

Children's Literature Reviews

Item 55 of 130

Hush : an Irish princess' tale

Donna Jo Napoli.

Cataloging in Publication

[Publisher description](#)

New York, N.Y. : Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2007.

p. cm.

Annotations:

Fifteen-year-old Melkorka, an Irish princess, is kidnapped by Russian slave traders and not only learns how to survive but to challenge some of the brutality of her captors, who are fascinated by her apparent muteness and the possibility that she is enchanted.

Best Books:

[Best Books for Young Adults, 2009](#) ; YALSA American Library Association; United States

[Best Children's Books of the Year, 2008](#) ; Bank Street College of Education; United States

[Kirkus Book Review Stars, October 1, 2007](#) ; United States

[Publishers Weekly Book Review Stars, October 1, 2007](#) ; Cahners; United States

[School Library Journal Book Review Stars, December 2007](#) ; Cahners; United States

[Senior High Core Collection Supplement to the Seventeenth Edition 2008, 2008](#) ; The H. W. Wilson Co.; United States

Horn Book Guide:

Spring 2008 Older Fiction Rating 3, Recommended, satisfactory in style, content, and/or illustration.

Reading Measurement Programs:

Accelerated Reader

Interest Level Middle Grade

Book Level 3.9

Accelerated Reader Points 9

Lexile, MetaMetrics, Inc.

Lexile Measure 570

Reading Counts-Scholastic

Interest Level 6-8

Reading Level 3.3

Title Point Value 17

Lexile Measure 570

Reviews:

Lynn Rutan (Booklist, Nov. 1, 2007 (Vol. 104, No. 5))

Melkorka, daughter of a wealthy Irish king, scorns the slaves around her, convinced that most are stupid. That belief changes when she and her young sister are abducted by Russian slavers. To conceal her origins, Melkorka

doesn't speak. Her muteness makes her the object of superstitious fascination, and it saves her from the brutal rape that others suffer. As the captives band together, Melkorka, silent but observant, begins to realize the humanity of the other slaves, as well as her own resources. The present-tense narrative is the real strength of this story, which is based on an Icelandic saga. Napoli's descriptions are saturated with details, which, while slowing the story, make events seem extraordinarily real. Promised maps, not available at the time of this review, will likely give readers a firmer grasp of the place and time, but even with them, this novel will best suit patient readers; they'll be the most rewarded by the rich voice of the narrator and by the circumstances of her journey. *Grades 8-11*

Gwynne Spencer (Children's Literature)

This tale is not just about an Irish princess, medieval and bold, being sent to a safe haven by her mother. It is not just about rapacious Vikings raiding, pillaging and plundering the rich coastal villages of Eire. It is about the brutality of war and how children and women bear the biggest burdens of living with loss. Melkorka's world, which we come to share, is not perfect. Her brother, the heir-apparent to the throne, was maimed by a Viking for nothing more than a bet. She and her sister are in danger because of a retaliatory raid in progress. Sounds like Iraq or Palestine, give or take 1,000 years. But Melkorka is a survivor who endures being sold as a slave, even gaining favor by use her one distinguishing trait: silence. No matter what, she does not speak or cry out. And because of her hush, she endures when others do not. She travels to the Ends of the World (Russia) and back to Eire, then on to Iceland, all in silence. Through her keen eye, the reader is taken into a world of war and conquest, narrated by women who overcome frailty and bear children in spite of all they see and experience. Highly recommended, especially for high school history and women's studies classes. 2007, Atheneum Books for Young Readers/Simon & Schuster, \$16.99. Ages 12 to adult.

Kirkus (Kirkus Reviews, October 1, 2007 (Vol. 75, No. 19))

Napoli takes the bare bones of a legend—Icelandic, tenth century this time—and clothes it in fire, flesh and blood. Melkorka is 15 and her sister Brigid eight when they are swept from their royal Irish parents and taken by a slave ship. When Brigid leaps overboard in a desperate move to escape, Mel—now called Aist, or stork, because she will not speak—focuses all her being on learning about the rough men who hold her. She learns from the other women—Irish, Norse, Baltic—and helps to care for other, terrified children. Her companions are sold, but fear of her unbroken silence keeps her until an Icelandic chieftain pays extravagantly. Readers, who know her every thought and wild feeling, will marvel at how she maintains that passionate muteness even as Hoskuld carries her, pregnant, to Iceland, through violence and storm. As always, Napoli is a spellbinding storyteller, her prose rich in details both tender and blood-soaked. From the texture of embroidery to the odor of sheep dung, her language is vivid, precise, cinematic. 2007, Atheneum, 320p, \$16.99. Category: Historical fiction. Ages 12 to 15. Starred Review. © 2007 Kirkus Reviews/VNU eMedia, Inc. All rights reserved.

Tena Natale Litherland (Library Media Connection, February 2008)

Long associated with psychological fairy tales and historical fiction, Donna Jo Napoli crafts a masterful first person historical narrative based on a medieval Icelandic saga. Melkorka, a beautiful 15-year-old Irish princess, is captured and sold into slavery. Witnessing countless acts of brutality, she quickly learns that silence is her best survival tool. Physically defenseless, her beauty and lack of speech are initially mistaken for witchcraft by the slave catchers but later intrigue her new master, the King of Iceland. From her violent capture and sea journey across Northern Europe to her eventual relocation to Iceland, readers will be caught up in lyrical language, psychological penetration, and heightened suspense. The medieval Viking world is realistically dramatized. Depictions of rape are presented without sensationalism to expose the utter helplessness of slaves, particularly female slaves. Complex and well-drawn, Melkorka is convincingly portrayed as a pampered sheltered princess, who evolves into a strong, risk-taking young woman. The story ends with Melkorka, the king's concubine, pregnant and about to face her fate in a new land with her new queen. Recommended. 2007, Atheneum (Simon & Schuster), 320pp., \$16.99 hc.. Ages 15 up.

April Spisak (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, March 2008 (Vol. 61, No. 7))

Napoli fleshes out a barebones character from an Icelandic work, the Laxardal saga, and adds historically accurate details from Ireland, Russia, and Scandinavia from the 900s to bring her to life. Melkorka, fifteen, is an Irish princess, who goes from a life of extraordinary privilege to one of privation, torture, and danger in just a few days after she is kidnapped by Russian slave traders. Melkorka luckily stumbles upon the one thing that saves her (to some degree) from the fates the other slaves suffer: she does not speak in an effort to conceal her high birth, leading the captors to wonder if she might be an enchantress (and therefore too dangerous to sexually assault and too valuable to sell off). Although no true happy ending is possible, Melkorka grows enough throughout the novel

to accept life as a journey of small and significant disappointments and joys, and she finds a remarkable peace that will resonate with readers who will have suffered along with her. Indeed, the first-person narration, an unveiling of every unrestrained feeling and thought she refuses to utter, reinforces this intimate bond between the reader and the protagonist as the only ones who truly know her soul: all of the other slaves and captors see only glimpses of her desires, fears, and changes. The richly detailed storytelling offers an often uncomfortable (though always eloquent) mix of violence and beauty, resulting in potent historical fiction that is at once haunting and uplifting
Review Code: R -- Recommended. (c) Copyright 2006, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. 2007, Atheneum, 308p., \$16.99. Grades 8-10.

Horn Book (The Horn Book Guide, Spring 2008)

Irish princess Melkorka is taken by slave traders to become the concubine of an Icelandic chieftain. She realizes that not speaking gives her power over her superstitious captors, who suspect she's an enchantress. Napoli maps Melkorka's transformation from haughty, spoiled princess to slave and, ultimately, survivor. Additionally, she sketches fascinating details of various medieval cultures. Category: Older Fiction. 2007, Atheneum, 309pp, 16.99. *Ages 12 to 14*. Rating: 3: Recommended, satisfactory in style, content, and/or illustration.

Karen Jensen (VOYA, February 2008 (Vol. 30, No. 6))

The Irish princess Melkorka is always being told by her mother that she should hush. After she is kidnapped by a Viking slave ship, silence brings her strength. When Melkorka refuses to speak, one of the traders aboard believes that she is a witch and protects her. Eventually Melkorka is sold to a man who favors her and makes her his concubine. In the end, Melkorka finds herself settling in a new land, with a child of her own on the way. Hush is a difficult book to begin; Melkorka is a spoiled, unlikable character. Once on the slave ship, however, her character begins transforming, and the reader begins caring about her plight. The conclusion will not satisfy readers looking for a traditional happy ending, but the journey is haunting in ways similar to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The fact that Melkorka does not speak throughout the final two-thirds of the book might be frustrating for some readers, but it is essential in maintaining the atmosphere of the work and the major theme of its title. Several scenes allude to rape—one of them a gang rape and the other the beginning of Melkorka's relationship as a concubine. Other mature discussions involve the brutality of the medieval world (poor families put their newborns in the snow to avoid feeding them) and Melkorka's gradual acceptance of her fate, including her relationship with the man who purchased her. This challenging read is based in part on an old Irish folktale. VOYA CODES: 3Q 3P S (Readable without serious defects; Will appeal with pushing; Senior High, defined as grades 10 to 12). 2007, Atheneum/S & S, 320p., \$16.99. Ages 15 to 18.

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