

Reading companion

The nineteen traditions in the order the book takes them, with every myth from each. The page is where the myth begins in the paperback.

Greek Mythology c. 800 BCE

Tales of capricious gods upon Olympus and the mortal heroes who dared the abyss between order and chaos.

10 myths

Prometheus the Firebringer — *Of the gift that could not be taken back* p. 16

Orpheus and Eurydice — *A descent made bearable only by song* p. 19

Persephone and the Pomegranate — *How spring learned to leave* p. 22

The Twelve Labors of Heracles — *An impossible penance for an unbearable crime* p. 25

Theseus and the Minotaur — *Seven youths, seven maidens, and a thread* p. 28

The Fall of Icarus — *Wax wings, a warning, and a sun the boy could not bear to look away from* p. 31

Medusa — *Of the woman who was punished for being looked at* p. 34

Athena and Arachne — *The contest of looms, and what a goddess could not bear to lose* p. 37

The Wooden Horse — *Of the gift the city should not have brought through its gate* p. 40

Atalanta and the Golden Apples — *The fastest woman in Greece, and the three apples she could not run past* p. 44

Egyptian Mythology c. 3000 BCE

From the silt of the Nile, a cosmology of sun-barques, scarab-rolled mornings, and weighing of hearts in the Hall of Two Truths.

7 myths

The Murder of Osiris — *And the long task of Isis, who refused to let him stay dead* p. 50

Ra and the Serpent Apep — *The barque of the sun and the snake at the bottom of the night* p. 53

The Weighing of the Heart — *What Anubis asks at the door, and what the feather replies* p. 56

Isis and the Seven Scorpions — *What a hostess refused, and what was given anyway* p. 59

The Rage of Sekhmet — *How the lion-headed daughter was stopped, at the last hour, by a flood of red beer* p. 62

Hathor and the Distant Goddess — *How Thoth went south to coax a sulking goddess out of the Nubian desert* p. 65

The Tale of the Two Brothers — *Bata, Anubis, and the heart in the cedar tree* p. 68

Norse Mythology c. 800 CE

From the cold sagas of the North: a doomed pantheon nailed to the World-Tree, awaiting the wolf at the end of all winters.

7 myths

Odin at the World-Tree — *Nine nights nailed to himself for the price of letters* p. 72

The Binding of Fenrir — *How the gods bought time, and what it cost a hand* p. 75

Thor in the Hall of Útgarda-Loki — *What the great god lifted, and what the giants laughed at* p. 78

Ragnarok — *The twilight of the gods, foreseen and walked into anyway* p. 82

The Death of Baldur — *How a mother got an oath from every thing in the world, except one* p. 86

The Mead of Poetry — *How Odin became, briefly, an eagle, and brought back the poet's gift* p. 90

Hel and the Dead — *Of the daughter who was given a kingdom no one else would take* p. 94

Japanese Mythology c. 700 CE

Kami in every river-stone and pine, sun-sister and storm-brother quarreling across rice fields and sea-foam.

5 myths

Amaterasu in the Cave of Heaven — *How a goddess was coaxed back into the sky by laughter* p. 98

Susanoo and the Eight-Headed Serpent — *An exiled storm-god finds his redemption in a sword pulled from a tail* p. 102

The Dragon Princess Otohime — *Three days under the sea, three hundred years above it* p. 105

Izanagi and Izanami — *The first marriage, the first death, and a husband who looked back too soon* p. 109

Tamamo-no-Mae — *The most beautiful woman at court, and the nine tails she had been hiding* p. 112

Hindu Mythology c. 1500 BCE

Cosmic ages without count: gods that dance worlds into being and devas that churn oceans for the nectar of deathlessness.

6 myths

The Churning of the Ocean of Milk — *How gods and demons turned the sea together for the nectar of deathlessness* p. 118

Krishna and the Serpent Kaliya — *A boy-god dances on the heads of the river's tyrant* p. 122

The Descent of Ganga — *How a king's penance brought the sky-river to earth, caught in a god's hair* p. 126

Hanuman's Leap — *How the monkey-god jumped the strait to Lanka and brought back the herb of life* p. 130

Shiva's Tandava — *The dance that destroys and remakes the cosmos* p. 134

Narasimha, the Man-Lion — *How Vishnu kept the letter of an unbreakable promise by becoming, briefly, neither man nor beast* p. 137

Celtic Mythology c. 500 BCE

Mist-bound islands of the Otherworld, salmon of wisdom, and a boy whose battle-frenzy could cool only in three vats of water.

6 myths

The Children of Lir — *Nine hundred years as swans on the cold lakes of Ireland* p. 142

Cú Chulainn's Final Stand — *The hound of Ulster, lashed to a stone, fighting until the raven came* p. 146

The Wooing of Étaín — *A love that survived being turned into a fly and a thousand-year wind* p. 150

The Morrigan — *The crow-goddess who flew over the battlefields, choosing whom the war would keep* p. 154

Pwyll and Rhiannon — *How a Welsh prince met a woman riding a slow horse he could not catch* p. 157

Bran the Blessed — *Of the giant whose head went on speaking after his body had fallen* p. 162

Mesopotamian Mythology c. 2100 BCE

The first written stories on earth, baked into clay: kings who would not die, queens who descended past seven gates.

2 myths

Gilgamesh and the Quest for Immortality — *The first hero who could not bear that his friend had died* p. 168

Inanna's Descent to the Underworld — *Seven gates, seven garments, and a sister who was waiting* p. 172

Aztec Mythology c. 1300 CE

Suns made and unmade, feathered serpents of dawn, and a covenant of blood that the world might not stop turning.

2 myths

The Five Suns — *Four worlds destroyed, and the fifth turning above us by sacrifice* p. 178

Quetzalcoatl and the Bones of the Underworld — *How the feathered serpent stole the bones of the dead to make us* p. 183

Roman Mythology c. 700 BCE

Wolf-suckled twins, household gods at every threshold, and an empire that translated its borrowed Greek pantheon into a state religion of duty and fortune.

3 myths

Romulus and Remus — *Twin boys, a she-wolf at a riverbank, and the founding of an eternal city* p. 188

Cupid and Psyche — *A wife who lit a lamp, and the sorting of seeds at the foot of a goddess* p. 192

Aeneas in the Underworld — *A father, a sibyl, a golden bough, and the long parade of unborn Romans* p. 196

Chinese Mythology c. 1500 BCE

Five elements turning under a Jade court, rivers carved by the spear of a hero, and a stone monkey who learned the ten thousand transformations.

5 myths

Pangu Splits the World — *How a giant in an egg pushed earth and sky apart, and what became of his bones* p. 202

The Monkey King — *How a stone monkey learned the seventy-two transformations and was nearly contained* p. 205

Chang'e and the Moon — *Of the elixir she drank, and the rabbit who keeps her company* p. 209

The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl — *How a river of stars was set between two lovers, and the magpies who bridge it once a year* p.

The Jade Emperor and the Twelve Animals — *How the calendar was made by a footrace, and why the cat does not speak to the rat*
p. 217

Korean Mythology c. 100 BCE

A bear who fasted in a cave to become a woman, a princess who walked into the underworld for medicine, and shamanic songs older than the dynasties that wrote them down.

2 myths

The Sun and Moon Siblings — *How a brother and sister climbed a rope into the sky to escape a tiger* p. 222

Princess Bari — *The seventh daughter who walked into the underworld for the medicine to save her parents* p. 226

Mayan Mythology c. 1500 BCE

Hero twins descending into Xibalba to play ball with the lords of death, gods of maize who shaped men out of dough, and the long count that measured ages by the turning of jade gears.

2 myths

The Hero Twins of Xibalba — *How two brothers played ball with the lords of death and won* p. 232

The Creation of the Maize People — *The four false makings of human beings, and the dough at last that worked* p. 237

Slavic Mythology c. 600 CE

Forest crones in chicken-legged huts, firebirds that scorch the moonlit orchard, and a thunder-god whose hammer keeps falling on the snake at the root of the world tree.

3 myths

Baba Yaga — *Of the witch in the chicken-legged hut, who eats some who knock and helps others* p. 242

The Firebird — *Of a tsar's apple-thief, the prince's long quest, and a feather that lit a tower* p. 246

Veles and Perun — *The yearly war of the thunderer and the snake at the root of the world tree* p. 251

West & Central African Mythology ancient

A spider who bargained the Sky-God for all the world's stories, a smith-god who beat the road open with his iron, and a hero so small his mother kept him in her belt.

3 myths

Anansi and the Sky-God's Stories — *How a small spider bargained the entire treasury of the world's stories down out of heaven* p. 256

Ogun, the Iron God — *How the road to the world was opened by a smith who would not let a forest stop him* p. 260

Mwindo, the Hero in the Belt — *Of the boy his father tried to drown, who walked through the underworld and came back king* p. 264

Persian Mythology c. 1000 BCE

A bird as old as memory roosting in a nest of healing leaves, a king whose cup showed all the seven climes, and a champion who killed his own son before learning his name.

3 myths

The Simurgh — *The bird as old as memory, who raised an outcast prince in a nest above the world* p. 270

Rostam and Sohrab — *Of the father who killed his son before learning his name* p. 274

Jamshid's Cup — *How a king saw all the seven climes in a small bowl, and lost what the cup had shown him* p. 278

Polynesian Mythology ancient

A trickster who fished islands out of the sea on a hook of his grandmother's jaw, a goddess of fire who carries her temple in a volcano, and a long voyaging across an ocean of stars.

3 myths

Maui Fishes Up the Islands — *How a small trickster, with his grandmother's jaw for a hook, pulled up the land* p. 284

Pele's Wrath — *The fire-goddess who walks her sister's island in a stranger's clothes* p. 287

Hina and the Eel — *How the coconut tree grew, and what its three eyes remember* p. 290

Inuit Mythology ancient

A young woman thrown from a kayak who became the mother of every seal, and a raven who stole the sun out of a chest in a house where there had never been a sky.

2 myths

Sedna, Mistress of the Sea — *Of the woman whose father cut off her fingers, and what each finger became* p. 294

How Raven Stole the Light — *Of the trickster who became a pine needle to slip into a chief's house and take back the sun* p. 298

Turkic & Tengri Mythology c. 500 CE

Sky-Father Tengri above, the dark lord Erlik Han below, and a she-wolf named Asena who guided a wounded boy to the valley that became a nation.

2 myths

Erlik Han, Lord of the Lower Country — *How the dark brother shaped the first body and was sent below* p. 304

Asena, the Mother Wolf — *How a wounded boy was raised by a she-wolf in a hidden valley, and the nation that came of it* p. 307

Arabian Mythology pre-Islamic & medieval

Snake-queens beneath the orchards, a roc whose wing puts out the sun, and lovers gone mad in the desert, named for the night and for the moon.

3 myths

Shahmaran, Queen of the Snakes — *Of the woodcutter who fell into a cave of serpents and the queen who taught him medicine* p. 312

Sindbad and the Roc — *How a sailor was carried over the cloud-line by the foot of an enormous bird* p. 316

Layla and Majnun — *How a young man went mad in the desert for a love that could not be permitted* p. 320