

MYTHICAL MONSTERS

The Legends Behind the Creatures of *The Eye of the North*

Ratatosk

Ratatosk, or Ratatoskr, is not named in *The Eye of the North* but is alluded to in Chapter One, when Emmeline describes the giant squirrel her parents brought home from an early expedition. Ratatosk is a squirrel in Norse mythology who lives in the great world-tree, Yggdrasil [**Ig-dra-zil**], and who scampers up and down the tree carrying messages from the eagle who lives at top of the tree to the serpent Níðhogg [**Neeth-hog**] who gnaws eternally at its roots. Yggdrasil connects the nine worlds of Norse mythology, from Asgard at the top, where the gods live, to Hel, the world of the dead. The world of humans is Midgard, which means 'Middle-Earth'; this might sound familiar to anyone who has read *The Lord of the Rings*. Midgard is one of the nine worlds.

The Æsirsmounts

The Æsir [**Ay-seer**] is the word used to describe one of the Norse **pantheons*** of gods and goddesses (though the goddesses also had the word Ásynjur [**Aw-seen-yur**] to describe them collectively on their own). The other pantheon was known as the Vanir. Most of the gods and goddesses you've probably heard of in Norse mythology belong to the Æsir – gods like Thor, Odin, Frigg, Freyja, Tyr, Loki, Heimdall, Baldr and many more. So, Æsirsmounts was the term I came up with to describe the horses which would have carried these ancient deities across the ice of the frozen North. Hófvvarpnir [**Hauf-varp-neer**], the horse who appears in *The Eye of the North*, is mentioned in a thirteenth-century saga written by an Icelandic named Snorri Sturluson as being the steed of a goddess named Gná [**G-nauw**] – his name means 'hoof-thrower'. According to legend he could ride on land, sea and sky.

Sleipnir [**Slipe-neer**] is the most famous horse in the world of the Norse gods, described as being the best of all horses. His name means 'Slippy', and he is the horse belonging to Odin, the leader of the gods. He has eight legs and was used to travel to the underworld, known as Hel, to plead for the life of the beloved god Baldr after the trickster god, Loki, had Baldr killed.

The Yeti/The Abominable Snowman

The Abominable Snowman is mentioned briefly by Thing during a conversation with Madame Blancheflower, Edgar and Sasha in *The Eye of the North*. Thing thinks the creature is a myth, but when the adults treat his question seriously he realises that such a creature actually exists – at least, in the world of the story. In our world, sightings of the creature known in various parts of the world as the Yeti, Sasquatch, The Abominable Snowman and Bigfoot have occurred frequently, often in remote locations and sometimes in places prone to snow, but nobody has ever provided proof that they actually exist. They are said to be tall, humanlike in appearance, but covered in long, shaggy hair which is often described as reddish in colour, with faces which appear more ape-like than human. In medieval England, the Wild Man, or 'Wodwose', appears in stories and tales as well as art, but is thought to be a **personification**** of Nature – he may share some similarities with the Abominable

Snowman, as he is found in remote locations and is also covered from head to toe in long, unruly hair. Similar legends are found all over the globe. The Icewalkers in *The Eye of the North* are also partly inspired by the Yeti.

The Kobold

A creature found in Germanic folklore, the kobold is something like a brownie or a fairy, the size of a small child and generally grumpy in temperament. If treated well they will be helpful to humans, doing household chores and small tasks, but are quick to anger if mistreated. Some kobolds live in mines and are associated specifically with underground spaces, like our friend in *The Eye of the North*. The element cobalt takes its name from the word 'kobold', as it is troublesome to mine from the earth and early miners blamed the kobold for this.

The Kraken

The thirteenth-century Icelandic **saga***** of Örvar-Oddr tells of a gigantic sea creature which would lurk underwater to take its prey by surprise. This is believed to be the first known depiction of what would later be called the kraken. Octopus- or squid-like in appearance, krakens have eight (sometimes ten) huge arms, fierce and terrifying eyes, bodies that can measure a mile and a half in circumference, and were famed for being powerful enough to sink ships and drown whales. They would use their powerful arms/tentacles to crush the ships unlucky enough to pass above them, reducing the vessels to splinters, before feasting on the sailors; whales were even less lucky, as the kraken would wrap its tentacles around the whale's body, making it impossible for the whale to breathe or swim away, and then the kraken would force the whale below the water until it drowned.

In the nineteenth century, several sightings of giant squid were reported, including one from a French warship which, in 1861, fought a battle with one, eventually killing it with gunshots. The sailors estimated the squid's body, excluding its arms, was about eighteen feet long. Many other gigantic squid have been discovered over the years, but never one as large as the mythical kraken. This might be because the creature isn't real – or perhaps, if you've read *The Eye of the North*, you might have other ideas...

Activities:

Design your own legendary beast! Make it scary, if you like – as scary as possible...

Think about things like where your monster lives, what it eats, how it gets around, and whether it has any predators (other creatures, including humans, who would try to hunt it). Now, draw a picture of your monster and give it a name – the more blood-curdling the better!

Next, make up a legend about your monster. Maybe, like the kraken, it hides in the depths of the sea waiting for something to swim over it. What does it do while it waits?

Maybe, like the yeti, it lives in a very isolated place. What does it do for food while waiting for something nice and juicy, like a lost human being, to wander by?

Maybe, like the kobold, your legendary creature is very small instead of very big. What sort of tricks or skills would your creature have to make it just as scary and clever as a bigger beast?

Maybe, like Sleipnir and Hófvarpnir, your legendary creature has a magical power. What sort of magical power would your creature have, and how would they use it?

Can you turn your legend into a saga by learning it off by heart and reciting it for your friends and family? Make sure to act out all the scary bits, like a good skald! A 'skald' is an old word for a person who composed and performed poems for the entertainment of everyone, making the stories as interesting and memorable as possible. Extra points if you dress up to look the part!

Glossary

***pantheon:** A pantheon is a name for a group of gods belonging to a particular tradition – so, we speak of the Greek pantheon, the Roman pantheon, the Norse pantheon, and so on.

****personification:** When a human figure is used to stand in for a concept, like 'nature' or 'war' or 'love', one of the terms we can use for it is personification. So, the Wild Man of medieval English folklore is a personification of Nature; his wildness, his untamed existence, and his out-of-control appearance are all seen as things he has in common with Nature.

*****saga:** A saga in Old Norse culture was a long story, often about things like battles or famous warriors, which would originally have been part of an oral (spoken) tradition – so, this means their exact roots can be hard to trace. People would have learned them by heart to recite at feasts and celebrations, and they are also a feature of Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic cultures.