

A CONVERSATION WITH FRIBRIK ERLINGS



Friðrik Erlings was born in Reykjavík, Iceland. He graduated as a graphic designer from the Iceland Art and Craft School in 1983.

Since then, he has worked as a writer and at an advertising agency.

Friðrik has written and translated numerous lyrics, written scripts for film and televi-

sion, as well as biographies and novels. He is the founder of the Icelandic band, The Sugarcubes. The following is an excerpt of a much longer interview with the author

that you can find in the Resource Center at northsouth.com. **Check out Benjamin**

Dove's myspace page and email ellenorthsouth@comcast.net if you would like to

be Benjamin's myspace friend.

North-South: Fire is a recurring image within the book. Sometimes, it gives light to something good and powerful as when Roland begins the Knight of the Order while other times it is a tool of unrestrained violence. What are some of the other ways you use fire as both a symbol and an agent? How does fire change depending on who is using it?

Friðrik Erlings: A very good friend of mine said after reading the book, that he experienced the story as Benjamin's initiation in fire and water. Fire, of course, can be the most powerful of the four elements, the others being water, earth and air. In Icelandic, we have a saying that when someone has gone through severe difficulties, it has been a "baptism in fire." I'm sure there's something similar in English.

In the novel the fire illustrates the mood of those present by the fire, for example the description of the fire in the shipyard, when The Black Feather is waiting for Roland and Benjamin to come and fight, is seen more or less through the eyes of Jeff, the traitor. How the fire casts shadows on the bulks of the huge trawlers scares him, makes him feel small and guilty. In the scene you mentioned in your question, when Roland begins the Order, the description of the fire in the beginning of the chapter illustrates the mood of the four boys, their righteous anger and their frustration because of the murder of Grandma's Dell cat, Socrates. At the end of that chapter the fire has changed its character; it has become a flame of hope, a burning conviction, a burning desire to fight against injustice.

When Grandma Dell's house burns down, Benjamin wakes up in the middle of the night and notices these strange colors dancing on the walls and the ceiling of his room: this fire comes from the subconscious, it is Benjamin's fear that everything is about to change, that his world is about to burn to cinders. The question is: Will he rise like Phoenix from the ashes? Or will he forever carry the scars of Manny's death? When Grandma Dell's house burns down, to Benjamin it is a terrible foreboding of the tragedy that will change his life forever. Again the question might be: Will he be able to turn the tragedy of Manny's death into strength, or will he succumb to guilt and remorse? Actually, at this point, you could look at the heroism of Grandma Dell, on one hand, and the heroism of Roland on the other hand, for comparison here. Will Benjamin, eventually, become a stronger spirit because of his experience? *Read further questions and answers at northsouth.com.*

A Discussion Guide

PEER PRESSURE GANG VIOLENCE LITERARY SYMBOLISM
INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS POSITIVE COMMUNITY ACTION

Benjamin Dove by Friðrik Erlings



September, 978-0-7358-2149-1, \$7.95 paperback
September, 978-0-7358-2150-7, \$15.95 library edition

"Benjamin Dove is a story about maturity; a story about paradise lost, when the young lose their innocence and nothing will ever be the same again. A brilliantly well conceived and written work of fiction . . . The conflict between good and evil creates a tension which becomes all the more poignant, as the good isn't all good and tolerant."

--*Silja Adalsteinsdottir*

NORTHSOUTH
BOOKS

Truth and Consequences

A discussion guide to
Benjamin Dove by Fritørik Erlings

SUMMARY

As an adult, Benjamin Dove looks back on a childhood summer that changed his life forever. A summer when his new friend Roland, seemingly descended from the knights of the past, encouraged him to stand up for himself and for those he loves. It was a summer when he and his friends formed the Order of the Red Dragon that gave them a sense of identity and purpose in their turbulent world; a summer when innocent childhood games were torn apart by an almost inevitable tragedy.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Benjamin (Dove): It is primarily through his eyes that we see the summer's events unfold
Jeff (Eagle), friend of Benjamin, insecure and likes to be thought of as tough
Emmanuel, aka Manny (Unicorn), friend of Benjamin and Jeff
Christina, little sister of Manny
Howard the Hood, they say even his soul is "pitch black"
Eddie the Turd, the eventual leader of the Order of the Black Feather
Grandma Dell, the self-appointed guardian of the weak and the young, whose house looks over "The Ground" where the kids play

Socrates, Grandma Dell's cat
Roland (Dragon), the catalyst who transforms Benjamin and his friends into the heroic Order of the Red Dragon
Jacob Grant (Wolf), the bank manager

THE SETTING

Though Fritørik lives and writes in Iceland, the story of *Benjamin Dove* could be true of any city in the world. However, the action is mainly confined to the neighborhood including the "Ground," the homes, and the junkyard.

STANDING UP TO THE HOOD

Roland proves his courage early on when he stands up to the bullies. He doesn't even flinch when they prepare to set him on fire. "You should know only cowards make sport of picking on younger children," he says. Why do his words spark even more violence from the bullies? How did you feel about Grandma Dell's intervention? Pick three words to describe your perception of Roland after this incident.

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST NEVER SERVED

Grandma Dell's intervention results in tragedy for her when her beloved cat is found hanged in her house. Why do you think this happened? Would you have been able to do what Benjamin did? "The birds are silent today," Benjamin notes. "Even your worst enemy deserves forgiveness when he is dead." How does this foreshadow key events later in the story? Is it true that no one is past forgiveness?

PERSONAL SYMBOLISM

When Roland and his friends create the Order of the Red Dragon, they each choose a symbol of their own that illuminate their dreams and souls. Manny, who is afraid of horses, chooses a unicorn. Why does Benjamin chose a dove? What would *you* choose?

COMMUNITY ACTION

Howie redeems himself when Grandma Dell's house burns down by rescuing her. How does he rescue himself in the process? The Order of the Red Dragon make it possible for Grandma Dell to stay in her neighborhood. How do they plan and execute and what role do the adults in the community play? Do you see a need in your community that you and your friends can meet? Consider drawing up a plan of action similar to that of the Order of the Red Dragon.

PEER PRESSURE

Peer pressure happens on both sides. Why is Jeff pushed out of the Order of the Red Dragon? Why does he join Eddie? If the motto for the first is "for justice, against injustice," what is the motto for the Order of the Black Feather? How does Jeff get pressured into the mounting violence? What happens when he tries to escape? What kind of person do you think is most susceptible to peer pressure?

TRAGEDY

Howie reforms, Grandma Dell gets her house back but almost unbearable tragedy still happens in the community. Why? What purpose does Manny's death serve? Think back to Manny's choice of symbol--the unicorn, the "king of horses." How does Benjamin's dream at the end provide a measure of forgiveness to Manny's friends? How would you have ended the book? Would it still have the same impact? Does someone have to pay the cost for the mistakes others make? What redemption do you see at the end?

An expanded version of this Discussion Guide is available at northsouth.com. Also, visit Benjamin Dove's myspace page. Email ellennorthsouth@comcast.com to request to be added to Benjamin Dove's myspace friends list.