

"The Vikings fought lots of battles and Egil was really bad-tempered. It was exciting then, but scary too."

Ginny, 11

Is it really possible to become famous throughout your country and beyond both as a fearless warrior and as a renowned poet?

Egil Skallagrimsson lived in Iceland a thousand years ago, and this is the story of his long and violent life. He could compose beautiful poetry, but he was also capable of staggering brutality.

Can Egil successfully avenge his father's exile from Norway, defend his honour against the Norwegian King Erik Bloodaxe, and support the English King Athelstan in his battles against the Scots?

When his travels finally find him at home again in Iceland, how will Egil feel about his family – his loving wife Asgerd, the brother he lost in battle, and his dead sons?

And what will he do with his two chests of silver?



ISBN 978-1-906230-87-6



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An Icelandic Classic

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The story of Egil Skallagrimsson



Retold by Brynhildur Thorarinsdottir
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Translated from the Icelandic
by Julian D'Arcy and Phil Roughton

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Published by Real Reads Ltd
Newbury, Berkshire, UK
www.realreads.co.uk

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First published in Icelandic in 2014 by Námsgagnastofnun, Kópavogur
This English edition first published in 2015
Reprinted 2016

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ISBN 978-1-906230-87-6

Printed in China by Wai Man Book Binding (China) Ltd
Designed by Lucy Guenot
Typeset by Bookcraft Ltd, Stroud, Gloucestershire

THE CHARACTERS

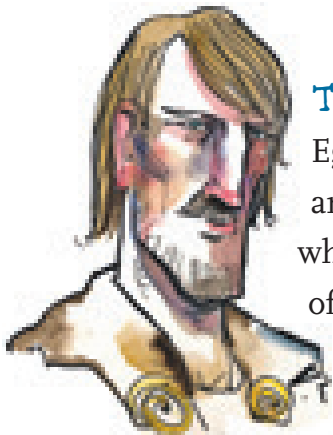
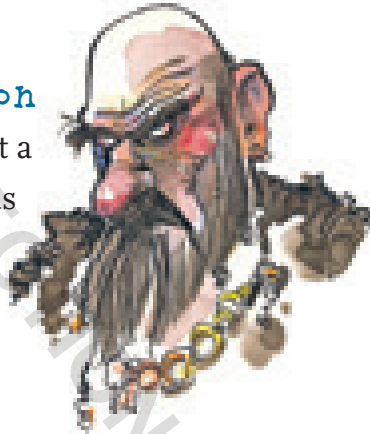


Egil Skallagrimsson

Even as a boy, Egil was big and tough. Now a respected farmer in Iceland and a vicious Viking abroad, can his talents save him when he gets on the wrong side of royalty?

Skallagrim Kveldulfsson

Ugly and temperamental, but a skilled craftsman, Egil's father was one of Iceland's original settlers. What havoc can he wreak when he loses his temper?

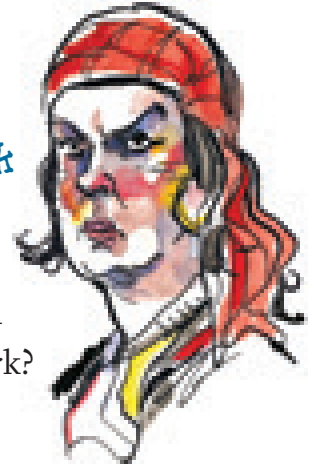


Thorolf Skallagrimsson

Egil's older brother is handsome and strong, but how will he fare when he joins battle with the king of Scotland?

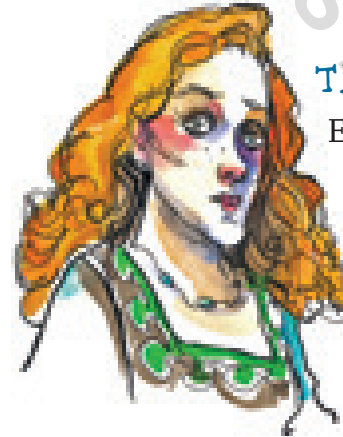
Thorgerd Brak

Thorgerd Brak is Skallagrim's servant and Egil's nursemaid. What can she do to save Egil when his father goes berserk?



Thorgerd Egilsdottir

Egil's exceptionally clever daughter is named after Egil's nursemaid. When her father's life is in danger, what can she do to save him?



Queen Gunnhild

Egil's arch-enemy is beautiful, but cruel and tyrannical, and highly skilled in the magic arts. Can she use her shape-shifting skills to thwart Egil?





EGIL'S SAGA

There was a man named Ulf, the son of Bjalfi. He lived on the west coast of Norway when Harald Fairhair began his conquest of the country, around the same time that the settlement of Iceland began. Ulf was a big, strong man, but he always became grumpier as the day wore on, and went to bed early in the evening. For this reason, he was called Kveldulf, or Evening Wolf. He was rumoured to be a shape-shifter.

Kveldulf's wife was called Salbjorg, and they had two sons, Thorolf and Grim. Thorolf was handsome and popular, but Grim was ugly and resembled their father. He was very strong and quick-tempered. At such times he would become as ferocious as a wild beast, and no one could restrain him. Grim went bald at an early age, and was thus called Skallagrim, or Bald Grim.

Thorolf entered the service of Harald Fairhair, but was slandered and betrayed by friends of the king and then killed by the king himself.

Skallagrim and Kveldulf exacted cruel revenge for Thorolf's death. They killed a large number of King Harald's liegemen, and fled the country. They gathered crews of strong men, and sailed to Iceland along with their families, farmhands and servants.

By now, Kveldulf was growing old; he became ill and died on the way to Iceland. Skallagrim and his wife Bera, however, settled down in a peaceful fjord on Iceland's west coast. They built a farm at the foot of some crags a short distance from shore and called it Borg, after which the fjord was named: Borgarfjord. Skallagrim gave his crew land in Borgarfjord, creating a settlement there.

Bera and Skallagrim had two daughters, Saeunn and Thorunn, and two sons. The older son was named Thorolf. He was tall and handsome, strong, cheerful, good at sports and extremely popular.

The younger son was called Egil. It soon became obvious that he would turn out ugly in both appearance and temperament, just like his father and grandfather. When Egil was only three, he was as big and strong as many six- or seven-year-old boys. He

was very eloquent, even poetic, at an early age, but was hard to control in games with other youngsters.

One of those who fled King Harald Fairhair's persecutions was Yngvar, Bera's father. He sailed with all of his household to Iceland, and Skallagrim gave him a farm at Alftanes in the Myrar area, a short distance from Borg. Yngvar once held a great feast at Alftanes. Skallagrim and Bera invited thirteen-year-old Thorolf to go along with them to the feast, while three-year-old Egil had to stay at home.

Egil told his father that he wanted to go too. 'You're not going,' said Skallagrim, 'because you don't know how to behave in company when there's a lot of drinking going on – and you're hard enough to handle when you're sober.'

Egil was not happy. He went and found a packhorse, mounted it and rode off



- There is much magic in *Egil's Saga*. Queen Gunnhild has magic powers, preparing a magic potion to lure Egil. She is also a shape-shifter, turning into a swallow in order to disturb Egil as he is trying to compose the poem *Head Ransom*.

- Skallagrim is as selfish with his money as Egil is. He hides his silver before he dies, just as Egil does at the end of the saga.

- The battle between the English and Scots in which Thorolf is killed is given a substantial build-up. The Scottish army is so large that King Athelstan has to gather more soldiers. While he is away, his liegemen do various things to make it look as if their own force is larger, and to delay the fight. On the second day of battle, Athelstan returns with reinforcements, making the armies of the Scots and English equal in size. The original narrative highlights Egil's and Thorolf's strategic skills as they take control in the king's absence.

Back in time

The events in the Icelandic family sagas took place during the Viking Age in the ninth and tenth centuries, but the sagas themselves were not written down until the thirteenth century. No one knows who wrote these sagas, including *Egil's Saga*; all we know is that the author of *Egil's Saga* was highly talented, combining old stories and creating a unified work from them. Much of *Egil's Saga* has its roots in historical reality; other parts are clearly fiction. Authorship of *Egil's Saga* is sometimes attributed to Snorri Sturluson, Iceland's most famous medieval author. Snorri lived for a time at Borg, Skallagrim and Egil's farm, and therefore probably knew stories that had been handed down for three hundred years.

The Icelandic family sagas are set at the start of the settlement period in Iceland, telling both about Iceland's first inhabitants and the history of Norway, since most of Iceland's settlers came from Norway. At the time of *Egil's Saga*, one of the many local kings in Norway, Harald Halfdanarson or Harald Tanglehair, declared that he would not