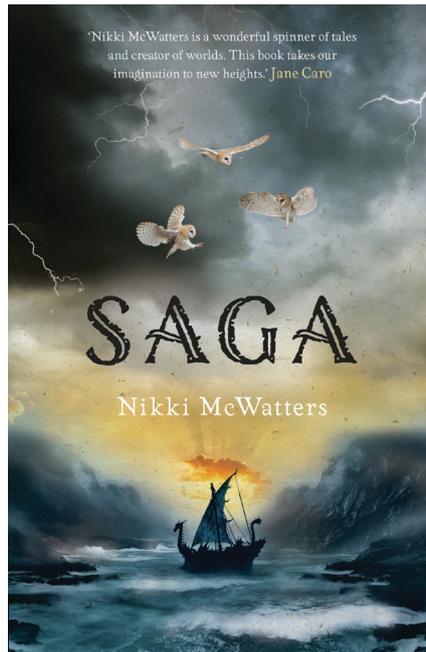


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SAGA

Nikki McWatters



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Saga is the third book in *The Systir Saga* series, in which the stories of women from different cultures and historical eras are shared. Astrid, Mercy and Mia are courageous women who display grit and perseverance in their pursuits of identity and truth.

Set in Norway during the last years of the Viking period, Astrid is a young priestess destined to record the True Things in honour of the Goddess Nerthus. As her pagan religion is threatened by Christendom, Astrid is at times conflicted by the task ahead, one that is made more difficult when she falls in love with the Norwegian king.

In 1813, Mercy is taken from the Glasgow Poorhouse by a ruthless undertaker, spending her days writing obituaries for the dead and preparing their corpses for funerals. Overwhelmed by the inhumane treatment of the bodies of the poor, she flees to London in search of a better life. There, she meets Ann Radcliffe, an author who teaches Mercy much about herself and her rightful place in the world.

In modern-day Australia, Mia is gifted the *Systir Saga* book after the death of her cousin, Paisley. In a quest to uncover the truth behind this mysterious book, she and her best friend, Cait, travel to Scotland in search of answers.

Although centuries separate their stories, these three women are linked by a common bond of sisterhood that is unbreakable.

THEMES

- Courage
- Identity
- Love
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Women
- Matriarchs
- Poetry
- Stories
- Paganism
- Perseverance
- Norway
- Vikings
- Gender Equality
- Education
- Risk-taking
- Belonging
- Bullying

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WRITING STYLE

Saga is a beautifully crafted literary text narrated by three female characters – Astrid, Mercy and Mia – each from different contexts and time periods. Narrated in first person, past tense, all three stories are rich with figurative language and detailed description, particularly the recounts of Astrid and Mercy, which provide vivid depictions of life during their respective eras. Of note is the emphasis on strong female characters who withstand the patriarchal structures of their societies. In addition, the power and majesty of stories and words is explored. This text is suitable for secondary students, particularly Years 10–12.

STUDY NOTES**Astrid – Orkneyar, Norway – 1066–67**

- Discuss the use of imagery in the opening paragraph of Astrid’s story on p. 1. How does this give readers an immediate sense of Astrid’s voice? How is the time and setting established in this first chapter?
- Discuss Astrid’s observation that ‘people speak too much and listen too little’ (p. 2). Share a time when this was true for you.
- Astrid learns to become skilled in the art of poetry, which includes becoming a vessel of wisdom. Select a small number of poems that help investigate this concept.
- Why does Astrid have to learn the way of her gods, as well as the new Christ-King? What role does religion play in *Saga*?
- What does Mother Thorberg mean when she says ‘To know the past and the present you must be able to detect the currents of the future’ (pp. 5–6)? Write a reflection that relates this advice to a modern-day context.
- Astrid is told that her calling as a skáldmær is not ‘for a woman, so prepare to fail. Words belong to men’ (p. 12). Why, when told she would fail, did these words ‘[stoke] a fire in [her], fanning [her] pride’? Discuss this in context with the role of women throughout history. How have women challenged such sentiments? Give examples to support your ideas.
- Astrid is tasked with describing things in two words by learning the art of kenning. Examples include a *storm* (sky-anger), *failure of a king to sound more victorious* (vanquished sacrifice), *air* (shadow’s breath) and *blood* (sword-juice). She later describes Olav’s arms as ‘safe branches’ (p. 51). Brainstorm a list of other words that could be kenned, then try describing them in two words.

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- Discuss Nikki McWatters' use of language to describe the longhouse on p. 39 and/or the storm on p. 82. Write your own piece of description using rich imagery.
- Why, when falling in love with Olav, does Astrid say 'my guilt was suffocating me' (p. 123)? Why can't she let herself be with Olav? Why can't they run away and be goatherds? Why has the author deliberately structured the story in this way?
- In the role of Astrid, write a journal entry upon discovering that you are pregnant with Olav's child. What would you do if you were Astrid?
- What clues do we get of the nature of Arnórr's relationship with Astrid? Why is he so supportive of her desire to keep a record of the words of the Goddess? What does he mean when he says 'I believe that the recording of life, all of life, is the only way forward' (p. 225).
- Why is it important the women balance history by telling their own stories?
- How important is Unn to Astrid's life? Why does Astrid take Unn under her wing?
- Discuss Astrid's comment that 'True joy comes from The Belonging ... It is, quite simply, mattering to someone who matters to you' (p. 226). Compose a poem that expresses your experiences of belonging.
- Why does Astrid say to Olav 'They stripped away your Ollieness' (p. 234)? How does this realisation hurt Astrid?
- Why did the author ensure that Astrid gives birth to a daughter rather than a son? How does this support the themes in the text?
- At the start of *Saga*, Mother Thorberg says to Astrid 'that tongue of yours is still a runaway mare' (p. 5). Does this change by the end of the novel? How is Mother Thorberg's acceptance of Astrid a strength of the novel?
- Create a character profile of Astrid before and after her time with Arnórr jarlaskáld. How does she grow and change throughout the text?
- Select a passage from Astrid's story to annotate, showing your understanding of figurative devices and the author's ability to 'show not tell'.
- Describe the relationship between Astrid and Olav. How does her love for him change over time?
- Mother Thorberg is depicted extremely vividly. How does the author describe her with such sensitivity, particularly as she faces death? Use the description on p. 2 to sketch her. In addition, with reference to

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pp. 289–93, discuss the evocative yet delicate description of her death. How has the author used language features to achieve this?

- In the role of Astrid, write and perform a script to perform upon discovering that Mother Thorberg is your grandmother.
- How does Mother Thorberg describe what love is? Explain your understanding of love in your own words.
- What role does Mother Thorberg play in *Saga*? How does she help Astrid to process and accept her situation?
- What role do owls play in Astrid's story? How does Nikki McWatters use this motif to represent wisdom and destiny?
- In the role of Astrid, write a diary entry of the evening you give Freyja to Unn as the sisters depart for Eire.

Mercy – Scotland and England – 1813–1816

- Mercy starts her story with the advice 'if there's a lesson, it is to take a risk, no matter how dangerous, to improve your situation' (p. 13). How is this shown throughout Mercy's story?
- Why, upon discovering that Mercy can read and write, does Mr Riggs say 'Well, that's a foolish and pointless skill for a girl' (p. 17)? What does this tell us about gender issues during the nineteenth century?
- In the role of Mercy, write a series of diary entries of your time with Mr Lester.
- Why does her time at the undertaker's give Mercy 'a deeper understanding of life and death and the tenuous veil that separated them' (p. 53)?
- When writing obituaries, Mercy can only use twenty words to capture the lives of the deceased. Try writing your own twenty-word obituary, or that of a friend.
- Why does Mercy flee to London? How does this decision impact on her life? Why does she see 'the rest of [her] life spread out in front of [her] like a book with blank pages' (p. 106)?
- Why, when Mercy meets Ann Radcliffe, is it the mention of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that saves her?
- Why does Mercy exclaim 'Women wrote books!' (p. 113)? How does this empower her?
- How does Mercy's time at Windsor shape her? Give examples from the text to support your thinking.

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- Why are Ann's ideas about social equality seen as 'strange' (p. 134)?
- Why does Ann say that educated women will inherit the future? What comment is *Saga* making about the role of education and the position of women in society?
- Ann gives Mercy a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Find out more about Mary Wollstonecraft and her work as a feminist.
- Discuss Ann's comment that 'Imagination can make the unreal real and the real unreal' (pp. 139–40). What examples from literature support this view?
- Write a reflection to respond to Ann's statement that: 'It is how we prevail, how we use what we learn, how we overcome, that shapes us and our destiny. The strongest trees get that way from withstanding the greatest winds' (p. 140).
- Why does Mercy say that 'Names. Clothes. Food.' (p. 143) won't change who she is?
- With reference to the passage on p. 143, explain in your own words the essence of what Ann hopes to teach Mercy.
- If Ann believes that Mercy is 'like a daughter' (p. 165), why doesn't she offer to adopt her? How would the story have been different had Ann adopted her? Is Mercy better off without Ann as her mother? Discuss.
- What role do Percy and Mary play in Mercy's life at Windsor? Why have these characters been included in *Saga*?
- Why does Ann say to Mercy 'you have risen like a phoenix from the ashes of your unfortunate past' (p. 202)?
- Why does Mercy feel so humiliated at the dinner, weeping until she has 'no more tears' (p. 245)?
- Why does Mercy liken Ann to Mr Lester?
- How does the line from Hamlet, 'To thine own self be true', reflect Mercy's actions after the dinner?
- How does telling the truth about her background liberate Mercy?
- Relate Mercy's stories to various works of Charles Dickens. Why has Nikki McWatters incorporated the Dickens family into Mercy's story?
- Write a response to Mercy's statement that 'my suffering has been my greatest teacher' (p. 298).
- Why does Mercy say 'I was a tree without roots. Perhaps that made me a weed' (p. 321)?

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- How did you feel when Mercy met her mother? Write a reflection to share your thoughts.
- What is the significance of Mercy discovering her true name and heritage?
- Discuss the author's ability to use setting to engage the reader, for example, the Poorhouse in Glasgow, to establish Mercy's situation.
- What relationship does Mercy share with Jimmy Friday? How does he help her to maintain hope?
- What do you think is the most powerful passage in Mercy's narrative? Explain why this extract is so effective, justifying your choice with reference to language features and the use of motifs and themes.
- How did you feel when Ann uses Mercy as an experiment? What does this reveal about Ann's character? Why does Mercy leave after the dinner party?
- What would her life had been like had she never met Ann? Would she have found true happiness? Discuss.
- Write a reflection to share how you felt at the end of Mercy's story.

Mia – Australia and Scotland – Present Day

- How does Mia respond to the matrilineal book when she is first given it?
- How does Mia's quest help bring the threads of the three stories together?
- Why does the author deliberately have Mia describe their room in Scotland as 'coffin-small' (p. 156)?
- Why is it so important for Mia and her fellow 'systirs' to prove that there was a 'land [that] worshipped a goddess and lived in a matriarchal society' (p. 188)?
- How are the revelations of Mia's maternal bloodline like those of Astrid?
- Why does Sylvia say that finding the book 'will put egg all over the faces of the stuffy misogynist dinosaurs who don't think it possible that a Mother Goddess predated their patriarchal man in the sky' (p. 222)?
- Discuss Mia's and Cait's comments that mining companies are 'still raping and pillaging ... just ...like Vikings' (p. 329).
- Research the Pict civilisation of Ancient Britain.
- How do Mia and Cait complement one another?

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General Notes

- Nikki McWatters uses figurative language throughout *Saga* to create beautiful and effective passages of writing. As you read, record examples of figurative language that appeals to you. How do these contribute to the richness of *Saga*? Some examples are included on the page numbers below:
 - Astrid
 - 1, 6, 9, 10, 39, 44, 49, 50, 83, 87, 89, 95, 123, 124, 128, 129, 132, 160, 197, 228, 229, 233, 289
 - Mercy
 - 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 26, 103, 106, 113, 140, 142, 205
 - Mia
 - 73, 181, 220
- Discuss the role of women in *Saga*. How are the female characters role models for modern day girls? How does *Saga* give power to the feminine?
- How are Astrid, Mercy and Mia similar to and different from one another? Compare their characters using a graphic organiser.
- What place do stories play in helping people become better at understanding others?
- Discuss the clues that bring these three women's narratives together through the *Systir Saga* book?
- Analyse the way in which Nikki McWatters has successfully created three unique voices in *Saga*.
- In the role of one of the characters, write and perform a monologue showing your understanding of the themes of the novel.
- How do stories 'enrich both the audience and the storyteller' (p. 300)?
- How are birds used as a motif in *Saga*?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I truly believe that we are all made up of stories as much as of our DNA. From the moment we are born we are told stories, through picture books, fairytales, stories of our culture and of our friends' cultures, historical tales and those unfolding in the media in real time. My ideas for my books don't come directly and purely from my imagination but from the cauldron of stories I've been told over the years that I hold somewhere in my consciousness. They are filed away

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in my mind's library and I can call upon them to make sense of the world and to recreate my own fictions for the page. As a writer I don't own stories, I simply capture them and put them between the covers of a book. This was the idea that was the seed for *Saga* – three young women making sense of the stories around them and within them.

The mythical *Systir Saga* book is a metaphor for all the women's stories of the world throughout human history, most of which were only whispered behind closed doors because history was written by men and mostly all stories, records and recounts were male-driven. My three characters come to learn that their stories are important and worth sharing with the world, although all were at times afraid of being silenced. My little book is a tribute to all the women who tell stories, listen to stories, read stories and thrive because of stories.

I set the three stories over a wide spread of history from tenth-century Orkney and Norway to Gothic nineteenth-century Britain to modern-day life in the Blue Mountains of Australia. I want to show that the power of storytelling has not changed and that the stories of our ancestors are carried in us whether we realise it or not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikki McWatters was shortlisted in the 2010 Queensland Premier's Literary Award Emerging Writer category. Her books include the memoirs *One Way or Another* and *Madness, Mayhem and Motherhood*; and young adult novels *Sandy Feet*, *Hexenhaus*, *Liberty* and *Saga*. *Liberty* was a 2019 CBCA Notable Book of the Year for Older Readers. Nikki won the 2016 Irish Moth Award and has written for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Huffington Post UK* and *The Big Issue*. She is currently the spokesperson for the annual Vinnies CEO Sleepout. Nikki also has a law degree in her bottom drawer somewhere.

nikkimcwatters.wordpress.com