

Bend author, historian takes on the Vikings

By DAVID JASPER
The Bulletin

Among the many fascinating people who call Bend home is author and historian C.J. Adrien, a Summit High grad and, more notably, a bona fide Viking expert.

Adrien, 34, has written several books about the Vikings. One of the more recent books is "The Kings of the Sea," the third in his Saga of Hasting the Avenger trilogy. It was published in May by Runestone Books and released last month in audio format from Tantor Audio. In September, Runestone Books published Adrien's children's book, "I'm a Viking!: A History Book About the Vikings for Kids," illustrated by his fiancée, Crystal Whithaus. How does a kid from a mountain town in the Northwest develop a fascination, much less expertise, with Viking history and culture?

Well, if you're Adrien — friends know him as Christophe — you're half-French and half-American, and you spend a significant portion of your childhood in France.

"I grew up between the two," Adrien said. "My parents bought a house in Sunriver in '91. It was kind of a vacation house, so we lived in France and then we vacationed here."

Still, France isn't all that close to Scandinavia, from whence the Vikings sailed.

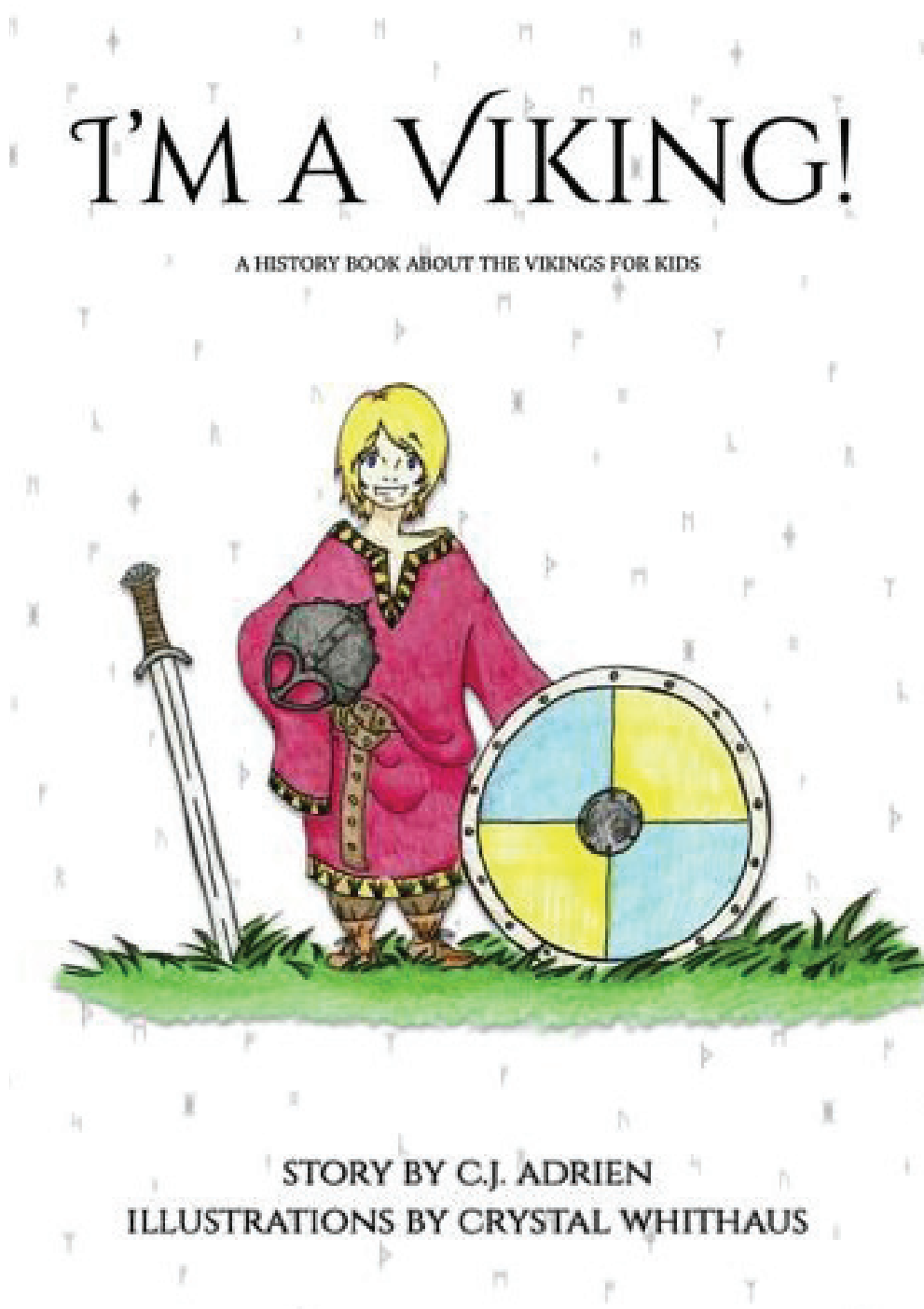
The French branch of his family is on his father's side, "and the island that they're from, called Noirmoutier, has this kind of mythology around it," Adrien said. "It was the first place the Vikings attacked in France during the Viking Age."

For a kid who had a nascent interest in history, a subject he'd go on to major in, that news was riveting.

"I grew up around castles and stuff. I just always loved it," Adrien said. "My favorite class in school was history. So when I got to college, I was going to study history. That was it."

He went on to enter a doctoral program in history at the University of Oregon, but that didn't pan out due to the onset of the Great Recession. He switched gears and instead went for a master's degree so he could teach in Bend. (Today he works as an estimator for Webfoot Painting.)

Ironically, given his Northern European appearance, more than one islander believed he was of Viking heritage at the sight of him. As a teen, he worked summers at a fish market on the island, "And we had this little old lady that would come in, and she wanted to be served by 'the Viking.' ... We later figured out that it wasn't the Vikings that



The cover of one of Adrien's books.

made us tall, blue-eyed blondes in an area that is not known for that. It was the Dutch."

And given his interest in history, Adrien began exploring the story of the Viking presence in France, which hadn't garnered much previous attention, and eventually came to write the epic series.

"By and large, historians (in France) were like, 'There's not much to go on.' It's always been kind of swept under the rug," Adrien said. "I think it's kind of a national embarrassment, this idea that during the formative years of the Brittany region of France, they were occupied by the Vikings for three decades. Nobody talks about it."

Nor did the corner of history receive much attention from British historians, he said. "I think it's a linguistic disconnect, where there's a ton of French sources, but people in the Anglican world don't really care because it didn't happen in England."

It so happened that Adrien's grandfather, a businessman who retired to Noirmoutier, served as president of the historical association on the island.

"He's very well-known, very well-regarded on the island," Adrien said. The nonprofit association's board had "wanted somebody who wasn't a historian to settle the disputes, because they constantly bicker. It's hilarious."

His grandfather's position afforded the multilingual Adrien unprecedented access to historical archives.

"I got access to stuff that your average person is just never going to have access to," he said. "I have been able to pinpoint things that French historians haven't been able to see the broader picture, or Anglophone historians haven't been able

to see the broader picture. Because I sit in the middle, and I can see and read and understand the two sources, contextually as well, between the two, I can do a little bit of crossover."

The first book, "The Lords of the Wind," arrived in 2019. Published in both French and English and written in the first person, it told the story of Hasting as



C.J. Adrien is an author in Bend.

an orphaned and enslaved child, and how he came to sail with the Vikings.

Critics praised it, and the Historical Novel Society, which promotes the genre for readers and writers, lauded it as well: "It's clear Adrien has a passion for this time and these peoples. The intricate details and engrossing characters propel the plot forward. If you want to sit down with an extremely well-researched tale involving heroic battles, first loves and the making of a legend, this book is for you. Recommended."

In December, he'll launch a virtual international book tour to promote "The Kings of the Sea" and "I'm a Viking!" The latter was inspired by the dearth of good children's books about Vikings, as Adrien discovered during a visit to France in which he gave an

academic speech, in French, to a group of historians on the subject of the Vikings' presence in France.

"That was nerve-wracking, (but) I did very well," he said. While there, a museum near the island was hosting a traveling exhibit about Vikings on loan from the Swedish Nationalmuseum.

"It must have been fate, as the Vikings would say," Adrien said. There, he bought a kid's book about Vikings for his son.

"It was just bad," Adrien said. "So I was like ... 'I'm going to write an actual book that kids will actually like, that will teach them about the Vikings — and parents, too.'"

"That's the big one I'm pushing right now," Adrien said. "I think it's my proudest achievement, and I didn't even do it. My fiancée did."

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