

THE NO.1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

NEIL GAIMAN



"Gaiman assumes the role of fireside bard, inviting us to sit close on a chilly winter's night and chuckle and wonder along with him"

FINANCIAL TIMES

"Powerful"

THE TIMES

"Gripping"

IRISH TIMES

NORSE MYTHOLOGY

BLOOMSBURY

The author's affection for the characters shines out from every page, and the narrative, always crisp and direct, combines an adult's insight with a childlike sense of wonder at the magic of it all; the heroes, the monsters, the giants, the runes. Best of all, the stories remain as fresh and appealing as they were when I first discovered them.

Joanne Harris, *Spectator*

It's virtually impossible to read more than ten words by Neil Gaiman and not wish he would tell you the rest of the story. He is a thesaurus of myth, both original and traditional . . . The halls of Valhalla have been crying out for Neil Gaiman to tell their stories to a new audience. Hopefully, this collection will be just the beginning.

Natalie Haynes, *Observer*

A brisk, bloody retelling of the Norse myths with enough serpents, swords, murderous winters and feasting dragons to dispel all nonsense about the north being a place of cosy, hygge pleasures.

The Times

A gripping, suspenseful and quite wonderful reworking of these famous tales. Once you fall into the rhythm of its glinting prose, you will happily read on and on, in thrall to Gaiman's skilful storytelling.

Washington Post

In reinterpreting the tales so faithfully and with such abundant joy, Gaiman assumes the role of fireside bard, inviting us to sit close on a chilly winter's night and chuckle and wonder along with him.

Financial Times

Superb. Just the thing for the literate fantasy lover and the student of comparative religion and mythology alike.

Kirkus

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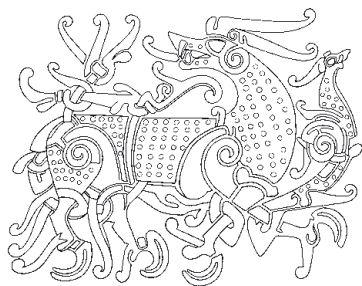
Chu's Day at the Beach

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Illustrated by Divya Srinivasan

Cinnamon

NORSE
MYTHOLOGY



NEIL
GAIMAN

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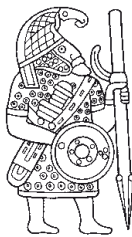
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FOR EVERETT,
OLD STORIES
FOR A NEW BOY.



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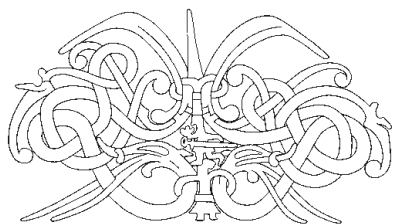
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AN
INTRODUCTION



It's as hard to have a favourite sequence of myths as it is to have a favourite style of cooking (some nights you might want Thai food, some nights sushi, other nights you crave the plain home cooking you grew up on). But if I had to declare a favourite, it would probably be for the Norse myths.

My first encounter with Asgard and its inhabitants was as a small boy, no more than seven, reading the adventures of the Mighty Thor as depicted by American comics artist Jack Kirby, in stories plotted by Kirby and Stan Lee and dialogued by Stan Lee's brother, Larry Lieber. Kirby's Thor was powerful and good-looking, his Asgard a towering science fictional city of imposing buildings and dangerous edifices, his Odin wise and noble, his Loki a sardonic horn-helmeted creature of pure mischief. I loved Kirby's blond hammer-wielding Thor, and I wanted to learn more about him.

I borrowed a copy of *Myths of the Norsemen* by Roger Lancelyn Green and read and reread it with delight

and puzzlement: Asgard, in this telling, was no longer a Kirbyesque Future City but was a Viking hall and collection of buildings out on the frozen wastes; Odin the all-father was no longer gentle, wise and irascible, but instead he was brilliant, unknowable and dangerous; Thor was just as strong as the Mighty Thor in the comics, his hammer as powerful, but he was . . . well, honestly, not the brightest of the gods; and Loki was not evil, although he was certainly not a force for good. Loki was . . . complicated.

In addition, I learned, the Norse gods came with their own doomsday: Ragnarok, the twilight of the gods, the end of it all. The gods were going to battle the frost giants, and they were all going to die.

Had Ragnarok happened yet? Was it still to happen? I did not know then. I am not certain now.

It was the fact that the world and the story ends, and the way that it ends and is reborn, that made the gods and the frost giants and the rest of them tragic heroes, tragic villains. Ragnarok made the Norse world linger for me, seem strangely present and current, while other, better-documented systems of belief felt as if they were part of the past, old things.

The Norse myths are the myths of a chilly place, with long, long winter nights and endless summer days, myths of a people who did not entirely trust or even like their gods, although they respected and feared them. As best we can tell, the gods of Asgard came from

Germany, spread into Scandinavia, and then out into the parts of the world dominated by the Vikings—into Orkney and Scotland, Ireland and the north of England—where the invaders left places named for Thor or Odin. In English, the gods have left their names in our days of the week. You can find Týr the one-handed (Odin's son), Odin, Thor and Frigg, the queen of the gods, in, respectively, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

We can see the traces of older myths and older religions in the war and the stories of the truce between the gods of the Vanir and the Aesir. The Vanir appear to have been nature gods, brothers and sisters, less warlike, but perhaps no less dangerous than the Aesir.

It's very likely, or at least a workable hypothesis, that there were tribes of people who worshipped the Vanir and other tribes who worshipped the Aesir, and that the Aesir-worshippers invaded the lands of the Vanir-worshippers, and that they made compromises and accommodations. Gods of the Vanir, like the sister and brother Freya and Frey, live in Asgard with the Aesir. History and religion and myth combine, and we wonder and we imagine and we guess, like detectives reconstructing the details of a long-forgotten crime.

There are so many Norse stories we do not have, so much we do not know. All we have are some myths that have come to us in the form of folktales, in retellings, in poems, in prose. They were written down when

Christianity had already displaced the worship of the Norse gods, and some of the stories we have come to us because people were concerned that if the stories were not preserved, some of the kennings—the usages of poets that referred to events in specific myths—would become meaningless; Freya’s tears, for example, was a poetic way of saying “gold”. In some of the tales the Norse gods are described as men or as kings or heroes of old, so that the stories could be told in a Christian world. Some stories and poems tell of other stories, or imply other stories, that we simply do not have.

It is, perhaps, as if the only tales of the gods and demi-gods of Greece and Rome that had survived were of the deeds of Theseus and Hercules.

We have lost so much.

There are many Norse goddesses. We know their names and some of their attributes and powers, but the tales, myths and rituals have not come down to us. I wish I could retell the tales of Eir, because she was the doctor of the gods, of Lofn, the comforter, who was a Norse goddess of marriages, or of Sjöfn, a goddess of love. Not to mention Vor, goddess of wisdom. I can imagine stories, but I cannot tell their tales. They are lost, or buried, or forgotten.

I’ve tried my best to retell these myths and stories as accurately as I can, and as interestingly as I can.

Sometimes details in the stories contradict each other. But I hope that they paint a picture of a world and a time.

As I retold these myths, I tried to imagine myself a long time ago, in the lands where these stories were first told, during the long winter nights perhaps, under the glow of the Northern Lights, or sitting outside in the small hours, awake in the unending daylight of midsummer, with an audience of people who wanted to know what else Thor did, and what the rainbow was, and how to live their lives, and where bad poetry comes from.

I was surprised, when I finished the stories and read them as a sequence, to find that they felt like a journey, from the ice and the fire that the universe begins in to the fire and the ice that end the world. Along the way we meet people we would know if we met them, people like Loki and Thor and Odin, and people we want to know so much more about (my favourite of these is Angrboda, Loki's wife among the giants, who gives birth to his monstrous children and who is there in ghost form after Balder is slain).

I did not dare go back to the tellers of Norse myth whose work I had loved, to people like Roger Lancelyn Green and Kevin Crossley-Holland, and reread their stories. I spent my time instead with many different translations of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, and with the verses of the *Poetic Edda*, words from nine hundred years ago and before, picking and choosing what tales I wanted to retell and how I wanted to tell them, blending versions of myths from the prose and from the poems. (Thor's visit to Hymir, for example, the

way I tell it here, is a hybrid: it begins in the *Poetic Edda*, then adds details of Thor's fishing adventure from Snorri's version.)

My battered copy of *A Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, by Rudolf Simek, translated by Angela Hall, was always invaluable, continually consulted, eye-opening and informative.

Huge thanks go to my old friend Alisa Kwitney for her editorial assistance. She was a fabulous sounding board, always opinionated and forthright, helpful, sensible and smart. She got this book written, mostly by wanting to read the next story, and she helped me make the time to write it in. I'm incredibly grateful to her. Thank you to Stephanie Monteith, whose eagle eyes and Norse knowledge caught several things I might have missed. Thanks also to Amy Cherry at Norton, who suggested that I might want to retell some myths at a lunch on my birthday eight years ago, and who has been, all things considered, the most patient editor in the world.

All mistakes, conclusions jumped to, and odd opinions in this volume are mine and mine alone, and I would not wish anyone else blamed for them. I hope I've retold these stories honestly, but there was still joy and creation in the telling.

That's the joy of myths. The fun comes in telling them yourself—something I warmly encourage you to do, you person reading this. Read the stories in this book, then make them your own, and on some dark and icy winter's evening,

A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

or on a summer night when the sun will not set, tell your friends what happened when Thor's hammer was stolen, or how Odin obtained the mead of poetry for the gods . . .

Neil Gaiman
Lisson Grove, London,
May 2016

NORSE
MYTHOLOGY

THE PLAYERS

Many gods and goddesses are named in Norse mythology. You will meet quite a few of them in these pages. Most of the stories we have, however, concern two gods, Odin and his son Thor, and Odin's blood brother, a giant's son called Loki, who lives with the Aesir in Asgard.

Odin

The highest and the oldest of all the gods is Odin.

Odin knows many secrets. He gave an eye for wisdom. More than that, for knowledge of runes, and for power, he sacrificed himself to himself.

He hung from the world-tree, Yggdrasil, hung there for nine nights. His side was pierced by the point of a spear, which wounded him gravely. The winds clutched at him, buffeted his body as it hung. Nothing did he eat for nine days or nine nights, nothing did he drink. He was alone there, in pain, the light of his life slowly going out.

He was cold, in agony, and on the point of death when

his sacrifice bore dark fruit: in the ecstasy of his agony he looked down, and the runes were revealed to him. He knew them, and understood them and their power. The rope broke then, and he fell, screaming, from the tree.

Now he understood magic. Now the world was his to control.

Odin has many names. He is the all-father, the lord of the slain, the gallows god. He is the god of cargoes and of prisoners. He is called Grimnir and Third. He has different names in every country (for he is worshipped in different forms and in many tongues, but it is always Odin they worship).

He travels from place to place in disguise, to see the world as people see it. When he walks among us, he does so as a tall man, wearing a cloak and hat.

He has two ravens, whom he calls Huginn and Muninn, which mean "thought" and "memory". These birds fly back and forth across the world, seeking news and bringing Odin all the knowledge of things. They perch on his shoulders and whisper into his ears.

When he sits on his high throne at Hlidskjalf, he observes all things, wherever they may be. Nothing can be hidden from him.

He brought war into the world: battles are begun by throwing a spear at the hostile army, dedicating the battle and its deaths to Odin. If you survive in battle, it is with Odin's grace, and if you fall it is because he has betrayed you.

If you fall bravely in war the Valkyries, beautiful battle-maidens who collect the souls of the noble dead, will take you and bring you to the hall known as Valhalla. He will be waiting for you in Valhalla, and there you will drink and fight and feast and battle, with Odin as your leader.

Thor

Thor, Odin's son, is the thunderer. He is straightforward where his father Odin is cunning, good-natured where his father is devious.

Huge he is, and red-bearded, and strong, by far the strongest of all the gods. His might is increased by his belt of strength, Megingjord: when he wears it, his strength is doubled.

Thor's weapon is Mjollnir, a remarkable hammer, forged for him by dwarfs. Its story you will learn. Trolls and frost giants and mountain giants all tremble when they see Mjollnir, for it has killed so many of their brothers and friends. Thor wears iron gloves, which help him to grip the hammer's shaft.

Thor's mother was Jord, the earth goddess. Thor's sons are Modi, the angry, and Magni, the strong. Thor's daughter is Thrud, the powerful.

His wife is Sif, of the golden hair. She had a son, Ullr, before she married Thor, and Thor is Ullr's stepfather. Ullr is a god who hunts with bow and with arrows, and he is the god with skis.

Thor is the defender of Asgard and of Midgard.

There are many stories about Thor and his adventures. You will encounter some of them here.

Loki

Loki is very handsome. He is plausible, convincing, likeable, and far and away the most wily, subtle and shrewd of all the inhabitants of Asgard. It is a pity, then, that there is so much darkness inside him: so much anger, so much envy, so much lust.

Loki is the son of Laufey, who was also known as Nal, or needle, because she was slim and beautiful and sharp. His father was said to be Farbauti, a giant; his name means “he who strikes dangerous blows”, and Farbauti was as dangerous as his name.

Loki walks in the sky with shoes that fly, and he can transform his shape so he looks like other people, or change into animal form, but his real weapon is his mind. He is more cunning, subtler, trickier than any god or giant. Not even Odin is as cunning as Loki.

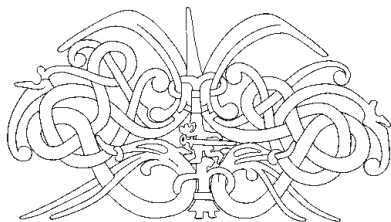
Loki is Odin’s blood brother. The other gods do not know when Loki came to Asgard, or how. He is Thor’s friend and Thor’s betrayer. He is tolerated by the gods, perhaps because his stratagems and plans save them as often as they get them into trouble.

Loki makes the world more interesting but less safe. He is the father of monsters, the author of woes, the sly god.

THE PLAYERS

Loki drinks too much, and he cannot guard his words or his thoughts or his deeds when he drinks. Loki and his children will be there for Ragnarok, the end of everything, and it will not be on the side of the gods of Asgard that they will fight.

BEFORE
THE BEGINNING,
AND AFTER



I

Before the beginning there was nothing—no earth, no heavens, no stars, no sky: only the mist world, formless and shapeless, and the fire world, always burning.

To the north was Niflheim, the dark world. Here eleven poisonous rivers cut through the mist, each springing from the same well at the centre of it all, the roaring maelstrom called Hvergelmir. Niflheim was colder than cold, and the murky mist that cloaked everything hung heavily. The skies were hidden by mist and the ground was clouded by the chilly fog.

To the south was Muspell. Muspell was fire. Everything there glowed and burned. Muspell was light where Niflheim was grey, molten lava where the mist world was frozen. The land was aflame with the roaring heat of a blacksmith's fire; there was no solid earth, no sky. Nothing but sparks and spurting heat, molten rocks and burning embers.

In Muspell, at the edge of the flame, where the mist

burns into light, where the land ends, stood Surtr, who existed before the gods. He stands there now. He holds a flaming sword, and the bubbling lava and the freezing mist are as one to him.

It is said that at Ragnarok, which is the end of the world, and only then, Surtr will leave his station. He will go forth from Muspell with his flaming sword and burn the world with fire, and one by one the gods will fall before him.

II

Between Muspell and Niflheim was a void, an empty place of nothingness, without form. The rivers of the mist world flowed into the void, which was called Ginnungagap, the "yawning gap". Over time beyond measure, these poisoned rivers, in the region between fire and mist, slowly solidified into huge glaciers. The ice in the north of the void was covered in frozen fog and pellets of hail, but to the south, where the glaciers reached the land of fire, the embers and the sparks from Muspell met the ice, and warm winds from the flame lands made the air above the ice as gentle and as comfortable as a spring day.

Where the ice and the fire met the ice melted, and in the melting waters life appeared: the likeness of a person bigger than worlds, huger than any giant there will be or has ever been. This was neither male, nor was it female, but was both at the same time.