

“But watch out for monsters”

A Review and Discussion of Chadwick Ginther’s Thunder Road Trilogy

Ginther, Chadwick. *Thunder Road*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2012. 386 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8801-400-9.

Ginther, Chadwick. *Tombstone Blues*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2013. 418 pages. ISBN: 978-0-88801-445-0.

Ginther, Chadwick. *Too Far Gone*. Winnipeg: Ravenstone, 2015. 352 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8801-541.

The Thunder Road trilogy is a series of books by Winnipeg author Chadwick Ginther, which tells the story of one possible outcome to the question “what if the Norse gods actually came back again after Ragnarök?” In this case, long after Ragnarök – so recent that the books could be said to be set in modern times. This essay will discuss how the author has incorporated the Norse myths into a very modern work of fiction while still maintaining continuity with the original sources of this material, such as *The Poetic Edda* and *The Prose Edda*. Ginther creates a compelling story sure to grab the attention of fans of the speculative fiction genre. The trilogy consists of the books titled *Thunder Road*, *Tombstone Blues*, and *Too Far Gone*. One characteristic that stood out right from the start, between this series and those that might typically come to mind when thinking of works that are either inspired by or reimaged tellings of Norse mythology, is that the series is set in modern times, as opposed to being set in a fantasy pseudo-medieval setting, such as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* series, or in the time when the Norse myths originated, such as retellings like Gerður Kristný’s *Bloodhoof*.

The reviewer Karla King is a student and TA with the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba.

The first book, *Thunder Road*, was published in 2012, and right from the prologue the reader is met with modern terms and concepts such as pipes and steel, a welder’s torch, as well as cigarettes (*Thunder Road*, 1). We later learn that this part of the book is set in the oil patch of northern Alberta. Indeed, this was done intentionally by the author, as he stated himself in a brief talk about the books presented during the “Tolkien, Fantasy and Northern Legend” event in the Icelandic Reading Room at the University of Manitoba on November 9, 2023. He stated that his intention was to be able to tell a story in the same world as the Norse myths, without needing to ask the reader to ignore parts of established mythology as he created events involving the gods that ran contrary to what is said in the original mythology (paraphrased). When considering the details of the original Norse myths found in works such as the Poetic and Prose Eddas, he successfully does this with one major exception, without which the series could not exist in its present form. In order to include the characters in the story, Ginther finds ways to bring a number of the Norse Gods who were killed at Ragnarök back to life. Part of Norse mythology is the event Ragnarök, which kills most of the major gods in the pantheon, including Odin, Thor, Heimdall, Tyr, and Frigg³⁴ and without at least some of these deities, there would be no Norse mythology to incorporate into the books.

Throughout all three books, the writing is filled with little details that allude to the Norse myths, as well as things from the cultures that once believed in them, especially if the reader is familiar with the mythology and the Icelandic or Old Norse languages at all. For example, our protagonist, Ted, is contacted by a company called “Svarta Mining and Smelting”. “Svarta” is a modernization of the word “svartr” in Old Norse (and the modern Icelandic word “svartur”), which is the word for the colour black. Then in chapter 5, we learn that Loki has returned. His character had actually been introduced earlier in the story, in chapter two, but other than a physical description (which is irrelevant when it comes to Loki, as this trickster god is also an adept shapeshifter) and a private nickname of “The Smiler” that Ted assigns him in his head, we don’t actually know who this character is. In chapter 5, the Smiler finally introduces himself to Ted and we become aware that he is Loki in disguise. This is very on-character for Loki, who appears in various stories in the Eddas shape-shifted into a number of other forms, such as a salmon (“Loki’s Quarrel,” in *The Poetic Edda*, page 92), and a horse (chapter 42 of “Gylfagynning,” in *The Prose Edda*, page 51). This makes it especially intriguing for Loki to be the one who warns of oncoming monsters,

³⁴ Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 9-12

uttering the words of the present review's title quote within the story. By the time the reader has finished the third book in the series, we find out that Loki has been around Ted for much longer than he realizes—Ted visits his parents back in Edmonton in *Too Far Gone* and sees a picture of his mother from many years prior in which Loki can be seen in his original form. We also learn that the dog that Ted had owned with his ex-wife Susanna, whom they had coincidentally (and ironically) named Loki, actually was Loki shapeshifted into dog form. We encounter Loki many times over the course of the three books. He continually provides Ted with assistance, but not without leaving plenty of chaos in his wake.

The basic premise of the first book is that after witnessing an explosion at the oilfield where Ted was working, and seeing the fire giant Surtr, Ted has been chosen by the *dvergar* (dwarves) to prevent Surtr from burning the world. He is kidnapped by some of these dwarves, tattooed against his will with magic tattoos, and then launched into (mis)adventure. On the drive from Alberta to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Ted has decided to move to get a fresh start, he picks up a hitchhiker named Tilda (after nearly hitting her) who turns out to be a Norn, one of the three witches/goddesses who control the fate of humans. She is returning home to Gimli, Manitoba, which fits the mythology quite well, considering it is one of the places in the Manitoba Interlake region which was founded by Icelandic immigrants in the late 1800s. In fact, the name Gimli itself comes straight from Norse mythology, even though the average Lord of the Rings fan would probably immediately think of the dwarf of the same name upon hearing the town name. His quest to deal with the dwarves and giants ends up bringing him and Tilda north to Flin Flon, Manitoba, which is where Svarta Mining is apparently based. This is an appropriate place for a dwarven-owned mining company to operate from, as the town is located on the Canadian Shield, which is a geologic shield, a large area of exposed Precambrian igneous and high-grade metamorphic rock. In Flin Flon, they fight with the dwarves, giants, and Tilda's amma (grandmother) who are all vying to control Mimir's head, as it is a powerful magical item. By the end of the book, Ted and Tilda are a couple, Tilda is pregnant with the next generation of the Norns, and although they did not kill him, they have managed to drive Surtr off.

Considering how much of Loki we see in the first book, it came as no surprise that the second book of the trilogy (*Tombstone Blues*) was centered mainly around a storyline involving Hel, who is Loki's daughter. She rules over a place also called Hel, which despite the similarity of her name, is not the same as the concept of Hell in Christian mythology. Hel is more of an underworld, and receives a portion of the dead, but it is not required to be a

terrible person to end up there. We quickly learn that she is coming for vengeance, as she is angry that Ted has taken "her belongings". One of Ted's tattoos is of the Gjallarhorn, which in Norse mythology was a horn associated with Heimdallr, and it was said that the sound of the horn would herald the coming of Ragnarök. In Ted's case, activating his Gjallarhorn tattoo would summon the einherjar, who are the Honoured Dead, to fight alongside him. These weren't, however, just the nameless, faceless dead of long ago, but rather it had been somehow enchanted to summon a number of Ted's ancestors who had fought in World War I. Vengeance is a recurring theme in many, many of the Norse Sagas, so it follows that it would make a logical theme to center a modern story involving the Norse Gods around.

Through Ted's adventures in *Tombstone Blues*, we encounter Valkyries, Thor, a jötunn, Odin's brothers Vili and Ve, and Tyr. The Valkyries are working for Hel, and act accordingly. Tyr has been bound by Hel, so his behaviour is guided by that and thus we cannot really compare him to Tyr in the Eddas. Thor, at first glance, seems very odd compared to the sagas, as he appears to be in some sort of relationship with Hel, but if we look at all of Thor's characteristics in the Eddas, he is not just a protector of Asgard and Midgard. He is also very short-tempered, impulsive and easily provoked. These characteristics are seen in his choice to involve himself with Hel and her affairs, and the way he comes after Ted trying to regain Mjölnir from him.

By the end of the second book, Ted has vanquished Hel—not by killing her, but by turning her into a mortal woman rather than the half-living/half-dead goddess she was before. But this hasn't happened without the events leading up to her becoming mortal wreaking havoc all over Winnipeg. Ted and Tilda are also no longer a couple, and Tilda has had a miscarriage and lost the baby. Hel has also told Ted what he needs to do to deal with Surtr.

This brings us to book three, *Too Far Gone*, in which Ted's attention has returned to Surtr. He is also on his way back to Alberta, as Surtr has apparently camped out back in the oilfields once again. However, on his way through Saskatchewan, he sees a sign for a "black metal" concert and feels compelled to check it out, even without any bands listed. Once he arrives at the site, it turns out that the band is called Surtsúlfar, or "Wolves of Surtr". As a matter of fact, the concert is set up specifically to summon Surtr so he can burn the world. Ted successfully thwarts this attempt by summoning up heavy rainstorms with the powers of his tattoos that put out all the fires and prevent any new ones from being started. Once this fiasco is finished, Ted continues to Edmonton, where he also plans to attend his best friend's wedding.

The third book is significantly bigger than the first two, but the extra volume does not seem frivolous the way it has in other series by other authors. Much of this is done to include significant character development alongside the battles that move the story forward. Eventually we learn that Loki has been controlling almost everything right from the start. We also learn that the goddess Freyja is alive and is going to play a key role in helping Ted defeat Surtr. In the end, Ted does manage to vanquish Surtr, but the state that things are left in afterwards are quite different from what the writer would have normally expected from a fantasy novel.

In the end, the writer enjoyed the Thunder Road trilogy immensely, more than she can remember enjoying any other fiction book she has read in the past few years, and the fact that the characters were believable as being the same deities she had just read about in the Prose and Poetic Eddas made it even more enjoyable. The series is complex and action-packed enough to entertain even a reader who is not familiar with Norse mythology at all, but with so many references to the mythology that a reader with significant knowledge about it will be entertained by both the action and the literary allusion. At one point, Ginther has one character threaten another with a Blood Eagle (a particularly gruesome, horrifying method of torture which always ends in the recipient's death), to which the writer thought "Wow, he really did his research!". This is the kind of series that you start one evening and then find yourself finishing an entire book at the wee hours of the morning, despite needing to go to school or work the next day. The only possible complaint would be that it is only a trilogy, and not a longer series.

Karla King

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