



★ **The Ring Breaker: 1139 Orkneyjar**

Jean Gill

The 13th Sign (Oct 14, 2022)

Softcover \$17.99 (328pp)

979-1-09-645939-1

In Jean Gill's gripping historical novel *The Ring Breaker*, a young man comes of age in the Viking-era Orkney Islands, navigating court intrigue, his own survival, and his confusing feelings about the *jarl's* cursed ward.

The book strikes the right balance between its beautiful descriptions, its character-driven plot, and its authentic, vivified period and setting. Its story opens with Skarfr as a baby who's seen as too weak to survive and is left in the open by his father, but is saved by a cormorant. The bird becomes an important symbol throughout the story.

Skarfr's rescue marks him as a boy about whom sagas will one day be written. Orphaned and raised by a cruel *skald* (a bard/troubadour), he comes to work for the *jarl* who rules Orkney and develops a friendship with Hilf, a girl who's wise beyond her years but is considered an outcast because of the actions of her forebears. Skarfr also witnesses growing tensions between two powerful rivals who hold power within the *jarl's* circle and makes fateful decisions that affect his relationships.

All these characters are compelling and nuanced, and Skarfr's attitudes toward them shift throughout the book. Twelfth-century Orkney is rendered in great detail, from the interplay between Norse religion and the *jarl's* adopted Christianity to the seafaring voyages to deal with troubles in Scotland to the power dynamics at play. *The Ring Breaker* includes a touch of mythology and prophecy, too—elements that further enhance its complicated human story. While the book has a satisfying ending that allows it to stand alone, its epilogue also introduces a reveal that sets up an earned sequel.

With its strong grasp of history and place and a cast that defies easy categorization, *The Ring Breaker* is a thrilling adventure novel.

JEFF FLEISCHER (November / December 2022)

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