

Hey everybody. So, **Imaginary Worlds** comes out every other week. This is an off week. But I'm trying something new. Every so often, when I do an episode where there's so much great material I couldn't fit in, I'm going to air the outtakes in a bonus episode that comes out the following week.

My previous episode was about Norse mythology. And I talked to two experts who I found totally fascinating.

I'm going to start by playing bonus material from my interview with **Carolynne Larrington**. She's a professor at Oxford, and the author of **The Norse Myths That Shape The Way We Think**.

I asked her if there was a moment in her academic research when she came across Norse myths in their raw form and she thought -- this is very different from the Norse mythology I had read as a kid.

CAROLYNE: Probably when I read, I first read the poem *Lokasenna*, um, translated as *Loki's Quarrel*. And it's, uh, a poem in which Loki who's gradually becoming very alienated from the other gods, bursts into a hall where everybody's feasting and starts picking fights with everybody inside and accusing people of all kinds of disreputable behavior. And I thought the first time I came across it, wow, um, the gods are totally different from us clearly, but they have, if they have a moral code, it's not a moral codes that really applies to humans. And these are not the stories that I read in *The Heroes of Asgard* when I was seven. Um, so that was, that was a moment of which I, I thought the gods are more complicated than I had thought when I was, I was little and reading these stories in a kind of wide-eyed way and thinking that they're all heroes in, or maybe not offering any kind of particular moral example, but simply doing their best under trying circumstances and not quite getting up to the kind of stuff that Loki accuses them of.

***You know, one of the things I think is so interesting is that, you know, uh, storytellers are really drawn towards Norse mythology because it's fascinating and because it's, it, there's a lot of it that it, that does not have in common with our, uh, modern, uh, Western values, uh, Judeo-Christian values. Are there things about this mythology that you find particularly fascinating and refreshing because they don't fit, you know, our sort of modern styles of storytelling that things just happened in these Norse myths that just don't happen in modern storytelling or, or, you know, sort of more in the more Christianized Western storytelling?***

CAROLYNE: I think there's, there's something about the ways in which the gods just go out one day to see what's going to happen, and very often kind of, uh, threesomes, they're just going out and looking around, checking out the world. They're not going to

research into the, the morals or the ethics of the humans or anything. It's kind of, yeah, let's go and see what's going on. Oh, we're kind of hungry. We'll just, here's an ox. We'll kill the ox and we'll cook it up for dinner. Oh, the ox isn't cooking, the fire isn't working properly. What's going on here? Oh, it turns out there's a giant eagle in the tree who's magically sopping the fire from cooking, and then Loki gets stick and hits the eagle, and the eagle reveals himself as a giant. His magic makes Loki stick to the stick. And so the giant eagle flies off with Loki, and then other stuff kind of follows from that. And you imagine the other two gods going, oh, I wonder what happened to locate. Well, at least, you know, the ox is cooking so that part of the adventure ends and they go off home again. So there's, there's something about the kind of randomness in a way of, it's, it's a typical pre-modern storytelling pattern, which is more or less, once upon a time there was some gods and they decided to go out for a walk and then stuff happened. And it's the randomness of the stuff, which I, I think I find so interesting about these stories.

***Yeah. It doesn't have to follow this sort of, kind of Joseph Campbell Hero's Quest hero's journey, uh, type template.***

CAROLYNE: Yeah. Um, it's not as if it's not the kind of, um, you know, to contrast it with kind of our theory and story that we're all sitting in the hall and someone comes in and goes, we have a problem. This bad night is besieging, my ladies' castle. Can I have a volunteer? And then someone goes, oh yeah, I'll come and, and sort this out for you. And then he goes off and he has to kill this night and that night, and then there's a dragon and then that kind of thing. And it's not as if you have a figure saying at this point, oh, then you have two choices. You could do this thing or you could do that thing. And this is very clear cut. It's kind of almost on the hoof decision making.

***You know, what's interesting too is that there, it's almost like their motivations feel more relatably human. I mean, it's an interesting contrast to Arthurian legends because there's, you know, it is for valor, it's for glory. Uh, it is for, you know, nobility. Like they have these, these, these high ideals that sometimes it's hard to relate to the, the more base human instincts. Even though the gods are clearly capable of doing fantastical things. Everything they're doing is kind of like, if your average schmo in the street was a God and <laugh>, you know, it was kind of like, yeah, I'd do that. Sure. <laugh>, why not <laugh>?***

CAROLYNE: Right? I know that there is this substance which will give the gift of poetry to God's men. The giants are sitting on it. I need to go and get my hands on it. What will it take? Well, it will take fraud, deception, breaking a woman's heart, lying, cheating. But yeah. Hey, I've got the mead.

**I also had a great conversation with Ada Palmer. She's a professor of history at the University of Chicago. She's also a fiction writer and she sings about Norse mythology in her acapella group.**

**In the conversation I'm going to play, she refers to the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda. They're both collections of Norse mythology from The Middle Ages.**

**We don't know who made the Poetic Edda. But we definitely know who made The Prose Edda.**

**It was an Icelandic scholar named Snorri Sturluson. By that point -- the 13th century -- the lands the Vikings had conquered were fully Christianized. Snorri was trying to understand the pagan beliefs of his ancestors, but he did it through a very medieval Christian lens.**

ADA: The prologue of Snorri is one of the weirdest and most fascinating texts you'll ever read. And it begins by saying that in the beginning, God created the world and Adam and Eve and, you know, walked with them and they knew all the theology. But then a few generations later, they had wicked descendants. And the wicked descendants were afraid to speak the name of God because they were afraid of being punished. And a whole generation went by without them ever doing so, which meant that their children, according to Snorri, had no idea of religion because their parents had known it, but had been silent about it. So, then we get to the state in which humanity doesn't know the truth about the universe, but says Snorri, humans were able to observe nature and deduce that there must be a power who was the maker of the planets and the stars and the master of weather and the controller of day and night, uh, because these things had such consistent patterns. And so humans deduced this, and then made up a set of stories about the figures involved. So, Snorri, you know, nests this as, this is a description of a religion that was invented by people who had lost knowledge of the original, but then he also ties it into Greek and Roman stuff and claims that the Viking stories are retellings of the same things that the Trojan War is a telling of. And that Asgard is Troy, and that Odin is Priam. And that Hector is Thor, which makes Achilles the Midgard serpent. And by the time you get to that, you're like, what? Uh, and then Loki is Odysseus, and you're just sort of trying to wrap your head around <laugh> this as it gets odder and odder. And he's like, and yes, and Thor was married to the Adelphi Oracle, who's called Sybil, which we call Sif. And you're like, no, sir, nothing was married to the Adelphi Oracle, but I love you anyway, Snorri, uh, this makes no sense, <laugh>. And you know, that's this fantastically bizarre prologue that many people never get past to get to the next bits of Snorri, which tell the myths sort of more internally and without reference to Greek and, and Biblical things. But Snorri is trying to preserve and tell these tales in a context where he's Christian, but where he values these stories. And we know his father values these stories. I mean, the whole, uh, assault on Snorri's father. That's the reason Snorri was given the education he had, which was actually given, he had a very expensive education as the blood price for this attack. You know,

the attacker shouted, I'm going to make you one-eyed like Odin know who you like so much while trying to stab Snorri's dad's eye out. So, amongst the people who are contemporaries of Snorri and his father, they were conspicuous for caring more about these old story than their peers did. Even in a Christian context, rather than being secret practitioners, what this is, is that they're interested in the poetic tradition. And one of the things Snorri is very concerned about is that people retain the ability to read old poems and understand them, and especially to understand references in them. Because Skaldic poetry is full of kennings, which are a poetic way of saying a thing. So instead of the sun, you would say the treasure of the sky, and instead of the sky, you would say the roof of the world. And so, you can say the treasure of the roof of the world, and you mean the sun, but sometimes the kennings are references to stories. So, another way to say the sun is wolf's bait because the wolf is supposed to swallow the sun at Ragnarök. But if you don't know the story of Ragnarök, you don't know why the sun is wolf's bait. And if you don't know the story of the theft of Sif's hair, you don't know why gold is Sif's hair. So, Snorri wants us to know all the stories necessary to get these poetic references in poems that he's afraid people won't understand anymore. And so, he's eager to write down all of these tales less for the sake of preserving belief or communicating what the metaphysics was, than preserving the capacity to understand these poetic references and the poetry that he values so much.

***So, at this point, I mean, is he our main source for these tales, you know, a thousand years later?***

ADA: So, there's two major sources for the tales plus two peripheral sources. Major sources for the tales are Snorri, who is writing this down in a Christian context, plus the Poetic Edda, which is Snorri collection of anonymous, mostly fragmentary medieval poetry composed during the period before Christianization, for the most part, when this was the dominant belief system. And we don't know who wrote them, and we don't know when they were written, except that linguistics can tell us vaguely which century. Uh, and the poems are composed in multiple countries over multiple centuries, and they contradict each other, uh, and Snorri studied them and Snorri quotes them. And these poems give us a number of the major tales. They describe the death of Balder. They describe the capture of Loki, they describe Ragnarök. They describe the creation of the world in extremely dense, difficult to understand poetic phrasing. we, we then supplement incomprehensible sentences such as the Sons of Two Brothers shall inhabit widely, the windy world with, archeological finds, which sometimes give us details or inscriptions, which sometimes give us names. The frequency with which we find a name, or a name used as a place name tells us things. So, for example, Thor's stepson Ullr is a character who appears in very, very few stories and very, very things that, few things that Snorri or the Poetic Edda preserves for us, but his name appears in a jillion place names and a jillion inscriptions. So, he must have been a very significant figure just by statistic counting up of how often he's mentioned in things that just say, so and

so son of so and so made this rock. Right? And that does not tell us anything about Ullr. But if it's, you know, if Ullr is in the names of people very frequently, he must have been a big deal in a way that's Snorri doesn't preserve. And then we have all of these other sagas, pretty much all of them composed in the Christian period that have little corners of references to Viking stuff. But if we took all the written material we have that's actually discussing these gods, it would fit in three Penguin paperbacks. Uh, and then another couple volumes indexing of, this is how many place names have Thor in them. This is how many place names have Freyr in them. This is how many place names have Ullr in them. Ullr turns out to be a bigger deal than we thought everyone. Too bad we have no idea why.

**More after this.**

## **AD BREAK**

***It sounds like there's a lot of things about the Viking culture and the Norse myths that you like that you admire. Is there anything that even with your 21st century values you kind of struggle with?***

ADA: I mean, when we're looking at any medieval society, certainly this one, the valorization of sexual violence is very uncomfortable, uh, and very present. Uh, and many approaches to Norse culture have tried to minimize it. And I don't think it's ethical to minimize it. I think we need to acknowledge that it's there. So, for example, the story of Freyr and Gerd, um, this is the explanation of how these two figures are married, is told by Snorri, and it's told by the Poetic Edda, which is the older medieval more, more authoritative source. And, you know, in Snorri's version, it's a paragraph. And, you know, he sees her, falls in love with her, sends a messenger to woo her, she, uh, then agrees and they get married. But in the original Poetic Edda versions, you know, the messenger goes and says, you know, will you, will you tell me that Freyr is not the man in the world you hate most? And she says, no, I'd rather die. Uh, and he tries to bribe her with the apples of immortality. And she's like, no, I would rather die. And he's like, I will kill your father if, unless you marry this man. And she's like, then my father will die with honor protecting me because I'll never do this. And eventually he uses horrible magic to coerce her into doing it. And yet the storybook versions that we usually get retold, even the very latest ones that get published, tell Snorri's version and erase the presence of sexual violence and discomfort in the other one. because it's a more comfortable version of the story. Uh, but I think that that version of the story, while it makes sense if I was telling this to a 10 year old, isn't what should be there in the versions for adults where we have to acknowledge the fact that this was all over the place. Because if we erase how bad the past was, that's one of the ways we make people think there was no progress.

***Yeah. I mean, what do you like about when you read the Norse mythology, what speaks to you, uh, on a personal level that's made you so fascinated by it and fond of it too?***

ADA: I, I'm very interested in the way friendship and failures of friendship are so core to it and animate so much of it, right? It's the friendship between Odin and Loki that first saves the world several times and then destroys the world. Uh, and when you go through, you know, the list of kennings that refer to different gods as friend of so-and-so much more often than they do the romantic partnerships, uh, romantic partnership, you, you referred to the, uh, man as the burden of the arms of the woman. So, Odin is the burden of the arms of Frig, and Thor is the burden of the arms of Sif, uh, or the burden of the arms of Járnsaxa. But much more often you refer to Thor as Loki's friend, uh, or you refer to Odin as Loki's friend and you refer to Loki as Odin's friend. Um, I, I'm very delighted by the way, friendship and the violation and loss of friendship being epically important, animates the core of it in a way that it rarely does. Who is Zeus friends with? Right? Nobody. Who are any of the Greek gods friends with? We have a description of a friendship, a real serious friendship between Apollo and Hermes as they bond over the aftermath of when Hermes is a little kid and steals Apollo's cattle. Uh, and that that trick and the aftermath make them friends. But then there's no consequence of that in later narratives. Friendship is nowhere. Uh, friendship is all over the place among Vikings. The very importance of I've met a person and I care deeply about them and they care deeply about me, which I really love and I think is important to write about. And one figure that's very interesting that people always struggle with is Balder. Because Balder is a negative space in this mythology, right? The mythology is animated by the fact that Balder was murdered and Balder is a god. And people often want to look at Balder and ask, what is Balder the god of, usually asking what the god, what anyone is the god of betrays the fact that you've been looking at Greek stuff too much, uh, <laugh> where things people are very clearly god of things. And there are a couple of Norse figures where you can say, you know, Thor is definitely the god of thunder and some other stuff. Uh, but a lot of these figures are not describable as God of anything. They're a figure in his story. And Balder is a figure in his story, who, what he is, is something so excellent that when it's murdered, it is worth allowing the entire universe to be destroyed in order to have there be justice for that murder. Uh, and that you would rather have the universe end, but have justice for that, that have the universe continue, but not have justice for that. And this isn't about having the universe actually be just because the universe has had lots of other injustices in it that have also been one. Uh, it's just that this one murder of this one person, this one person was so precious that their murder cannot be allowed to go unarranged, even if we can make a long list of all of the other terrible deeds that have gone unarranged in the history of this cosmos. And so you try to wrap your head around what is that, what is the thing that is so precious that we can't yield it? Uh, when there aren't stories about Balder actually doing anything,

uh, except that he didn't want to marry Skadi, uh, when Skadi wanted to marry him. That's basically all we have. And even that is an absence of an action and not an action. But when we try to think about Balder, the more I think about it, the more what makes sense to me is that he's associated with all of those things that make life worth living in that interim that you've carved out space for. Right? And he's someone who, he dearly loves his wife, and she dearly loves him, and he doesn't want to take another wife. He's a god of familial love, uh, and he's, you know, a god associated with light, but he's not the sun and he's not the spring thaw because that's more Freyr, but associated with, you know, things being able to live and thrive, but very much associated with the home and with the kinds of happiness one finds at the home, as well as with the hope for continuation because he's Frig and Odin's son and Frig and Odin's heir, even though he's not Odin's firstborn. He's Odin's firstborn by Odin's primary wife, which makes him the heir, uh, Thor's the firstborn, but different mother. So, uh, you know, if we wrap our head around Balder as representing those things, we have that are worth having in the brief period during which life continues, right? When we say Odin worked this hard to carve out a space where we can live, Balder is all of the reasons that that's worthwhile. All of the wonderful things that we get to have and be and love and enjoy in the periods of time that we do have upon the Earth. Uh, and then you cannot allow a violation of that to go on avenge. because that is the whole point.

***I just want to ask you about your acapella work with the Norse music. Uh, do you, are you still doing that?***

ADA: Yeah, um, I'm not, I'm not actively finishing any new songs at the moment, though I have a couple of unfinished back burner ones. But the song cycle is complete. But what I'm interested in is trying to find a work with other theater companies to really do a proper run of this as a play. You know, it's been performed in its totality only twice, uh, at science fiction conventions, and these are both, you know, hasty we have one day of rehearsal kinds of things. But it's a very, you know, I put a lot of work into it and it strives to tell these stories in a way that gets across among other things, their incompleteness. Uh, and you know, even within the songs, the different singers bicker with each other about what is actually correct, because the sources disagree. So, the singers disagree, and the songs communicate, you know, the creation myth, Ragnarök, the Death of Balder, they tell these very classic stories in, in a fun and engaging way, and I love that I've managed to piece these together into a story, but the story's about their patchworkness and their thread bareness and how much is missing.

***Do you, when you, when you perform it, do you feel like, or how do you feel like, uh, how does it feel to perform those songs as somebody who's studied these myths?***

ADA: I mean, it's incredibly powerful to be performing it. Uh, and part of that is also that the breath control and muscle control that come with the performance of high intensity acapella music, especially when you have complicated harmonies going on with you are

very medically therapeutic. Uh, so when I'm singing I'm not in pain, the pain actually eases up. Uh, and so as a chronic pain sufferer, that is an incredible experience. Uh, and yeah, I mean, friends describe me when I sing as being possessed, which is perhaps slightly strong, but, uh, the, the actual act of singing them is very, very intense. And, uh, I would say emotionally transporting. And you know, that's something musical performance does, but I certainly think a lot about myself as a disabled writer and disabled performer, uh, when I'm performing these pieces that are also about figures being world shapely important and disabled at the same time. Uh, and so when we think carefully about how to represent disability in ways that are constructive instead of ways that advance ableism, uh, how to carefully choose our words, I know there's lots of arguments about the word disabled versus differently abled versus handicap versus all these other things. The core of that is to find ways to represent it positively, uh, and to represent it in a variety of different contexts rather than the kind of very repetitive archetypes of disability that you get in fiction. Um, and so I love the way Viking myth, which I loved long before I thought of it in terms of disability and which I loved long before I identified as disabled. Um, but which I loved definitely long before I realized, wait a minute, this is actually a pattern that they're all disabled. Uh, putting that together as a pattern is, is a, is a big leap that I find it exciting. Therefore, that's something I already loved, is additionally an opportunity to, uh, broaden the narrow band in which we explore disability.

**That's it for this week's bonus episode. I hope you enjoyed it. And we'll be back with new episodes of Imaginary Worlds next week.**