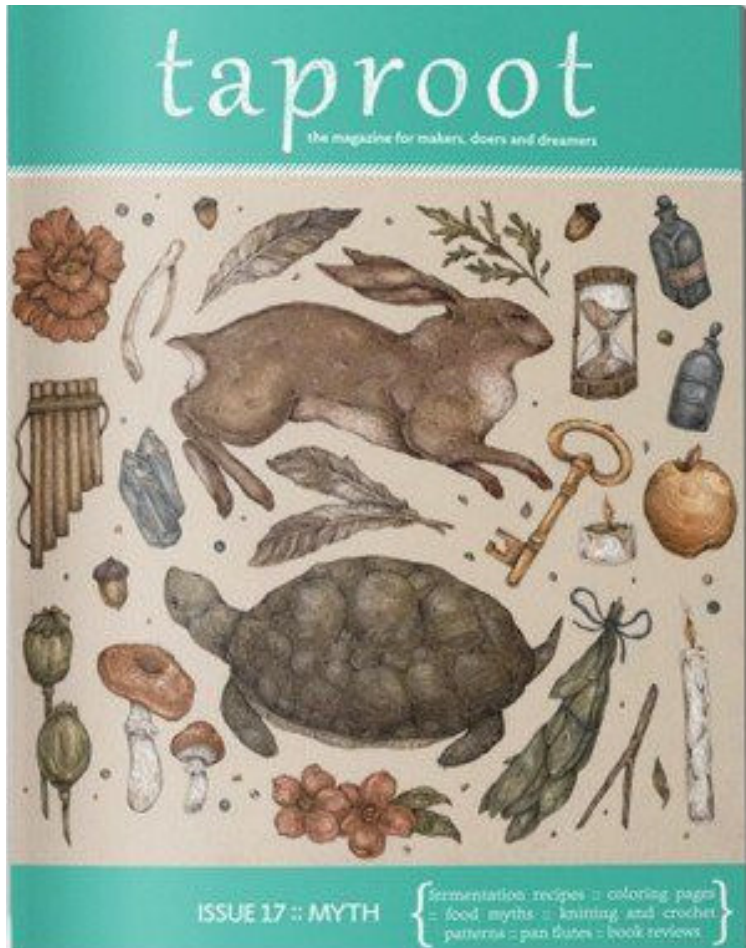


Recommended Reading: *Myth*

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Myth is vast in meaning. It is as ancient as the Greeks and as modern as an Internet essayist debunking the “myth” of multitasking. Myths certainly have the power to harm, but they can also hold space for truth—even if those truths aren’t rooted in fact.

I have been, historically, a receptor of myth. We all are, I think. Mine came as stories of virgin birth and transfiguration and wine-into-blood, wrapped in the haze of church incense and presented as unshakeable truth. And although that air has cleared, for me, I don’t particularly care to understand the sleight-of-hand that embellishes a card trick, what smoke and mirrors make the magician’s hat produce a rabbit. I choose to believe in magic rather than trickery.

The following is a small collection of myth-ish tales that I find to be the truth-holding type.

Madeleine Is Sleeping by Sarah Shun-lien Bynum

Each time I read Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum’s novel *Madeleine Is Sleeping*, I feel open to, taken in by, its fairytale cloak, all the blurred boundaries and realities that the story wraps around its finger and beckons with. As I’ve tried to explain this book to others, though, I’ve found that the best I can offer are qualities, emotive and visual—how it makes me feel and see—and perhaps a few small character sketches: a fat lady who sprouts wings, a man with a William II mustache who sings out his backside, the libertine widow, a young

girl named Madeleine whose fingers have fused into mitted hands after being dipped, as punishment, into a pot of lye. It is a book that straddles the realms of the real and unreal, the sacred and the profane, prose and poetry—and it does all of this without getting clunky, without losing its grip on the rope that holds up the curtain.

On most pages of this book, the wash of white space around lines of type suggests poetry. Each vignette—or, perhaps, each chapter—is topped with a title, often a sole word and occasionally a phrase: *Hush, Ahem, Stirring, Alchemy, The Hospital, Atop a Caravan, Objects Lost on Journeys, Madeleine Reasons, Madeleine Rejoices*. Early on in the novel, the title “Madeleine Dreams” introduces characters and threads of story that can be placed firmly in the dream realm. Reality, then, exists in the bucolic village in Belle Epoque France where Madeleine’s family—a mother, a father, and a small troupe of sticky-handed siblings—tiptoe around her still, sleeping body. At first, these vignettes present the family’s life, burdened though it might be with an excess of pears in the orchard, as revolving reverently around the sleeping girl. The farther from home Madeleine travels in her dreams, though, the more muddled and strange this reality turns. Characters step over from the dream realm to have chats with Mother, to hitch a ride in the pony cart with the children, and to stow away in Madeleine’s bed. A coded letter from Madeleine reaches her siblings from the gypsy caravan she has joined in her dreams.

We readers accept these crossings between the waking world and the dream world, the blurring of our perceived boundaries of what is real and unreal, because the language of the

novel carries us back and forth until we no longer know in which direction we are moving. It weakens our convictions about what we know to be true. The book steps into the circus ring of theatrics and sideshow freaks, where we can hardly believe our eyes, but when the curtain is drawn, there is a beautiful woman bowing devilishly across the strings of the viol that is her belly. We suspend our belief for the pleasure of playing audience to the spectacle and wonder. We might recognize the chair we are sitting on from the dining room of a neighbor, the hall may smell of kerosene and gunpowder, and we may notice tiny bits of down clinging to the coat of the man onstage, but we are about to be told a story—*hush*.

Hild: A Novel by Nicola Griffith

We are led into the seventh-century world of Nicola Griffith's novel by the hand of three-year-old Hild—the girl who would become adviser to kings, the “light of the world” abbess of Whitby. It is a world thoroughly and viscerally imagined by Griffith from what few facts can be gathered about St. Hilda of Whitby's early life from Venerable Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English*. History gives us this: the second daughter of a royal household, Hilda is brought up in the king's court after her father is poisoned when she is very young; she later becomes a nun and the founder of Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire. *Hild* fills in all the wondrous in-between.

The novel's story is both subtle and huge. It winds through the inner landscape of a girl whose mother has given her the mantra “Quiet mouth, bright mind,” and whose tenuous position as seer to her king uncle lands her in the mud-suck of the battlefield before she is yet ten. On a grander scale, it is the story of one mythology (Anglo-Saxon paganism) giving way to another (early Christianity). But the characters in *Hild* are not led solely by superstition: Hild's visions are rarely purely fantastical, and the conversions that happen are as shrewdly political as they are spiritual.

While this is by no means the tale of woman chained to household drudgery, I was especially drawn to the familiar minutiae of domestic life, belabored as it might have been with the technologies available in the seventh century. In *Hild*, we get the weft and warp of the loom, the slow churning of butter, the deft straining of cheese—tasks that any woman of the time would have been occupied with, her contribution to the larger functioning of the community. These are tasks, however, that occupy the hands but often leave the mind free to wander, to pluck up details that might have otherwise gone amiss, and, in the case of many

women in this book, to quicken with the pulse of advantage and power.

And the best thing of all: Nicola Griffith is currently at work on a sequel to *Hild*.

The Once & Future King by T. H. White

My two young sons are currently about forty books deep into Mary Pope Osborne's Magic Tree House series. While the books have served nicely as a jumping board into the world of long fiction—and have helped us all find a slower rhythm for read-aloud chapter books—I have struggled with their formulaic nature (that is, brother and sister embark on an adventuresome mission in their time-traveling tree house). The boys love this predictability, the comfort of knowing that by chapter ten the children will find their way home again. But first on my list of books to read with them after we've worked our way through the rest of Magic Tree House is T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

My sons have already met many of the players in the legend of King Arthur—Merlyn, Morgan le Fey, the mystic realm of Camelot—but not quite as they are presented in White's enormously vibrant retelling. The first chapter in the book, “The Sword in the Stone,” is an almost perfect tale of boyhood. The story details, not just the outer energies and escapades (which are certainly present, in the form of quests and falconry and jousting) of young Wart (Arthur), but also the developing inner complexities of character, the doubts and concerns of self that are inevitably forming. Merlyn, who is present as Wart's tutor, helps guide the boy into experiences that take him, quite literally, outside of himself by changing him into various animals. But even master Merlyn is flawed; one of my favorite passages in the book dips into a moment after Merlyn has brashly reprimanded Wart's foster brother for speaking meanly:

Kay, instead of flying into his usual passion, hung his head. He was not at all an unpleasant person really, but clever, quick, proud, passionate and ambitious. He was one of those people who would be neither a follower nor a leader, but only an aspiring heart, impatient in the failing body which imprisoned it. Merlyn repented of his rudeness at once. He made a little silver hunting-knife come out of the air, which he gave him to put things right. The knob of the handle was made of the skull of a stoat, oiled and polished like ivory, and Kay loved it.

I find moments like these to be so important, moments in which our shared, flawed humanity is laid bare—the inevitability of hurt and harm inflicted always there, but also the endless potential to make it better.

The Wild Unknown Tarot Guidebook by Kim Krans

My first experience with tarot was when I was about seventeen, at a Renaissance festival. I circled the tiny tent where a woman in a fringed head scarf and red lipstick offered readings, trying to cull the courage to go in while my boyfriend was preoccupied with a jousting match. I think I was hoping she would sense my hesitation and draw me in, tell me what I didn't know I wanted to hear. Tarot doesn't quite work that way, though. I've learned that the cards require a certain clarity, a specificity of purpose, a question—even if the question is as simple as “what do I need to focus on today?”

Beyond being seventeen and wanting someone to tell me something about myself, I hadn't been especially drawn to the tarot. That is, I wasn't until *The Wild Unknown* deck and guidebook appeared years later, magically, at just the moment I needed them. The imagery on these cards is modern but timeless, and in Kim Krans's words, they “speak to a world of wild nature and mystery . . . a place where the darks are truly dark and the lights are bright and expansive.” These images appear to be almost etched into the smooth cardstock, which is both hefty and delicate. The use of color

is minimal and striking against the black-and-white illustrations, giving the effect of sudden light pouring through stained glass into a darkened church.

My experience with *The Wild Unknown* is mostly personal. I draw a single card when I feel I need some nudge of guidance, a tool for a particular moment—much as we might consult a book of daily affirmations or meditations. The guidebook is brief but encouraging. Written entirely in Krans's own hand, the explanations of the centuries-old symbols represented in the arcana feel intimate, almost immediately relevant. And doubts about our abilities to correctly interpret the cards' meaning are met with this: “Well here's the thing: you do know enough. You've been a person on earth every day since you were born. You've experienced all the emotions and situations these cards depict.”

They hold our shared evolution, the arc of mythology that we all, as humans, experience.

