

## Book Review

The Complete and Original Norwegian Folktales of Asbjørnsen and Moe. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. Foreword by Neil Gaiman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. xxi þ 319 pp. £27.99 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-51790-568-2

A decent English translation of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe's *eventyr* has been a long time coming, and we finally have it here. Tiina Nunnally has produced a clear and scintillating rendition of these tales that are so much a part of Norwegian culture and folkloric history. The 'complete and original' folktales the title of this book refers to are Asbjørnsen and Moe's first, 'original', collection *Norske Folkeeventyr* ('Norwegian Folktales', first volume 1843) of fifty-eight tales, plus the further two tales that appeared in the third edition, but not incorporating their *Ny Samling* ('New Collection', 1871). The present volume is a translation of the fourth edition of *Norske Folkeeventyr* (1868), the last that Asbjørnsen and Moe worked on together. Their folktales were first translated into English by George Webbe Dasent in *Popular Tales from the Norse* in 1859, comprising the first fifty-eight *Norske Folkeeventyr*, and in his 1874 *Tales from the Fjeld*, containing the two additional tales plus forty-five from the *Ny Samling*. Subsequent English translations of a number of tales from *Norske Folkeeventyr*, *Ny Samling*, and Asbjørnsen's two collections of *Norske Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn* ('Norwegian Fairy Tales and Legends', 1845–48 and 1866) have appeared in various collections over the decades. However, these are mostly fragmented and, for the most part, do not capture the voice and atmosphere of the original collections, while Dasent's translations are often odd and in serious need of updating.

As many storytellers and folklorists know, translating folktales and other such texts is fiendishly difficult (and often unsuccessful), not least because we lose nuance, tone, and even meaning. Nunnally recognizes as much in her Translator's Note, and has done well to preserve many of these things, producing a lively and readable collection to fill the reader with the feelings of wonder, peril, and comedy that are the hallmarks of these narratives. Of course, Asbjørnsen and Moe's own approach was to record the tales in a 'consistent, literary voice' (xvii), rather than in the dialects of the storytellers, in a conscious contribution to the formalization of the written Norwegian language (Bokmål) and literature. This was intended as a distinct input—alongside the tales themselves—to Norway's striving for independence from Denmark. If I was forced to pick at one thing that was marginally less satisfying with regards to this translation, it would be the use of the literal translation '[the] Ash Lad' when referring to Askeladden, the hero of so many of these tales. As the original name rolls so much better off the tongue, and its meaning could have been easily explained in the Translator's Note, this is very slightly obtrusive, particularly when the descriptive name of another hero, Lillekort, is untranslated. However, this is more down to personal preference and overfamiliarity than anything, and I daresay that no one else would find fault here. And it is, of course, infinitely better than Dasent's renaming of Askeladden as 'Boots'.

Neither the short Foreword by Neil Gaiman nor Nunnally's Translator's Note are particularly scholarly, or reveal to us new information or interpretations, but this, I think, is deliberate, and makes the collection more accessible to a wider audience. Gaiman's is an intentionally *uncritical* and affectionate appreciation of the tales presented in this book. He reflects on his first visit to Norway, the close connection between the Norwegian landscape and its folktales, and the influence of folklore and landscape on artwork—particularly that of Theodor Kittelsen, examples of which grace the dust jacket and a couple of pages within. The Translator's Note contains solid and comprehensible summaries of Asbjørnsen and Moe's lives and works. It describes the Grimms' influence on the two Norwegian collectors, both in their

motivation for collection and in their interpretation of the tales, alongside the reception of the tales and Dasent's translation. It ends on a personal reflection of Nunnally's childhood encounters with various Nordic folk characters, and her delight in reading Asbjørnsen and Moe (as the collection of folktales is colloquially known) for the first time.

As well as the tales themselves, Nunnally has also included translations of Asbjørnsen's Forewords to the second, third, and fourth editions, and an excerpt from Moe's Introduction for the second edition. These are all found at the end of this volume, likely a mindful decision to allow more casual readers to encounter the tales on their own terms, with a slight framing offered by Nunnally's Translator's Note. Including these Forewords and part of the Introduction by the collectors here is essential for readers to know more about the context, motivations, and collection methods of Asbjørnsen and Moe, particularly for those who cannot access them in Norwegian. Following these, and equally important, is a list (from information from the second edition of 1852) that provides details on where each folktale was collected, where variants of the tale are found, who collected it, and the tale titles in Norwegian. This allows the reader to delve into specific tales and their associated regions further, and hopefully will encourage readers to further explore the rich culture and history of Norway today. I would unreservedly recommend this delightful volume to anyone with an interest in folktales and in Norway, and applaud the University of Minnesota Press for bringing these tales to a broader readership.

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