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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Square Sails and Dragons

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A thousand years ago Norse society spread through colonization and raiding. The tenth century settlement of Greenland was founded and ruled by Eric the Red a man kicked out of Norway and Iceland for murderous deeds. Greenland's remoteness in *Square Sails and Dragons* is appreciable; it's people can count on little but their own precarious harvests. The country consists of two settlements and surrounding farms too small for formality or much social stratification. The traditional Old Norse religion hangs on there despite the expansion of Christianity into the northern countries.

This saga-based tale follows Eric's capable son Leif Ericsson on a mission to establish trade with Norway and bury the hatchet with King Olaf Tryggvason an active Christianizer. Terje Gundersson an orphaned commoner stows away on the voyage. He is desperate to escape the image of his parents' and sister's last living moments on a collapsing rope-bridge: "…he watched the entire structure on his side break away and the three of spill into the air like fish dumped from a net."

The ship founders on shoals off the Hebrides. Local ruler Lord Kalek and his willful but alluring daughter Thorgunna play hosts until repairs are complete. Leif leaves a little Leif-let behind a conscience-needling decision. Terje's untapped intelligence is his great asset. Determined to learn he earns Leif's esteem by becoming an able seaman in short order. Terje acquires language skills under instruction from Leif's former tutor Thykir the German. His own disastrous romance arises while wintering at the royal court of King Olaf in Nidaros (modern-day Trondheim). The zealous king accumulates converts with persistent verbal argument and persuasion of the sword certain that "'…what is good for him is good for all of Norway and even those who chance to visit his land.'" He works especially hard to convince Leif who could pass conversion on to all of Greenland contrary to Eric the Red's vehement wishes.

Condemning gossip is sparked in Nidaros by the public performance of a malicious "skald" a highly structured poem. The identity of a Greenlander accused of impropriety is withheld by the poet but once word gets back to King Olaf the offender's welcome is revoked. The crewman in question "'…secretly sought the hand of a betrothed courtier attacked a king's officer and incurred the ban of outlawry…"

The nuanced supporting character Thykir has a rich internal life. Though he misses his original homeland as foster father to Leif he's a more important personage than he could have been barring exile. Lund's dual arcs together form a durable understructure—a partly-documented figure coming into his own alongside a fictional striving young commoner. The historical facts check out from Norse customs to nautical terminology. Actual and constructed characters blend harmoniously. *Square Sails and Dragons* is an adventure suitable for adult and teen readers. (August 21, 2009)

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