

The Norse Myths: A Guide To The Gods And Heroes



Synopsis

An exhilarating introduction to the vivid, violent, boisterous world of the Norse myths and their cultural legacy – from Tolkien to Game of Thrones The Norse Myths presents the infamous Viking gods, from the mighty Asyr, led by Ænn, and the mysterious Vanir, to Thor and the mythological cosmos they inhabit. Passages translated from Old Norse bring this legendary world to life, from the myths of creation to ragnarök, the prophesied end of the world at the hands of Loki’s army of monsters and giants, and everything that comes in between: the long and problematic relationship between the gods and the giants, the (mis)adventures of human heroes and heroines, with their family feuds, revenges, marriages, and murders; and the interaction between the gods and mortals. Photographs and drawings show a range of Norse sites, objects, and characters, from Viking ship burials to dragons on runestones. Dr. Carolyn Larrington describes the Norse myths’ origins in pre-Christian Scandinavia and Iceland, and their survival in archaeological artifacts and written sources, from Old Norse sagas and poems to the less-approving accounts of medieval Christian writers. She traces their influences into the work of Wagner, William Morris, and J. R. R. Tolkien, and even Game of Thrones in the resurrection of the Fimbulvetr, or “Mighty Winter.” 100+ duotone illustrations

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Customer Reviews

“An accessible blend of scholarship and story, full of intriguing asides... In easily digestible chapters, well-regarded scholar Larrington addresses the gods and goddesses of the myths before offering a lineup to those they battle – the giants who roam the world.” – Library

Dr. Carolyne Larrington is a supernumerary fellow and tutor in medieval English literature at St. John's College, Oxford. Her previous books include *The Poetic Edda, Magical Tales: Myth, Legend and Enchantment in Children's Books*, and *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones*. She also presented BBC Radio 4's *The Lore of the Land*.

cleverly woven

I love this.

When it comes to discussions about the Norse myths I am frustrated at how literally they are taken. Myths are, by their nature, symbolic and allegorical, but most raconteurs and commentators on Norse myths fail to treat them as such. Instead, there is a perpetuation of some worn and misleading stereotypes that fail to convey the breadth and nuance of the material. Ms. Larrington's book is no exception. Some examples: Odinn is portrayed once again as the "king of the gods" (or some version of that assertion) when there's evidence, cited in this book even, that other gods like Thor were more prominent in certain areas, and that even the idea of a power hierarchy of the gods, at least as far as the myths are concerned, runs into issues upon closer examination. Taking the genealogy of the gods and giants, and sexual and marital relations, literally is another issue. Genealogy and "marriage" are more likely to be part of the allegorical message than meant as literal relationships. Freya as a "goddess of love" is not substantiated by anything more than a statement by Snorri that she likes love songs. Seidr, Larrington says, was a "disreputable" practice. This is likely a historical Christian overlay as there is also evidence that seidr practitioners were respected or viewed at least neutrally. Larrington even refers to the reception of Thorbjorg in the Saga as Erik the Red, in which the seidr practitioner seems to be welcomed and honored at the settlement except for the unease of a Christian woman. And so on. I think the literalization of the Norse myths, and the perpetuation of popular stereotypes of the Norse deities, ultimately does this rich body of allegorical material a disservice. This is, as a reader of this review may already have sensed, a major pet peeve of mine. I wanted a scholar like Ms. Larrington to tell me something new about the myths, not just create another version of the same problematic and overly simplistic treatments they are usually given. That said, Larrington's book could be a good starting point for those new to the subject as she presents a useful overview of background material and some historical context. But I don't

recommend it for anyone looking for a more nuanced and atypical treatment.

I bought this to read to compliment Neil Gaiman's book on the same subject. Gaiman's book is a more fun read, but this one fills in some empty spaces with extra detail. It's just not as easy to read.

This review covers both Neil Gaiman's Norse Mythology and Carolyne Larrington's The Norse Myths: A Guide to the Gods and Heroes. Unlike their Greek counterparts with whom most readers are far more familiar, the Norse gods impose little order upon the world. The best they seem able to do is withstand a greater chaos, for a time. Of course, they are rather chaotic themselves, as well as violent, willful, lusty, sometimes ridiculous and quite often treacherous. Only Odin seems to spend much time thinking about the future or the role of humans in this world, but that concern for humans is self-serving, as he seeks, favors, and betrays warriors in order to swell the ranks of his forces for the final battle at the world's ending. Now both Carolyne Larrington, the eminent and accomplished scholar of Old Norse, and Neil Gaiman, who surely needs no introduction, have published volumes on Norse Mythology within days of each other. It's all so convenient the Norns might have had a hand in it. Each of these books is interesting and entertaining, but in quite different ways. Gaiman, as one might expect, opts for a more dramatic treatment of his subject, retelling a selection of important myths at varying lengths, all building towards the climax of Ragnarok. His tales are at times touching, at times quite funny. There's a moment near the end, for example, where Kvasir, the wisest of the gods, guides Thor, not the wisest of the gods, to understanding the importance of a net Loki had created and destroyed, a moment which strongly reminds me of the scene in Monty Python and the Holy Grail in which Sir Bedivere explains to the peasants how one determines who is and who is not a witch. Yet the fine and frequent humor of Gaiman's treatment obscured for me, as it also did in his earlier American Gods, the overwhelming sense of loss now and disaster to come that haunts the world of gods and men in Norse mythology. In the end it seems reduced to a joke and a game, as a dying Heimdall gleefully informs a dying Loki that the last laugh is on him. The book's last words 'And the game begins anew' only reinforce this impression. Larrington, like Kvasir with his recreation of Loki's clever net, captures more of what she seeks. By not focusing narrowly on the drama of the tales she captures more of their tragedy, and suggests more of their meaning for Norse and more broadly for Teutonic culture in general, since these tales were told from Vinland to the Volga and across the centuries before and after the North became Christian. Her inclusion of the part humans play in Norse Mythology --

of Sigmund and Sigurd and all their bloody-minded, bloody-handed kin, more accursed than the House of Atreus, more trapped by the needs of the gods but without the least final justice, doomed in every sense. The world of gods and men a fuller, rounder shape. For the tales involve us. The twilight of the gods is also our own. By including humans, the unwilling and often unwitting players in the doom of the gods, Larrington allows us to understand better the world which told these tales, because through them, as Lewis put it in *Surprised By Joy*, "pure Northernness" engulfs us: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity. I did not laugh as often reading Larrington's book as I did Gaiman's, but I nodded more and learned more. I would suggest, however, that they are most profitably enjoyed together.

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