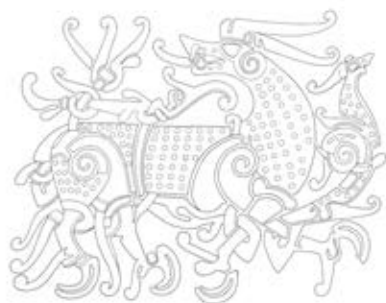


NORSE
MYTHOLOGY



NEIL
GAIMAN

NOTES

The *Poetic* (or *Elder*) *Edda* is a collection of anonymous poems in Old Norse, some mythological and some poetic. The most famous and most important of these poems is the *Voluspa*, sixty-six stanzas long. In it, a gigantic woman, a prophet and seer, imparts everything she sees to Odin.

Snorri's *Edda*, known as the *Prose*, or *Younger*, *Edda*, was written around 1200, and is in three sections: *Skáldskaparmál*, a book of instruction and explanation for skalds about the art of poetry and ways to use language in Norse poetry (which also contains a number of stories), the *Háttatal*, a catalog of 102 different poetic meters, and the *Gylfaginning* ("the fooling of Gylfi"), in which Gylfi, a Swedish king, travels in disguise to Asgard and meets with its rulers, who call themselves High, Just as High, and Third, and asks questions, and receives many of the stories in this book as answers.

The *Prose Edda* was written by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). He was twice the Icelandic Law Speaker, the highest political office in the land. He lived as a politician and statesman, and was murdered at the age of sixty-two, by his son-in-law, for political reasons. He was also a poet and a historian. His most important works are

the *Prose Edda* and the *Heimskringla*, a history of the Swedish kings that delves back into mythological times.

Edda is the Old Norse word for “Great grandmother.” So perhaps these are “grandmother’s tales.” There are other suggestions for the origins and meaning of *Edda*—that it comes from the Old Norse word for poetry, for example, or perhaps that that *Edda* means “The Book from Oddi.” (The Oddi in this case would be the farm that Snorri Sturluson grew up on.)

Before the Beginning and After

This is built up from the Gylfaginning in the *Prose Edda*, and also from the *Poetic Edda*’s Voluspa, Grimnismal, and primarily the Vafthrudnismal.

Yggdrasil and the Nine Worlds

This is for the most part taken from the *Poetic Edda*’s Voluspa and Grimnismal. That there were nine worlds is widely agreed. What those nine worlds were varies, depending on where you look.

Mimir’s Head and Odin’s Eye

This is a patchwork tale, built up from several different sources.

The tale of the spring of wisdom is found in the *Poetic Edda*, Voluspa, and in the *Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning. The wisdom of Mimir’s head is from the *Poetic Edda*, Voluspa and Sigdrifumal, while the story of Mimir and Hoenir is to be found in the *Heimskringla*, Snorri’s collection of sagas about Old Norse kings, in the Ynglinga saga.

The Treasures of the Gods

These come from the *Prose Edda*, from the Skaldskaparmal.

The Master Builder

This is a retelling of a story from the *Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning.

The Children of Loki

From the *Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning.

Freya's Unusual Wedding

This is a retelling of a poem in the *Poetic Edda*, the Thrymskvitha, or the Lay of Thrym. It was the first of these stories that I wrote, and the first I ever read aloud to an audience. It was listening to the audience's reaction that gave me the impetus to keep going.

The Mead of Poets

This was an interesting story to retell. It feels like two or three different stories that have become attached, and the challenge was in trying to make them feel like one narrative. It's chiefly from Snorri's treatise on poetry in the *Prose Edda*, the Skaldskaparmal, and from the *Poetic Edda*, the Havamal.

Thor's Journey to the Land of the Giants

The question is asked, "Now has Thor never had an experience in

which he encountered something so strong in might and powerful in magic that it was too much for him?" and in the *Prose Edda's* Gylfaginning the question is answered.

The Apples of Immortality

Prose Edda, Gylfaginning.

The Story of Gerd and Frey

The most famous version of this story is from the *Poetic Edda*, a poem called the Skirnismal. In it Gerd objects to marrying Frey, and is threatened to make her change her mind. While I built the retelling from both versions, I chose Snorri's *Prose Edda's* Gylfaginning version for what happens when Skirnir tells Gerd that Frey loves her, in which she simply agrees to marry him. I prefer marriage without threats.

Their son Fjolnir is mentioned in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, *Ynglinga saga*.

Hymir and Thor's Fishing Expedition

I built this from two sources: The *Poetic Edda* poem Hymiskvida, "the Lay of Hymir," and the *Prose Edda*, Gylfaginning. Basically, the story is the poem, but the prose version has a longer and (to my mind) more interesting version of the fishing trip, and it's in the *Prose Edda* that Hymir cuts the fishing line.

Tyr is the son of Odin in the *Prose Edda*, but he is the son of Hymir in the *Poetic Edda*, so I compromised and made Hymir his stepfather.

The Death of Balder

Snorri is the main source, the *Gylfaginning*. There is more material in the poem *Balder's Dreams*, in the *Poetic Edda*.

The Last Days of Loki

One of the things I was really looking forward to when I wrote this book was to tell the story of the *Lokasenna*, a poem from the *Poetic Edda*, “Loki’s Flyting.” And then, when I got there, somewhat ruefully, I covered the material I had been looking forward to making a chapter in a paragraph: it’s what a drunkenly mischievous Loki says to the various gods and goddesses to upset them, and what they say back to him in their defense or to counterattack. It’s a wonderful poem, but it felt like it would have thrown the shape of the story off to have included it. This is built up from the *Lokasenna* and the *Prose Edda*, *Gylfaginning*.

Ragnarok: The Final Destiny of the Gods

I finished this book in a house in Hudson, New York, during the first blizzard of the season. The house had no Wi-Fi (and barely any furniture), and a power outage during the night made the first draft of the chapter vanish from my computer. I was sad, but wrote it for the second time, and it came out brighter; this time it found the ending in Snorri, at the end of the *Gylfaginning*. Snorri quotes extensively from the *Voluspa* in the *Poetic Edda*.

A G L O S S A R Y

Aegir: Greatest of the sea giants. Husband of Ran, father of nine daughters, who are the waves of the ocean.

Aesir: A race or tribe or branch of the gods. They live in Asgard.

Alfheim: One of the nine worlds, inhabited by the light elves.

Angrboda: A giantess, mother of Loki's three monstrous children.

Asgard: Home of the Aesir. The realm of the gods.

Ask: The first man, made from an ash tree.

Audhumla: The first cow, whose tongue shaped the ancestor of the gods, and from whose teats ran rivers of milk.

Aurboda: A mountain giantess, mother of Gerd.

Balder: Known as "the beautiful." Odin's second son, loved by all but Loki.

Barri, isle of: An island on which Frey and Gerd get married.

Baugi: A giant, the brother of Suttung.

Beli: A giant. Frey kills him with a stag's antler.

Bergelmir: Ymir's grandson. Bergelmir and his wife were the only giants to survive the flood.

Bestla: Mother of Odin, Vili, and Ve, and wife of Bor. Daughter of a giant called Bolthorn. Sister of Mimir.

- Bifrost:** The rainbow bridge that joins Asgard to Midgard.
- Bodn:** One of two mead vats made to hold the mead of poetry. The other is Son.
- Bolverkr:** One of the names Odin calls himself when in disguise.
- Bor:** A god. Buri's son, married to Bestla. Father of Odin, Vili, and Ve.
- Bragi:** God of poetry.
- Breidablik:** Balder's home, a place of joy and music and knowledge.
- Brisings, necklace of the:** A shining necklace belonging to Freya.
- Brokk:** A dwarf capable of making great treasures. Brother of Eitri.
- Buri:** The ancestor of the gods, father to Bor, grandfather of Odin.
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- Draupnir:** Odin's golden arm-ring which, every nine nights, produces eight arm-rings of equal beauty and value.
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- Egil:** A farmer, the father of Thialfi and Roskva.
- Einherjar:** The noble dead who died bravely in battle, and who now feast and battle in Valhalla.
- Eitri:** A dwarf who forges great treasures, including Thor's hammer. Brother of Brokk.
- Elli:** An old nurse who is, in fact, old age.
- Embla:** The first woman, made from an elm tree.
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- Farbauti:** Loki's father, a giant. "He who strikes dangerous blows."
- Fenrir or Fenris Wolf:** A wolf. Loki's son with Angrboda.
- Fimbulwinter:** The winter before Ragnarok, which does not end.
- Fjalar:** The brother of Galar and murderer of Kvasir.
- Fjölnir:** Son of Frey and Gerd and first king of Sweden.
- Franang's Falls:** High waterfall where Loki hid himself in the guise of salmon.

Frey: A god of the Vanir, who lives with the Aesir. Freya's brother.

Freya: A goddess of the Vanir, who lives with the Aesir. Frey's sister.

Frigg: Odin's wife, the queen of the gods. Mother of Balder.

Fulla: A goddess, Frigg's handmaiden.

Galar: One of the dark elves. Brother of Fjalar and murderer of Kvasir.

Garm: A monstrous hound, who kills and is killed by Tyr at Ragnarok.

Gerd: A radiantly beautiful giantess, loved by Frey.

Gilling: A giant, killed by Fjalar and Galar, and father of Suttung and Baugi.

Ginnungagap: A yawning gap between Muspell (the fire world) and Niflheim (the mist world) at the beginning of creation.

Gjallerhorn: Heimdall's horn, kept by Mimir's well.

Gleipnir: Magical chain forged by dwarfs and used by the gods to bind Fenrir.

Grimnir: "The hooded one." A name for Odin.

Grinder: Tannngjóstr, or "teeth-grinder." One of the two goats who pull Thor's chariot.

Gullinbursti: The golden boar made for Frey by the dwarfs.

Gungnir: Odin's spear. It never misses its mark, and oaths made on Gungnir are unbreakable.

Gunnlod: A giantess, the daughter of Suttung, set to guard the mead of poetry.

Gymir: An earth giant, Gerd's father.

Heidrun: A goat that gives mead instead of milk. She feeds the dead in Valhalla.

Heimdall: The watchman of the gods, far-seeing.

Hel: Loki's daughter with Angrboda. She rules Hel, the realm of the shameful dead, who did not die nobly in battle.

Hermod the Nimble: A son of Odin. He rides Sleipnir to beg Hel to release Balder.

Hlidskjalf: Odin's throne, from which he can see the nine worlds.

Hod: Balder's brother, a blind god.

Hoener: An old god, who gave humans the gift of reason. One of the Aesir, sent to the Vanir to be their king.

Hrym: The leader of the frost giants at Ragnarok.

Hugi: A young giant, able to run faster than anything. In reality, thought itself.

Huginn: One of Odin's two ravens. Its name means "thought."

Hvergelmir: A spring in Niflheim, beneath Yggdrasil, that is the origin of many other rivers and streams.

Hymir: A king of the giants.

Hyrrokkinn: A giantess, even stronger than Thor.

Idavoll: The "splendid plain," on which Asgard was built, and to which the surviving gods will return after Ragnarok.

Idunn: A goddess of the Aesir. She is the keeper of the apples of immortality, which give the gods eternal youth.

Ivaldi: One of the dark elves. The sons of Ivaldi crafted *Skiðbláðnir*, Frey's remarkable ship, Gungnir, Odin's spear, and new, beautiful golden hair for Sif, Thor's wife.

Jord: Thor's mother, a giantess, who was also a goddess of the earth.

Jormungundr: The Midgard serpent. One of Loki's children and Thor's nemesis.

Jotunheim: Jotun means giant, and Jotunheim is the realm of the giants.

Kvasir: A god formed from the mixture of the spittle of the Aesir and the Vanir, he became a god of wisdom. Kvasir was murdered by dwarfs, who made the mead of poetry from his blood. Later, he came back to life.

Laufey: The mother of Loki. Also called Nal, or needle, because she was so thin.

Lerad: A tree, probably part of Yggdrasil, which fed Heidrun, the goat that gives her mead to the warriors of Valhalla.

Lit: An unfortunate dwarf.

Loki: Odin's blood brother, the son of Farbauti and of Laufey. The shrewdest, most cunning of all the inhabitants of Asgard. He is a shapeshifter, and his lips are scarred. He has shoes that allow him to walk in the sky.

Magni: Thor's son, "the strong."

Megingjord: Thor's belt of might. Wearing it doubles his strength.

Midgard: "Middle yard." Our world. The realm of humans.

Midgard serpent: Jormungandr.

Mimir: Odin's uncle and keeper of the spring of wisdom in Jotunheim. A giant, perhaps also one of the Aesir. He was decapitated by the Vanir, and his head still gives wisdom and watches over the spring.

Mimir's well: A spring or well at the roots of the world-tree. Odin traded an eye to take a sip of its water, scooped up in Heimdall's Gjallerhorn.

Mjollnir: Thor's remarkable hammer and most prized possession, made for him by Eitri. (Brokk worked the bellows.)

Modgud: "Furious Battler." She was the guardian of the bridge that leads to the land of the dead.

Modi: Thor's son, "the brave."

Muninn: One of Odin's ravens. Its name means "memory."

Muspell: The fiery world that exists at the beginning of creation.
One of the nine worlds.

Naglfar: A ship, built from the untrimmed finger- and toenails of the dead. The giants and the dead from Hel who will battle the gods and the Einherjar at Ragnarok will travel on this ship.

Nal: "Needle." Another name for Laufey, Loki's mother.

Narfi: Loki and Sigyn's son, Vali's brother.

Nidavellir, also called Svartalfheim: Where the dwarfs (also known as dark elves) live beneath the mountains.

Nidhogg: A dragon who devours corpses and chews on the roots of Yggdrasil.

Niflheim: A cold, misty place, there at the start of everything.

Njord: A god of the Vanir, father of Frey and Freya.

Norns: The three sisters, Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld, who tend the well of Urd, or fate, and water the roots of Yggdrasil, the world-tree. They, along with other norns, decide what will happen in your life.

Odin: The highest and oldest of the gods. He wears a cloak and a hat and only has one eye, having traded the other for wisdom. He has many other names including all-father, Grimnir, and the gallows god.

Odrerir: A kettle for brewing the mead of poetry. "Ecstasy-giver."

Ran: Wife of Aegir the sea giant, goddess of those who drown at sea, mother of the nine waves.

Ratatosk: A squirrel who lives in the branches of Yggdrasil and takes messages from Nidhogg the corpse-devourer at the roots to an eagle who lives in the upper branches.

Rati: The auger or drill of the gods.

Roskva: Sister of Thialfi, Thor's human servant.

Sif: Thor's wife. She had golden hair.

Sigyn: Loki's wife, mother of Vali and Narfi. After Loki's imprisonment, she stays with him beneath the ground, holding a bowl with which she protects Loki's face from the venom of the serpent.

Skadi: A giant, daughter of the giant Thiazi. She marries Njord.

Skiðbláðnir: A magical ship, made for Frey by the sons of Ivaldi. It folds up like a scarf.

Skirnir: A light elf, Frey's servant.

Skrymir: "Big fellow." A particularly big giant, encountered by Loki, Thor, and Thialfi on the way to Utgard.

Skuld: One of the norns. Her name means "that which is intended," and her domain is the future.

Sleipnir: Odin's horse. The fastest of horses, eight-legged, the offspring of Loki and Svadilfari.

Snarler: Tanngrisnir, which means tooth-barer or snarler. One of the two goats who pull Thor's chariot.

Son: A vat for mead.

Surtr: A huge fiery giant who wields a flaming sword. Surtr existed before the gods. Guardian of Muspell, the fire region.

Suttung: A giant, the son of Gilling. He takes vengeance on his parents' killers.

Svadilfari: A horse belonging to the master builder who built Asgard's wall. Father of Sleipnir.

Thiazi: A giant who disguises himself as an eagle to kidnap Idunn.
Father to Skadi.

Thokk: Old woman, whose name means “gratitude” but is the single living creature who won’t mourn the death of Balder.

Thor: Odin’s red-bearded son, Aesir god of thunder. The strongest of the gods.

Thrud: Thor’s daughter, “the powerful.”

Thrym: Lord of the ogres, who wanted Freya for his bride.

Tyr: The one-handed god of war, a son of Odin; the stepson of Hymir the giant.

Ullr: Thor’s stepson. A god who hunts with bow and arrow and who skis.

Urd: “Fate.” One of the three norns. She determines our past.

Urd’s well: The well in Asgard tended by the norns.

Utgard: The “outyard.” A wild region of giants, with a castle at its center, also called Utgard.

Utgardaloki: The king of the giants of Utgard.

Valhalla: Odin’s hall, where the noble dead who die bravely in battle feast.

Vali: There are two gods named Vali. One is a son of Loki and Sigyn, who becomes a wolf and kills his brother, Narfi. The other is a son of Odin and Rind, conceived to avenge Balder’s death.

Valkyries: “Choosers of the slain.” Odin’s handmaidens, who collect the souls of the dead who die bravely on the battlefield and bring them to Valhalla.

Vanaheim: The realm of the Vanir.

Var: Goddess of marriage.

A G L O S S A R Y

Ve: Odin's brother, a son of Bor and Bestla.

Verdandi: One of the norns. Her name means "becoming," and she determines our present.

Vidar: Odin's son. The silent and reliable god. One of his shoes is made from all the cast-off scrap leather of all the shoes that have been made.

Vigrid: The plain where the great battle of Ragnarok will take place.

Vili: Odin's brother, a son of Bor and Bestla.

Yggdrasil: The world-tree.

Ymir: The first being, a giant bigger than worlds, the ancestor of all giants. Ymir was nourished by the first cow, Audhumla.