

Minnesota Storytime  
Reading Guide

**Title:** *The Race of the Birkebeiners*

**Author:** Lise Lunge-Larsen

**Illustrator:** Mary Azarian

**Publisher and  
Copyright Date:** Houghton Mifflin, 2001

**Connection to  
Minnesota:** Minnesota author

**Summary:** This is a story based on real events that took place in Norway. On Christmas Eve, 1206, Inga of Varteig sets out with loyal peasant warriors, the Birkebeiners, in a desperate attempt to save her baby, Prince Hakon, from the Baglers who want to kill him so that he can never be king. They bravely cross-country ski over Norway's tallest mountains during a fierce snowstorm, struggling to survive while eluding their pursuers.

**Suggested ages:** 7-10

**Tips for Reading:**

- Practice pronouncing the Norwegian names before reading them aloud.
- Point out that the endpapers look like old writing paper which helps set the story in a "long ago" time.
- Help children pay careful attention to the illustrations, noticing important details, to learn more about life in Norway during the Middle Ages.
- Stop at a crucial time in the story (when Inga must trust the Birkebeiners with her baby or when she must carry the burning irons) to ask children what they think will happen next.

**Questions  
before reading:**

- What do you know about Norway?
- Have you ever cross-country skied or do you know anyone who has?
- What is it like to ski up a steep hill?
- How long were you able to ski?
- Do you know what a saga is? (a long heroic narrative)

**To Introduce  
this story say:** We're going to look at a book about true events that took place a long time ago in Norway – back in the Middle Ages. It is a story of a race on skis to save a baby's life.



**Questions  
After Reading:**

- What do you know about life in the Middle Ages from reading this story?
- What did Norwegian people believe and value?
- Would wrapping their legs in birch bark protect warriors' legs in battle?
- What was the ordeal in this story?
- Have you read any other stories where the characters face a terrible ordeal?
- Why did Mary Azarian decide to use woodcuts to illustrate this story?

**RELATED ACTIVITIES**

**Culture:**

- Look at a map of Norway to see where this story takes place.
- Research information about the modern Birkebeiner ski races that are run every year in Hayward, Wisconsin. Use the internet site [www.birkie.com](http://www.birkie.com).
- Discuss the Norwegian population in Minnesota. Compare Norway and Minnesota.

**Suggestions for  
English Language  
Learners:**

- Have the children "retell" the story. Note parts of the story that may not be clear to children and refer back to those pages to discuss further.
- Draw a simple "map" (outline) of the story with the help of the children. Use symbols to represent parts of the story or simple sentences that capture the main ideas.
- Make a list of cultural references (holidays, weather, government, dress, transportation, etc) in the story that are similar to the cultures of children you are reading to and those that are different.

**Related Books:**

- ***The Troll With No Heart in His Body*** retold by Lise Lunge-Larsen, illustrated by Betsy Bowen (Houghton Mifflin, 2003)
- ***East O' the Sun & West O' the Moon*** by Peter Christian Asbjornsen (Dover Publications, 1986)
- ***Three Billy Goats Gruff*** by Peter Christian Asbjornsen, illustrated by Glen Rounds (Holiday House, 1993)
- ***Favorite Norse Myths*** by Mary Pope Osborne, illustrated by Troy Howell (Scholastic, 1996)

