

DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE GOOD HAWK

SHADOW SKYE • BOOK 1

JOSEPH ELLIOTT

“The Good Hawk feels like something new and bold; a journey that is both thrilling and moving. Be prepared to be totally captivated by this amazing adventure until the very last page . . . and even beyond that.” – HOLLY JACKSON

“A brave new voice in fantasy fiction.” – SALLY GREEN



ABOUT THE BOOK

Agatha is a Hawk, brave and fierce, who protects her people by patrolling the high walls of their island home. She is proud of her job, though some in her clan whisper that it is meant to keep her out of the way because of the condition she was born with. Jaime, thoughtful and anxious, is an Angler, but he hates the sea. Worse, he's been chosen for a duty that the clan hasn't required for generations: to marry. The elders won't say why they have promised him to a girl in a neighbouring clan, but there are rumours of approaching danger.

When disaster strikes and the clan is kidnapped, it is up to Agatha and Jaime to travel across the haunted mainland of Scotia to Norveg, with help along the way from a clan of nomadic Highland bull riders and the many animals who are drawn to Agatha's extraordinary gift of communication.

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1. From the very beginning of the story, we learn that Agatha is not like other people.* List her strengths (like climbing and being a good friend) and her weaknesses (like swimming and getting words mixed up). Could it be that some of her weaknesses, like being stubborn, are actually strengths? Do you know anyone in real life who reminds you of Agatha?
2. Other characters in the book call Agatha a “bloody idiot” (page 21) and a “good-for-nothing menace” (page 151). At one point, frustrated, Maistreas Eilionoir tells her, “Shush your mouth! Stop that. How do you expect me to understand when you speak such garbled nonsense?” (page 319). Why do you think the others speak to Agatha this way? How does it make you feel when they do? Sometimes people call Agatha a *retarch* (pages 30, 54). Does this remind you of a word you’ve heard people use? Why do you think people use it? Why might it be a better idea to find other words to use?
3. Early in the story, when she is stripped of her Hawk duties, Agatha is told to eat at the children’s table. She says, “Now I have to sit at the table with the children. I hate it there because I am not a child” (page 54). It’s true that Agatha sometimes acts like a child, so why doesn’t she want to sit at the children’s table? Have you ever had an experience like this? Describe it.
4. Agatha changes over the course of the story. List some ways she changes and some ways she stays the same. How do others’ perceptions of her change by the end of the book?
5. Sometimes Jaime has trouble breathing. Lileas tells him her father has the same thing sometimes, and she helps to slow his breathing by talking to him and placing her hand on his chest. What do you think is happening to him at these times? Does it happen to you or to people you know? How do you or they control it?
6. The lands in this book are based on real places, but the map has changed over the centuries. Look at a modern map of Europe and find Norway (Norveg), Scotland (Scotia), England (England) and the Isle of Skye. Use that as a guide to draw the semi-mythical land of *The Good Hawk* and chart the course that Agatha and Jaime took from Scotia to Norveg. Note on the map any other points of significance.
7. Agatha put the tribe in danger when she accidentally shot a flaming arrow at her own tribe members. Do you believe she should have lost her status as a Hawk? A tribe leader says, “We always knew it was a risk to make Agatha a Hawk, but let us remind ourselves that she has always been one of the most loyal and hardworking members of this clan” (page 30). Is loyalty enough to entrust someone with a responsibility? What are some reasons for and against her losing her status?
8. Jaime makes the decision to let Knútr live. What did you think of Jaime’s choice? Would you have done the same? Why? Were you surprised by the king’s reaction to seeing that his son was alive?
9. When did you first realize that Agatha could communicate with animals? Crayton says we’re all animals, so it makes sense. What do you think of that? Do you feel like you can communicate with animals? Have you ever tried?

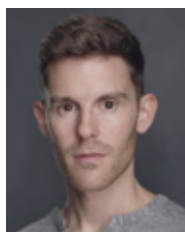
*From her description in the text, it is apparent that Agatha has Down’s syndrome. Most people are born with forty-six chromosomes – twenty-three come from the mother and twenty-three come from the father. Each of the cells that make up our bodies contains all forty-six chromosomes. A person with Down’s syndrome has forty-seven chromosomes – the usual number plus an extra twenty-first chromosome. That extra chromosome can mean a lot of different things. Like all people, no two people with Down’s syndrome are exactly alike, but they can share common traits. People with Down’s syndrome are more likely to have heart defects. They tend to be short (like Agatha) and have some difficulty speaking (like Agatha). Some have trouble walking or performing small motor tasks, like fastening buttons or using a fork and knife. Pretty much everyone with Down’s syndrome has some level of intellectual disability, meaning they learn more slowly than others, and sometimes don’t pick up on social cues as quickly.

We know from historical records that people with Down’s syndrome have been around for many centuries, but it was not until the late nineteenth century that a British doctor named J Langdon Down recognized them as a group with many of the same characteristics. And it wasn’t until the middle of the twentieth century that science was advanced enough to show that Down’s syndrome is caused by that extra twenty-first chromosome.

Many people with Down’s syndrome cannot walk and talk as well as Agatha. If she had been born with a heart defect, she would have died as an infant, because the method to fix such a problem didn’t come along until the 1970s, long after *The Good Hawk* takes place. So someone like Agatha would have been very unusual back then.

10. The people from Raasay believe in arranged marriage. Clann-a-Tuath does not believe in marriage in any form. What do you think? List the pros and cons of each way of life.
11. The people from Raasay get to choose whatever job they would like, while Agatha, Jaime and their people are assigned to certain jobs, which they don't necessarily like. How do you think jobs should be assigned? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
12. What do you think of the poems about Nathara that are included throughout the book? The author uses very few words to tell her story. Try writing a poem like one of these that tells your own story in a tight format.
13. Why is Queen Nathara so obsessed with honey? Think about the foods that the people in *The Good Hawk* eat. What is a typical menu for members of Jaime's tribe? Crayton's? What about Nathara? What did she eat before the plague, and what does she eat now? What about water and hygiene? How is it different for these characters than it is for us today?
14. Agatha does not always tell the truth. She says, "Sometimes lying is okay when it is a small lie" (page 49). What do you think of that? Discuss examples of when (if ever) it's okay to lie and when it is not.
15. The animals that Agatha communicates with respond better to her when she is polite. Why do you think that is an element in this story?
16. When talking about the *sgàilean*, Jaime thinks, "Fear is weakness. Clann-a-Tuath does not feel fear" (page 202). Do you ever feel fear? Do you think it's a sign of weakness – or of something else?
17. It is revealed that Crayton has a male partner. This makes Jaime uncomfortable. He says that in his clan, being gay is not "dùth", which means *honorable, proper, right* (page 216). How does our society view people who have same-sex partners? What more do we need to do to bring about acceptance?
18. There is a lot of discussion of Queen Nathara being "mad". What does that mean, in medical terminology? What are some clues that she is mad? What evidence indicates she is not? Why do you think Nathara acts the way she does?
19. As Jaime prepares to sail to Norveg, Crayton tells him he is a hero for even trying, and they have this exchange: "I don't feel particularly brave." "None of the bravest people do." (page 288) What do you think of that? Are you brave? Do you ever feel like you do brave things even when you aren't feeling brave? Name a time that happened to you or someone you know.
20. Near the end of the story, it's revealed that the shadows, the *sgàilean*, want to hurt Agatha ... but they don't hurt others from her tribe. What do you think that means? What do you think happened to the necklace with the amulet that held the *sgàilean*?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joseph Elliott is a writer and actor, well-known for his work in children's television including CBeebies series "Swashbuckle". His commitment to serving children with special education needs was instilled at a young age: his mother is a teacher trained in special needs education, and his parents provided respite foster care for children with additional needs. He has worked at a recreational centre for children with learning disabilities and as a teaching assistant at Westminster Special Schools. The heroine of his first book, *The Good Hawk*, was inspired by the many incredible children he has worked with, especially those with Down's syndrome. Joseph lives in London.

These questions were prepared by Amy Silverman, a freelance journalist based in Arizona and the author of *My Heart Can't Even Believe It: A Story of Science, Love, and Down Syndrome*.

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