

# **The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool Short Guide**

## **The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool by Rosemary Sutcliff**

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## Overview

recounts some of the most celebrated tales in Irish folklore and legend, and reflects values the Irish people have for centuries held most dear. Most of the tales focus on "high" deeds that benefit the community at large. For example, Finn slays the fire-breathing monster Aillen not only to prove his own courage, but also to save Tara, the Great Hall of the Kingdom of Erin (the ancient name for Ireland). Furthermore, Finn kills the monster with a mysterious, powerful spear given him by an old Fianna warrior. The tale stresses the responsibility of the young to draw on the resources and wisdom of their elders. Variations on this theme recur throughout the stories; when the pattern of respect is broken, tragic results ensue.

The stories depict the loyalty of Irish men and women to their island. Despite their strong desire to protect Ireland from invaders, Finn and his company are willing to help strangers (even those who come in warships) or to forgive enemies (even those who have slain Irish chiefs). The tales emphasize, too, the Irish respect for their heritage—both literary and historical. Among the skills Finn and his warriors must master is the art of storytelling, particularly of the tales of Erin. Sutcliff herself tells these tales with a cadenced vigor, characteristically Irish, that should be heard as well as read.

## About the Author

Rosemary Sutcliff was born on December 14, 1920, in West Clanden, Surrey, England. Because Sutcliff's father was an officer in the Royal Navy, the family moved frequently during her early life. When he retired in 1930, they settled in Devonshire, where Sutcliff was labeled "educationally subnormal." Her subsequent success demonstrates that, on the contrary, she was not subnormal, but rather an exceptionally gifted painter and writer. Today, several of Sutcliff's miniatures hang in London's Royal Academy of Art.

By the early 1950s Sutcliff gave up painting and devoted herself entirely to writing. Intrigued by a revival of interest in historical fiction, she created a trilogy of novels—*The Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch*, and *The Lantern Bearers*—that recounts the history of a fictional family during the Roman occupation of the British Isles. The last book in the series, *The Lantern Bearers*, won the Carnegie Medal in 1959 as that year's most outstanding British children's book. Like Sutcliff's other works, *The Lantern Bearers* features close attention to historical detail combined with a sympathetic treatment of characters. Sutcliff achieves in her writing what is the hallmark of the best historical fiction: insights about the consequences of collisions between public affairs and private lives.

## Setting

The deeds of Finn Mac Cool take place in and near Killarney, a town on Ireland's southwest coast; Dublin, a mid-coast port on the island's eastern shore; and other regions of southern and central Ireland. Although Finn and his men are human heroes, they often receive supernatural aid in the form of fairy magic and Druid spells. They live in a time out of mind, although their deeds become enmeshed with the invasions of the Norsemen, who are representative of all of Ireland's invaders. It is the mission of the Fianna, the celebrated Warrior Brotherhood, to protect the land from foreign invasion and to maintain internal peace and brotherhood. Finn Mac Cool is the greatest hero ever to become captain of the Fianna.

## Social Sensitivity

The Irish have long pursued a national identity, their quest historically complicated by Ireland's relationship with England. Irish nationalists throughout the ages—such as the writers who fueled the Irish literary Renaissance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—have often called upon folklore and legend to help establish an Irish identity. During the late 1960s the religious, economic, and political strife in Northern Ireland finally erupted into open and prolonged violence. An author whose work typically focuses on British settings and themes, Sutcliff offers in *The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool*—as she had in her earlier volume, *The Hound of Ulster*—a sympathetic tribute to Irish heritage.

A book that may be judged, on one hand, to be a gesture on the part of a sensitive Englishwoman toward building the spirit of community in Ireland is, on the other hand, a treatise on violence with universal applicability. The deeds of Finn Mac Cool speak to a common primitive heritage. The reader witnesses simple, violent modes of justice. Heroes and villains alike chop off the heads of their enemies, hang them from their belts, and display them for the edification of the community. This confrontation with a barbaric past helps readers to understand the need for more complex and humanitarian codes of conduct. At the conclusion of "The Battle of Garva," in which Finn Mac Cool is killed, Sutcliff notes that there remained "nothing but boys and old men" after the battle. While such has been the situation after any great war anywhere, Sutcliff's simple observation is an important reproach, made in the hope that readers will never become inured to violence.



# Literary Qualities

The hero cycle of tales is one of the oldest forms of literature. Some of the genre's popularity stems from the bond established between the listener or reader and the hero. When, for example, Finn Mac Cool helps to save the newborn child of a handsome young stranger, the reader shares in Finn's pride and sense of accomplishment. Sutcliff's rendering of Irish legend features many common elements of traditional folklore. The mystical numbers three and seven turn up frequently, and spears, cloaks, and helmets boasting magical qualities appear in various tales.

Sutcliff imbues the frequently barbaric tales of Finn and his men with the lilting rhythms of Irish speech. She reminds the reader of the Irish love of poetry, song, and story. A profile emerges of an ancient Irish people whose features are both rough and gentle, sharp and soft.

Sutcliff never attempts to simplify her subjects, their motives, or their actions; just as she does in her historical fiction, she succeeds in revealing the complexities involved in establishing a national identity.

There are a number of parallels between the tales of Finn Mac Cool and the better-known Arthurian legends. The young Finn is taught by Finegas, the Druid, as Arthur is taught by Merlin the magician. The romantic rivalry between an aging Finn and a vigorous young Dearmid compares with the conflict between King Arthur and Lancelot over the love of Guinevere. Furthermore, Finn's band of warriors, each with his own particular strengths, is comparable to the Knights of the Round Table. "The Horses of the Fianna," explicitly establishes a connection between Finn and King Arthur. In this tale Arthur, "a lesser son of the King of Britain," serves under Finn. The treachery committed by King Arthur's son against Ireland's great hero suggests the long history of IrishEnglish conflicts. Indeed, the tales of Finn came to be called Fenian tales, and it is the spirit of these tales that gave life to the anti-British Fenian movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Such connections with other folk legends and with historical events provide *The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool* with cultural breadth and depth.



## Themes and Characters

The prevailing theme in the legends of Finn Mac Cool and his men is the affirmation of such values as loyalty, justice, courage, and comradeship. These folktales developed, like many similar legends, to appeal to the communal spirit of the "folk" who both heard and created them. They also celebrate the extraordinary qualities of a particular hero who comes to symbolize certain ideal national characteristics. Thus, while the stories recounted in *The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool* bear the conventional marks of all folk legends and herotales, they are decidedly Irish.

Typically Irish details appear in descriptions of the landscape and the animals and plants that inhabit it. The game that young Finn plays—hurley, also known as hurling—is an old Irish game that resembles lacrosse. Both the Druids and the fairy-people are characteristically Irish, and the heroic but flawed character of Finn Mac Cool himself—with his mixture of the comic and tragic—has become a common type in later Irish literature.

"Finn" is Gaelic for "fair," and, in the early tales in particular, the fairness of Finn Mac Cool is striking. Fair-haired and fair-minded, Finn is tall, strong, generous, and skilled in battle. He has a remarkable way with words and is fiercely loyal to his men and his hunting hounds. But he is also capable of falling deeply in love, and his attachment to the beautiful Saba almost makes him forget his warrior duties.

Finn is by no means a simple or static character. As he matures, Finn's responses to new challenges become more complex. A dark side of his character emerges, in that he is apt to nurse old wounds. And in his treatment of Dearmid, the handsome young Fianna warrior, Finn is tragically unfair. Finn's jealousy is that of an aging celebrity for the extraordinary magnetism of a younger "star." Finn's stubbornness and his refusal to forgive Dearmid for attracting the lovely young Grania epitomizes the reluctance of the old order to give way to the new.

Some of the other characters in the tales are hardly characters at all; they exhibit talents that Finn can employ for the benefit of himself and the company.

Keelta Mac Ronan, for example, looks and runs like a greyhound and has the highly valued gift of minstrelsy. Ligan the Leaper challenges the very wind for speed and can leap across the great hall.

Fergus Finvel is the wisest of Finn's men, and Dering O'Basna can tell of events far away in time or place. Finn befriends a shipwright who can fell a tree, cut it into planks, and build a ship with three strokes of an axe; and he meets a climber so sure-footed he can climb a single thread of silk. These characters—each of them a specific quality, personified—comes to the fore just in time to save Finn from an apparently hopeless situation.





Among the more developed characters is Oisín, the son of Finn and Saba. He is a gifted, magical, charismatic child.

Aside from being a valiant warrior, he is the greatest poet and harpist Erin has ever known. It is Oisín who keeps alive the high deeds of his father. After three hundred years in the Land of Eternal Youth, he returns to Ireland where he finds all trace of the Fianna gone. He is introduced to Saint Patrick, chief of a new sort of Brotherhood—that of Christianity. The mutual respect of these two legendary Irishmen signifies the blending in the Irish soul of the ancient codes with the ways of Christianity.



## Topics for Discussion

1. When the Lady Saba asks Finn why he must leave their happy home and go to meet the approaching war-boats in Dublin Bay, Finn replies, "A man lives after his life, but not after his honor."

Discuss the relationship between honor and family responsibility as depicted in The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool.

2. Why is it so important that the Fianna guard the coast of Ireland?

3. Each member of the Fianna must learn to tell the tales of Erin. Why is training in oral history so important to them?

4. How does Finn's boyhood in Slieve Bloom prepare him for his position as captain of the Fianna?

5. How does the story "Giolla Dacker and His Horse" provide comic relief in the tales of Finn Mac Cool?

6. "Finn" means "fair," and Finn Mac Cool is known for his fairness and sense of justice. Is there ever a time when Finn behaves unjustly?

7. Why do you suppose there is nothing said about the education of young girls, as there is about young boys, in these tales?

8. According to the tales of Finn Mac Cool, how did horses arrive in Ireland?

9. Why is Oisín called "Little Fawn"?

10. Why does Saint Patrick, a Christian, insist that Oisín write down the apparently godless tales of the Fianna?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Trace the development of Finn's character throughout the tales. Does he become wiser as he becomes older?
2. Each of the tests that Finn must pass before he can join the Fianna has a special purpose. Describe and give the reason for each test.
3. Who is the most loyal of Finn's men?

Use evidence from several of the tales to make your case.

4. Compare the different women described in the tales. Who is the most complete as a character?
5. What is the significance of Oisín's three-hundred-year absence from Ireland? How does his time in the land of eternal youth prepare him for his role as national poet and minstrel?
6. Discuss the importance of the various animals depicted in the tales, such as the hounds, the horses, and the salmon.



## For Further Reference

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Townsend, John Rowe. *A Sense of Story*.

New York: Lippincott, 1971. Essays on nineteen English-language writers for children and young adults, including brief biographical notes by the authors and lists of their works.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

In *The Hound of Ulster*, Rosemary Sutcliff recounts the tales of Cuchulain and the Red Branch Warriors of Northern Ireland. *The High Deeds of Finn Mac Cool* balances these legends with tales from more southern regions of the country. Together, the two volumes provide a complete picture of the Irish heroic spirit. The Cuchulain tales are wild and harsh, while the Finn Mac Cool tales take on some of the softness of the Killamey countryside. The Dananns, or fairy people, appear in the Cuchulain tales as gods or demigods, but in the Finn Mac Cool tales they are much more human.



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