



***Skyriders* by Polly Holyoke**

A Guide for Educators and Readers

Packed with action and adventure, *Skyriders* is an excellent choice for book clubs, a classroom read aloud, and/or independent reading. This guide was developed using the Common Core Standards in the grade five strands of reading literature, reading foundational, writing, speaking & listening, and language.

About the Book

When monsters emerge to attack the empire, it's up to twelve-year-old Kiesandra and her beloved winged horse N'Rah to prove to herself and the imperial army that she has what it takes to lead them to victory... and to ensure the survival of their world.

About the Author

Polly Holyoke is the author of the award-winning *Neptune Trilogy* and the acclaimed *Skyriders* series. She grew up hiking, skiing and camping in the Colorado mountains. A former social studies teacher, she LOVES books and reading. She even wrote her first book, *Two Days at Eagle Pass Ranch*, with her best friend when she was in fifth grade. This remarkable tale about two girls outwitting horse thieves was never published, but it did get her hooked on writing stories.

Polly has always liked horses and been fascinated by the Pegasus myth. Her favorite picture book when she was little was a beautifully illustrated story of the Greek hero Bellerophon who tamed Pegasus, and together they defeated the terrible three-headed chimera terrorizing Lycea. She's also been intrigued by the brave young riders of the American Pony Express, and she combined elements of both to create her *Skyriders* series.

Her husband introduced her to scuba diving, and she's been fortunate enough to dive all over the world. Like her heroine Nere in her *Neptune Trilogy*, she is mildly claustrophobic, and therefore she doesn't dive in wrecks or lava tubes anymore.

She currently lives in the mountains of Colorado with two rescue Chihuahuas and a nice husband who puts up with piles of books all over their house. She enjoys going to work in her pajamas and getting paid for daydreaming.

Pre-Reading Activity

Judging A Book by its Cover

You've heard the idiom you can't judge a book by its cover. But when it comes to published books, the opposite is true. Every time you go to the library, a bookstore or a book fair, you definitely judge books by their covers. An effective book cover should not only pique your interest but also give you clues into what the story will be about.

As a pre-reading activity, look at the cover and ask: who is the main character? What conflict will they face? What is the setting? The genre? What's the tone? Is there anything about the cover that hints at a theme? Write down your answers and place them in an envelope.

Once you finish reading the story, open the envelope and review the predictions, placing them in two piles—one for those that turned out to be true and one for those that did not. Did the cover do its job? How does Brandon Dorman (the illustrator) use color, perspective, and composition to capture the story? Check out [Brandon's website](#) to learn more about his work.

During Reading

Questions to Deepen Comprehension

Chapters 1-3

1. What are Kie Torsun's duties as a sky courier? What challenges does she face in doing her job?
2. What is the relationship between Kie and N'Rah? How would you describe it? How do they communicate?
3. Why is Kie motivated to deliver the emergency dispatch on time? What member of her family is she worried about? Why?
4. What is your first impression of Topar? Is he Kie's friend or a colleague? Do you think there's a chance they could become friends? Why or why not?
5. Why is there a trough by the well in every city and town in the Empire of Prekalt? What happened three hundred years earlier? In what ways does that history matter now?
6. What does the incident with Betta tell you about Kie?
7. Why is her apple orchard important to Kie?
8. Why does Kie want to be promoted to senior courier?

9. What are the Foul Ones? What do they look like?
10. Why is Kie embarrassed when another courier sees her practicing skyfighting?
11. What are Kie's assumptions about Prince Shayn?

Chapters 4- 7

1. What is one smart tactical decision Kie makes in her first encounter with chimerae?
2. In what ways are the chimerae different from how Kie imagined them?
3. Why did the Emperor send his son Prince Shayn on this mission?
4. What fact about the chimerae did Kie share with the prince that, despite his extensive reading on the subject, he didn't know?
5. What message does N'Tor, Uncle Dugs's skysteed, send to Kie?
6. What does Kie promise Prince Shayn she'll do?
7. What does Kie find when she returns to Durwen?
8. What does Uncle Dugs want Kie to do and why? Why does this task seem so daunting to her?
9. What are Kie's first impressions of Pedarth?
10. When Kie arrives at the Imperial Stables, how is she treated?
11. At the end of chapter seven, Kie is disappointed she was unable to get her uncle's manual to the Emperor's commanders before the imperial Skyforce deployed. Why does she think she failed? What does the phrase "words have never been her friends" mean?

Chapters 8- 13

1. What is Kie's plan now? What does she feel conflicted about? How are her two goals in opposition to one another?
2. During the clinic for the senior herd, what does Kie realize when she touches N'Talley and N'Rile? How is Kie different from other skyriders? Why doesn't she want other skyriders to find out about her ability?
3. How does Kie help N'Seella?
4. Why did Kie and Topar fight with Ruden, the cadet? How does Ruden disrespect them? How are Kie and Topar vindicated?
5. What is one of the fundamental rules the creators of the Great Alliance made with the skysteeds three hundred years ago?
6. Whom is N'Talley bound to? How and why does she put Ruden in his place?
7. Name two things Kie thinks are wrong about how things work in Pedarth these days?
8. What happened to Prince Shayn? What information from Uncle Dug's manual helps him?
9. What is Kie's first impression of Princess Halla? What does she learn that changes that impression? Why is the princess afraid of flying? How does Kie help the Princess?

Chapters 14 -20

1. What does Kie tell Ruden about N'Saran's condition? Why is Ruden resistant to hearing this? What pressures does he face?
2. Why are some skysteeds unbound? Why does Kie think this is wrong?
3. Why does the Dowager Empress grant Kie a favor? What does Kie ask for? Why is it a clever request?
4. Why does Kie want to hide her ability to mindspeak with other skysteeds?
5. What weapons do they practice with in the old stadium? What tactics are best in fighting against the chimerae?
6. What happened to Kie when it was her turn to speak at Imperial War Council meeting?
7. Who is Lord General Rennart and what does he want? What does Topar reveal to Kie?
8. What plan does the prince come up with to convince the Imperial Skyforce commanders to reconsider their tactics for fighting the chimerae?
9. In their battle with the chimerae, Kie doesn't tell Topar and Prince Shayn she can mindspeak with other skysteeds. Was this a mistake? What would you have done?
10. How does Princess Halla save the day?
11. What happened to N'Rah during the battle? How does this make Kie feel?

Chapters 21- 27

1. What two things does Kie reveal about herself to her friends? Is it important information to share? Why?
2. Why does the Head Courier think Kie and Topar represent a threat to the courier service? What do you think?
3. Who is the Nexara? What does the term mean?
4. Who will defend Pedarth? What is the plan?
5. What does Kie tell the cadets they must start doing even though they are already very busy with their classes? Why does she think this is important?
6. What does N'Forth, the lead mare of the unbound, tell Kie? How does this change Kie's goals and plans?
7. How does Dessie feel about flying with N'Forth? Would you like to ride a skysteed?
8. When Kie wakes to the news that over a thousand chimerae are headed to Pedarth, what is Prince Shayn's strategy? How will they defend Pedarth?
9. How does Kie's ability to mindspeak with the skysteeds help during the Battle of a Thousand Chimerae? What is the cost to her by the end of the battle?
10. What message does Kie receive from the scourge master physically bound to a huge command chimera? How does that message make her feel?

11. Is Kie looking forward to being a guest of honor at the imperial banquet? How is she honored at the event?
12. What does Kie want at the end of the story? How has she changed?

Using Context Clues to Determine the Meaning of Unknown Words

In writing *Skyriders*, author Polly Holyoke built an entire world with its own history, mythical creatures and other fantastical elements. There are some words readers will encounter that aren't in the dictionary. Using context clues (reading the words around the unknown word) figure out what the bolded words in the sentences below mean:

"If we rack up another on-time arrival, we'll earn five silver **dashins**, which could pay for more of Uncle Dugs's medicine." (p.1)

"And you still dye your hair with **tada** root so people will think you're a proper **Rosari**." (p.8)

The last of Kie's grumpiness vanished as they soared into the blue sky, startling a flock of **cheechees**. (p.19)

"They're better than standard courier weapons if you run into a flock of **grytocs**." (p.22)

Bonus: create an illustrated dictionary for readers. Make sure to include: triwires, botans, dayan trees, the chimerae, alai plants, dekkar tree, sand dragon venom, wing-shredders, and a gold and amaratine medal. You might also create Uncle Duggan's manual. Include recipes for healing antidotes, diagrams of weapons, and fighting tactics and strategies.

Discussion Questions

1. In the opening chapters of *Skyriders*, what does Kiesandra Torsun want? How do her goals change over the course of the story?
2. Kie is confident in her abilities as a sky courier, but unsure of herself in other ways. Where do you see examples of her lack of self-confidence? Does her sense of self change as the stakes are raised? What events help her gain the most self-confidence?
3. When Kie leaves Durwen to journey six hundred miles away to Pedarth, she takes a leaf from her father's dayan tree. Have you ever had the experience of being homesick? If you were going on a long trip, what would you bring to make you feel connected to your family? Your home? Your city or town?
4. N'Rah thinks Kie would be happier if she had a herd of her own. In the opening chapters, he worries Kie spends too much time by herself. Do you agree? How does she connect with others as the story develops? By the end of *Skyriders*, do you think Kie has found a herd of her own?

5. Uncle Dugs warns about the chimerae and the importance of the old ways of fighting them. His concerns are dismissed as are Kie's when she first attempts to share Uncle Dugs's manual with the Emperor's commanders. Have you had the experience of wanting others to take your concerns seriously, only to be ignored? How did you feel? Did you find a way to persevere? If so, how? If not, is there anything you learned from Kie?
6. When Kie visits Central Relay, she feels a sense of pride as she reads the motto chiseled on one of the buildings: *Through storm and heat, and the darkness of the night, we fly and bind the empire together.* Do you think being a sky courier is an admirable job? Why or why not? What does it mean to Kie? Have you ever been part of a group or a project that made you proud? What was that experience like?
7. Why does Kie think grooming your own skysteed is important? Have you ever had the experience of caring for a pet or another person, perhaps a younger sibling? How did that make you feel? Did you feel more connected?
8. Do you sympathize with the unbound skysteeds? How does Kie help to change their situation? How does this impact grooms like Dessie? What does their experience say about the importance of having a purpose?
9. The concept of the chosen one is an element often found in the fantasy genre, especially in stories with mythological roots. How is Kiesandra Torsun the chosen one? How is her heroism rooted in her unique gifts, destiny, and/or a special lineage? Have you read other stories with protagonists who are considered chosen ones? How are they similar or dissimilar to Kie?
10. What qualities do you think make a good leader? Who in the story demonstrates those qualities? Who would you follow and why? Who do you most admire?
11. In writing *Skyriders*, author Polly Holyoke was, in part, inspired by a book she read as young person: [Pegasus, The Winged Horse retold by Nathaniel Hawthorne](#), illustrated by Hershel Levit. The illustrations of Pegasus and the monstrous chimerae sparked her imagination and stayed with her for many years. Are there stories that have stuck with you for a long time? Maybe a picture book you read when you were younger? What is it about the book you remember? Why is it important to you?
12. Now that Kie is considered the Nexara, the connector between humans and skysteeds, what responsibility does she have? At the end of the book, she is flying home to Durwen. Do you think she'll be able to resume her ordinary life as a sky courier? What do you predict will happen in *The Sky King*, the next book in the series?



Extension Activities Across the Curriculum

Perfect Partners

In *Prekalt*, humans and their skysteeds take a Binding Oath to become partners. As a team, they might deliver the mail, play in tournaments or protect the empire against the chimerae. Create trading cards for the skysteeds and their human partners. Make these by hand or use this tool found at [ReadWriteThink.org](https://www.ReadWriteThink.org). On each card include: a picture, a character trait, and their goal (what do they want during the course of the story). For human characters, include a memorable quote and one example of an action they took that supports the character trait you've given them. These cards may be used for trading or playing. For example, place the cards face down to play memory. Can you match the humans with their skysteeds?

Wanted!

Author Polly Holyoke, a former social studies teacher, has always loved history. In developing the plot for *Skyriders*, she was inspired by the brave riders of the Pony Express who carried mail between Missouri and California during the early days of the westward expansion in the United States. For more information, [check out these primary sources here](#), including a photograph of a station along the route. These riders faced extreme weather, rough terrain and unforeseen dangers. Sounds like Kie Torsun and her sky courier colleagues, doesn't it?

Check out [the recruitment poster](#) that was used to attract Pony Express riders. Who were they trying to recruit? Why?

Now create a poster to recruit sky couriers. Be sure to include the characteristics needed to make a sky courier successful. How would you advertise the job? How many dashins would you pay per week? Other benefits? What dangers would riders need to know about? Expectations?

If you are interested in learning more about the Pony Express, [here's a site](#) to start your research.

Creating a Motto

Sky couriers have the motto— *Fly safe, Fly free*. States have mottos. Maybe your school or another organization you're involved with has a motto like *Do a good turn daily* or *Be Prepared*. What is a good motto for the Skyforce? For the grooms? For Pedarth? For Kie?

Now create a motto for your library or classroom. What words capture the purpose or mission of your community? How can you express this in a short, catchy phrase? Hold a contest, and then display the winning motto on the classroom or library door.

How about a personal motto?

Speak Up!

Write a speech to convince the imperial war council to use the old fighting techniques as outlined in Uncle Dugs's manual. Write it from the point of view of Kie, Topar, Prince Shayn, Uncle Duggan or the Dowager Empress. Try to use the tone and language you think they might use. Make sure your speech includes an introduction and logically ordered reasons. After writing and revising, practice delivering your speech. Set-up a mock imperial war council in the classroom and take turns trying to win over the commanders.

Create Your Own Myth

Polly Holyoke was definitely inspired by Greek mythology in general and the Pegasus Myth in particular when she wrote *Skyriders*. Many cultures throughout history have created myths to explain natural phenomena like the origins of fire, lightning or rainbows. Topar tells a Ledari myth that explains the origins of Prekalt's two moons, Great Cerken and Little Cira. Create a myth of your own that explains why something exists in the natural world. If you want, your myth could even contain a hero and a monster.

Fly into Reading with a Winged Mural

Let *Skyriders* inspire your readers to read more! Create a wall display with an outline of two wings (the center part will be where students stand). Using feathers made out of paper ([here's a template](#)), have students write down the title of each book they read during the school year or summer. You may want students to include a short summary or review. Once the wings are filled in with feathers, students can stand between the wings for photos. Celebrate your skyreaders!

Exploring Fantasy as a Genre

What elements of the fantasy genre can be found in *Skyriders*? Using the chart below, provide specific examples or make a note if the element is not present. Take another book you've read in the fantasy genre and complete the chart for it. Compare and contrast. What similarities and differences do you see? Are there other elements of the fantasy genre you think should be included in the chart?

Fantasy Elements	<i>Skyriders</i>	Book Title:
The setting is a creation of the author's imagination		
Magic (charms, spells, rituals)		
Fantastical characters and/or Mythical creatures		
Universal themes of good vs. evil, a fight for power, or justice, love, friendship, love		
Medieval setting with castles, swords and knights		
The main character comes from a humble background and/or would be considered an underdog		
The main character is a chosen one due to: unique gifts destiny a special lineage		



