

# When We Were Vikings

by Andrew David MacDonald

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## About the Book

For Zelda, a 21-year-old Viking enthusiast who lives with her older brother, Gert, life is best lived with some basic rules:

1. A smile means “thank you for doing something small that I liked.”
2. Fist bumps and dabs = respect.
3. Strange people are not appreciated in her home.
4. Tomatoes must go in the middle of the sandwich and not get the bread wet.
5. Sometimes the most important things don’t fit on lists.

But when Zelda finds out that Gert has resorted to some questionable --- and dangerous --- methods to make enough money to keep them afloat, Zelda decides to launch her own quest. Her mission: to be legendary. It isn’t long before Zelda finds herself in a battle that tests the reach of her heroism, her love for her brother, and the depth of her Viking strength.

“A most welcome and wonderful debut” (Tyrell Johnson, author of *THE WOLVES OF WINTER*), *WHEN WE WERE VIKINGS* is an uplifting debut about an unlikely heroine whose journey will leave you wanting to embark on a quest of your own...because, after all, we are all legends of our own making.

## Discussion Guide

1. On page 13, Zelda says, “Deeds and actions are what will make a person great and legendary.” Do you think Zelda’s deeds and actions throughout the book have given her legendary status? What about Gert’s or AK47’s? Discuss with your group.
2. In the beginning of the book, Zelda tells a woman, “Hurting children causes emotional instability as adults.” Discuss

Zelda's and Gert's childhood. Do you think they were able to overcome the instability of their own childhoods and form meaningful relationships with others? Why or why not? Do you think it is possible for people to come out of a traumatic childhood unharmed?

3. Zelda frequently repeats wisdom she has learned from others, such as "we do not lie to people in our tribe." Share with your group something you learned from Zelda or your favorite Zelda quote. Have you applied any of Zelda's wisdom to your own life?

4. Zelda often refers to the famous Viking skeleton that was recently discovered to be a woman and not a man. She also finds out that this Viking woman was a high-ranking warrior. How does this change Zelda's outlook on life? What does this mean for her? Discuss her reaction in the context of gender representation in pop culture.

5. Gert can be categorized as both a villain and a hero. Discuss with the group his role as both archetypes. Do you think Gert is a good brother? Why or why not? Did you ever empathize with him? Why or why not? Discuss how the same actions can cause someone to be seen as a villain by some but as a hero by others.

6. One of Zelda's driving forces throughout the novel is to be taken seriously and be seen as an adult. Where does Zelda's need to be seen as a grown-up lead her, and how does this drive impact her life? How does Zelda defy others' expectations of her?

7. *Kepple's Guide to the Vikings* is an important tool for Zelda as she navigates the world. Discuss the value of books and libraries in your life. Was there a book such as *Kepple's Guide* in your life that changed the way you viewed the world?

8. AK47 tells Zelda that "the world is too complicated to have rules for everything. And when it comes to things like love and sex --- you need to kind of figure them out on your own." Why do you think Zelda struggles when she doesn't have a set of rules to follow?

9. Dr. Kepple tells Zelda that "sometimes life finds us, and when it does we have to rise to the occasion and have courage." How does Zelda demonstrate this at different points throughout the novel?

10. Zelda says she forgot Toucan was a villain when he was dying. How does Toucan's death affect Zelda, AK47 and Gert?

11. In terms of Zelda's Viking moral code, does Zelda's killing of Toucan make her a villain or a hero? What do you think would have happened if Zelda never confronted him?

12. Dr. Kepple also says that "we make lists, rules, and try to order things, trying to control them, when actually the most important parts of life, the parts really worth cherishing, are the things that we don't expect." Do you agree or disagree? Discuss with the group your most cherished moments and whether or not they were moments you expected.

13. On page 138, AK47 tells Zelda, "I love him, I do. And I want things to work. But it's not so simple." Discuss the romantic relationship between Gert and AK47 versus between Zelda and Marxy.

**14.** By the end of the novel, Zelda has displayed constant bravery and heroism in the face of challenges and obstacles. Discuss with your group whether you know of anyone with a disability who has triumphed in a similar way, and how society at large can better help people like Zelda flourish.

## Author Bio

Andrew David MacDonald grew up in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He won a Western Magazine Award for Fiction, was shortlisted for the Canadian National Magazine Award for Fiction, and his work has been anthologized in four volumes of *The Journey Prize Stories*, collecting the year's best Canadian stories from emerging writers. He has an MFA from the Program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

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