

BOOKS □ BOOKS □ BOOKS □ BOOKS

Anderson, Rachel, and David Bradby (Bob Dewar, illus.). *Reynard the Fox*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

Harrison, Michael (Tudor Humphries, illus.). *The Curse of the Ring*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

Harrison, Michael (Tudor Humphries, illus.). *The Doom of the Gods*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

Middleton, Hayden (Anthea Toorchen, illus.). *The Island of the Mighty*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

These books are the first four in the Oxford Myths and Legends series. Oxford claims that these books "retell" traditional myths and legends and that each book contains "full color and black and white illustrations [which] combine with the text in appealing to younger readers while retaining the power of poetry of the old stories" (jacket blurb).

There is great need for books which will introduce young readers to myths and legends other than those from Greece and Rome. Western European myths and legends, especially the Scandinavian and Celtic, have been shortchanged for generations, attracting popular attention only in such publications as *Thor* comic books and various fantasy novels or as a part of the Arthurian legends respectively. Unfortunately, these books promise a good deal more than they deliver.

Reynard the Fox is perhaps the best of the lot because it attempts so little. It is a pleasant collection of some of the more popular tales of the traditional French trickster figure, Reynard the Fox. A number of the stories feature Reynard's prodigious appetite, and all of the stories show the trickster at his sly best.

The Curse of the Ring is a retelling of the *Volsunga Saga*, probably more familiar as Wagner's *Ring Cycle* of operas, containing the stories of Sigurd — the forging of the sword, the slaying of Fafnir, and the rescue of Brynhild. The strength of this book is that it is a fairly complete retelling of the *Ring* story.

The Doom of the Gods attempts to present Norse mythology in its 80 pages. The collection begins with "The Wall of Asgard," includes most of the popular stories, and concludes with "Ragnarok." But the stories of the Norse Gods are set in "a time

before our time," and after the last battle, "new land rose out of the waters," "birds and beasts covered the land," and "New men and women spread over the land and a new Father ruled the heavens." This Christian ending is not in the original.

The Island of the Mighty is perhaps the most disappointing of the four. It selects Welsh tales from the *Mabinogi* and elsewhere, making sure to include one with King Arthur in it and another with Merlin and dragons but with little or no thought as to how well they fit together into a whole. The Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* is retold without reference to the other three branches, and Nisien, the brother of Efnisien is missing from the story.

These retellings seem to be less an attempt to introduce young readers to ancient myths and legends and more an attempt to capitalize on the inherent ability of myth and legend to attract readers — even in such skimpy versions as these. If these were really introductions for young people: 1) stories would be told faithfully, and many of them, especially in the Norse and Celtic books, are not; and 2) there would be support materials — introductions and afterwords, maps, and bibliographies. Except for *Reynard the Fox*, which has an afterword that discusses the source materials as well as the history and nature of the Reynard stories, not one of these books has any secondary materials in it. What happens to the child who wants to find out more about these materials? One expects better scholarship from Oxford University Press.

— C. W. Sullivan III

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