



The Ghostfaces (The Brotherband Chronicles)

By John A. Flanagan

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From John Flanagan, author of the worldwide bestselling *Ranger's Apprentice*, comes a brand-new chapter in the adventures of young Skandians who form a different kind of family--a brotherband.

When the Brotherband crew are caught in a massive storm at sea, they're blown far off course and wash up on the shores of a land so far west that Hal can't recognize it from any of his maps. Eerily, the locals are nowhere in sight, yet the Herons have a creeping feeling they are being watched.

Suddenly the silence is broken when a massive, marauding bear appears, advancing on two children. The crew springs into action and rescues the children from the bear's clutches, which earns them the gratitude and friendship of the local Mawagansett tribe, who finally reveal themselves. But the peace is short-lived. The Ghostfaces, a ruthless, warlike tribe who shave their heads and paint their faces white, are on the warpath once more. It's been ten years since they raided the Mawagansett village, but they're coming back to pillage and reap destruction. As the enemy approaches, the Herons gear up to help their new friends repel an invasion.

In this sixth book in the action-packed Brotherband Chronicles, the Herons find themselves in unfamiliar lands and prepare for battle with a ruthless, unknown enemy.

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The Ghostfaces (The Brotherband Chronicles) By John A. Flanagan Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #10427 in Books
- Brand: Philomel Books
- Published on: 2016-06-14
- Released on: 2016-06-14
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 1.31" w x 6.19" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for John Flanagan's bestselling Brotherband Chronicles

"[A] vigorous offshoot of the Ranger's Apprentice series."--*Booklist*

"This enjoyable, old-fashioned tale should have easy appeal for Flanagan's many fans, who are already invested in the world he's created."--*Publishers Weekly*

"Well developed and vocabulary rich, with endearing new characters and a rousing adventure that assures new episodes, this book will delight Flanagan fans."--*School Library Journal*

"Flanagan's characters are well-developed, and readers will appreciate the humorous quirks of Hal's group of misfits. This coming-of-age tale, with themes of self-worth and redemption, will be welcomed by fans of the "Ranger's Apprentice" series, as well as by any reader who enjoys a rollicking adventure on land and sea."--*Children's Literature*

"A sweeping novel of adventure, written with wit and a sure sense of storytelling." —*Booklist*

About the Author

John Flanagan grew up in Sydney, Australia, hoping to be a writer, and after a successful career in advertising and television, he began writing a series of short stories for his son, Michael, in order to encourage him to read. Those stories would eventually become *The Ruins of Gorlan*, Book 1 of the Ranger's Apprentice epic. Together with his companion series, Brotherband Chronicles, the novels of John Flanagan have now sold millions of copies and made readers of kids the world over. Mr. Flanagan lives in the suburb of Manly, Australia, with his wife. In addition to their son, they have two grown daughters and four grandsons.

You can visit John Flanagan at

www.WorldofJohnFlanagan.com

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Chapter 1

"I don't like the look of that," Thorn said, wrinkling his nose as he sniffed the damp salt air.

He and Hal were standing on the breakwater of the small harbor that served Castle Dun Kilty in Clonmel. The castle itself was several kilometers inland, but the harbor was home to a small fishing fleet that provided food for the castle and its surrounding village. In addition, it was a haven for courier ships bringing messages to King Sean, ruler of Clonmel.

Heron was one such ship. She had delivered a signed and sealed set of official papers to the king, a renewal of the treaty between Skandia and Clonmel. She had also delivered similar documents to three other kingdoms farther down the Hibernian coast. Erak liked to use the Heron for such tasks. She was fast and handy, and Hal was a reliable navigator.

Now, however, their task was completed and it was time to head for home. But the weather wasn't altogether promising.

The two friends studied the gray, racing seas that surged past outside the harbor walls, driven by the stiff north wind.

Thorn sniffed again. "It'll be a wet, rough passage north to round the tip of Picta," he said.

Hal shrugged. "We've been wet before," he replied, and then grinned. "It's part of a sailor's lot, they say."

"No sense in getting soaked for the sake of it," Thorn said. "If we wait a day or two, this might blow itself out."

"Or it might get worse, and then we'll find ourselves trapped here, with a hard beat north into the wind and sea. We could be caught here for a week or more."

"We'd be dry," Thorn said.

Hal shook his head. "We'd be bored to tears as well," he said. "There's precious little to do in the town here." He paused, studying the racing waves once more, looking to the north, then he came to a decision. "We'll go," he said. "Let's get the crew on board."

They strode briskly back around the breakwater to the small town. There was an inn there where the Herons had been accommodated while they carried out their diplomatic mission. The others were finishing their breakfasts in the taproom when Hal and Thorn entered, allowing a gust of cold wind to swirl around the room and set the fire flaring in the grate. Eight pairs of eyes looked up at them expectantly.

"We're going," Hal told them.

"About time too," Stig said. He shared Hal's opinion of the lack of entertainment in the little port. Stefan, Ulf and Wulf gulped down the rest of the nourishing porridge the innkeeper had served them. The rest of the crew had finished eating, but they took final sips of the inn's excellent coffee, knowing it would be their last for some time.

Hal glanced at Edvin. "Are we stocked up?"

Edvin nodded. "Provisioned and watered, ready to go," he said, then added, "Although I'd like to pick up a few loaves of bread."

Once they were at sea, they'd be subsisting on hardtack biscuits. It was always good to have a supply of soft fresh bread at the start of the voyage. Hal nodded assent and Edvin hurried out, heading for the bakery a few doors away. The rest of the crew gathered up their rucksacks and other personal belongings and straggled out the door.

"Take a reef in the sails before you hoist them," Hal called after Ulf and Wulf. "That wind is getting up."

The two sail trimmers nodded. It made sense to do this before they hoisted the sails, rather than have to lower them again to lash a fold in them and reduce the sail area.

Hal waited behind to check the reckoning the innkeeper had ready for him. He ran his finger down the list of charges—so many rooms for so many nights, and a tally of the meals his crew had eaten. He signed off on the bill and handed it back. They were on a diplomatic mission and the bill would be sent to Castle Dun Kilty.

“Thanks for the hospitality,” he said to the innkeeper.

“Always a pleasure to see you,” the innkeeper replied. The Herons had provided him with good business at a slack time of the year. Then he couldn’t help grinning. “Although there was a time I’d never have said that to Skandians.”

Hal smiled in return. Not too many years ago, the presence of a wolfship in the harbor would have been accompanied by a lot of unpleasantness, and the skirl wouldn’t have been signing for the food and drink consumed by the crew. He would have simply seized it at sword point—along with the inn’s taking for the week.

“Different times,” he said. He picked up his own kit bag from where he had left it earlier in the morning and tossed it over his shoulder as he exited. The cold wind whistled round the harbor, and he quickened his pace as he headed for the jetty where Heron was moored.

Edvin was a few meters in front of him, carrying a net of fresh loaves. He jumped lightly down from the jetty onto Heron and stowed the bread in the central watertight section of the hull. Even inside the bay, the unruly sea was causing the little ship to jerk at her moorings, and setting the wicker fenders squealing as she snubbed against the ropes holding her to the jetty.

Hal made his way aft, stowed his kit bag in his personal space and stepped to the steering platform. He glanced at Stig.

“All ready?” he asked, although he knew the answer. Stig was an efficient first mate.

“Whenever you are,” Stig replied.

Hal unlashd the restraining rope on the tiller and looked around the harbor. There were no other ships moving. The boats of the little fishing fleet were cozily tucked up in their moorings farther down harbor.

Very wise of them, he thought bleakly, pulling his sheepskin collar up higher round his neck in anticipation of the wet journey ahead. He reached inside his jerkin and produced his woolen watch cap, emblazoned with the heron symbol. He pulled it tight down round his ears and glanced up at the wind telltale on the mast. The wind was on their beam, from the port side.

“Starboard sail,” he ordered, and Stefan and Jesper bent to the halyards, sending the slender, curving yardarm up the mast and letting it clunk into place. Ulf and Wulf were watching him expectantly.

“Cast off for’ard!” Hal called to Thorn in the bow. Thorn released the for’ard mooring rope and the bow began to swing out, away from the jetty.

“Cast off aft,” he said to Stig, then, “Sheet home!”

The ship gathered way almost immediately as the twins hauled the sail tight. She curved away from the jetty,

buffeting her way through the short, steep waves. Hal let her slide away to starboard, heading diagonally across the little bay. The tiller vibrated under his hand, and, as ever, he marveled at the sense that he was in control of a living being.

When he judged the angle was right, he brought the bow round to port and the twins reacted immediately, hauling the sail in tighter. Now Heron was angled to the left of the harbor mouth. But she'd make leeway, falling off to the right under the force of the wind, so that when they reached the harbor mouth, she'd be heading straight for the center of the gap. Hal couldn't have articulated how he knew where to head the bows so they would arrive at that exit point. It was a combination of instinct and experience, and his intimate knowledge of his ship's performance and handling.

The ship passed between the two granite breakwaters, heading into the open sea. Instantly, the wind force increased as they emerged from the shelter of the harbor, and the ship began to heel to starboard. Ulf and Wulf, without needing to be told, eased the sheets to reduce the pressure in the sail, and the Heron came upright once more. She rose to the first of the rollers, then slid down into the trough behind it, smashing into the following wave and drenching the deck and its occupants with a shower of white water.

"What price a warm, dry inn now?" Thorn called.

Hal grinned at him. "I can set you ashore again if you like," he said. "We'll come back for you next summer."

Heron swooped up the face of another roller, then slid down the back, sending more spray across the decks. Those not on duty huddled under tarpaulins, hastily snatched around them.

Hal grinned to himself. It was cold. It was wet. And he loved it. This was what his life was meant to be, he thought, the freedom of movement that a good, seaworthy ship gave him. The exhilaration of meeting and taming the wind and the sea.

Then a shower of spray hit him in the face, and he spluttered and coughed. A hand nudged him and he dashed the spray out of his eyes to see Lydia beside him, holding out a tarpaulin cloak.

"Cover up, idiot," she said, "before you drown."

She took the tiller while he hauled the cloak around him. He smiled at her gratefully.

"Thanks, Mummy," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Mummy yourself," she muttered, then she sought shelter in the leeward rowing benches. A wave broke over the bows and water surged the length of the deck. Kloof, fastened by a length of rope to the mast, snapped at it and tried to bite it as it swirled around her. She seemed to be enjoying herself, Hal thought.

They spent the rest of the morning tacking back and forth as they made their way north along the coastline. By midday, they had left Hibernia behind and could see the dim gray coast of Araluen and Picta to starboard. It was wet and cold and uncomfortable but that was a minor concern to the crew. They were young and hardy and they were used to conditions like this. They had sailed in wet, icy weather virtually since they could walk. Skandians didn't stay in port because of a bit of cold weather.

And besides, they were heading home and that was sufficient reason to put up with a bit of discomfort.

In the early afternoon, they rounded the northernmost point of the coast of Picta, and Hal, after giving himself plenty of sea room, set a course to the east. The wind was on their port side now and they were on a reach, possibly their best point of sailing. The Heron swooped and skimmed over the rollers like her namesake, and they all felt the elation that came with sailing fast and heading for home.

Mid-afternoon, Thorn left his customary position at the foot of the mast, where he huddled with Kloof, sharing her warmth, and paced back to the steering platform. The rest of the crew were following Lydia's example, crouching in the leeward rowing well, wrapped in cloaks and tarpaulins, heads down and chins tucked in to conserve warmth.

Thorn gestured with a thumb to the north. "I really don't like the look of that," he said.

Hal followed the direction of his thumb. A black line of thick, heavy storm clouds, shot through with flashes of lightning, blotted out the ocean.

It was still a long way away. But it was coming straight at them.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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