

Norse Mythology
By Neil Gaiman

Looking back, *Norse Mythology* seems like an inevitable project for Neil Gaiman; his enormous body of work is chock-full of references, explicit and implicit, to Odin, Thor, Loki and various other characters and locations that stem from the Norse myths he elects to (re)tell here in their unaltered and unmitigated forms. These are not stories inspired by Norse mythology. These are not modernized updates. This is *Norse Mythology*, rewritten and reorganized from their original appearances in the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*, but pure as fresh-fallen snow and told in Gaiman's singularly crisp language.

Milton famously used layered similes and shifting perspectives to describe the size of Satan in the first book of *Paradise Lost*: “[Satan’s] spear, to equal which the tallest pine / hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast / Of some great admiral, were but a wand.” You start out with the image of a normal spear; then, you are forced to imagine that spear as if it were the size of a ship’s mast and adjust your perception of Satan to match; Milton then compares the spear to “a wand,” and you *again* have to reorient Satan’s size in your head while maintaining the original simile of a mast-sized spear. These mental gymnastics contribute to a feeling of helpless humanity, of attempting to understand a figure so mythic and so incomprehensible that your senses play tricks on you.

I bring this up because Gaiman does something similar throughout *Norse Mythology*: he constantly upends, distorts, and subverts your understanding not only of the size of the gods, but of their power as well. They carve canyons and drink oceans dry in some stories; in others, they can barely hold their own against their adversaries. This pantheon doesn’t reek of petulant omnipotence like the Greek conglomerate. These gods feel like superheroes and supervillains, obscenely powerful but often outwitted and outmatched by each other and their enemies—an interesting perspective, given that Gaiman reveals in the introduction to *Norse Mythology* that his first experience with these stories was through Thor as a character in the Marvel comics.

Gaiman isn’t entirely responsible for this, of course—he also acknowledges in the introduction that the Norse myths which have come down to us are often incomplete and contradictory. They do not create a consistent narrative. But under Gaiman’s hand, this quality becomes integral to the grander themes of the book. It was always Greek mythology, not Norse, that spoke to me in a way that no other world mythology did; I love how those gods, for all their power, are so inescapably human in their behavior. One of the most unexpected delights of *Norse Mythology*, however, is the way in which it humanizes its own pantheon, not only through the gods’ childish antics but in their place on the world stage. They are not puppeteers so much as puppets who can see their strings.

The promise of Ragnarok, the end of the world, hangs over these stories like a dark cloud on the horizon. Ragnarok is inevitable. It’s an inextricable part of the Norse narrative that ties these tales together. And yet, there’s a sense at the conclusion of Gaiman’s book that all the death and bloodshed could have been avoided if only the gods were marginally wiser, kinder, less reckless. It’s strangely sobering and all-too-relevant, a reminder of our own place as humans: powerful but destructive, and not immune to that destruction. The gods of *Norse Mythology* are part of a bigger world (literally, because giants), where danger lurks around every corner and their survival is anything but guaranteed. This quality lends gravitas to their struggles.

Gaiman wisely does not forget that these stories originated not only to entertain, but to explain the ways in which the world works. His narrative voice—suitably mythic, playful, and

full of humor (it's difficult not to imagine Gaiman himself sitting across from you on a dark night, telling these stories from the opposite side of a campfire, the orange glow carving deep shadows across his face)—occasionally interjects to address you directly. When the gods enlist the dwarfs to create Gleipnir, a ribbon made from the footsteps of a cat, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird, Gaiman quickly steps in to counter your criticism: “You say you have not seen these things? Of course you have not. The dwarfs used them in their crafting.”

Gaiman's prose is clean, precise, and immensely readable—old as they are, these tales are anything but dry and dusty. His modernized language only rarely feels like it breaks the spirit of the stories (the use of the phrase “shut up,” which appears a couple of times, is the linguistic anachronism that shattered the immersion for me); considering the difficulty of the needle Gaiman is threading, however—staying stylistically true to the original myths while making the language more palatable to modern readers—he succeeds admirably. He brings out a surprising amount of humor, too: Thor's antics are always amusing, but Gaiman also structures his sentences and paragraphs so that he can poke fun at his characters through ironic undercutting.

Reading Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* made me wish I was a kid again. It made me wish I had never heard these stories before, just so I could have the pleasure of experiencing them for the first time all over again. This isn't to say that *Norse Mythology* is not worth reading if you already know the tales—on the contrary, Gaiman makes them feel fresh and alive and new. But if you are unfamiliar, or even only passingly familiar, with these stories, then you are truly in for a treat. I can't imagine a more vivid, more thrilling introduction than through Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*.

Review by Aaron Larson