



## Myths of Origin

*Catherynne M. Valente*

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## **Myths of Origin** Catherynne M. Valente

Live the Myth! New York Times best-seller Catherynne M. Valente is the single most compelling voice to emerge in fantasy fiction in decades. Collected here for the first time, her early short novels explore, deconstruct, and ultimately explode the seminal myths of both East and West, casting them in ways you've never read before and may never read again.

**The Labyrinth** - a woman wanderer, a Maze like no other, a Monkey and a Minotaur and a world full of secrets leading down to the Center of it All.

**Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams** - an aged woman named Ayako lives in medieval Japan, but dreams in mythical worlds that beggar the imagination . . . including our own modern world.

**The Grass-Cutting Sword** - when a hero challenges a great and evil serpent, who speaks for the snake? In this version of a myth from the ancient chronicle Kojiki, the serpent speaks for himself.

**Under in the Mere** - Arthur and Lancelot, Mordred and le Fay. The saga has been told a thousand times, but never in the poetic polyphony of this novella, a story far deeper than it is long.

## **Myths of Origin Details**

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## From Reader Review Myths of Origin for online ebook

### Tyrannosaurus regina says

Though the story notes gave me some context, I'm still not entirely sure what the novellas here were really doing, I just know that they were doing it *beautifully*. Even with a thin narrative thread binding each together, the imagery and the language were incredible. The rating is a compromise, between my longing for a narrative in each but being swept away by the way they are told.

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### Jacquelyn Fusco says

The Labyrinth was depressing. I skipped the second one because her notes said it was gonna be really depressing. The Grass-Cutting Sword was...not as good as her other stuff. I started Under in the Mere, but stopped because I am not familiar with the King Arthur stories.

This is some of her earliest writing and she was depressed at the time for at least some of it. The Orphan's Tales are dark, but their depth and intricacy are rewarding. These short stories did not give me enough to endure the melancholy and despair.

I'm hoping I'll like Deathless...the Melancholy of Mechagirl's title makes me pause...I so adored The Orphan's Tales and the Fairyland books!! And Palimpsest was good too. I'll try The Bread We Eat in Dreams.

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### Kris says

I must admit I had a false-start with this book. I had been wanting to read *Yume no Hon*, The Book of Dreams, for quite some time now and I recall settling down to it and somehow the words read like vapor dispersing as soon they hit my eye, all but forgotten. I set my book down and it was months before I picked it back up again to start again with a different myth.

This time *Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi*, The Grass-Cutting Sword, was my starting off point and I had a much easier time of it. Each story a mini-seed in and of itself, one small piece of a bigger whole. Each head of the *yamata-no-orochi*, the eight-headed-eight-tailed snake and the family of girls that were devoured, one by each head. It tells the tale of the origin of Japan, of Izangi and Izanami, and their children who sprang from various beginnings and populated the land with gods. Central to this tale is Susanoo-no-Mikoto, god of storm and sea, and his battle with the orochi.

I quite liked this story. I always knew where I was in it, as each orochi head made an appearance, and it was lovely re-visiting the origin myths of Japan in a very accessible way - those that have tried muddling through the *Kojiki* or the *Nihon Shoki* know what I mean. I loved reading about ancient Japan through Cat's eyes; the observations made, the detailed descriptions of surroundings, and of course the myths of Japan's origins. It really struck home because Japan was home for a couple of years. I could feel Japan through her eyes and it made me ???????, a little nostalgic.

Next for me was *Under in the Mere*, set firmly in Arthurian legend and oddly the present day, each mini-chapter a character-weaving of immense power. The beginning point is the Lady of the Lake and from

thence to various knights, Mordred, Morgan le Fay all personified with Tarot deck characters as their chapter headings. It is interesting to note the juxtaposition of medieval and current, of ancient times and some not-too-distant Californian past that each of these Arthurian characters can somehow see as I, too, can see having grown up in Southern California. Another story of home for me. I also very much liked this story; it was a telling of Aurther through lesser known means and Arthur was not the focus here but the tale, the myth. It was quite lovely.

I'm now working my way through *The Labyrinth*, which seems to me like little vignettes in the mind of a young woman as she navigates the mazes of her mind, of her life, of where she should be and needs to go.

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## Story says

It took me a while to log this after I'd finished. It was nice to revisit Valente's early novellas, but I was mostly interested in *Under, In the Mere*. Again, it had the feeling of a series of prose poems, this one centered on visions of masculinity. I loved how it opened and closed with a female voice, the Lady of the Lake and Morgan Le Fey respectively. I can't seem to talk about these early works of hers without getting deep into structure and image and cadence; because it does read so much like poetry, because they are snapshots, vignettes, no action really happens, and the substance of it is the body of Arthurian legend that most readers would already be familiar with, indeed, it depends, like a good poem, on the familiarity. Of all of those early novellas, I like this and *Yume No Hon* the best. They cut like knives.

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## Melanti says

Labryinth - 4 Stars

Yume No Hon - 5 Star

Grass Cutting Sword - 4 Stars

Under in the Mere - 5 Stars

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## Ea Solinas says

Catherynne Valente is an author on the rise, entrancing readers with her luscious, dreamlike prose and her exquisite explorations into magical realms. Even her children's stories are like little gold-rimmed gems.

"Myths of Origin: Four Short Novels" brings together four novellas written over the years, from her debut novella "The Labyrinth" to the recent story "Under in the Mere." They're beautifully-written, swimming in exquisite words and images -- and the main problem is that it's often hard to extract a true narrative from it.

"The Labyrinth" is the tale of the Walker, the Seeker-After, a woman who ate the compass rose. She wanders through the timeless, endless Roads of the Labyrinth, where she finds a Hare, a figure garbed in opals, a Crocodile, a Mirror, an erudite Lobster and his keys, and countless other strange wonders. Will she ever find the center?

"Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams" switches the focus from a mystical world to ancient Japan. The story

centers on Ayako, a woman who lost her village long ago, and now lives in a pagoda on the side of a Mountain. Nearby villagers believe her to be a spirit, and bring offerings to her -- but the answer of what Ayako is connects to a vast expanse of goddesses.

"The Grass-Cutting Sword" is another strange, beautiful tale based in Japanese folklore. The tale is partly about the thunder god Susanoo, who is sent to earth in human form by his sister Amaterasu. As he struggles to defeat the eight-headed monster Yamata-no-Orochi, Valente explores the perspective of the Orochi's multiple heads ("I am Eight. We are Eight") and the maidens sacrificed to him.

And finally there is "Under in the Mere," which reimagines Arthurian legends just as adeptly. It follows the perspectives of various characters from Arthurian legend -- the Lady of the Lake; Sir Kay and his thoughts of his brother; the Green Knight; the dancing, dreaming Sir Dagonet; Lancelot and the two women he loved; Morgan le Fay bringing her brother to Avalon; Galahad in a modern world, and others.

WARNING: These books are not easy read. All four are awash in windswept, jewel-toned words that slowly drown you in their beauty, and they often don't have straightforward narratives. "The Labyrinth" is particularly hard to read -- it's a very experimental novel, like someone took a few dozen lush poems and stretched them into prose.

The following three novellas have more defined stories, but they still aren't for people who like nice, defined beginning-middle-end stories. These are for people who like to sink into decadently luscious, scented prose like a luxurious bath, surrounded by flowers, talking animals, mystical dream-lands and dusty jewels. Valente's prose is almost too sensual to stand at times.

"Myths of Origin: Four Short Novels" drowns you in lovely words and eerie, hallucinatory dreams -- just don't expect a story that won't befuddle you.

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## **Amanda says**

Under the Mere:

I have been looking for a Kindle copy of Under The Mere since the moment I heard there was a Cat version of Arthur. I have been an Arthurian buff since I was wee thing, and I have been a massive fan of Cat since the moment I discovered her. Hear there was a crosshatch between the two maybe be long desperately for it.

Finally, I got to cross it off, and I have to say I deeply loved getting to ready this. Dissolving into the lake of all of it, glorious and descriptive and enchanting. I think that everyone (who loves these two things, as well) should definitely take it as a charge that they will need these. It's gorgeous and worth having.

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## **Lianne Burwell says**

How to rate this book? It's really difficult. The first story was written when the author was young with poetry aspirations. The language is beautiful, but convoluted. The others do better of getting story in their, but still, it's more about the language than telling a story. As a result, it took me forever to get through it.

I'm glad I read the stories (and despite the tag on the cover, only one of them is really long enough to be

considered a 'novel'), but putting all four together is a bit of an overload.

Not sure I feel any urge to read anything else by the author, but maybe I'll feel different in a year or two.

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## Jess says

(Review originally posted on my blog)

Let me begin by admitting that this review will not do Catherynne M. Valente's book(s) justice. Valente is one of my favourite authors, and is, in my opinion, one of the most talented and exciting writers of fantasy working today. Her imagination is vast, her skill nigh unsurpassable, and her writing is consistently beautiful, awe-inspiring, and shocking. Be prepared: this is going to be an adjective-heavy review, and yet I can tell you now that it still won't be able to fully describe what I think about Valente's work. But, hell, I'm going to try anyway.

Myths of Origin is an omnibus edition of Valente's early prose works. It comprises four novellas: The Labyrinth, Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams, The Grass-Cutting Sword, and Under In The Mere. Each work is very different, and yet similar concerns and tropes also run through them, making it fascinating to have them collected together in such a way. In brief, the four novellas use existing myths and legends as springboards in order to launch the reader into fresh, revisionist perspectives, and to explore the psyches of their characters. The Labyrinth, as its title suggests, extrapolates its narrative from the Greek labyrinth myth, with minotaur included; Yume No Hon, by contrast, inhabits the mind of a lonely old Japanese woman who in dreams becomes other and all women, mythic or no; in The Grass-Cutting Sword, Valente retells a myth from the Kojiki chronicle, in which she gives voice to the so-called 'villain' of the piece, the maiden-eating serpent, reshaping his role and giving us insight into his motivation; likewise, in Under In The Mere each chapter is told by an Arthurian character – the Lady of the Lake, Kay, Lancelot, Bedivere – and others more obscure: these are their stories, if they could tell us themselves. And beyond gleams the light of Avalon, of the otherland, which Valente re-imagines as California, complete with beaches, litter-strewn alleyways, and quayside drunkards.

Have I whet your appetite yet?

While all four of these novellas are fantastic in their own ways, my favourite is The Labyrinth. This is perhaps partly because it was my first foray into Valente's work, when I bought a separate copy about two years ago (the 2004 Prime books hardback, which incidentally has a beautiful cover). By telling you about The Labyrinth, I hope to give you some glimpse into the quality and depth of Valente's work in general (though her writings all do different and exciting things in their own rights, of course).

Reading The Labyrinth was an experience that really opened my eyes to what could be done with fantasy, with myths, and with language in general. I realise that that sounds vague and flippant, it isn't meant to. Truly, I was in awe. The Labyrinth stunned me with its rich, sensuous, and surprising imagery, its visceral-yet-nebulous narrative which reaches beyond the events on the page and ripples outwards with numerous allusions and symbolic resonances, and the eerie and magical characters that walk its pages – all things which I have come to know as characteristic of Valente's fabulous writing.

In The Labyrinth, a woman wanders through weaving pathways, meeting strange and beguiling creatures – an icy angel and a golden monkey, to name but two – but her progress, whilst often rendered in harsh and physical terms, is not merely corporeal but symbolic (ouch, that's a painfully reductive way of putting it, but bear with me!). Valente's novella incorporates mythic logic – of the beast and the maiden, of the three stages

of womanhood, maiden-mother-crone – making the protagonist’s journey heavy with meaning. Such allusions do not, however, make the story abstracted and difficult to access as a reader. The symbolic echoes serve to enhance the emotional impact of the story, and even moved me to tears in places. I think, perhaps, that this works so very well because the mythic resonances tap into deep, tender places in the readers’ minds. We sense the weight of cultural, historical, and emotional baggage that these myths carry with them... and it moves something in us. Certainly, the way that Valente uses her allusions is not distancing, but the very opposite – it is intimate and stirring.

Above, I said that Valente’s work was ‘heavy with meaning’. By this, I did not mean to imply that Valente’s prose is turgid or overwrought. Her lush, poetic style may be a little oblique for some readers’ tastes – especially in a market in which ‘transparent’ prose is the norm – but honestly, if you are willing to expend the extra concentration that Valente’s work needs (and deserves!), you will not regret it. With many other authors, you can sense that language is merely a tool via which to tell their swashbuckling story/communicate their great characters. If the writing’s also good, that’s a plus; if not, oh well, the story was pretty fun. The same cannot be said of Valente; in her works, style and content are not divisible. Her writing is more challenging than most, but it is doing something more than most, too. It is language with affect. The reader traverses the linguistic paths as well as the characters, and not all paths are smooth and straight.

If this sounds at all interesting to you, read Valente. Plunge into her words. Revel in them. Breathe them in.

Now that’s magic.

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### **Anna Maria says**

The four short novels collected in this book are "The Labyrinth", "Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams", "The Grass-Cutting Sword" and "Under in the Mere". The most important thing you need to know about them is that they're not actually novels, but rather novel-length poems. Each tale has a central idea or image rather than an actual plot, which makes "Myths of Origin" a challenging and pretty slow read. I would recommend it only to someone who likes poetry and can enjoy a longer work purely for its exquisite, dreamlike prose and strong imagery where the boundaries between the fantastical, the mythological and the real are blurred.

Personally, I really enjoyed parts of "Myths", but other parts made very little sense to me and were difficult to get through. I found it helped to read Valente's afterword, so I would recommend reading it as a foreword instead if you struggle with parts of this book.

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### **Darceylaine says**

Switched from the kindle version to this lovely hardcover version with pages that are nice to the touch. Suddenly I feel better about the whole enterprise. For a book whose prose is as slippery as this one, it is so grounding to be able to see the thing on a printed page.

I am reviewing each book from this anthology separately as I finish them. See individual reviews.

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## **Willis says**

I do not, repeat do not recommend this book!! It suffers from adjective vomit, descriptive diarrhea, a redundancy of nonsensical metaphor verbosity, most of which are not even close to being pertinent to the plot! It is a grab bag of long-winded, rambling, loquacious paragraphs that serve absolutely no purpose whatsoever other than to act as an ego stroking device and fill the pages with pretentious, wordy fluff!

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## **Alytha says**

The Labyrinth - quite liked it for the imagery and emotions it evokes, although the story is everything but linear. Very sad too.

Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams - Has some good parts and some less so...all in all, readable but a bit complicated

The Grass-Cutting Sword - Probably the most straightforward story in this book...also very sad

Under in the Mere - A retelling of the Arthurian myth. Some characters are really well-done and interesting, others just confusing.

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## **Megan Baxter says**

Second review in a row where I adore an author but have more reservations about this particular book. In this case, it's not that I didn't think it lived up to previous books. That would be hard, since this is some of the first stuff Catherynne Valente wrote. It's more that, if I hadn't already known what a terrific writer she is, I might not have stuck this one out.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision here.

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

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## **Shawn Edrei says**

Dense to the point of incomprehensibility. Hard pass.

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