

BOOK CLUB KIT

DEAR BOOK CLUB MEMBERS,

Thank you so much for choosing *The Witch's Heart* as your book club pick. Reading is often such a solitary hobby, and getting truly excited about a book has often led me to recommend it to my friends and then wait impatiently for them to finish it so I'll have someone to talk with about it. It's my honest and humble hope that *The Witch's Heart* evokes the same sort of excitement in you!

This story was a true passion project, born out of my deep interest in Viking Age myths and legends. Angrboda is a rather obscure character in Norse mythology, known only as the mother of Hel, Fenrir, and the Midgard Serpent. But this lack of information means that there are a million different ways to write her story, and mine is only one of them. Some have envisioned her as a warrior queen or even as slightly monstrous herself. Those people might be surprised by my interpretation of her as a solitary cave witch, but I've noticed that there seems to be a common thread in different interpretations of Angrboda, a certain fierceness her name invokes—and not just because it means "bringer of sorrows."

My approach to telling Angrboda's story was to draw connections between her associations and those of other mysterious women in Norse mythology, and to reimagine what could have been going on through her eyes in the background of the myths from start to finish. By the end I had turned the giantess Angrboda into a formidable witch, but the story always ends the same—with Ragnarok.

This presented a unique challenge. You see, in Norse mythology, nobody truly escapes their fate—not even if you're clever enough to do so. But to twist fate to your advantage? Well, that's something else entirely.

Whether you're brand-new to Norse mythology, have only seen the Marvel movies or watched *American Gods*, or you're coming into this book with an extensive background in mythology, I am honored that you decided to read *The Witch's Heart* and I hope you enjoy it. One of the things I love the most about Norse mythology is the humanity of its players, and it's my fondest hope that Angrboda's story will resonate with you in some way. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for giving her a chance to tell her tale. And please feel free to reach out to me on social media—I'd love to be part of your discussion!

–Genevieve

A CONVERSATION WITH

Genevieve Gornichec

Tell us about *The Witch's Heart*. What inspired you to write this story?

The Witch's Heart is the story of the giantess Angrboda from Norse mythology: a sort of obscure figure who's more or less the mother of the apocalypse, and whose only claim to fame is having her children stolen by the gods. In a lot of ways, it's sort of a behind-the-scenes tale—she hears the stories we know from the myths when she doesn't participate directly, so you get the whole mythology from a totally different perspective.

I got really into Norse mythology when I was in college. I lived in Sweden for a semester, and then when I got back, I took a class on Old Norse and got to read some of the stories in their original language, which was amazing. I was really lucky that my university also offered classes on Norse myths and Icelandic sagas (all with the same fabulous professor, to whom I owe my deepest thanks for getting me into all this). I learned so much, and I'm still learning.

It was during the Norse mythology class that I started feeling this weird connection to Angrboda. I just thought she was so interesting, and National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) was coming up while I was taking the class, so I ended up sitting down and writing the first draft of *The Witch's Heart* in three weeks that November—and then writing my term paper on Angrboda. From there, I just kept researching and revising the book, and in the end *The Witch's Heart* turned out that much better for it.

Can you tell us a bit more about who Angrboda is in Norse mythology? And why did you choose to write about her specifically?

Angrboda is mentioned by name one time each in the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda*, our two main sources for Norse mythology. Each time, it's in relation to her kids with Loki, who are Hel (ruler of the dead), Fenrir (a giant wolf), and Jormungand, also called the Midgard Serpent (a snake so big he wraps around the world and bites his tail).

The *Prose Edda* tells us that, when the gods found out about the kids, they stole them to prevent the "mischief and evil" they'd wreak in the future. They put Hel in charge of the dead, bound Fenrir, and tossed Jormungand into the sea. We never hear from their mother again—at least, not by name. In the *Poetic Edda*, she's mentioned in one poem as being Fenrir's mother. It's never stated that she and Loki are married, either; Sigyn is described as his wife among the gods, and Angrboda his lover in Jotunheim. (In *The Witch's Heart*, I made Angrboda his wife, too.)

What makes Angrboda so interesting to me is that you can draw a connection from her to other women in mythology with whom she has things in common. For example, in the poem "Baldr's Dreams" in the *Poetic Edda*, Odin rides to Hel's realm to raise a dead seeress whom he accuses of being "the mother of three [ogres/monsters/trolls]." Some interpret this as being Angrboda; Neil Gaiman states it explicitly in his own Norse mythology retelling (which made me so happy).

Beyond that, I'm just a sucker for minor side characters, especially the ones who are often vilified. In most Norse myth retellings you read, Angrboda is either completely ignored or depicted for two seconds as this gross monster. Plus, before I wrote *The Witch's Heart* about ten years ago, I briefly poked my head into Norse myth fandom online and saw that Sigyn was getting a majority of the love from fans, which is awesome! But it bummed me out to see Angrboda getting sidelined again, so I decided I wanted to write her story.

What do you feel are the main themes/issues that are addressed in *The Witch's Heart*?

Angrboda spends almost the entirety of *The Witch's Heart* on the periphery of all the action; the stories of Norse mythology are largely told to her by either Loki, Skadi, or Gerd. So there's this theme of feeling like an outsider, which Angrboda has mostly accepted but which Loki struggles with from beginning to end. Is he a god? Is he a giant? Is he just an entity of chaos? How about all three? People try to put him in a box, and Loki just doesn't work that way; he's a liminal character, walking the boundaries between so many different labels you could stick on him. So I think there's a lot to be said about belonging. The harder he tries, the worse it gets in all aspects of his life. Sometimes you just have to accept who you are and roll with it—there's a certain freedom in knowing that you'll never fit the mold, and that's okay.

There's also this theme that runs through the Norse myths and Icelandic sagas that's concerned with inheritance, both material and immaterial, which I tried to echo. To what lengths would you go to make sure your legacy survives? What would you sacrifice? That really comes out in the second half of *The Witch's Heart* as we creep closer and closer to Ragnarok, the doom of the gods (and almost everyone else—spoiler alert). Although it's not just about kids as a legacy—it's about your actions in life. At one point in *The Witch's Heart*, a character expresses anxiety about having no children to remember them, they're assured that their deeds alone will ensure that they'll never be forgotten. It's all about the idea of what you're leaving behind once you're gone.

Did the book require any special research?

The Witch's Heart involved me absolutely obsessing over the *Eddas*, buying a bunch of different translations and comparing them, and also looking at Old Norse texts and looking up certain words to see if they could be translated differently. A lot of it was looking at all the retellings I've read and going, "Okay, where in the *Eddas* did it say that?" and trying to walk it back. (I have a history degree, so I love asking myself, "Okay, we know this, but how do we know this?" and then getting sad about how much we don't know.)

You also have to be careful with the Eddas as they were written down by Christians hundreds of years after the Viking Age ended, although the poems existed in the oral tradition before this, because the Vikings didn't write (or at least, not in the way we think of writing). Every writer has an agenda, and it can be tough to filter both the historical biases and our own modern ones, so there are extra layers in there to unpack. So many female figures are mentioned in the *Eddas* and then never heard from again—it makes you wonder if there were more stories about them that just didn't get written down because the authors weren't interested in them.

But for me that lack was almost liberating, because it meant I could draw my own conclusions and be neither right nor wrong. For example, if that dead wise woman whom Odin is hassling in "Baldr's Dreams" is in fact Angrboda, then she might have prophetic powers, too. Plus, she has associations with wolves and snakes, like the giantess Hyrrokkin, who rides a wolf with snakes

for reins. And who else rides wolves in Norse mythology? The giantess Hyndla, who also has prophetic powers. It's a stretch, but once I made that connection, a story started to form.

And then we get to Gullveig, who is a very mysterious figure who was burned three times by the gods and later wanders as the wisewoman Heid, another seeress. "The half-burnt heart of a woman" was eaten by Loki in one poem (in *The Witch's Heart*, he gives it back to its owner), so there's a possible connection to Gullveig there. Most people think Gullveig/Heid is Freyja, which is super valid.

But also for my own purposes I thought, "Wouldn't it be cool if these creepy women were all the same person?" And then, "If I give one creepy woman all this cosmic power, what kind of person would she be?" And then *The Witch's Heart* happened.

editor. She asked great questions, some of the most important being "Why is this happening?" To which I'd say "Because Norse mythology!" To which she'd reply something along the lines of, "That's not good enough; it has to work as a story on its own." But she knew how important it was to me to be able to write a satisfying ending to a story that ends in an apocalypse *without* compromising the source material I was drawing from, and that really meant the world to me.

It's challenging to write a story with a prophecy in it—you get to the point where the characters are just going through the motions and start to lack agency, which takes away from the narrative. So a lot of the struggles I had in the last stages of revision had to do with Ragnarok. My process was different in revisions because I wasn't just writing it for my own satisfaction—I was held accountable, and in the end, it made the story better than I ever could have made it on my own.

"If I give one creepy woman all this cosmic power, what kind of person would she be?"

How did your writing process change, if at all, while writing this novel?

Even though I wrote the first draft in three weeks, it's changed a lot since then. Your first draft is always for you. My goal was to make this fit as seamlessly into the background of Norse mythology as possible, so I took a lot of time to research, put stories in chronological order, and basically try to get my ducks in a row. There were just some things that wouldn't work narratively, so there was a point where I had to sort of pick and choose what I wanted to go with and which liberties I had to take with the mythology to make the story make sense.

After I signed with my agent, we revised, and then I went through revisions with my

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

Angrboda spends the first half of the book trying to regain her identity after this horrible trauma she'd been through at the very beginning, and is pretty successful. Then, once everything gets taken away from her, she is basically back at square one and has to regain her identity all over again, this time all on her own, and has to find the power within herself to prevail. One of the things I hope people take away from this is that it's never over, even when it seems hopeless. You'll be surprised what strength you find if you look deep enough.

GLOSSARY OF CHARACTERS

ANGRBODA: A giantess who lives in Ironwood, mother by Loki of Hel, Fenrir, and the Midgard Serpent. In *The Witch's Heart*, she's combined with several other obscure characters in the myths (Hyndla, Hyrrokkin, Gullveig/Heid, and the Seeress).

LOKI: Shape-shifting god who is at least half a giant himself, and who is good at getting the gods into trouble and then out again. Eventually he plots the death of Odin's son Baldur and is bound in torment until Ragnarok.

SKADI: A giantess associated with mountains, skiing, and hunting. Famously goes to Asgard to demand compensation for her father's death after he's killed, and ends up marrying into them instead. In *The Witch's Heart*, she's also a close friend of Angrboda.

HEL: Ruler of the Norse underworld and daughter of Loki and Angrboda. Commonly depicted as half dead and half alive. When Baldur was killed, she decreed that if everything in all the Nine Worlds would weep, she would relinquish him.

FENRIR: Giant wolf and son of Angrboda and Loki. Bound by the gods using trickery, and bit off the god Tyr's hand in the process. Fated to swallow Odin at Ragnarok.

JORMUNGAND: Also known as the Midgard Serpent, a snake so big he encircles the realm of Midgard and bites his own tail. Fated to slay Thor at Ragnarok.

GERD: giantess and distant relative of Skadi who is threatened into marrying the god Frey

SIGYN: Loki's wife in Asgard, mother of their two ill-fated sons, known for holding a bowl above Loki's head to catch the venom of the snake hung above him.

ODIN: The highest of the Norse gods. Likes to travel in disguise, using different names, and generally wears a broad-brimmed hat and cloak. Particularly interested in prophecy and the gaining of knowledge.

BALDUR: The son of Odin, his death was orchestrated by Loki. Most beautiful and most beloved of the gods.

THOR: hammer-wielding son of Odin, known for slaying giants

FREYJA: Priestess of the Vanir, known for her golden necklace Brisingamen and her feathered cloak that turns the wearer into a falcon. Also has associations with magic, sex, and war.

FREY: Freyja's brother, associated with fertility and sending his servants to bully giantesses into marrying him.

TYR: God associated with war and justice. Gets his hand bitten off by Fenrir.

FRIGG: Odin's wife and Baldur's mother, said to know the fate of all men.

NJORD: sea god, father of Frey and Freyja, husband of Skadi.

THE NORNS: triad of female fate spirits who dwell in a hall at the Well of Urd, at one of the three roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil

MIMIR: one of Odin's closest advisers, in the story a disembodied head.

Character Pronunciation Guide

All pronunciations are for the anglicized versions of the names

ANGRBODA: AHN-gur-BOH-duh

LOKI: LOW-kee

SKADI: SKA-dee

HEL: HEL

FENRIR: FEN-reer

JORMUNGAND: YORM-uhn-gahnd

GERD: GURD

SIGYN: SIG-yinn

BALDUR: BALL-dur

FREYJA: FREY-uh

TYR: TEER

JOTUNHEIM: YOH-tun-haym

ASGARD: AZ-gard

JARNVIDJUR: YARN-vid-yurr

SEID: SAYD

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This book draws strongly on Norse mythology. Which of these gods and goddesses were you familiar with and which were new to you? How did the author's depictions of the deities you knew compare to the images you already had of them? Do you think basing a novel on already established characters makes it easier or harder to write?
2. The book starts out with Loki literally giving Angrboda her heart back. What does that signify about their relationship? Do you think it is a significant reason that she trusts him even though she knows he is Odin's blood brother and a trickster?
3. After Angrboda becomes a mother, her priorities shift a great deal. How does becoming a mother change her outlook on the world and define her goals?
4. Even though Loki is known to be a trickster god, Angrboda trusted him. Did you? Were you surprised by his betrayal or did you see it coming?
5. Angrboda and Skadi's relationship is one of the most important and enduring in Angrboda's life. Describe how their relationship changes over time. How does Angrboda and Skadi's relationship compare to Angrboda and Loki's relationship?
6. Who was your favorite character in the book and why? Who was your least favorite?
7. The author scatters in tidbits of Viking Age material culture (like nalbinding) even though the book takes place in a mythic version of the past. Did you find the portrayal of Viking Age culture evocative and did you learn anything about how people in those times lived?
8. Near the end of the book Angrboda has a moment when she wonders if Loki and Odin have been plotting together during the entire book. Do you think there is any possibility of that?
9. Angrboda has visions of the future and a strong notion of what her fate—and the fate of her children—will be, even though she hopes she can change it. Do you consider knowing the future a gift or a curse? Loki refused to hear his wife's prophecies—would you do the same? Do you think he knew more than he let on?
10. The end of the book depicts the end of the world as Angrboda knew it with Ragnarok, yet she ensures that her daughter will find a new life and her legacy will live on in stories. Did the ending make you happy, sad, or a mix of both?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Genevieve Gornichec



GENEVIEVE GORNICHEC earned her degree in history from the Ohio State University, but she got as close to majoring in Vikings as she possibly could, and her study of Norse myths and Icelandic sagas became her writing inspiration. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio. *The Witch's Heart* is her debut novel.

GENEVIEVEGORNICHEC.COM • GENGORNICHEC