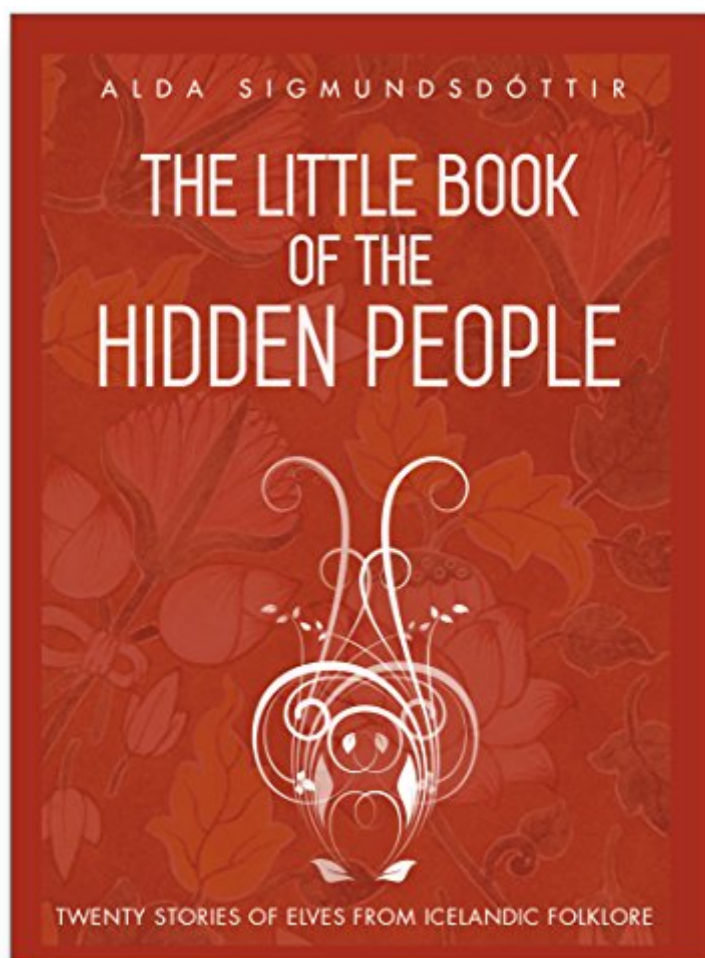




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The Little Book Of The Hidden People: Stories Of Elves From Icelandic Folklore



Synopsis

Icelandic folklore is rife with tales of elves and hidden people that inhabited hills and rocks in the landscape. But what do those elf stories really tell us about the Iceland of old and the people who lived there? In this book, author Alda Sigmundsdóttir presents twenty translated elf stories from Icelandic folklore, along with fascinating notes on the context from which they sprung. The international media has had a particular infatuation with the Icelanders' elf belief, generally using it to propagate some kind of "kooky Icelanders" myth. Yet Iceland's elf folklore, at its core, reflects the plight of a nation living in abject poverty on the edge of the inhabitable world, and its people's heroic efforts to survive, physically, emotionally and spiritually. That is what the stories of the elves, or hidden people, are really about. In a country that was, at times, virtually uninhabitable, where poverty was endemic and death and grief a part of daily life, the Icelanders nurtured a belief in a world that existed parallel to their own. This was the world of the hidden people, which more often than not was a projection of the most fervent dreams and desires of the human population. The hidden people lived inside hillocks, cliffs or boulders, very close to the abodes of the humans. Their homes were furnished with fine, sumptuous objects. Their clothes were luxurious, their adornments beautiful. Their livestock was better and fatter, their sheep yielded more wool than regular sheep, their crops were more bounteous. They even had supernatural powers: they could make themselves visible or invisible at will, and they could see the future. To the Icelanders, stories of elves and hidden people are an integral part of the cultural and psychological fabric of their nation. They are a part of their identity, a reflection of the struggles, hopes, resilience and endurance of their people. All this and more is the subject of this book.

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Customer Reviews

According to legend, Eve, mother of mankind, was asked by god to display all her children. In a bout of laziness she selected the best ones and got them presentable. God counted them and made them royalty, the ones that were hidden were confined to a status of dwelling in boulder and mountains. These are the Huldu folk of Iceland which many refer to as elves. Legend has it that if you are in the wilderness you may suddenly see one of them only to have them disappear into a rock or boulder. Much of the lore about these folk is reminiscent of faerie and elf folklore of old Europe. It was on a whim that I decided to purchase this slender volume and believe me I am glad that I made this purchase. Too bad it was not longer as I consumed this volume in a matter of hours and it left me wanting more. Not only were the stories entertaining and the authoress's notes after each story informative but she also has a strong dose of common sense and strong Icelandic pride. She starts off dispelling a rumor put forward in Vanity Fair that most Icelanders believe in Elves and will not begin a construction project unless an elf seer is brought in and determines whether or not it is ok to build there. The authoress states boldly that most people do not believe in elves and that before construction begins the place is checked out to see if there is any valuable archaeology or whether it is important in folklore. After all why destroy your own history. The stories of the Huldu folk arose from a harsh environment where only the strongest could survive. Believe me old Iceland was tough. Bitter cold, lack of food and primitive lodging made survival difficult. More over men could not marry until they accumulated enough wealth which was tough to do. Sexual relations were limited to reduce the number of births. If the man of the house died the woman lost everything and was sent forward as a laborer. That meant kids were fostered out and the holding auctioned off. People could disappear in fog drifts or get lost along the way from one farmstead to another. Where as the people were poor, the elves had plenty. Elves were known to seduce mortals, this could explain unwanted pregnancies. Humans were not allowed to dance together because it led in their

eyes to illicit unions. Elves often got people to dance. Being abducted by elves could be used to explain away how a child could get lost in a snow drift or step over a precipice. At least a parent could think the child had found a better life. The book itself is composed of 21 stories collected orally by the author. They involve many motifs. One popular motif is a mortal woman called away from church or home to help an elf woman give birth. The woman is rewarded but gets an ointment on her eye that allows her to see elves. When they find out they nullify the effect of the ointment or use some spittle to weaken the eye. Nicer than the European version where the woman is blinded. Several stories involve women meeting hidden folk in a dairy, being seduced and then made pregnant. Later the child is born and the woman gives it to the Huldu Folk. Later the lover comes back after she is married and the two die in each other's arms. The child is sometimes raised by the remaining parent or goes off on its own. There are also stories of those who disturbed elves and ended up receiving a poor fortune for it. Others who helped the elves received good fortune. Enjoy these tales they are a quick and entertaining read and the author opens up a door into the mind and heart of Iceland.

This is the third book by Alda Sigmundsdóttir that I've read since returning from my first trip to Iceland 3 weeks ago. Being of Norwegian heritage, I've always been fascinated about the Vikings' discovery and settlement of Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland ("Vinland"), but I knew very little about that history or the culture that developed in these places. I think of Alda as kind of a "reverse Leif Ericson" - she was born in Iceland and raised in Canada and Western Europe, before returning as an adult to "The Land of the Nice". What's awesome about Alda's books is her perspective as an "outsider's insider", and her super concise, articulate yet informal writing style. The books I've read are collections of short essays, which makes them very quick reads. Think of *The Little Book of the Hidden People* as an Icelandic version of Grimm's Fairy Tales (Alda makes this comparison). Like Grimm's Fairy Tales, there are clear morals to each story that reinforce cultural values. Now, imagine a book of Grimm's Fairy Tales, where each fable is followed by well researched explanations of that story's cultural and historical context, all written in a very vernacular and accessible style. If you can picture that, and it sounds interesting, go ahead and order this book without delay.

What a brilliant little book! Ms. Sigmundsdóttir has a very engaging way of writing, but doesn't embellish the tales. And in her commentaries she has a fine sense of the difference between "believing" in the stories and fully accepting them as part of the back story of this amazing culture

with its difficult history. I've immersed myself in the Sagas and Jón Árnason's book and other writings about the folklore of Iceland and this is a great (and necessary and welcome) addition to the tales. I'm going to buy her other books right now.

I loved this book for its sociological/anthropological take on Icelandic mythology, rather than the usually inexplicable "fantastic epic" prism taken by many authors who venture into this world. It brings very unique points of views which is what makes indie books, such as this one, very interesting, important and of great relevance to be published. Works of this kind enriches and enlightens the big mass publishing market. I have a special love for Iceland, even though I know so little about it. Books like this one are a great way to learn the history of a country through the eyes of the common folk, the everyday farmer, the ordinary people, and basically through unofficial eyes of written History, done by authorities.

Annoying that the author sets the premise that she wants to tell us traditional stories about elves and hidden people, then says she doesn't believe in them and deconstructs the stories in obvious and not very insightful ways. Just ok. I gave it away as soon as I read it. Meh

-A wonderful little book and an excellent introduction to Icelandic folklore. I used this as a text for my seminar on world folklore because it gave the students a succinct approach to some standard Icelandic tales in addition to other Icelandic reading they were doing before a study tour to Reykjavik. What was most valuable for our purposes is the author's distinct interpretation at the end of every tale. Her strong point of view allowed for some great discussion on the meaning behind the stories.

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