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Ragnarok: The End of the Gods, by A.S. Byatt

REVIEWED BY GALE ZOË GARNETT

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This article was published more than 10 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.



A.S. Byatt

The premise for A.S. Byatt's retelling of the Norse myths is both simple and compelling: A girl (whom Byatt calls only "the thin child") is sent from the wartime London blitz to the

though she is too young and too socially constrained by the customs of the time and place to know how to name or discuss it.

Her book-born life of the imagination begins with a chiaroscuro of fairy tales: moons and suns; dragons and dwarfs; wolves and foxes; forests and darkness. She builds her own stories out of these tales, tales of "wild riders and deep meres, of kindly creatures and evil hags."

These imaginings are enormously expanded upon, and influenced forever, when her mother gives her *Asgard and the Gods*. "The stories belonged to the 'Nordic' peoples, Norwegians, Danes and Icelanders." The thin child is living in England, a northern land invaded and settled by Vikings. "These were her stories. The book became a passion."

Ragnarok takes us into Valhalla, home of Odin, Thor and, for me most compellingly, the shape-shifting trickster Loki. Byatt's Loki is as clever, as beautiful and sexy as the situation requires, or as ugly and malevolent. His beauty is "always affirmed, yet hard to see ... always glimmering, flickering, melting, mixing ... the shapeless mass of the waterfall ... the invisible wind that hurried the clouds in billows and ribbons ... amused and dangerous, neither good nor evil ... the gods needed him because he was clever, because he solved problems. When they needed to solve problems, mostly with giants, Loki showed them the way out."

He also fathers three rapacious children, whose ever-expanding greed would bring an end to the Norse gods and the world they and their disciples bestrode. One is a super-powered wolf, another a violently vicious black and blue giantess. The most intriguing, and ultimately most destructive of these, is a small female snake, with scales of dull gold and bright blood red. A ravenous need to kill and feed makes her grow her so huge that she girdles the world and fishes out its waters until, too fat to move, she curls up in the shoals and along the shores of large countries, killing with fangs and accreted venom any creature that comes near

Some books are so image-rich, so pulsing with life, that the reviewer does not know which passages to choose for quoting – one has to fight writing out the entire book – which is not acceptable literary criticism (and would, quite unfairly, reduce book sales). Do read this book. Read every page of it. It is a great gift from the greatly gifted.

FURTHER READING

There is a wealth of reading that cross-references A.S. Byatt's retelling of the Norse myths. A few of the richest are:

D'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths

As with D'Aulaire's book of Greek myths, it's nominally a children's book, but a splendid "road in" to myths for readers of all ages.

The Sagas of the Icelanders

Along with the Eddas, the core of Nordic myth. Icelandic myths spread and cross-pollinated throughout the ancient world.

The World Guide to Gnomes, Fairies, Elves and Other Little People

Thomas Keightley's definitive compendium of the mythic bearers of great power and magic in compact size.

The Penguin Book of Scandinavian Folktales

An illuminating delight from cover to cover.

The Book of Goddesses and Heroines

The anima power and magic in myth, with Nordic goddesses liberally represented in Patricia Monaghan's work

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1
Phillip Crawley, Publisher