

THE SECRET OF KELLS

Ireland, France, Belgium 2009, 79 min.

German certification: minimum age 6
recommended for 10 years and older

Director	Tomm Moore
Script	Fabrice Ziolkowski
Art director	Ross Stewart
Editing	Fabienne Alvarez-Giro
Music	Bruno Coulais

What THE SECRET OF KELLS is about

Ireland in the 9th century: fearing the imminent attack of the Vikings, Abbot Cellach decides to build a high wall around the abbey to protect it. His nephew Brendan, on the other hand, is far more interested in the precious book with the golden cover which Brother Aidan, fleeing from Scotland, has brought with him. Brendan is fascinated by the wonderful drawings with which Aidan turns every page of the book into a work of art – and he is even more delighted when the old abbot asks him for help, and introduces him to the secrets of book illumination. When Brendan leaves the safety of the abbey for the first time in his life – without the knowledge of his uncle – to search for berries to make ink for the illuminations, he meets the mysterious woodland fairy Aisling. The boy will need her help again later on. For a special crystal is needed to complete the illustrations of the book, which is supposed to bring hope to humans. And that crystal is the eye of the Crom Cruach, a creature that hides in a cave in the forest.

In this outstanding animated film, Tomm Moore links the story of a boy learning to stand on his own two feet and discovering his talent with Irish history and mythology and the genesis of the Book of Kells. He brings to life the medieval art of book illumination by telling of its power and at the same time cleverly imitating its features in his images.

The following worksheets focus on

- references to historical events and Irish mythology
- the relationship between Abbot Cellach and Brendan
- the significance that the Book of Kells has for the characters
- the way the film incorporates typical Celtic knot patterns in its images, and the images of the film become artistic ornaments themselves, imitating the Book of Kells

Publishing information

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Les Armateurs/Vivi Film/ Cartoon Saloon/ France2Cinema; Optimum Home

(All the stills are from the DVD THE SECRET OF KELLS, released in Great Britain by Optimum Home. They serve as image quotations, to enable study of the film's content, and not as illustrations.)

History and locations

Brendan’s character is an invention of the film. The Book of Kells, however, actually exists: it was probably in the 9th century that monks on the Scottish island of Iona began to copy and elaborately illustrate the four Gospels.

What historical events of the period do you learn about in THE SECRET OF KELLS?

But numerous mythical creatures also appear in THE SECRET OF KELLS. What do you learn in the film about the following creatures from Irish mythology?

Aisling (Gaelic: dream, vision)	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Crom Cruach	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Pangur Bán	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Look for more information about these figures on the Internet – e.g. on the English-language Wikipedia pages at <http://en.wikipedia.org>

Look for two important locations of the film on a map: the island of Iona in Scotland and the Abbey of Kells in Ireland.

Protection from the Vikings

Comparisons: how does Abbot Cellach plan to protect the Abbey from the Vikings? And what is Brendan's plan?

Abbot Cellach



Brendan

Unusual images



What is wrong with this picture? (for example, look at the arrangement of the ink pots, or the page Brendan is writing on.)

Why might the director have deliberately drawn with incorrect perspective? (Remember in what period the film's story takes place, and what it is about.)

Book illumination

The monks who elaborately decorated (religious) books are also referred to as “illuminators”. The word comes from Latin and means “to shed light” or “enlighten”.

What do you think: what was book illumination meant to “shed light” on?

Here you can see an image from the film. In the scriptorium of the abbey, Abbot Aidan is teaching Brendan how to illuminate books. (Scriptorium is the name given to the room in an abbey where the monks used to copy and illuminate books. The name comes from the Latin word “scribere”, meaning “to write”.)



How does the film show how “enlightening” Brendan’s book illumination is? Pay particular attention to the colours used to present the scriptorium within the abbey, and also the night.

Discuss with the class what book illumination means to Brendan. You should also talk about what obstacles Brendan has to overcome on his path to becoming a book illuminator.

Become an illuminator yourself! Write your name in capitals on a large sheet of paper, and decorate the individual letters with delicate patterns, making the colours as bright as possible. Put together your illuminated names to make a picture gallery.

Ornaments, patterns and shapes

The following images come from the scene in which Brendan leaves the abbey for the first time, goes into the forest, and meets Aisling there.



1



2



3



4

Look especially at the branches of the trees and at the wreaths of mist in these images. Copy patterns or shapes which appear repeatedly (for example knot patterns or spirals).

Discuss what similarities exist between the film THE SECRET OF KELLS and the real Book of Kells. (To find pictures of the real Book of Kells on the Internet, go to the website of Trinity College Dublin at <http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie>, and enter the keyword “kells” in the search field.)