Norse Mythology by Neil Gaiman

Footnotes

(1) I mentioned my youthful interest in Greek Mythology before when reviewing *The Golden Fleece* by Robert Graves

(2) Besides which, when you're already familiar with the basics of one mythology, it's easier to keep reading in that vein because the entry barrier to each additional story is lower. You don't have to spend time at the beginning of each story acquainting yourself with the pantheon of gods and goddesses, or figuring out what the metaphysical rules are. You can just plunge into the story.

(3) I've also mentioned this predisposition before back when reviewing *The Once and Future King*, to explain why I never got into the King Arthur legends as a kid.

(4) Possibly this is, as Neil Gaiman implies in his introduction, because we don't have as much surviving literature about Norse Mythology as we do about Greek Mythology, and so it's a bit more difficult to create detailed stories. And yet... Neil Gaiman manages to create very engaging stories in his book, so maybe it's just that the author I read wasn't up to the task.

(5) As I noted in one of my previous interesting random fact posts, the days of the week in English are a strange hybrid of the Latin week with the Norse week. Saturn day, Sun day and Moon day all come from the Latin week, whereas Tyr's day, Odin's day, Thor's day and Frige's day all come from the Norse gods.
On a side note, I've always found it fascinating how little most people know about the origins of the days of the week. We use those names all the time, and yet most people have no idea where they come from. It's amazing how incurious people can be about the stuff that surrounds them every day--and I include myself in that, since I went for years without knowing this stuff myself.

(6)...and arguably "giants" also come from Norse Mythology. I know Greek Mythology had giants too, but the giants in Greek Mythology seemed to play less of a central role than the ones in Norse Mythology, so I suspect that the archetypal "giant" in modern folklore comes more from the Norse Mythology. I'm just speculating though, I haven't researched this thoroughly.

(7)...speaking of things I haven't researched thoroughly, I'm a little bit unsure of the exact relationship between Norse Mythology, German folklore, and the modern epic fantasy genre. I'm assuming that the elves and dwarfs and trolls in German fairy tales come to German folklore from the Norse Myths. But am I wrong? Did the German fairy tales develop these creatures independently?

(8) My understanding is that this is all Tolkien's influence. I once read somewhere (can't remember where now) that Tolkien and C.S. Lewis disagreed about how fantasy should be written. Tolkien felt that a writer should only use one type of mythology when creating a world,

so Tolkien only used creatures from Norse Myths. C.S. Lewis, on the other hand, borrowed freely from both Greek and Norse mythology--so in The Chronicles of Narnia, there are centaurs and satyrs alongside dwarfs. Tolkien strongly disapproved of this mixing and matching that his friend Lewis was doing. Tolkien's view won out in terms of what is now normal in the genre, and that's why the modern fantasy genre uses Norse creatures and not Greek creatures
....is that right, or am I over-simplifying things? Someone correct me if I'm getting this wrong.

(9) Comic book fans, of course, were already familiar with this long before from the Marvel comic books. But I had been exclusively a DC comic book man during my comic collecting days, and so I missed out on all this fun.
Neil Gaiman also got his first introduction to Norse Mythology from the Marvel *Thor* comics written by Jack Kirby, as he writes in his introduction.

(10) Oh, and also Wagner's epic Ring cycle is based on Norse Mythology as well. So reading about Wagner recently also predisposed me to want to learn more about Norse Mythology.

(11) I actually first saw this book in an airport on a trip back home in April 2017. I thought about picking it up at the time, but ended up leaving it on the shelves. I've been regretting that decision ever since. (To be fair to myself, this was before I had seen *Thor: Dark World*, or *Thor: Ragnarok*). I've been keeping an eye out for this book since then. I looked for it in bookstores when I was back home last Christmas, but didn't see it. I've been looking for it in bookstores here in Vietnam, and haven't seen it for the past 3 years. But then it finally started showing up in bookstores here in Vietnam a few months ago, and I grabbed it.

(12) I'd given *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman a mixed review, so that made me slightly cautious of Neil Gaiman. (Although I really liked *Good Omens*, but since that was a collaboration with Terry Pratchett, I'm unsure of how much to credit Gaiman.) But I decided to give Neil Gaiman another chance, and I'm really glad I did.
On a side note: after reading this, I feel like I can now understand why Norse gods feature so prominently in *American Gods*.

(13) Also, someone was kind enough to recommend this book in the comments of my Youtube review of *Thor Ragnarok*, further cementing my desire to check it out.

(14) Many years ago, my introduction to Greek Mythology was to start out with the readable modern retellings before working my way up to the original classics. And that's generally my philosophy with breaking into any new subject. I'm not sure if I'll ever work my way up to the original classics or not, but either way, this readable copy seems like the best way to start.

(15) It's very possible that the reason this book is so short is because there was no more to tell. Neil Gaiman, in his introduction, laments that, unlike Greek Mythology, we have very few surviving stories from Norse Mythology.

(16) There's also some sort of prehistoric war between the Aesir gods and the Vanir gods, which is alluded to several times in the book, but never described. I got the impression this was similar to the prehistoric war between the Olympians and the Titans in Greek Mythology, which is also frequently alluded to but (I believe) never described in detail.

(17) Or at least, it's unclear to me. Anyone out there know more about the belief systems of the Germanic people?

(18) For the most part, these stories form a chronology, and yet every once and a while, something appears to be out of order. Kvasir appears in *The Master Builder*, several chapters before his birth is described in *The Mead of Poets*.

(19) The whole concept of Ragnarok is a bit confusing, though. The way it's written, the gods don't seem to realize all of this is predestined. But then if the gods themselves don't know, then how do we humans know? And once we humans know, and have written it down in our books, how come the gods can't just read our books and find out what is going to happen in Ragnarok?

(20) In his endnotes to *The Last Days of Loki*, Neil Gaiman admits that he summarized into a single paragraph a long section where Loki insulted all the other gods one by one because he did not want to throw off the shape of the story. Wikipedia, as of this writing, contains a much more detailed account of Loki's back and forth with all the other gods. Besides being fascinating for its own sake (it contains allusions to many other legends and stories), it also makes clearer why the gods were determined to get their revenge on Loki after this encounter (a motivation that is not quite as clear in Gaiman's retelling). Perhaps Gaiman should have left that long section in after all?
Although, judging from what is written on Wikipedia, too faithfully reproducing that whole section may have interfered with the publishers plan to market this book to both children and adults.