he asks for several bottles of whisky to be brought up to his residence because he will be receiving the bishop from Aberdeen.

The origins of the mysterious circular stone structure described at the opening of the chapter is revealed when Mr. Simon takes the school on a field trip to see what is left of the structure. While he is giving his lecture about the history of the Broch, one of the other boys in the group wanders down to the rocks below and watches his father's fishing boat, instead of listening to the lesson. Thorfinn wanders away from the group as well, and sits down against the edge of the Broch to create his own story about the structure's history. What follows is the narrative that Thorfinn imagines.

A group of seafarers arrive on the island of Norday. The previous inhabitants, presumably Picts, take fright when their welcome is not returned and the travelers attack. The original inhabitants run inland. They live with difficulty in the hills and sometimes steal animals for sustenance. They rarely interact with the new occupants, who have taken over the original seaside villages.

The newly arrived travelers name the island Norday and establish themselves there. On the nearby island of Selskay, there is a great leader and he encourages all of the chiefs of nearby islands to join and create a system of defence against other invaders. Distant relatives from their homeland, who they call the "Children of the Sea King" will likely follow the tide of migration and want to settle on the Orkney Islands. They call them the "Islands of Orc." They remember how they have driven the original people out of their homes and fear that the same will happen to them.

Castles, towers, and brochs are built along the shorelines of many of the islands. The chief of Norday asks Thorfinn, who in this story is a poet, to write a song/poem to



commemorate these achievements. Thorfinn writes "The Song of the Broch" and the song is included in the text.

The next summer, attackers arrive and are frustrated to find that the villagers have not run away as expected, but are in fact, safe with their provisions inside the shelter of the broch. The islanders have the additional advantage of being above their enemy. The attackers leave in frustration as a storm starts. This leaves several of the attackers injured or dead. The current wave of violent seafarers find that other islands in the area also have the same tall, stone towers. Though boats are sometimes spotted along the horizon, no other attackers arrive and a period of peace begins for the well protected Orkney Islands.

Some time later, a ship of Norwegians land peacefully on the island looking for an idyllic place to settle. The islanders greet them and let them stay overnight, but encourage them to move on to the west. The islanders tell the strangers that to the west lie beautiful islands with rich farmland and even more wonderful places to settle.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The term "Broch" refers to a type of primitive castle used two thousand years ago by the inhabitants of the Orkney Islands. The structure was quite tall and was surrounded by a thick, stone wall made with two layers of stone. This made it nearly impossible for the enemy to enter.

It is important to note that in this chapter, Thorfinn's fictional adventure takes place in a very early period of the island's history. In Set One, two thousand years ago, the story describes a time when the Celtic people arrive at the Orkneys in various waves of settlement. Almost no information is left to shed light on the original Stone Age inhabitants of Northern Great Britain, except for the remains of stone dwellings and other structures, such as the broch described in the current chapter. The Romans were the first to leave a written historical record. They describe fierce tribes of Picts, who fought the invading Roman army, pushing the Romans further south and inspiring the construction of Hadrian's Wall. In the fourth century AD, the Romans retreated from Britain and tribes of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes arrive in England. Scots arrive in what is now Scotland, settling among the tribes of Celts, who already resided in the area. When Brown describes the mysterious unnamed peoples who retreated inland, he is likely referring to the early Picts. The group of early inhabitants, in what is now Scotland, remain mysterious to contemporary historians because of the lack of written historical record. Having Thorfinn narrate a song commemorating the construction of the Brochs, is fitting, since the invaders in this chapter would have passed down their history in oral form.

The image of water lapping at the shore and eroding the rocks is an important image in the novel. If we follow the metaphor of the sea representing the passage of time, then pieces of the island's structure and its history fall away and are eroded by the passage



of time. The 20th century inhabitants of the island, including Thorfinn and his father, have forgotten the origins of the brochs and have thus, lost touch with part of their heritage.

In the previous chapter, Thorfinn described how Jacob was a steady presence on the island, almost as permanent and important to the island as the rocks on the seashore. In this chapter, the imagery is continued. There is a stone structure whose permanence is jeopardized due to the erosive action of the ocean. Something as permanent as rock is, in fact, in danger of being eroded and lost forever.

In the song that Thorfinn creates for the Norday chief, he speaks of the broch as the "stone mother" of the island and praises her in many ways. The broch will protect the island's people for many years, while generations wither and enemies are kept away. The structure is made of stone and a strange comfort is represented in the lines that invoke a mother who casts "stone arms" about the people "in a time of trouble." The broch is a protective figure and comfort comes from the strength of the stone that acts as a shield against enemies.

At the end of the chapter, the Norwegians, who land peacefully looking for a new place to settle, are greeted with a reserved hospitality. They are hosted for an evening, but are clearly not welcome to settle in the Orkneys. The islanders send the travelers further to the west, with stories of even more fertile lands. Though the islanders cannot know it at the time, these Norse travelers' are a forewarning of the Vikings, who will arrive centuries later to take over and populate the islands of the area. The author has included this detail, which links this chapter to the first of Thorfinn's stories, where the boy accompanies a boat of Orkney Vikings on their adventures to Byzantium.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The chapter begins with the narrator describing the two big houses that exist on the island: the Minister's manse and the Laird's hall.

Currently, the elderly laird, Mr. Harcourt-Smithers, spends summers on Norday to hunt and fish, after his winter stay in London. Though he is still widely respected on the island and richer than the islanders, the laird is not a true islander since his ancestors do not come from the island. The laird is also running his island estate under conditions greatly changed since his grandfather's time. The Laird's hall was once an extremely well run estate, with a large staff and luxurious furnishings. However, by the 1930's, the hall has begun to deteriorate. The laird's grandfather had owned all of Norday "from the lowest stone in the ebb to the topmost cairn-stone on the summit of [the mountain] Fea" (p. 94). He had been forced to sell almost every farm because of debts for death taxes and had not made much money by selling off the farms and crofts. Subsequent rulers were left in much reduced circumstances.

The present laird has only the factor on staff, a man named Thomas Vass. He is a merchant, who does errands for Mr. Harcourt-Smithers and takes care of business for the lord while he was away from the island. Every summer, the laird's two granddaughters visit the island and can be seen riding their horse, Selkie. Each year, Thomas Vass drives to meet the ferry bringing the girls to the island. The lord's Ford, which was only car on the island, readies the decaying hall for the "harmless old gentleman" and his two grand-daughters. This year, however, the old man arrives on his own, saying that the girls have gone travelling with school friends. He gives a long and fairly incoherent speech about the island and the islanders, speaking more than he does for most of the remainder of his stay in Norday.

The current hall was rebuilt in the late eighteenth century, after the original had been burned down by a ship full of King George III's supporters. The laird at that time was a supporter of the Jacobite rebellion. Bonnie Prince Charlie had been forced to take shelter for a winter in the caves of another island and had returned to find his hall gone.

When Thorfinn Ragnarson hears this story, he wishes he could have been in that rebellion, accompanying the young prince Charlie in his adventures. Before school, he sits in a field and imagines journeying with the Prince from the West Highlands to the Prestonpans, then on to Edinburgh and the battles in England, where the prince and his forces threatened the German born, English King George. The prince turned back, however, and a large English force attacked, as the Scottish army retreated back to Scotland with the Earl of Cumberland leading the attacks against the fleeing forces. Bonnie Prince Charlie did escape to France, but Thorfinn preferred to imagine him ending his life on the battlefield at Culloden in April of 1746, instead of the life of exile and eventual poverty that awaited him.



Thorfinn is awakened by the school bell and the sounds of animals and birds in the field around him. As Thorfinn hurries to school, he sees the girl who is staying at the Minister's manse. She is riding on horseback and waves and calls to him as Thorfinn makes his way to class late. During Mr. Simon's lessons on Greek and Roman mythology, Thorfinn wonders who the girl could be. He tells himself he does not like girls, not even his sisters, and makes himself think about other things.

The manse is the other big house on the island where the minister stays. The island has had several eccentric ministers in recent years. The current one is Reverend Hector Drummond, who keeps to himself and does not seem to take good care of himself. Hector Drummond is a bachelor, whereas most of the past ministers have been married. The village women worry that he does not take care of himself and they notice, for example, that he does not eat much, nor keep the exterior of the manse in good order. Reverend Drummond is a very private man. Guests are rarely invited into the manse and never allowed past the front hall. When women from the village drop off baked goods and food, he brings it to the poor people of the island. The women do not understand this and soon stop bringing gifts. The Reverend often goes on visiting rounds and the women enjoy serving him tea and baked goods. He also spends quite a bit of time with the poor, such as the beachcomber, Jimmo Greenay, though the other islanders cannot understand why he does so. The Reverend is also untraditional in other ways. He comes to the pub one day, for example, saying gently, that if the men from the pub won't come to church, then he will come to them.

A description of past ministers gives more information about the island's past. For several generations, the ministers were scholars and amateur scientists. One 18th century minister only read Latin poets and criticised all other contemporary and recent writers. Another minister had written a history of the islands and had correctly hypothesised the Norse roots of the island's people. During the Napoleonic era, a minister had criticised the young men for refusing to volunteer to fight in the King's war. Another minister in the 19th century had refused to comment on the fossils found on the island. These fossils prompted scholars to estimate a date for the beginning of Creation. The minister at the time noted only that he had found a few "curious things" from beside the ocean of time.

The minister before Mr. Drummond was a man named Aeneas Abernethy, who retired in 1935. The previous Reverend had been an advocate for temperance or the use of "strong drink," which is another way of saying he supported a ban on alcohol of any kind. He had attempted to shut down the bar at the inn and many women on the island had supported a ban on liquor. The temperance movement was strong on the island and it was as it was in other parts of Great Britain. Though the ban was never put in place, a division between the people on the island began, with some supporting the church and temperance and others supporting the pub and the inn.

By second spring, Mr. Drummond is stationed on the island. A strange, young woman arrives off the steamer. Her identity is a mystery, though earlier Isa Estquoy, the postmistress, notices that the Reverend was sending mail to his mother and to an Edinburgh woman named Sophia Lauderdale. The woman is very beautiful and her



arrival sparks all kinds of speculation. When she is not greeted at the ferry, the islanders do not know what to think. Instead of going to the inn as the islanders expect, the young woman walks with her heavy luggage to the manse. Some think she must be the Reverend's niece. Others speculate that she must be his fiancée. Though the women try to find out her name, neither the Reverend, nor his guest give out Sophie's name, information on her background, or clues about the purpose of her visit.

The woman goes horseback riding often on Selkie, the laird's horse. She also walks alone along the hills and bird watches. She offends James MacTavish, the innkeeper, by riding quickly through the village, almost upsetting one of his beer casks. Once, she stops for tea with Jimmo, the beachcomber and later stops in at Smylder to speak with old Jacob Olafson. At the poor croft called Swinhurst, the young woman makes a visit to Winnie Swona's granddaughter, Eliza, who is reportedly sick with consumption. Soon after Sophia's visit, Eliza recovers fully and the townspeople are shocked. The townspeople are also shocked that Sophie does not attend church the first three Sundays she is in town. She does attend later, though, and puts flowers in the church windows on Easter Sunday, something that has never occurred before. She is also found one evening alone in a stone ruin thought to have religious origins, standing silently with a lit candle.

One day Sophie comes across Thorfinn Ragnarson, who is sitting by the side of the road with his school bag. He has been sent home early from school for "laziness and inattention" (p. 116). Thorfinn tells Sophie how Mr. Simon has said he will be a failure. Sophie tells him that one day he will be a poet and promises that she will come and visit him at Ingle again one day. Thorfinn is elated at this conversation, but later feels humiliated when Sophie sees him outside the school gates and asks about his poetry and all the other children laugh.

When she leaves, the islanders watch as Sophie rides down to the pier on the horse Selkie. She dismounts and takes leave of Mr. Harcourt-Smithers. She kisses Thorfinn goodbye and tells him she will come back one day. She then kisses the laird, the Minister and the colt, Selkie goodbye. As she leaves on the steamer, the *Raven*, she blows kisses out toward the island.

At the end of the chapter, Thorfinn finally asks what the woman's name is and the Minister explains that she is his younger, half-sister, Sophie. The Reverend has not realized that the islanders did not know he and Sophie were siblings. He explains that some of his sister's eccentricities come from their mother, who came from the West Highlands with "a bit of Gaelic enchantment in her" (p. 126). Mr. Harcourt-Smithers decides to give Selkie to Thorfinn, who rides the horse back to Ingle, imagining he is riding the horse belonging to the Greek goddess, Persephone.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Sophie's presence on the island coincides with springtime. Her behavior is eccentric and refreshing to the islanders, since they tend to settle into a routine in their work lives



and in their attitudes. Both Sophie and her brother exhibit Christian charity by tending to the unfortunate and spending time with those who are mostly ignored on the island. The villagers see Sophie's behavior as strange and unsettling and gossip abounds about everything from her secretive stay at the manse to how she misses several weeks of church. The villager's curiosity is intense, since they are not used to new people on the island, and certainly not one who seems to care so little for what others think.

Sophie brings a freshness and vitality to the island that is unusual. Like her half-brother, she is eccentric and independent, generally unworried about what others may think of her. Sophie is also portrayed as a figure with almost mythological characteristics. She arrives at the end of winter like the Greek figure, Persephone, who is associated with the end of winter and the regeneration of the natural world in spring. It is only at the end of the chapter, that we learn that the Reverend is her half-brother. To most of the villagers and to the young Thorfinn, Sophie's presence on the island is mysterious and intriguing.

Sophie also acts as a muse to the young writer, as the title of the chapter suggests. Where previously Thorfinn has been ridiculed and taunted for his daydreaming, he is now acknowledged as a writer with a developing talent. Though Sophie brings hope to Thorfinn and fuels his dreams of writing, she also brings some degree of pain: "Sophie" translates to *wisdom* in Greek and indeed self-wisdom often does involve some degree of pain accompanying personal development. Sophie brings the poet discomfort when she talks about his writing in front of the other children. Symbolically, Thorfinn has been introduced to his peers as a writer. The children represent the peer group or mainstream society and Thorfinn's embarrassment at being shown to be a writer is parallel to what the author himself may have gone through, deciding on an unconventional career such as writing, while living in a small and very insular island community. This puts its stock in fishing and working the land. Thorfinn's introduction into the world as a writer and the acknowledgment of his talent is a necessary, but painful step that most artists must take. The kisses Sophie throws out to the island and the kiss she gives to Thorfinn before she leaves, are also cause for inspiration and are the only hint at a potential love interest that develops between the two characters at the end of the novel.

Generally, Sophie is described in natural environments or interacting with animals or the more downtrodden inhabitants of the island. In a lyrical passage on p. 119, she is described riding by the sea and cresting hills, calling out to fishermen who are sailing nearby. She is also seen bird watching and swimming, in addition to riding the horse, Selkie across the island. The arrival of spring flowers on the island is also associated with Sophie's arrival. She is the one who places flowers in the church at Easter and it is by her side, that her brother notices the blackbird outside the window and its first song of spring. Also, Sophie's role as muse, is emphasized when she is seen late at night by a passing shepherd. Sophie is seen inside an ancient and abandoned structure, presumably of religious significance, carrying "a star and a candle" (p. 122) and partaking in some sort of private religious rite or ceremony.

Another issue highlighted in this chapter is that of alcoholism. The narrator describes how several individuals in the community can not "hold their drink" and hints at the



domestic violence that sometimes accompanies the problem of alcoholism. Linked to this is the division on the island between pub and church. There is a longstanding tension between the islanders who support temperance and those who disagree with the abolition of alcohol on the island.

The author subtly weaves in links to other chapters throughout the novel. In this chapter, he includes a reference to the press gangs active in the Napoleonic era, actively forcing young men to go to war in the name of the King. The next chapter's focus is on the press gangs and how the islanders wittily escape from the press gang's visit to Norday. Adding these details keeps at least some coherence to the text, since the storyline jumps between the centuries and the narrative risks becoming difficult to follow. The author provides links between the chapters by using these details and through following Thorfinn's daily life and interspersing events in the present time of the 1930s, with the boy's historical imaginings.

Furthermore, the central image of the waters of time washing against the island's shore, is presented in this chapter. The amateur archaeologist, who was the Minister on Norday during the Napoleonic era, attends a meeting where the date of Creation is estimated. Instead of giving a definite answer, he states that he has found a few "curious" or interesting objects, which originate on the island beside the ocean of time. The title of the novel is drawn from these lines. The island and its people are affected by the passage of time, but there is also an implication that the islanders are somehow set aside from the regular sweep of history. Because of their unique geographic location, they are isolated from the mainland and insulated from changes that arrive more quickly in other places.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Now the narration moves into Thorfinn's adolescent years, with a description of how Thorfinn has left school at fourteen and his two elder sisters having already left home to be married.

A conflict arises between the youngest Ragnarson daughter, Ragna and Tina Lyde when the latter arrives without knocking and places a rag mat on the floor near the hearth. Thorfinn's sister yells at the woman to leave them alone, shoving the mat into the woman's arms and telling her to never return to Ingle again. Tina does not come back to the croft again and Matthew wonders aloud why she has stopped visiting and bringing them her homemade goods. Thorfinn and his sister exchange a glance, but do not say anything. Though Tina does not come back to Ingle again, she can sometimes be seen at night on the hillside looking down at the farm. Sometimes at midnight, she will still be standing there.

Meanwhile, technological changes are coming to the island. A "wireless set" or radio is brought in, bringing drama shows and the news of the impending war. Other changes coincide with these changes in technology. Mr. Harcourt-Smithers decides not to return to Norday for the summer and the Reverend Hector Drummond announces that he will move on to a new parish in Lanarkshire.

Three strangers arrive on the *Raven* in the summer of 1937, as the island is celebrating the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. The strangers tote their equipment into the fields and carry out all kinds of measurements. The strangers will not answer the villagers' questions and continue with their work. Some of the crofters are polite to the men, though they get no answers from the strangers. One local woman, Matilda Kerrigan, runs at the men and kicks down their tripod. They reply civilly that she could go to prison for this and continue with their work unperturbed. Nothing more is heard from these men for almost a year and the islanders almost forget the strangers' brief and troubling presence on the island.

At Ingle, Matthew announces that he is going to be remarried and Tina has come to reside at Ingle. He implies that Ragna will soon be leaving and perhaps to be married to Andrew Rosey, the ferryman. Ragna is extremely upset and vows she will not marry Andrew Rosey. She refuses to accept Tina as a replacement to her deceased mother. Ragna yells at her father and her rage is exhausted. She asks her father affectionately if she has not taken care of him well enough, admitting that she could not bear to have another woman in the house using her deceased mother's things. Ragna leaves, saying she will neither marry the ferryman nor live under the same roof as Tina. Thorfinn rides out over the hills on Selkie, looking down on the calm island and the villagers' lives. He stops to think about the distressing events at home and falls into another reverie.



It is the reign of King George III. A war is underway, but the islanders are not affected by it. The British and the French are continually fighting and the islanders have been ignoring their conflicts for centuries.

The laird, who owns everything on the island, announces one day that the young men on the island must volunteer to fight at sea against the French. Mr. Harcourt-Smithers and the factor, Elphinstone, officially demand that the young men of the island present themselves for service. When no one volunteers, twelve men are nominated. However, the morning they are supposed to present themselves to the recruiting officers, these men and all other young men on the island are nowhere to be found. The laird acts surprised and embarrassed and the young men's families tell all kinds of stories to the press gang about why their sons are absent from the island. All of the island's young men are secretly hiding in caves on the other side of Norday.

Thorfinn Ragnarson is rumored to still be at home and the recruiting officers visit his house. Thorfinn's mother claims that her son is suffering from consumption and the press gang departs quickly, leaving Thorfinn alone.

When the recruiting officers leave, the people of the island dance and celebrate their success in outwitting the officers. Thorfinn is shy, however, and does not join in the celebration. Instead, he walks alone across the shore to where the seals are gathered.

Thorfinn watches as a group of Seal people dance on the shore. They take human form after shedding their skins and leaving them on the rocks near the edge of the ocean. One beautiful, young Seal woman is excluded from the group and sits nearby watching. Thorfinn cries out softly at her beauty and then stands up among the tall grasses where he has been hiding. The Seal people's dance is broken and the others retreat to the sea. Thorfinn takes the girl's sealskin before she can get to it and she is unable to rejoin her people. Thorfinn leads her to Ingle, where he hides the sealskin in the loft and then brings the girl inside to meet his father and mother. He names her Mara.

His mother rejects the girl immediately, shouting that she knows the girl is not from the island and that the girl frightens her. Thorfinn's father, James accepts the girl, welcoming her and offering her a seat at the table and something to eat. Mara refuses to eat earth-food and instead eats raw fish that the men bring her. As the evening progresses, Thorfinn's mother retreats to the fireside and seems to age prematurely. On the other hand, his father seems rejuvenated the longer Mara lives with them. Eventually, months pass and the old woman becomes ill and takes to her bed. By this time, Thorfinn and Mara are married and Mara has been taught how to speak and how to perform the tasks necessary to be a crofter's wife. Soon, she and Thorfinn are expecting their first child.

One day Mara is out visiting a friend and the old woman thinks the girl has left for good. Thorfinn's mother speaks for the first time in many days, saying that she is now the mistress of the house again, suggesting a local girl as a wife for Thorfinn. When Mara arrives home, she goes into labor and has the child. The old woman returns to the back



bedroom and dies shortly after giving the child her blessing. Several years later, James dies peacefully at home by the fireside.

As time passes, Mara adapts to farm life and she and Thorfinn have several children. Mara still refuses to eat porridge, potatoes, and other staple foods of the island, preferring raw fish. When the full moon is out, she becomes moody and unpredictable for several days at a time, neglecting her household duties and becoming silent, violent, and suffering from fits of rage. This is made public one day when fishermen bring in a dead seal to a neighbouring croft. When Mara sees the dead animal, she suffers an attack of rage and grief, weeping and scratching at Thorfinn as he carries her home. The other islanders gossip about Mara and her strange behavior, agreeing that she must have been left behind after a shipwreck. This assumption also explains her sudden arrival on the island several years before.

Several seasons later, a Swedish ship runs aground off the coast of Norday. The skipper, Bjorn Thorsteen, loses his cargo, which is secretly hoarded by the islanders. He also loses his wife, Solveig, the night of the shipwreck and Bjorn refuses to leave the island, irrationally believing her to still be alive. Thorfinn walks the beach and finds the decomposing body and the woman is buried in the churchyard.

The following August, Thorfinn takes his children by boat to the Lammas Fair. Mara stays home, saying she needs to carry out her chores. When the family arrives home that evening, they find the croft empty and the hearth fire nearly out. Mara has returned to her people and is never seen again in human form. Thorfinn stays for hours by the edge of the shore listening to the seals call out in their strange and plaintive language.

The next morning, Thorfinn is awakened by a man from the village who tells him that the press gang is back and looking for recruits. Instead of hiding in the caves like the others, he decides to wait at home and see what will happen. He decides he will accept his fate and so he stays at his croft, willing to face the consequences if the recruiters decide to pay him a visit.

Thorfinn wakes into the 20th century and rides back to Ingle, where Tina is making dinner. Ragna has gone for several days to look after Ben Hoy. The table is set for three and Thorfinn joins his father and Tina for the meal. All three eat together.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Thorfinn's childhood is ending and with it, the innocence with which he has embarked on his imaginary journeys. There is a great danger that the young writer will believe what he hears around him, that the weavings of his stories and his strong powers of imagination, are useless and futile. Thorfinn creates as he works out ideas about domestic union and the threat to young men's independence. This is represented by the menacing press gangs and their attempts at pressing men into war time service.



This chapter focuses on two things: the way the islanders outwit the press gangs that come to recruit young men to war and Thorfinn's marriage to the other, worldly woman Mara, who comes from the Seal people, who live in the ocean near the island.

By the 18th century, the islanders living in the Orkney Island region have been under the rule of monarchies for many centuries. Though this does not mean that the islanders felt commitment toward their political leaders, the physical isolation of the Orkney Islands mean that their way of life could continue unchanged for centuries, regardless of war and political tensions on the mainland, the rest of Great Britain, and Europe. This is why the narrator refers to the present war as being unimportant to the islanders. It is seen as just another of the ongoing wars between England and France. The Norday islanders have no interest in risking the lives of their young men to fight a war that has no bearing on their security or their daily lives. An island community, as isolated as the fictional Norday, would have to guard against a massive loss of life to their young men for an additional reason. Because the population was so small, the community that is so tightly knitted, would take away several dozen young men leading to a threat to the growth of population on the island and would threaten the next generation. If most of the young men were to disappear or be killed in battle, then much of the necessary work would also be compromised. The skill in farming and fishing would be irreplaceable. Also, jobs on the island were specialized and the loss of a blacksmith or a miller, for example, would have a large and devastating effect on the entire community.

Press gangs were commonly used to ensure that enough men were recruited to work the war ships in the king's service. As typical in many folk tales, the simple islanders outwit the authorities when they escape from having to enlist in the king's service.

The tale of Thorfinn's marriage to Mara also shows the importance of mythology and the islanders' dependence on the natural world. The narrator emphasises how the island people are special because of their mythical links to the Seals and to the rest of the animal world. Often, peoples mythology will include references to unions between humans and animals or between humans and beings from the supernatural world. In this case, Thorfinn's children are human and are accepted by the other islanders. They are special because of the scales on their hands that link them to their mother's heritage, as part of the magical Seal people and the mythical world.

In the 20th century narrative, Thorfinn's sister, Ragna rages at Tina Lyde, who she believes is trying to win her father's heart and become mistress of Ingle. Ragna yells at Tina and tells her she is not welcome at the croft ever again. Tina hurries away and it seems that this is the end of this subplot of the story. At the end of the chapter, though, Thorfinn comes home after his day out by the shore and finds Tina preparing a meal for him and his father. We are set up to believe that Tina has been banished from Ingle for good and that Ragna has won the battle of wills, which has raged between the two women. However, we find instead, that the opposite is true. Ragna has been sent away for a few days to look after Ben Hoy, which leaves Tina a chance to settle in at Ingle. Thorfinn's acceptance of her meal and the table set for the three of them, symbolizes Tina's acceptance into the Ragnarson family.



It is important to note in this chapter, as in the previous ones, how the invented stories contain links to what is happening in the 20th century storyline. Thorfinn rides out to the shore feeling upset about the tension, which has erupted between Ragna and Tina. In Thorfinn's 18th century story, the plot centers around Thorfinn's successful acquisition of his wife and children and the tension between Mara and Thorfinn's mother. In both narratives, there is also tension between the two, as to who will be in control of Ingle. In both stories, the men are welcoming and accepting of the new female figure. In the earlier story, the old woman retreats to a far room in the house, symbolically giving up the control of the hearth fire, the heart of the home, to Mara. Thorfinn and Mara's first child is born and that night, the old woman dies. Again, this symbolizes the passing of resistance, tension, and a new beginning. This is seen particularly, when the old woman on her death bed, gives the newborn her blessing. Back in the 20th century, Thorfinn returns home and sits down to a meal with his father and Tina. Through his reverie, his confused feelings have been resolved to some extent and he is able to accept Tina's presence even, if this family situation is not the way he would have wanted things. This parallels the ending of the 18th century story where Thorfinn returns home after Mara has disappeared and decides to stay home with his children to await the unpredictable future and the possible arrival of the press gang's second visit.

Important symbols in this chapter include: the sealskin, representing Mara's animal identity; the hearth, which is at the center of the house, representing the stability and warmth of the home; and the hearth fire, representing the health and strength of the family. Food is also important in this chapter. The raw fish Mara eats, symbolizes her difference from the human world to which she will never fully belong. Their children, however, are accepted in the human world and will pass on the link to the supernatural/animal world when they eventually have children of their own. In this way, a magical heritage is passed on to those who will later be the next generation of islanders. The only physical signs marking Thorfinn and Mara's offspring are the scales on the palms of their hands, noticed only by one of the fishermen, and thus, only slight markers of their difference.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

A large cargo ship anchors off the coast of Norday Island. Workers arrive from Ireland and the Scottish mainland and set up a temporary shantytown. This town is made up of tents used for worker housing and includes a beer canteen, which threatens the business of MacTavish's Inn. The land that had been surveyed several years ago is now suddenly being requisitioned by the government.

Boats continue to arrive with workers and materials for construction. Many farmers receive notice that they must vacate their homes and fields and give these up for government use. The workers are busy day and night pouring concrete for the foundations for buildings. Work starts on the main project. A large aerodrome or hangar, which will be used for British military planes in the event of German attack during the war, is constructed.

A pier is built and the work progresses quickly, so that almost overnight, the island is transformed. Birds take fright and the Seals move to nearby islands, as Norday is filled with the explosions from the island's reopened quarry and other construction work. A small reservoir is built and many of the islanders' fishing boats are used to bring workers over.

Several secretaries and officers arrive on the island, as the island's first telephone is installed. Dr. Lamond has never needed a telephone before, since none of the islanders have one. When the flight sergeant and pilot officers arrive with the typists, MacTavish is told that parts of his Inn will be taken over to house the officers and staff. The sound of typewriters is also heard on the island for the first time. Along with the other disruptions and closures, Isa Estquoy's post office remains open, but the store she runs is forced to close. She passes out the unsold stock to the islanders who drop by.

Louis Stewart, the owner of Westvove farm, burns down his old 800-year-old farm, saying he would rather see it burn cleanly than watch it be destroyed in other ways. Jimmo Greenay, the beachcomber, is content for the first few days of construction. However, groups of workers, do not know who he is and let him join them in their meals and camaraderie. Eventually, he is caught and warned to stay away. Throughout all the changes, Winnie Swona and her granddaughter, Eliza continue to live peacefully at their croft in one of the poorer and more isolated areas of the island. The two women continue with their daily chores and seem to ignore the changes happening to the island.

The islanders hear on the radio that the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain has met with Adolf Hitler and there is hope for peace. This hope turns out to be false and while the Second World War progresses in other parts of Europe, construction of the aerodrome continues on Norday.



One day, Matthew finds that Thorfinn has disappeared. It seems that Thorfinn has taken a travel trunk with him and left the island, perhaps for good.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter is incredibly important to the book as a whole. The author describes how, in a very short time, drastic changes come to the island. The author has spent the first six chapters describing the island and its history. He is painting a picture of Thorfinn's childhood and the island's past, through his stories about the island's history. Though there have been invasions and different races of peoples who have inhabited the island, the islanders' lifestyle has always been fairly simple. They have worked the land and fished from the sea, generally unaffected by threats from the outside world. The previous chapter shows, for example, the islanders outwitting the authorities and refusing to take part in European wars. This contrasts with the events in this chapter, where suddenly the outside world, with its wars and technology, take over the island, making irreversible changes to the island itself and to island life.

The natural world is also adversely affected by the changes brought about by forces outside of the Orcadians' control. Throughout the novel, the author has emphasized the cyclical nature of human life and the necessary dependence and sustainable relationship between mankind and nature. The islanders live in harmony with the seasons. The prototypical islander, Jacob Olafson, lives his life in harmony with nature and within the cycle of the sun's path across the sky. The respect for marriage and to the world that sustains them, is inherent to the islanders. The author has highlighted this relationship in Chapter Six, where the physical and spiritual union of human and nature are represented by Thorfinn and Mara's marriage. In the current chapter, the author emphasizes the massive disruption, which is occurring on the island by describing how animals leave the island, seeking other places to live. Seals, birds, and ducks are disturbed by the aerodrome's construction. The Seals move off to find a different place to live. A herd of cattle stampede through the temporary village of workers' tents, frightened by the fire that has been set at Westvoe. The final image of the chapter is of the horse, Selkie, who is seen on a hilltop against a red sunset symbolizing the violence and destruction that has been happening on the island. When Matthew Ragnarson looks for a second time, the horse is gone. The paragraph that follows describes the next day and how Thorfinn is missing. The image of the red horse against the brilliant, red sunset stands for the individual youth. Thorfinn is forced to witness the violence and decline of the ancient way of life on Norday. The setting of the sun is a symbol of the period of decline that will envelop the island as its original inhabitants (both human and animal), are forced to leave their homes. Sensitive to the changes that have come so suddenly to his home, Thorfinn, like the confused and migrating animals, leaves the island to search for another way of life.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Thorfinn returns to the deserted island of Norday after his release from a German prison camp, where he has spent most of the war living with other prisoners in Stalag 29B. Norday is now deserted and Thorfinn has chosen to return despite the ruined state that the island is in. Its fertile farmlands are destroyed by concrete and all of the houses are abandoned and in various states of decay. Even the hippies who lived here briefly are unable to take up permanent residence on the island. During their stay, they break off pieces of wood from village buildings and from the bar of the Inn, to use as firewood during the cold winters. When he returns, Thorfinn sets himself up in an old hut by the beach, taking over the place where Jimmo Greenay, the beachcomber, had lived. Supplies and mail are delivered to him by Mansie Drever, who makes the trip by boat from Selskay roughly once a week.

Thorfinn spends his days repairing the boat, *Scallop*. His evenings are spent writing. During the war, Thorfinn had first begun writing about Norday. He begins with historical tales set during various times in the island's past. He begins by writing in notebooks supplied by the Red Cross and is later encouraged to publish, with the help of the German officer, Major Schneider. He goes against protocol by inviting the prisoner to his office, sharing a drink with him, and encouraging him in his writing. The officer also gives Thorfinn, (known in this chapter as Private Ragnarson because of his membership in the army), the use of a typewriter. Thorfinn sends his manuscript to London and it is accepted for publication. He spends the remainder of his days in the prison camp typing manuscripts in a similar genre.

Near the end of the war, the helpful Major Schneider, is taken away by the SS and replaced by Corporal Weinhort. The new captain threatens to take Thorfinn's typewriter away, but in the end, relents after giving Thorfinn a speech about the new and purified world, which the Germans are attempting to create.

After the war, Thorfinn moves to Edinburgh where he continues his writing. He lives in the company of a wild and changing group of artist friends. Thorfinn continues to add to his publishing credits and after the publication of his first two novels, he attempts a poetic biography of an islander, charting the man's life from birth to death. This work is not received well by the public, nor with the critics, but the writer returns to working on historical romances, making a living from these and miscellaneous non-fiction pieces.

Thorfinn then writes a novel about the impact of industry and modern technology on a simple folk society. The novel is an instant success, bringing the author media attention and an identity in the literary scene. Though his friends host large celebrations for him in the Edinburgh garret, Thorfinn tires of the lifestyle and returns to Norday.



Thorfinn lives alone on the island, repairing the boat, *Scallop*, which once belonged to Jacob Olafson. He spends his evenings writing. Thorfinn is happy to have returned, even though he feels defeated in his dreams of celebrating the island through his writing. Thorfinn believes he is alone on the island, although he thinks he sees smoke coming from the chimney at the abandoned farm that used to belong to Winnie Swona and her granddaughter. It turns out that Winnie has left the croft to Sophie, who has now returned to the island and has been living off the land. One morning, she comes to Thorfinn's hut and brings him some potatoes and carrots. At first, he rejects her and her gifts, but he relents and they spend the morning recounting how they have spent the fifteen years since they last saw each other.

In the afternoon, the couple walk along the shore and Thorfinn tells Sophie that he will work the land and fish. She tells him she will work the land and look after the farm animals. The novel ends with the couple admitting that it is not always possible for an individual to get everything the heart desires. The couple decide that it will be their son, who will be the poet. As the novel ends, they continue to walk "beside the ocean of the end and the beginning" (p. 217).

Chapter 8 Analysis

Thorfinn's choice to return to Norday symbolizes his commitment to the land. He returns to the desolate and abandoned island, resolving to live off the land as much as possible, and to rely as little as possible on the outside world for his sustenance. His feelings about this are so strong that he does not want to open any of the tinned food in his hut because that would be a betrayal of the island and its ability to provide for him.

The atmosphere on the island is drab and depressing: "It is melancholy, the deserted village. The roofs sag, most of the windows are cracked, the doors that haven't been torn off withered" (p. 195). The physical state of the island stands as a symbol for what has become of the island's people, history, and culture. In an incredibly short period of time, it seems to have been completely wiped out. However, Thorfinn's return to the island, means there can be hope for renewal. The simple life that he chooses to lead, symbolizes a choice that individuals can make. A choice can be made to return to simple and sustainable ways of life, in harmony with the earth, and continuation of the traditions of their ancestors.

It is significant that Thorfinn begins writing while he is in prison. It is while he is confined in a German jail, that Thorfinn begins to write about Norday and the lives of his ancestors. The romances that Thorfinn writes are in fact, the same stories that have been introduced to the reader in earlier chapters. Though it is dangerous to read a fictional work as autobiography, in many ways, Thorfinn's writing career does seem to parallel that of the author. After writing many historical romances, which are all well received, Thorfinn attempts to tell the story of one islander, through the cycle of the character's life. Clearly referencing the chapter in which Thorfinn describes Jacob Olafson's life, this more experimental novel is not popular with Thorfinn's reading public. When Thorfinn publishes the story about the impact of massive technological change on



a simple "primitive" people, however, the novel is a great success. This may well reflect the almost instant popularity of Brown's first novel, *Greenvoe*, which received enormous public support after decades of Brown's life spent struggling to make a living with non-fiction and more importantly, with poetry.

This success leads to Thorfinn's continued absence from the island, as the author spends the early 1950s leading an artist's life in Edinburgh. His days are filled with changing friends and bouts of drinking. This lifestyle soon becomes tiresome and when Thorfinn returns to Norday, he is making a statement about his values. He repairs the boat, *Scallop* and links himself to the tradition of crofters and fishermen represented by this staple Orkney islander. Thorfinn attempts to write, but realizes that his true commitment is to living a simple and productive life. The change in his character, from an irresponsible artist on the streets of Edinburgh to an Orkney islander, potential husband, and father, comes about when he accepts the female presence embodied in the character of Sophie. Their agreement to work the land and fish means hope for the continuation of the tradition of the island's culture. The two are willing to put aside their own dreams and accept that it is their son, who will be the poet. In the last lines of the novel, we see that Thorfinn has matured and is able to make a commitment to Sophie and solidify his values. He accepts that not all dreams come true. Thorfinn will give up his writing or let it take second place, putting emphasis back on what is necessary to make a life together in harmony with nature. The storytelling tradition will continue with the couple's offspring. This way, the creative act of writing is secondary to the real creative act of reproduction and raising a family.

Important imagery in this chapter is again nature imagery. The flowers appearing at the end of the snow mirror in the springtime can be associated with Sophie's arrival on Norday several chapters earlier. As the couple walk along the shore, there is an acknowledgment that they walk beside the ocean of time. At the end of the novel, the cyclical nature of time and of human lives is emphasized. Sophie and Thorfinn are poised at a point in their lives that is both an ending and a beginning. The theme of voyaging and journeying is again referenced in these final lines. Since the novel ends with the main character and his love interest beginning a new journey on the island, which is located, as the novel's title suggests, beside the ocean of time.



Characters

Thorfinn Ragnarson

Thorfinn is the central character in the novel. There is one main storyline, which follows Thorfinn's life from childhood into young adulthood. Growing up in Norday, a fictitious Orkney island, Thorfinn is known to the other islanders including his family, as lazy and inept boy. He has problems concentrating at school and is disliked by his schoolteacher, Mr. Simon, who believes Thorfinn will amount to nothing.

Thorfinn is gifted with a vivid imagination, though he keeps this talent hidden until early into his adolescence. As a child, Thorfinn spends many afternoons imagining episodes from the island's history. He casts himself in roles in these dramas, going on adventures with Vikings and medieval knights. He acts as poet/troubadour for a Celtic chieftain who has had stone Brochs constructed to protect the island from invaders.

Thorfinn leaves the island soon after construction crews arrive to prepare a massive aerodrome for use during the second World War. He enlists and is captured as a prisoner of war, spending his time in captivity writing historical romances set on the island of Norday. He returns to the barren island several years later, living a wild artist's life in Edinburgh, where he has gained respect for his novel that explores the impact of massive technological change on a simple folk society. Thorfinn attempts to live simply off the land and sea and writes in the evenings. He is reunited with Sophie, the muse like figure, who appeared briefly in his childhood to encourage him with his writing. The two decide to reestablish their lives together on the once fertile, but now deserted island.

By the end of the novel, Thorfinn has succeeded commercially in his writing, but he still feels that he has not succeeded completely. He and Sophie will devote themselves to continuing the sustainable way of life that has almost disappeared. She tells him that their son will be the poet. Thorfinn's gifts, unknown to the people around him in his childhood, flourish in his storytelling. However, it is through passing the storytelling tradition on to his son that Thorfinn will truly be successful.

Sophie

Sophie, the Reverend Hector Drummond's half-sister, is the mysterious young woman who comes to stay on Norday Island during Thorfinn's childhood in the mid-1930s. She is independent and eccentric bringing a sense of renewal to the island. Though she does not attend the island church regularly during her stay, she is associated with religion since it is likely she who sets out flowers during the Easter service. Sophie is also seen late at night on ancient ritual grounds carrying out a private religious ceremony. Sophie's free-spirited nature is also seen when she rides at a quick pace



through town on Selkie, the horse, nearly upsetting a beer cask and causing James MacTavish to dislike her.

Sophie piques the curiosity of the townspeople and the women often gossip about her during her stay. Some wonder if she is the Reverend's fiancée or a girlfriend. Several women are jealous of her. The townspeople constantly press both Sophie and the Reverend for information, but both are vague in their answers, not realizing they have not explained Sophie's visit and their relationship as siblings.

To Thorfinn, Sophie is a muse and she is described as almost mythic in nature. He first notices her as she rides the horse, Selkie, and waves at him from across the fields. When she leaves, she blows kisses out across the island that can be seen as a form of blessing. Most importantly, Sophie tells Thorfinn that one day he will be a poet. She promises to return to him one day, as she does, fifteen years later, when Norday has been deserted and Thorfinn returns to live a simple life alone on the island. Sophie has been taken over Willa Swona's farm and lives for some time on the island without Thorfinn being aware of her presence. The two vow to each other that they will work the land and derive sustenance from the sea, bringing up the next generation, their son, who shall be a poet in their stead.

Jacob Olafson

Jacob is a typical Norday islander, who passes away shortly before the second World War and the massive changes that come to the island. Jacob, an old man living alone with his half-Native daughter, dies while Thorfinn is a child. His life inspires one of Thorfinn's stories and the story of Jacob's life takes up an entire chapter of the novel. Each phase of Jacob's life is narrated, with each phase described by the sun's trajectory through the sky. Jacob arrives and departs from the world in a boat. This is one of the central symbols of the novel, first by cradle and then by coffin. Both vessels carry the human being through the ocean of time, to or from the afterlife.

When Isa Estquoy sends Thorfinn on an errand to Smylder, the boy is surprised to find that Jacob is not the slightly menacing figure he assumed him to be. Jacob is kind to Thorfinn and comes to symbolize, for the storyteller, the folk identity of the Orcadian people. Thorfinn describes Jacob as being something steady and integrated into the island environment, almost organic in nature because of his lifestyle and his ties to the land.

Jacob grows up on Norday and is brought up at Smylder, the family croft. On the day of his sister's wedding, he shirks his responsibilities as ring bearer and disappears from the island much like Thorfinn will do many years later. Jacob spends ten years traveling, though the individual accounts of his adventures that are not described. He arrives back on Norday with Rena, his wife, and a woman who is a Native American from the west coast of Canada. Jacob's wife dies in childbirth, leaving Jacob to care for their daughter Janet, a girl who becomes a sharp tongued and argumentative as the years pass. Jacob tends to the farm, but dreams of a life at sea much as he did when he was a



youth when he left his father's farming chores to spend a summer working on his uncle's fishing boat. Later in his adulthood, Jacob demonstrates his independence by again, setting out on a sea voyage, this time on a trawler bound for Iceland. However, his experience cures him of his dreams of a life at sea and Jacob contents himself with caring for the animals and land at Smylder.

His uncle leaves Jacob the boat, *Scallop*, which is the vessel Jacob dies beside. At the end of the novel, Thorfinn repairs the boat in a symbolic act linking him to Jacob and the simple traditional way of life and the traditions of the island people.

Mara

Mara is a young, Seal woman who Thorfinn marries in the story recounted in Chapter Six, "Press-Gang and Seal Woman." Mara belongs to a mythical group of Seal people, who temporarily shed their sealskin at night and dance on the rocks by the seashore. Mara is sitting outside the circle of dancers when Thorfinn comes upon them. She is forced to follow Thorfinn home to Ingle when he takes her sealskin. Mara is hated by Thorfinn's mother, but accepted by his father. Though she accepts her transition to the human world, she is never fully part of it. Even her agreement to follow Thorfinn home is not entirely voluntary. Though the two have a happy married life, Thorfinn keeps her sealskin hidden from her. Mara seems content to take on the duties expected of a farm wife and is a competent mother to their many children. However, Mara has many idiosyncrasies, such as being unable to eat foods such as porridge, oatcakes, and staple foods in the islanders' diets. Mara prefers raw fish and her half, wild nature also shows itself during periods of the full moon, when she is silent, moody, and prone to unpredictable attacks of violence.

The islanders know Mara is different from themselves, but assume that she is a castaway left behind by one of the shipwrecked vessels that sometimes find themselves marooned or wrecked on the rocks near the island. Though Mara quickly learns how to perform the tasks necessary to her as a crofter's wife, her ties to her people are eventually stronger than her ties to Thorfinn and her children. One day Thorfinn finds the sealskin missing from its hiding place in the loft. Mara disappears one day and is never seen again in human form. She has not been able to integrate into human society, despite her love for Thorfinn and her attachment to her children.

The children born by Mara are to all accounts human. They have slightly scaly hands, which only one islander notices. In contrast to their mother, who was separate from the islanders because of her differences and her mysterious origins, these children will be fully integrated into island society. Her offspring bring a mythological and magical union of humans and sea animals that will live on in lore and in future generations.

Tina Lyde

Tina Lyde is a local Norday woman, who is interested in Matthew Ragnarson, Thorfinn's widowed father. She regularly brings gifts of baked goods to the Ragnarson household,



even when it is not clear that Matthew understands her intentions. The children detest Tina since they believe she is trying to infringe on their family situation. The children value their independence and Ragna in particular sees Tina as a competitor who may take away her role of mistress at Ingle. Since her mother's death, Ragna has been the primary caregiver for her younger siblings and she does not easily give this up. Both Ragna and Thorfinn are impolite to Tina and tell her they are fine without her. Ragna rages at the woman one afternoon, sending Tina away. It seems that Ragna has succeeded, since for quite some time, no more baked goods are delivered to Ingle. Tina can only be seen on occasion to be standing in the evenings looking at the cottage but not coming near it.

Tina does succeed in joining the Ragnarson household. Thorfinn learns an important life lesson about letting events take their course. Thorfinn rides the horse, Selkie out across the fields the day of Ragna and Tina's conflict. While he is there, he creates the story of the press gang and Mara, his wife from the Seal people. His fictional account of his union with Mara and Mara's presence in the house is Thorfinn's attempt at reconciling himself with Tina's presence in his father's house.

James MacTavish

James MacTavish is an opinionated, fiercely, nationalistic Scotsman. He is the innkeeper at the pub/inn on Norday Island and is an active member of the community. James MacTavish is longwinded and he makes speeches to the men gathered at the blacksmith's in the evening discussion sessions. His speeches are full of his convictions concerning Scottish independence and the distinct nature of Orkney Island identity. The fictional character of Sir James MacTavish is based directly on James MacTavish, the innkeeper.

Sir James MacTavish

Sir James MacTavish is the fictional character Thorfinn creates in his story of the knight's adventure in the Middle Ages on the road to the Battle of Bannockburn. Thorfinn casts himself as the knight's assistant. The knight himself, is proud and slightly comic, as is fitting in the tradition of tales of knights and their adventures. This particular knight, almost stock-character, is boastful, but very well intentioned. His character traits are influenced by characters in major works such as Cervantes, 'Don Quixote,' and Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" from the Canterbury Tales. Sir James MacTavish demonstrates his boastful nature and his impulsivity when he becomes drunk at the peasant's hut and brags about his friendship with royalty and when he leaps off his horse and swings his axe at the travelling tinkers. Sir James is also severe with the horse Seamus and his impulsive decision to take the higher mountain path leads the trio to near-demise in a bank of snow. Luckily Thorfinn's more moderate personality balances that of the knight, and in the end Sir James does come off as quite a likeable character, despite his many slightly comical faults.



Rolf Rolfson

Rolf Rolfson is the leader of the Swedish Viking expedition on the boat, *Solan Goose* in the 9th century adventure recounted by Thorfinn near the beginning of the novel. Rolf Rolfson is a fair and well respected leader, making wise decisions and leaving payment for food and hospitality received along the journey. As a leader, he is also courageous and wary. For example, on the night of the attempted attack by their Russian hosts, Rolf and his men attack first. This saves the crew's lives and also means that they can take over control of the land. In Byzantium, Rolf Rolfson's strength of character is also shown in his commitment to stay on as part of the Emperor's elite guard, the Varingers, despite the years of hardship and repetitiveness that this will involve.

Ragna Ragnarson

Ragna, Thorfinn's sister, is one of several female characters in the novel who are homemakers and "rule the roost" in their fathers' homes. Independent and used to being the woman of the house since her mother's death, Ragna takes poorly to the idea of Tina Lyde joining the Ragnarson household as Matthew's wife. Ragna expresses her anger at Tina, not at her father, viewing the woman's advances as a threat to family life. Eventually Tina does move in and Ragna is symbolically excluded on the day of Tina's welcome since the girl is sent to look after a neighbor while Matthew, Tina and Thorfinn eat a meal together. Ragna's place in the kitchen near the life-giving hearth at Ingle is now displaced by the presence of the older woman. Ragna will have to accept the change. The other option, suggested by her father, is that she marry Andrew Rosey, a local ferryman, who she rejects.

Isa Estquoy

Isa Estquoy is the village post-mistress and storekeeper. Village women often come to her store to share gossip and to pass the time. Several years previously, Isa sent Thorfinn on an errand to Jacob Olafson's. When Thorfinn thinks back to his childhood, he remembers Jacob's surprising kindness to him on this visit. Isa is one of the few islanders who do not criticize Thorfinn and call the young writer idle and lazy. The storekeeper is just happy that Thorfinn does not steal candy from the shelves like the other boys. Like all of the other islanders, Isa is affected by the arrival of the military complex and the aerodrome. The post office remains open, but the store is forced to close. In an act of either kindness or resignation, Isa gives out all the stock to islanders who drop by.

Laird Harcourt-Smithers

Mr. Harcourt-Smithers is the current laird of the island. He comes from a long line of lairds (lords), who have ruled over various areas of Scotland. By the mid 20th century, Mr. Harcourt-Smithers' role as laird is quite reduced compared to what it would have



been in his grandfather's time, when almost all the land on the island was owned by the laird and rented by the islanders for their farming. Mr. Harcourt-Smithers is a kind, yet a doddering old man. He is known for his eccentric ways and his lack of communicativeness. The laird is upper class and lives in the hall, one of the two large buildings on the island. Mr. Harcourt-Smithers generally keeps to himself. He is detached from his role as laird and only resides on the island in the summer time. Usually his granddaughters visit and ride the horse Selkie, but one significant summer, the girls choose not to return to the island. This change is one of the many changes that come to Norday in the mid 20th century. Among them, is the arrival of information technology and the disruption of island life by the construction of the wartime aerodrome.

Matthew Ragnarson

Matthew Ragnarson is Thorfinn's father. He is master of the house at Ingle. He leads a quiet and hard-working country life, tending to the animals and the farmlands. Like most other islanders, Matthew has made his living off the land and expects that his son must do this as well. Matthew is important in the novel because his opinion of Thofinn's worthlessness shapes the boy's self-image. Matthew is not a major character in the novel, but his presence is felt through his effect on his son's sense of identity. Matthew Ragnarson has lost his first wife when the children were young and raises Thorfinn and the three girls on his own. When Tina makes overtures of friendship, Matthew accepts her baked goods and eventually takes her as a wife. This causes intense tension between the children and Tina. In particular, Ragna feels that she is the mistress of the house and does not want to give up her position. This competition is played out between the women, though Matthew quietly makes his decision clear by sending Ragna away to care for a sick neighbor, thus easing Tina's transition into the household as Matthew's wife.

Reverend Hector Drummond

The Reverend is Sophie's half-brother. He is the reverend on the island during Thorfinn's early life. The reverend is a shy and very private man. Some indeed, believe him to be almost a recluse. The island women often push for information, interested in finding out if he has a fiancée or if he might perhaps be interested in taking a wife. In addition to being very private, the reverend eats simply and does not take good care of the manse. His simple bachelor lifestyle inspires quite a bit of local gossip. The reverend is also untraditional in other ways. He takes time to spend time with the less fortunate of the island. These are individuals such as Jimmo Greenay, who the other islanders tend to snub. His independent spirit is also seen when he goes to the pub to try and speak with the island men who never come to church.



Rena Olafson

Rena Olafson, Jacob Olafson's wife, is a First Nations person from the west coast of Canada. She was brought back to the island of Norday as Jacob's wife after Jacob's adventures in the North. Like Mara in the fictional account of the Seal woman, Rena must adjust to island ways and learn the work required of her as a croft woman and mistress of the house. Rena and Jacob have one daughter, Janet, who takes care of Jacob after Rena passes away.

Mr. Simon

Mr. Simon is the local island schoolteacher. He is not extremely patient with the students, using teaching methods edged with mockery and criticism. Mr. Simon has a negative effect on Thorfinn's self-image, since the teacher believes Thorfinn to be a dreamer, who will amount to nothing. To Thorfinn, Mr. Simon's teaching comes across as boring and dry. The lists of dates and other historical information presented in class are expected to be memorized and is transformed instead, into Thorfinn's historical adventure narratives. Mr. Simon has a girlfriend who seems, to the village women, to be as hot tempered and impatient as he is.

Jimmo Greenay

Jimmo Greenay is the local beachcomber. He is a destitute man who lives in a shack by the edge of the ocean. Generally, he is tolerated, but shunned by the other islanders. The Reverend Hector Drummond and his sister Sophie are exceptions. They take the time to visit with Jimmo Greenay. At the end of the novel, Thorfinn returns to Norday and takes over Jimmo's simple way of life and the use of his hut.

Major Schneider

Major Schneider is the German commandant in charge Thorfinn's prison block during the Second World War. Hailing from Bavaria, he is a supporter of the arts and quite likely critical of Hitler. Major Schneider is important because he shows Thorfinn kindness during the war, encouraging the young man to complete his novels. He loans him a typewriter and makes sure that the manuscripts are allowed to leave the compound. Major Schneider is removed by the SS several months before the Allied forces liberate the area. He likely meets an early death at the hand of his fellow Nazis. Perhaps his reason for bending the rules and socializing with Thorfinn is because of his love for the arts. Perhaps, it also has to do with the fact that Major Schneider has lost a son, when by this point in the novel, Thorfinn has also lost his father.



The three mysterious men

The three men who arrive on the island in the summer of 1937 are surveyors working for the government. They are brusque and non-forthcoming about the work they are carrying out. The men carry on their work despite the islanders' inquiries and protests. They do not inform the islanders of the disruption that will soon descend upon the island with the construction of the aerodrome.

Captain Weinacker

Captain Weinacker is the prison camp leader sent to replace Captain Schneider. Captain Weinacker is an idealistic man with firm convictions about the new world order that the Nazis are attempting to bring about. He is an intimidating character and threatens to stall Thorfinn's writing projects. He eventually gives his permission for Thorfinn to keep the typewriter. Captain Weinacker believes that all of the "old values" and religions will be extinguished with the triumph of the new regime.

Winnie Swona

Winnie Swona is a local Norday islander who lives on a fairly poor croft in a remote area of the island. Her croft is called Swinhurst and it is here, that Sophie comes to live after the war once the island is deserted. Since Winnie leaves the land to Sophie, we can assume that Winnie intuits that Sophie will return to the island and again act as the muse. She will inhabit the abandoned island and bring it new life by living simply and in the traditional ways.

Eliza Swona

Eliza lives with her grandmother, Winnie Swona at Swinhurst. During her childhood, Eliza is rumoured to be deathly ill with consumption. Sophie visits the girl despite the warnings about the Eliza's contagious disease and ill health. Eliza's miraculous "recovery" is the subject of island gossip and adds to the gossip about Sophie and her mysteriousness.

Liza Ragnarson

Liza is Thorfinn's mother in the account of the press gang's visit to the island. She saves her son from the press gang by pretending he is deathly ill. Liza later rejects Mara, the Seal-woman Thorfinn takes as his wife.



James Ragnarson

James is Thorfinn's father in the account of the press gang's visit to the island. He accepts Mara's presence in the house and seems to be enlivened by her company. Most importantly, he invites her to eat a meal at the family table. This symbolizes his accepting of her presence in the household, much like Tina Lyde is accepted in the 20th century narrative.

John Smithers

John Smithers is the fictional laird in the 18th century story of the press gang's visit to the island.

Elphinstone

Elphinstone is the local factor. He assists John Smithers in his administrative duties in the 18th century story of the press gang's visit to the island.

Sergeant Evans

Sergeant Evans is Thorfinn's sergeant while he and his peers are held prisoner at Stalag 29B during the Second World War.

Thomas Vass

Thomas Vass is the merchant and factor, who assist Mr. Harcourt-Smithers in the primary narrative set in the mid-20th century.

Selkie

Selkie is a horse owned by the laird of the island, Mr. Harcourt-Smithers. Selkie is usually ridden in the summertime by the laird's granddaughters. When Sophie visits the island, she is often seen riding the horse through town, along the hills, and by the seaside.

Seamus

Seamus is the horse ridden by Thorfinn and Sir James MacTavish in the fictional journey to the Battle of Bannockburn in the Middle Ages.



Sigrid Ragnarson

Sigrid Ragnarson is one of Thorfinn's sisters.

The Earl of Mar

The Earl of Mar rides down the same road that Thorfinn and Sir James MacTavish are travelling when they approach the Battle of Bannockburn. The Earl of Mar orders the knight's horse to be killed because it has fallen in the roadway. The Earl is seen riding in his carriage after the battle, sharing a drink with his prisoner the Earl of Penzance.

The Earl of Penzance

The Earl of Penzance is officially the Earl of Mar's captive after the Battle of Bannockburn. However, the two men seem to be enjoying themselves as they ride away from the battleground and the Earl's status as prisoner, is questionable.

Uisdean

Uisdean is a peasant who the travelers meet along the road south to the Battle of Bannockburn. He is kind to the travelers and exhibits traditional Scottish hospitality.

Madeline

Madeline is Jacob Olafson's sister.

Albert Laird

Albert Laird is the local carpenter.

Aeneas Abernethy

Aeneas Abernethy is the previous reverend on Norday Island.

Miss Cameron

Miss Cameron is Mr. Simon's girlfriend. She is also a schoolteacher.



Andrew Rosey

Andrew Rosey is the ferryman. Matthew Ragnarson implies that Ragna might marry this fellow.

Jess

Jess is the tinker's wife. She lets the family know that she has heard news of Jacob Olafson's travels.

Janet Olafson

Janet is Jacob and Rena's daughter.

Jock Seatter

Jock Seatter is the local blacksmith.

Bjorn Thorsteen

Bjorn Thorsteen is shipwrecked near the island of Norday. His wife, Solveig dies in the accident and he has a difficult time resigning himself to accept her death.

Dr. Lamond

Dr. Lamond is the local doctor.

Mansie Drever

Mansie Drever brings Thorfinn his supplies every week. He travels to the deserted island by boat.

Ben Hoy

Ben Hoy is an elderly neighbour.



Objects/Places

Norday and The Orkney Islands

Although Norday is a fictional island, the Orkneys are real islands situated at the very northern tip of Scotland, near the Atlantic Ocean six miles from the mainland. The neighbouring Shetland Islands are located in the North Atlantic Ocean. Both have miles of shoreline and are made up of many different islands. Many of these islands are not inhabited by people. These islands are part of Scotland, though their traditions are also rooted in Norse because of the Vikings who settled there in the 8th and 9th centuries.

Ingle

Ingle is the farm or croft on fictional Norday Island where Thorfinn and his family live. It is located on farmland that is arable and viable until the late 1930s, when most of the island is destroyed by the construction of the aerodrome and other military structures. Ingle is the setting for the main storyline, which follows Thorfinn throughout his later childhood and early adolescence. Ingle is also the setting for Thorfinn's fictional account of his early adulthood in 18th century Norday, when he outwits the press gang and brings home his Seal bride, Mara.

Smylder

Smylder is the croft inhabited by Jacob Olafson and his half-Native daughter. Smylder is Jacob's childhood home. He is born here and it is here that his daughter is raised after the death of Jacob's wife, Rena. The way of life at Smylder is typical of the Orkney islanders' traditions. Jacob's death, some time before the Second World War, is a foreshadowing of the changes that will come to the island and the eventual disrepair and abandonment that will occur across the island. An entire chapter of the novel is dedicated to describing Jacob Olafson's life and since his life is so closely tied to the land and sea, Smylder is of particular significance.

Selkie

Selkie is Laird Harcourt-Smith's horse, normally ridden during the summer by the laird's granddaughters. In the chapter "The Muse", however, the granddaughters decide to spend the summer elsewhere and Sophie rides the horse during her mysterious and enlivening visit to the island. Selkie is given to Thorfinn to ride when Sophie leaves the island and the horse becomes a symbol linking the two characters, as well as a symbol of independence. Once the aerodrome is constructed and the island is undergoing the changes that will alter it irreversibly, Selkie is seen late one afternoon cresting a hilltop against a red sunset. The next day Thorfinn has disappeared, having left the island, perhaps for good.



Seamus

Seamus is the horse ridden by the knight, Sir James MacTavish.

Solan Goose

Solan Goose is the Viking boat skippered by Rolf Rolfson in Thorfinn's fictional journey to Byzantium. Thorfinn accompanies a group of Vikings in this vessel as they explore the land of Russ and travel to Byzantium, where they will pledge themselves in service to the Emperor there.

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire has as its capital city, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), founded by the Emperor Constantine. The Byzantine civilization was part of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the Byzantine people thought of themselves as being the Roman Empire. Though to those in Western Europe, they were thought of as part of the East. The Constantine Empire thrived in the Middle Ages, with definite influence from the Greek culture. The Byzantine culture also spread throughout the area to the Slavs and Balkan peoples.

The blacksmith's (smithy)

This is where the island men meet in the evenings to discuss politics and share news.

The aerodrome

The aerodrome is a military structure constructed by the government on land that once belonged to the islanders of Norday. Without their consent, the land has been turned over to government use for building a massive airplane hangar and associated buildings for use during the Second World War in the case of enemy attack.

The post office

The post office is the center of town life and gossip for the women of the island. The post office and general store are joined and in the mid 20th century, the general store is forced to close when the military operations take over the island. The closing of half of this establishment foreshadows the abandonment of the other buildings and dwellings on the island.



Stirling Castle

This castle is an important building since throughout the last several thousand years it has been the site of much political controversy, with various factions attempting to gain control of the castle and its strategic land. In the 11th through 14th centuries, control of the castle vacillated between the English and the Scots. In the early 1300s, the English controlled the castle. On June 24, 1314, Robert the Bruce led the Scots in a victorious attack. The Scots, fighting for independence from the English, gained control of the castle and surrounding lands in the Battle of Bannockburn, which was fought several miles east of the castle grounds.

The stone tower (broch)

The broch is an ancient structure built several thousand years ago by inhabitants of the Orkney Islands. These structures were found throughout the Northern Scottish Isles and protected the islanders against attack.

The Vikings

These sea faring people arrived in the Orkneys and Shetland Islands in the 8th and 9th centuries AD. Though they are often portrayed as looters and ruffians, their sea voyages were often made for peaceful trading missions. They also worked the land in addition to being successful warriors.

The boat

As a vessel, the boat is tied symbolically to the journey that humans make in and out of the physical world. The local carpenter makes both cradles and graves. The two vessels accompany the human being from the spirit world to the physical world and then back again at the end of the cycle of a human life.

Stalag 29B

This place is the German prison where Thorfinn (then called Private Ragnarson) and his peers lived as captives during the Second World War.

The Edinburgh garret

A garret in Edinburgh is where Thorfinn lived during the 1950s. It was here, that he lived a rollicking artist's life as a writer, living from pay check to pay check until he decided to return to live a simple ,traditional life on the island of Norday.



The typewriter

A typewriter is given to Thorfinn to use during his time in the prisoner-of-war camp. Major Schneider loans the typewriter to Thorfinn so that the protagonist can continue to work on his manuscripts during his imprisonment.

The sealskin

The sealskin is what Thorfinn takes from the rocks while the Seal people dance and the young woman Mara crouches at the edges of the celebration. When Thorfinn steals the sealskin, Mara must stay in human form. Though she and Thorfinn eventually marry, she later decides to take back her sealskin and return to her people.

The caves

The caves at the far end of the island are a secret hiding place for the islanders and have been so for generations. During the press gang's visit, the men of the island hide in these caves and outwit the authorities.

The manse

The manse is where the reverend lives. The manse changes hands as reverends come and go throughout the years. During Thorfinn's childhood, the manse is occupied by Reverend Hector Drummond, Sophie's half-brother.

The hall

The hall is traditionally the laird's residence. It is one of the two large buildings on the island. Because the current laird does not have as much power over the islanders as did his ancestors, the hall is not as grand as it once was.

Swinhurst

Swinhurst is the remote croft inhabited by Winnie Swona and her granddaughter, Eliza. During the war, when all the islanders leave, Winnie bequeaths the croft to Sophie.

The Inn

The inn is owned and operated by MacTavish. On the island, many of the men enjoy socializing at the pub within the Inn. During the war, the islanders learn that the inn is to be taken over for government use, to house officers and other personnel.



The kirk (church)

The kirk, along with the inn, is one of the most important buildings on the island. In the early years of the 20th century, the island was divided between those who supported prohibition and those who rejected a ban on alcohol and supported the pub.



Themes

Threats to Traditional Island Life

The theme of Chapter Seven, "Aerodrome", is repeated in Brown's other major work *Greenvoe*. In some ways, the heart of the novel charts the ease with which industry and technology, coupled with the presence or threat of war, can destroy a simple culture, which has remained virtually unchanged for centuries.

The Norday Islanders are representative of many simple or "primitive" cultural groups, whose simple values and traditions are tied closely to the earth and the rhythms of both the land and sea. For perhaps the first time ever, traditional cultures around the world are threatened by changes imposed upon them by distant political centers and the influence of the industrialized world. In *Beside the Ocean of Time*, Brown describes moments in the childhood of Thorfinn Ragnarson. This young man witnesses in his lifetime the drastic and irreversible changes that come from the invasion of military and industrial interests on an otherwise peaceful and close-knit island community.

Change is seen as dangerous when imposed from outside forces, as represented by the government, for example, and other political organizations such as the 18th century press gangs. Similarly, technological change is invasive. In the mid 20th century, the otherwise fairly isolated Orkney islanders were suddenly faced with an onslaught of technology which changed their daily lives. From telephones and radios to large organizations and military operations threatened and closed down local farms and businesses. Though this is the case, there seems to be an acceptance of change on a personal level, particularly the acceptance of a life partner or family member into a character's life. Mara's acceptance into the Ragnarson household is clearly an acceptance of change. So too, is the family's final acceptance of Tina Lyde as part of the household, as is Thorfinn's agreement to join with Sophie and live as a couple, revitalizing the now deserted island.

The conclusion of the novel may almost be read as a parable. Thorfinn and Sophie's return to the abandoned island is a symbolic return to the values of the Orkney way of life. They choose to return and persist despite the dilapidated state of the crofts and the compromised island farmland. This choice connects them to the past and demonstrates their commitment to a self-sustaining life, virtually unchanged from that of Thorfinn's early ancestors. Leaving the city behind, Thorfinn decides to return to the hut by the edge of the ocean. He and Sophie will live off the land, farming and fishing, and relying as little as possible on foods or other goods from the outside world. When the two characters promise that they will take on this traditional way of life, they are in effect creating a link between the past and the future. They vow to continue the traditional way of life and pass it on to their children. The boat, *Scallop*, has lain unused by the side of the ocean. However, it is not too late for Thorfinn to make repairs and put it to use again as he and Sophie recreate their home from among the ruins.



Independence

The theme of independence also runs through the novel, as an offshoot of a larger theme which explores an individual's life and how this is tied to the upkeep and continuity of traditions. At the end of the novel, Thorfinn and Sophie vow to return to a traditional way of life. Their decision goes against many contemporary values held by many individuals in European and North American society. Sophie is a character who speaks her own mind and acts as she wishes. Thorfinn, on the other hand, has had to leave the island completely, spend time in the military and as a prisoner of war, and experience several years as a writer in Edinburgh before returning to his island home and making a strong commitment to the traditional Orkney way of life.

Characters in the novel who make decisions that run counter to what is expected by their close knit community include Jacob Olafson, Major Schneider, Sophie, the Reverend Hector Drummond, and Thorfinn himself.

For most of the men on the island, their lives will involve physical labor on the farm and this is how their future worth is measured when they are growing up. Jacob disappears from the island on the day of his sister's wedding, choosing to live a life of adventure and sea voyages before returning with a Native American wife to settle again on Norday. Jacob strikes a balance between work on the land and his love of the sea. Similarly, Thorfinn is devalued by his parents and others on the island because of his lack of interest in the land and his strong imagination. Like Jacob, Thorfinn must make the drastic decision to leave the island for several years before returning home to renew his commitment to the island and to its history. Thorfinn's status as poet/writer also sets him apart from his peers. In his early years, he is not comfortable with this mark of difference. However, when he returns to the island after the war, he has accepted his talent and makes a commitment to passing on the storytelling tradition to his children.

Both Sophie and her brother, Reverend Hector Drummond are eccentric figures. They live in ways not totally in line with the expectations of others on the island. The Reverend's independence is seen in his need for privacy and in his many acts of compassion. His outreach is scorned by other islanders. Sophie's free spiritedness also falls within the category of individuals living by their own values despite the small clashes with what is thought acceptable by the gossiping islanders. Major Schneider, in supporting the arts and, specifically, in aiding Thorfinn in the young man's literary endeavours, is putting himself at considerable risk to support his personal beliefs.

All of these individuals strive to live independently and to act without being caught up in the confines of the community's set ideas about comportment and proper conduct. In the larger picture, the theme of independence is vastly important to the Orkney islanders as a community, since they are distinct from the culture of the Scottish mainland and pride themselves on their sustainable way of life and their independence. The theme of independence is tied closely to that of the previous theme, which involves a reevaluation of simple traditions. This is particularly relevant because it offers an



alternative to current trends that value urban environments, technology, military interests, and consumer culture.

The Journey

The theme of the journey is central in the novel. In the opening chapter, Thorfinn describes his voyage with the Vikings. Similarly, as readers, we accompany the writer on a journey as he weaves tales throughout the book.

Vessels figure prominently in the novel, hence the importance of the ocean in the title and the repeated discussion of ocean voyages which bring the waves of inhabitants to Norday and the other Orkney Islands.

In addition to the physical journeys described in the novel, the author is concerned with the spiritual journey that individuals take from the spirit world into their lives on earth and the journey back again after death. Gossiping in the store, Isa Estquoy is reminded that the local carpenter creates both cradles and graves in his workshop. These two vessels accompany the individual in and out of the world, making it a cyclical journey, as described in the chapter, which focuses on the stages of Jacob Olafson's life. The journey of the sun charts each stage in Jacob's development, ending with his death beside his beloved boat, *Scallop*, on a fine spring day. Similarly, Thorfinn's life journey comes full circle as he returns from his adventures to settle again on Norday. The cycle of renewal will begin again through his union with Sophie, as the two return to the island and speak of the children they will raise.

The Passage of Time/Island and Ocean

As the title indicates, the inhabitants of Norday Island live on an island beside the vast ocean of time. The islanders live surrounded by the vast Atlantic Ocean, which separates them physically and culturally from the mainland. The ocean's action on the island comes to represent the passage of time. Boats are significant for this very reason, since these vessels carry the human being to their brief time on earth and then back again to the spirit world.

In Chapter Three, the ancient Broch structure is being eroded by the action of the waves washing against its foundations near the edge of the shore. Structures such as the Broch, once vitally important to the islanders. These structures are made of stone and seem strong and invulnerable. However, the structures are forgotten with time and their foundations can be threatened, as indeed, cultures themselves are vulnerable to the erosive passage of time.

Storytelling and Myth

The novel opens with the statement that Thorfinn is the "laziest and most useless" boy on Norday Island. As the story unfolds, however, the reader is taken along on Thorfinn's



imaginary journeys and accompanies the boy on his adventures at different times in history. Thorfinn's imagination is not a useless thing, as the other villagers and the school teacher Mr. Simon would make it out to be. In Thorfinn's social world "dreaming" and imagining are discounted as unimportant and a waste of time.

The way that most people on Norday Island learn about history is through Mr. Simon's history lessons. In contrast, Thorfinn's tales and indeed, the novel itself, are part of a long tradition of storytelling and myth making that is found in most cultures around the world. This tradition of embellishing tales and telling a culture's history through personal narratives is in contrast with the dry and rote memorization that comprises the way Thorfinn and his classmates are taught about the island's history.

By the end of the novel, Thorfinn has learned to accept his role as writer and to value the skill of passing on the oral storytelling tradition. Though he was once embarrassed by being labelled "poet" in front of his classmates, Thorfinn's skills are now incredibly valuable since he will keep the island's history alive. He will pass on his stories and this rich cultural tradition to his own children, as implied in the last lines of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written using third person narration. Throughout the novel, Brown uses omniscient narration. This gives the novel a unique tone, since the author is a true traditional storyteller. He is able to jump from place to place and describe events both "from above" and from within any of the characters. Most traditional storytelling is narrated in this way and the author is linking his novel to these oral traditions by making this choice of narration and point of view. This style of narration is different from much contemporary writing, which allows us to hear the story from the viewpoint of one character (or at least a limited number of characters). It also allows us to enter into the story through a limited number of perspectives. The author's choice of point of view makes for a novel that can cover a lot of ground. Between chapters, the author moves back and forth from Thorfinn's childhood, where we see his actions both from his perspective and from the perspective of the other islanders, to segments describing historical adventures. Though we are introduced to a great number of characters and gain some insight into their thoughts and actions, we are kept from forming a strong emotional attachment to most of them.

Setting

Most of the novel is set on the island of Norday itself. The island is important as a physical setting and also as a symbol. The island, cut off physically from the Scottish mainland by the Pentland Firth, represents a small pocket of independent and "primitive" culture, independent of larger cultural trends, and the modern/industrialized culture dominating the mainland and most of the industrialized world.

The land and sea, as well as other natural phenomena such as cliff and caves, are also important since for many hundreds of years the Orkney islanders have lived simple traditional lives as crofters and fishermen. For this reason, crofts (farms) are important. The three most significant being Ingle, where the Ragnarsons reside; Smylder, the Olafson residence; and Swinhurst, the croft which Sophie inherits. Inside the croft, the hearth is the most important place, since this is where meals are prepared. The hearth fire is the key to the life of the house and it is the female characters who tend to this fire.

Throughout the novel, the author attempts to paint for us a picture of the close knit island community, with its two large buildings (the kirk and the manse), its well-loved pub and inn, and its central store where the villagers come to do business and to gossip. Because the island is small and isolated, public opinion and town gossip thrive. Thorfinn must make his way in the world by finding where he stands in relation to the expectations placed upon him by his family and others on the island.



In the historical narratives, the setting is again confined mainly to the island itself, with the exception of the riverways navigated by the early Viking adventurers who have inhabited the Orkney Islands before setting out on their journey to Russ and Byzantium. Also, the second chapter departs from the island and charts the travelers' progress south through the north of Scotland as the two characters travel in the direction of the important Battle of Bannockburn. Part of Scotland's battle for independence from the English that was waged throughout the Middle Ages.

Thorfinn's brief stay in a German prisoner camp is also briefly outlined. He refers to this confined area as Stalag 29B and it is his imprisonment here, that first inspires him to think of his childhood on Norday and to write the stories that we have read about earlier in the novel. Though Thorfinn has spent several years living in a garret in Edinburgh, his time there is only mentioned and does not fall within the main narrative.

The novel emphasizes the simplicity and sustainability of the islanders' lives within the natural world and within their community. When construction commences for the military structures and the aerodrome, this natural balance is destroyed. By the 1950s, the island has been abandoned and most arable farmland destroyed by the military complex. Even the hippies who attempted to take over the abandoned buildings have given up due to the cold and the inhospitable nature of the island now that there is no functioning community.

The novel concludes by emphasizing the importance of place. It ends with Thorfinn and Sophie walking together along the shore at the edge of the island. The two speak of having children and accept their lots in life. Their return to the island is a commitment to living in harmony with the natural world and a commitment to this unique culture and place.

Language and Meaning

In general, the language employed in the novel is simple and easily accessible to a wide audience. Of course, the novel would have particular significance to Scottish readers and more specifically to inhabitants of the Orkney Island region. Despite this, however, the novel is accessible to the average reader. The language is simple and the action is carried out mainly through blocks of narration, with almost no use of extended sections of dialogue.

The author uses a highly traditional storytelling style, tied closely to oral storytelling traditions. For example, when the author begins to narrate the tale of Sir James MacTavish and the journey to the Battle of Bannockburn, the sections begins like many oral stories that are today generally associated with fairytales or children's tales: "A knight on horseback and a boy were riding through Sutherland in the north of Scotland."

The use of particular vocabulary identifies the novel as Scottish. First, there is the general British usage of English identified in spelling and the use of words that differ from those used in standard North American English. Secondly, there are words that are



particularly Scottish and, further, Orcadian. "Kirk" designates church, for example, and "peedie" translates roughly as "small" in the northern island, whereas elsewhere in Scotland the word used might be "wee."

Structure

The novel is 217 pages in length and is divided into eight chapters of roughly equal length. Each chapter is titled. The first six chapters include sections that follow Thorfinn's childhood in the late 1930s. In addition, it has embedded sections of text which follow Thorfinn's imagined adventures at various times in the island's history.

The last two chapters of the novel return to the main storyline, where Thorfinn has reached adulthood and leaves Norday, only to return again after the Second World War. The final chapter, "Fisherman and Croftwoman", makes use of a disruption to the main narrative trajectory, describing the intermittent years of the war between sections which describe Thorfinn's return to the now abandoned island. Six chapters have been used to describe Thorfinn's childhood and his elaborate imaginary adventures. Only one chapter briefly glosses over his years of imprisonment and his artist's life in Edinburgh after the war.

The novel comes full-circle with Thorfinn's return to the island. The conclusion of the novel is also a new beginning, since Thorfinn and Sophie are reunited and about to embark together in reinhabiting and repopulating the abandoned island.



Quotes

"Of all the lazy useless boys who ever went to Norday school, the laziest and most useless was Thorfinn Ragnarson." (p. 1)

"Thorfinn woke up from his dream of the Volga and Byzantium, humped in the bow of his father's yole. He surfaced slowly through eight and a half centuries." (p. 19)

"The monk shook his head. There was a small tinkle somewhere inside the wide sleeve of his habit. 'With this bell,' he said, 'I go to look for the dying and the dead. May they rest in peace. Now bless you, boy. You're too young to be on this road of blood.' Rats were scritchng among the ribs of Seamus the horse. Then the monk and the boy heard it, a mighty threefold bronze trembling from the towered city. King Robert the Bruce was announcing victory to the world." (p. 45)

"Thorfinn Ragnarson wasn't sad. He had neither liked nor disliked Jacob Olafson. Jacob had just been there always, like the reef in the Sound, like the rock on the hill." (p. 50)

"See, there he is, the new-born child, in his little ship of time, his cradle." (p. 52)

"Even as he and his father watched, that day, a bigger wave came out of the sounding flood-tide, and washed against the truncated ruin, and another stone tottered on its base and fell into the swirl and seethe of the water, and became one with the shore stones." (p. 72)

"Stone mother of this island, keep us well./Mother, cast stone arms about us in a time of trouble./Who will chide the axemen on the shore?/Who will drive those strangers, ashamed, off under the horizon?. . ." THE SONG OF THE BROCH (p. 82)

"I have picked up a few curious things from the shore of the great ocean of time," was all [the minister] would say. (p. 100-101)

"There was, that second spring of Mr. Drummond's incumbency, the episode of the strange young woman. She arrived off the *Raven*, the steamer that served the islands, carrying a heavy suitcase . . . No one was there, on the slipway of Norday, to greet her." (p. 110)

"The girl would rise in the stirrups if a fishing boat cleared the headland, making for the village. Her call came then, cold and sweet, across the waters. And the fisherman, pursued by a rising and falling drove of gulls, would wave his arms to the sea-girl, the gutting-knife flashing in the sun." (p. 119)

"The girl said to Thorfinn Ragnarson, 'You, poet, wait for me. I'll come back some day. Never forget.'" (p. 125)

"The body laments, the body dances; from somewhere deep within, in the heart's heart, or from beyond the furthest star, the good angel, the guardian, is playing on his pipe.



The music goes on and on, unheard for the most part. Through this lifetime of vanity we creep, stumble, march, follow plough and scythe, linger, hirple on a stick, until at last the feet are folded and lie still: but, seen through the angel's eye, it is an immortal spirit that dances from birth to death, all the way, from before the beginning till after the end" (p. 130).

"The young man was back again, at twilight, among the dunes. And there, on the sand, glimmering, were men and women—strangers—dancing! And the rocks were strewn with sealskins." (p. 151)

"There was a light in the window of Ingle. Thorfinn dismounted and let the horse loose in the field. He glanced through the window. There at the table sat his father with Tina Lyde; Tina was taking a cake and pots of jam out of her basket; the kettle was beginning to steam and sputter on the stove, and the teapot was warming on the hob. The table was set for three." (p. 177)

"Meantime the second larger ship the *More* had anchored closer to the beach and great sections of wood were levered out of her open stern and fitted into place, with baulks and iron bolts, and soon a ramp led straight from the ship to the shore. Down this inclined plane came tractors, bulldozers, vans, and trucks. . . Already a score of men had set to work widening the fishermen's path with blocks of concrete." (p. 182)

"The islanders saw, in the early hours, the lights of a third ship, and then a fourth, anchored out in the Sound. The new village of Nissen huts was half completed when the islanders came to their doors next morning before breakfast." (p. 183)

"The eight-hundred-year old farm was destroyed by the fire. And what had caused it? 'I knocked over the lamp,' said Louis Stewart of Westvoe, 'and the curtain caught. . .!'" . . . That night everybody in MacTavish's stood Louis Stewart of Westvoe whisky. When he got drunk near midnight he said, 'Better a clean fire than to be choked with paper and fumes and rust. . .'" (p. 188)

"One night—the same night that three bulldozers crushed the uncut barley of the Glebe into green slush, after a day of rain—there was a red sunset, and the horse Selkie was seen on the summit of the hill against a crimson splendour. Then another raincloud covered the sun, a shower drove in out of the west over the hill and the island. When Matthew Ragnarson looked again from the door of Ingle, after the cloud passed, the horse was no longer there. When Matthew went to rouse Thorfinn next morning for his bowl of porridge, the young man's room was empty, and the old sea-chest was gone from under the bed. It seemed that Thorfinn Ragnarson had left the island, perhaps for ever." (p. 191)

"It is melancholy, the deserted village. The roofs sag, most of the windows are cracked, the doors that haven't been torn off withered. It can just be read, the sign over the inn door—'Norday Inn, licd. to sell wines, ales, spirits. Prop: Jas. MacTavish'. . . A crate of empty beer bottles stands at the door still." (p. 195)



"The old boat is almost seaworthy again. The man has worked on her for a week or more, patching and caulking and painting. The name of the boat has faded on the stern. Now the man sits, freshening the name with white paint□SCALLOP." (P. 193)

"'Ah, the poet,' said Major Schneider. 'Welcome, Nordic poet. It seems to me, there are not enough poets in the world. Plenty of warmen. Few poets.'" (p. 202)

"After the moderate success of the two novels he wrote in Stalag 29B, Ragnarson attempted something more special, a novel that yearned towards poetry, a biography of an islander he remembered from his childhood, the pure inexorable graph from birth to death, but it was a complete failure with the reviewers and the public." (p. 213)

"And then this hack historian had a great breakthrough. He tried something different□the impact on a primitive simple society, close to the elements, of a massive modern technology. He had experienced it first hand, in his native island, when that pastoral place had been almost overnight changed into a fortress in the months before the Second World War. He embellished the record, of course, and simplified it too, in the writing." (p. 214)

"'I won't go on much longer with this writing,' he said. 'Till the bread and fish are assured, here I'll sit every lamplit night, toiling at the unattainable poem. In the end the pages will be food for moth and rust.'" (p. 217)

"'I'll dig my three acres and milk my goat,' said Sophie. 'I'll settle for that. We never find what we set our hearts on. We ought to be glad of that.'" (p. 217)



Topics for Discussion

In your opinion, to what extent does Thorfinn's journey follow the stages found in a typical coming-of-age narrative? Discuss the extent of Thorfinn's development (ex. in relation to his values, his emotional life, his family) in the main narrative and any lessons or changes that he works through in his fictional adventures.

Beside the Ocean of Time includes a reference to Thorfinn's unnamed and best-selling novel, which charts the destruction of a primitive people by a vast military-industrial organization. Read and research George Mackay Brown's novel *Greenvoe* and provide a comparison of both texts. Discuss significant similarities and differences in style, narration, structure, imagery, and themes. In your analysis, evaluate the differences between the novels and discuss the impact these might have on the reader.

Beside the Ocean of Time was written near the end of the author's life. Is it true that the novel can be read as a summary of Brown's literary life? Discuss the section of the novel where Thorfinn, now an adult, summarizes his literary successes and failures. How is this linked to the earlier narrative sections of the novel?

The novel opens with the line: "Of all the lazy useless boys who ever went to Norday school, the laziest and most useless was Thorfinn Ragnarson" (p. 1). Discuss how ideas and theme(s) introduced in these opening lines are carried through and developed or refuted later in the novel.

Discuss the challenges faced by Thorfinn in his development as a writer. In your discussion, you may want to comment on the writer's early years, the influence of school and family, Sophie's influence (note the chapter heading: The Muse), and his relationship with place (his home on Norday and his eventual return to the island after the war.) Pay careful attention to how Thorfinn casts himself in his fictional narratives and the role and values he associates with writers in different eras, including his own.

Place the novel in context historically and discuss the social and economic changes that influenced the creation of the work. You will likely want to research Orkney Island culture and use this as a starting point for your inquiry.

Choose an image that you find particularly important and chart its development throughout the novel. Within your analysis, please choose at least five passages to site and analyse, carrying out a close reading of each one.

Choosing either a journal format or the narrative style used by the author, write an additional chapter detailing events in the main narrative that are glossed over or missing from the novel itself. You may choose to follow Thorfinn during his time in Edinburgh or after living with Sophie for several years on Norday, for example. You may also want to choose to follow a different character such as Sophie, Mara, Matthew Ragnarson, or Tina Lyde. You might, for example, narrate wartime and the gradual abandonment of the island or narrate a series of main events from the perspective of a minor character.



Comment on the roles of men and women in the novel. You may choose to narrow this topic and explore issues affecting one sex or the other, perhaps focusing on one or two characters in detail, discussing the opportunities and challenges faced by these individuals in the tight-knit Orkney Island community.

Explore the theme of independence in the novel. Which characters do you identify as struggling with this? Describe how the struggle for independence is carried out on various levels, i.e. by individuals, by communities, and in larger political contexts. You may choose to focus mainly on character analysis and a close reading of the text, or focus on the political context and draw your arguments from extensively researched material. Please site several current and reputable sources, clarifying your own stance in relation to the arguments you cite in your work.