



RUNEMARKS

Joanne
Harris

READERS GUIDE

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Have
the Mark?

www.runemarksbook.com
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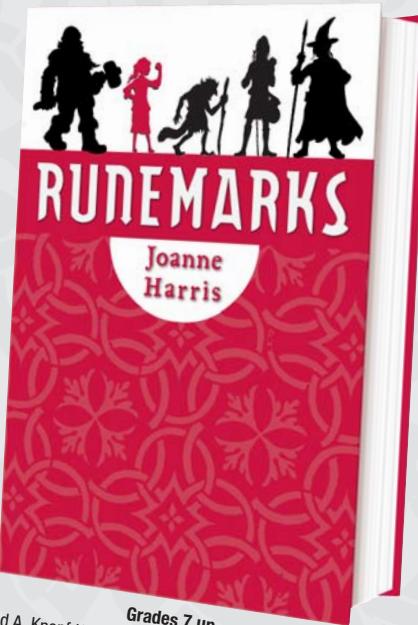
ABOUT THE BOOK

Runemarks is set in a universe of Nine Worlds, not unlike that of Norse legend. Five hundred years have passed since Ragnarök and the world has rebuilt itself anew. The old gods are no longer revered. Their tales have been banned. Magic has been outlawed, and a new religion, called the Order, has taken its place.

Enter Maddy Smith, a 14-year-old girl with an attitude problem. No one in her village likes her much; she is reputed to be imaginative, she tells stories, talks to goblins, and worse still, she has a ruinmark on her hand, a sign associated with the Bad Old Days.

According to One-Eye, the secretive traveler who is Maddy's only real friend, her ruinmark—or runemark, as he calls it—is a sign of Chaos blood and magical powers. And with a new battle brewing between the forces of Chaos and Order, Maddy needs all the power she can muster. Suddenly the gods, demons, and oracles of legend turn out to be not only real but also family. And the fate of the Worlds balances on the knife edge in Maddy's hand.

Runemarks is a fast-paced, funny, descent-into-the-underworld tale of secrets, revenge, trust, and destiny. It is about the end of all things and the possibility for new beginnings.



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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

↙ **Many of the characters** (Odin, Thor, Skadi, etc.), terminology (Ragnarók, Bjarkán, rune, etc.), and symbolism (the runemarks) are borrowed from Norse mythology. Spend time researching the major elements of the ancient Norse pantheon, focusing primarily on the story of Ragnarók (the battle at the end of the world). Students can read tales featuring the Aesir and Vanir, especially the characters who are listed on pages xii and xiii.

↖ **One of the prominent themes** in *Runemarks* is human intolerance of people and things that are deemed different than the majority, or “other.” Have students work in pairs or small groups to research significant periods in history when intolerance or hatred toward a particular group of people resulted in genocide (the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing campaigns in the former Yugoslavia, etc.). Give students time to report their research to the class. While reading *Runemarks*, challenge students to consider parallels between their findings and events in the storyline.

USE OF LANGUAGE

↗ **Loki has a way with words.** Review some of Loki’s one-liners, such as, “Might as well try to catch the moon on a string.” (p. 114) Ask students: Why do you think the author supplied Loki with such a clever tongue?

✗ **The Whisperer describes stories and legends** as, “Devices used by the ignorant for the benefit of the foolish and the obfuscation of the credulous.” (p. 153) Have students deconstruct this sentence to arrive at its basic meaning.

↘ **Joanne Harris is highly skilled at using words and phrases to create imagery,** such as the phrase, “gorgeous disarray” to describe a dream or a “distillation of stars” to describe the image of the underground cavern. Ask students: What do these phrases evoke in your mind’s eye? Review the text for other examples of language that help the reader create a mental picture.

▀ **Review the proverbs that open each book** of *Runemarks*. Discuss the historical significance of proverbs. Give students time to research famous proverbs and also to write original proverbs.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 5 Reread the last two paragraphs on page 19 that describe how the Malbry townsfolk regard Maddy. What does it mean that Maddy showed “signs of being clever,” and why would this be “disastrous for a girl”? Do you think this holds true for girls and women in our society? Does this same notion apply to boys and men?
- 6 The character of Loki fears little, but he greatly fears the fanaticism of the Order. (p. 109) What is *fanaticism*? What are some examples of it in the text? Why is it so dangerous? What are some examples of 20th century and early 21st century fanaticism?
- 7 Discuss the character of Nat Parsons and what he symbolizes. What is he after in the story and how does he go about getting it? What is his tragic flaw? Do you think he deserves his fate and ultimately his redemption in the river Dream? (p. 511)
- 8 Discuss the proverb “Not kings but historians rule the world.” (p. 151 and p. 161) What do you think it means? Do you agree with this idea?
- 9 Throughout *Runemarks*, the Vanir and Aesir shift from one “Aspect” to another. (p. 166) How is this notion of one’s Aspect related to identity and truth? Although Maddy discovers she is not human, how is her “humanity” revealed throughout the story? What character traits does she possess that make her heroic?
- 10 Reread pages 186 and 187 that describe the Word. What does the Word symbolize? What is the significance of the golden key? How can power be an addiction?
- 11 Do you think One-Eye was justified in withholding information from Maddy about her life? Why do you think he experiences a feeling of “deep and undeniable relief” after the Examiner says to him, “Your time is over?” (p. 238) Why do you think the author chose to fully blind him at the end? (p. 353)
- 12 What error in judgment does Skadi make in forming an alliance with Nat? Why do you think one who has such keen instincts would make such a poor decision? Why does she feel justified in double-crossing the Vanir?

continued . . .

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS continued

- Discuss the character of Ethelberta. What is meant by the following description of Ethelberta's realization that her "inner voice, once heard, was difficult to ignore"? (p. 321) How are Ethel and Maddy alike? How do Ethelberta's values, disregarded by the Folk, serve her in the end?
- Heimdell looks in awe upon Odin in his true Aspect: "To Heimdell he looked as if he were *made* of light, and if any of the Folk had dared to look, they would have seen it." (p. 323) Discuss this observation. How can it apply to your own interactions with people who are different from you in some way?
- Place students in small groups to discuss each of the novel's major themes: power/ambition, deception, intolerance, revenge, acceptance, identity, and destiny. What other threads or themes can students identify in the story?
- Loki is known as "the trickster" and symbolizes chaos. The Aesir mistrust Loki, but know that they need him for change to occur. (pp. 34—35) Discuss examples of chaos that have been catalysts for positive change. Discuss negative examples of chaos that are affecting the world today (war, environmental degradation, gun proliferation, etc.).
- The Whisperer tells Maddy, "The Folk have remarkable minds, you know—rivaling the gods in ambition and pride." (p. 463) Discuss examples of ambition and pride in the text. Do you think it is positive to be ambitious and proud? How do ambition and pride affect many characters in the story?
- The reader learns that Maddy wants to "free all the people in Malbry and beyond, to free them from sleep and into dream." (p. 526) What does the author mean by freeing people from sleep? Why have—and do—dictatorial regimes use tactics such as book-burning to gain or keep control over people?
- On the last page, the author concludes with this thought: "The river Dream, like the World Tree, has many branches, many routes." Discuss this idea. What branches will *you* climb or routes will *you* follow to realize your dreams?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Joanne Harris is the author of the bestselling novel, *Chocolat*, one of three novels she wrote during her 15-year teaching career. She is also the author of six additional novels, a collection of short stories, two co-authored cookbooks, and with the publication of *Runemarks*, her first novel for young readers. She has been published in over 40 countries and has won a number of international awards. She plays the bass guitar in a band that was formed when she was 16, is currently studying Old Norse, and lives in England with her husband and daughter about 15 miles from the place she was born.

For more information on the author, visit www.joanne-harris.co.uk

INTERNET RESOURCES

Wizard Realm

www.wizardrealm.com/norse/gods.html

Meet the Gods and Goddesses of the Norse Pantheon

Wikipedia

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Runic_alphabet

Find information on the Runic alphabets

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