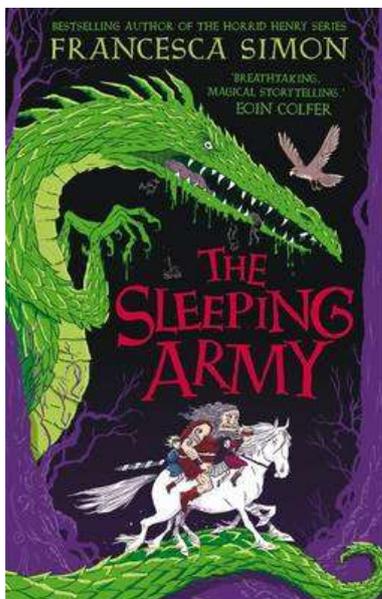


FRANCESCA SIMON on Norse Myth and her book, *The Sleeping Army*

One of my favourite books when I was a teenager was Kevin Crossley-Holland's *Axe-Age, Wolf-Age*, his re-telling of the Norse myths. I've always loved mythology, and I was very excited when I discovered all these strange new legends. The Norse myths were hard-edged, violent, terse and compelling, all reasons why the Vikings who worshipped these gods continue to fascinate us. So many of the stories involve playing tricks - Thor disguising himself as a **bride to sneak into a giant's palace and then almost giving himself away by scoffing so much food**; Loki changing into a mare to entice a stallion away from his owner - and, like most children, I loved stories about outsmarting enemies and rivals.



Unlike the Greek gods, the Norse gods were too busy with their own quarrels to bother much with humans, which makes them seem far more remote and mysterious. The Norse myths are more fragmentary and less well known than the Greek ones, and the universe they evoke is a harsh one: an icy, treacherous world of wolves, giants and dwarves. I was fascinated that Odin and his brothers formed the Earth from the flesh of a murdered frost giant, the sky from his skull, the seas from his blood. Norse myths are earthy: how about a giantess trying to drown Thor and Loki in a river of menstrual blood?

I also found it haunting that the Norse myths had a built-in, fated end: Ragnarok, where the Earth and gods are wiped out in a final flood, fire and death-battle. How poignant, to be a god and yet be unable to escape your fate.

My initial idea for my new novel, *The Sleeping Army*, **wasn't to write primarily** about the Norse gods, but about the mysterious Lewis Chessmen, the 12th-century Scandinavian ivory pieces exhibited **in the British Museum. I've** always been intrigued by these chess pieces, mainly because of their downturned mouths and worried faces. Why were they so unhappy? What **awful thing had happened to them? I didn't know how the Lewis Chessmen** and the Norse myths would intertwine. I just knew that, somehow, they would.

I also knew my heroine would be a young girl called Freya, and I wondered whether she was connected to the goddess Freyja in some way. What I knew **for sure was that my Freya would be the “hero” who** accidentally wakes the Chessmen from their slumbers by blowing on a great Viking horn. But why were the Chessmen asleep? Many European cultures have legends about **sleeping armies: Arthur’s knights, for example, are meant to sleep beneath** Tintagel, waiting to rise up at a time when the kingdom is in danger. But who enchanted my Chessmen?

When I write I often ask myself questions, and the resulting book is the answer. I found a partial solution in the story of Ragnarok: the gods had owned wondrous chess pieces, which survive the destruction of the world. I **decided that the Lewis Chessmen were Odin’s warriors, asleep and frozen until** he summoned them at a time of great peril. And that peril was the failure of Idunn to return to Asgard.

My favourite Norse myth is that of Idunn, the goddess of youth, and the theft of her golden apples, which keep the gods young. Loki steals her from Asgard and gives her to the giant Thjazi. The gods immediately begin to age, and Loki is ordered to rescue the goddess, which he does. That myth became the core of my novel, but with a twist: Loki never brings Idunn back, and the gods are old and dying and powerless.

And because the gods and their magic are fading, only four chess pieces awake when Freya blows the horn: the slaves Roskva and Alfi, Snot the Berserk, and a horse, Sleipnir. Their quest is to find Idunn and restore the gods to youth.

But I decided to take the myths one step further and imagine a world where the Norse gods were still worshipped and the myths about them have become sacred texts.

In the alternate world of *The Sleeping Army*, Christianity never happened, so Britain and other European countries never stopped worshipping the Norse and Anglo-Saxon gods - in fact, our indigenous gods. Hence the state religion, headed by the Queen, is called Wodenism, most Europeans are pagan, time is **dated from Woden’s birth, Richard Dawkins writes** *The Gods Delusion*, and no one is called Christopher.

© Francesca Simon

***The Sleeping Army* by Francesca Simon**
Published by Profile Books