

Top 10 Viking stories

Since Scandinavian raiders crossed the North Sea and descended on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 AD, the image of berserk pagan warriors spilling from their dragon-headed longships to spread indiscriminate death and destruction has loomed large in the western psyche.

The Vikings could be savage fighters, but there was a great deal more to them than that. They were peerless shipbuilders, masterful sailors and bold explorers who journeyed as far as North Africa, North America, and Baghdad. They were traders, builders, farmers, poets, with a culture and art unlike any other in Europe, and an intricate system of belief that had developed independently of the influence of the Roman Empire.

1. [The Long Ships](#) by Frans Bengtsson

Swedish author Frans Bengtsson consciously aped the style of ancient Icelandic Sagas in his sprawling tale of the life of Red Orm, whose eventful career takes him across Europe from Moorish Andalusia to the steppes of Russia, with romances, poetry contests, and frequent scrapes along the way. Vivid, authentic, exciting, and packed with wit, no one should go a-Viking without it.

2. [Beowulf](#) by unknown Saxon poet

Around a thousand years old, the epic poem may have been written in Old English but takes place in medieval Denmark. The tale of how hero Beowulf defends Hrothgar's hall from the depredations of the monster Grendel demonstrates that darkness, betrayal, moral ambiguity and the weight of fame have been features of heroic tales as long as we have told them.

3. [The Broken Sword](#) by Poul Anderson

Published in the same year as the Fellowship of the Ring, 1954, American SF author Poul Anderson drew upon many of the same influences as Tolkien, but with very different results. The Broken Sword is a short, savage, dark and strange fantasy that imitates the feel of Norse sagas. Skafloc, a mortal child stolen by elves, and the berserk Valgard, the changeling left in his place, are drawn into the endless battle between elves and trolls, and the schemes of Odin, with tragic consequences.

4. Havamal by Odin

Who could give a better insight into Viking thinking than the All-Father, old One-Eye, Odin himself? Havamal, also called the Word of the High One, gathers together sage advice from the Chief of the Gods to man on how to be a good guest, a safe traveller, and an effective lover, in the form of 165 poetic stanzas. There's a good English translation by WH Auden.

5. Blood Feud by Rosemary Sutcliff

Children's historical author par-excellence Rosemary Sutcliff wrote in many different eras and settings, but always with honesty, authenticity, a tight efficiency of language and an unforgiving toughness with her characters and her readers. Blood Feud is the tale of a British slave who wins his freedom by saving his Viking master's life, becomes his blood brother and joins him on a quest for vengeance that takes them from Scandinavia to Byzantium.

6. [The Norse Myths](#) by Kevin Crossley-Holland

A great introduction to some of the Vikings' strange and intricate beliefs, presenting a world filled with gods and goddesses, giants, witches, elves and dwarves, serpents that circle the world and wolves that swallow the sun, from the creation of the world to Ragnarok, the climactic battle that will see its destruction.

7. [The Saxon / Warrior Chronicles](#) by Bernard Cornwell

Captured as a boy and raised as a viking warrior, Northumbrian nobleman Uhtred becomes the one man ruthless enough to defend King Alfred's Wessex from the marauding Danes who have overrun the rest of Saxon England. Cornwell, famous for his Sharpe books, applies his military mastery to the Viking age in six books beginning with The Last Kingdom. Vivid characters, friendships forged in the crucible of combat, and crunching battle scenes ensue.

8. Vikings: Life and Legend by Gareth Williams et al

This companion book to last summer's groundbreaking Viking exhibition at the British Museum uses detailed photographs of the exhibits to present the latest theories on Viking culture, trade, power, and religious belief.

9. The Viking Trilogy by Henry Treece

More tough and uncompromising children's fiction with a dark heart and a feel of historical authenticity. Treece's trilogy: Viking's Dawn, the Road to Miklagard, and Viking's Sunset, tells of three voyages in the life of Norwegian Harald Sigurdson. As a boy he raids in Scotland, as a young man he travels the rivers of Russia and joins the Varangian Guard in Byzantium, and as an old man goes on a quest for vengeance that takes him via Iceland to the distant shores of North America.

10. The Hammer and the Cross by Robert Ferguson

A comprehensive and readable history of the Viking age that voyages as far as the Northmen themselves, via Iceland and Greenland to North America, down the rivers of Russia to Byzantium and beyond. There's a particular focus on the lives of semi-legendary figures like Harald Bluetooth, Ragnar Lothbrok and Ivar the Boneless, and on how the coming of Christianity altered the whole Scandinavian culture and way of life.