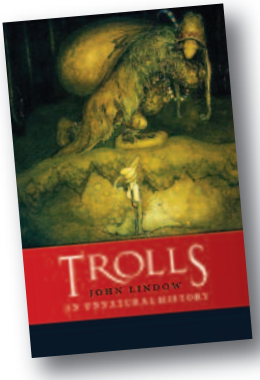


*A review of*

# Trolls: An Unnatural History

Katherine Langrish

Trolls have long lacked the kind of attention awarded to their more glamorous cousins the elves, and this witty and informative book comes as a welcome treat. Professor Lindow opens with the teasingly provocative story of a friend who encountered a troll while waiting for a tram one rainy night in 1970s Oslo. Whatever she 'really' saw, he asks, why did she identify it as a troll? Just what is a troll, anyway, and at what point in history do we first hear about them? How did they develop as literary and cultural phenomena? And what are they up to now, in the present century? With a great deal of relish, perhaps even a certain amount of glee, Lindow rolls up his sleeves and addresses himself to these interesting questions. Beginning with the earliest references to trolls in the medieval Icelandic Edda and sagas, he provides a compelling account of their sustained presence through later folklore, fairy tales and fairy-tale illustrations, into literature, children's stories and modern popular culture.

'Everyone knows what a troll is, even if our personal notions of trolls might differ.' Or we may think we do, for Lindow points out that even the derivation of the word is uncertain, and its 'semantic breadth' (12) makes any single definition hard to establish. Trolls may be giants, or human-sized, or smaller than human: they may be shape-shifters, witches, wizards, even animals, ghosts or the dead. To a large extent the word is a catch-all for any type of supernatural or uncanny event or creature, but some things remain constant: 'Trolls are … dangerous and anti-social, associated with peripheries rather than centres, sometimes easily spotted, sometimes not.' (29)

Trolls make their literary debut in a passage from Snorri Sturluson's *Edda, c.*1220-30, which tells how the Viking Age hero and poet Bragi the Old, travelling through a forest, is challenged by a troll woman to an exchange of verses. Fortunately Bragi is able to match verse for verse and escapes unharmed. Though we are not told what would have happened had Bragi failed, the encounter is threatening: from the beginning trolls belong to the night, to forests, mountains and sea, the wild liminal places where human beings are in danger.

Trolls represent the Other: and you don't get much more *other* than the dead, who were sometimes said to have 'gone to the trolls' or 'been given to the trolls'. Some dead actually became trolls, terrible revenants with black, swollen bodies. When living men are compared to trolls, they are always fearsome, such as the poet and hero Egil Skallagrimsson, who may have suffered from a bone disease which gave him a distinctive, grotesque appearance. Lindow makes it clear that to be likened to a troll was a back-handed compliment at best, and could be a killing offence. Ethnically different peoples such as the Inuit, encountered by the Norse in the medieval period, may also have been associated with trolls.

This reflection, this back-and-forth between human- and troll-kind is also apparent in stories where trolls are imagined to have a social organisation which mimics our own. A troll woman 'with a mane hanging down to her shoulders' informs one Ketill Haengr that she is heading for a troll assembly to which the troll king Skelkingr – a word related to mock/mockery – is coming from his home *Dumbshfr* – 'the misty sea'. If trolls begin to satirise human institutions, are they are becoming a little tamer? By the later medieval sagas trolls are sometimes even employed to build churches, although their intentions are usually devilish, and saints are required to slap them down.

In folklore trolls come closer to home. They are like difficult neighbours or a rival clan who must be appeased or propitiated but never trusted. Often they kidnap travellers or carry off women, taking them away into or under the mountain; they are a threat to the herder girls up on lonely sæters (Alpine meadows); but they may also turn up at the farmhouse door to borrow utensils or to demand and return favours. Any intercourse with them is fraught with uncertainty and peril. Lindow tells the tale of Johannes Blessom, stranded in Copenhagen one Christmas Eve, who accepts a lift from a man who turns out to be the *jutul* (giant) of a mountain near his home in Norway. Blessom hangs on as the sleigh whirls away through storm and wind. Losing a mitten at a halfway resting-place, he complains that his hand will freeze, and the *jutul*'s reply – 'You'll just have to tough it out, Blessom' – has become a Norwegian proverb. Blessom gets his ride home but disobeys the *jutul*'s instruction not to look back as he leaves. Of course there is a price to pay.

In fairy tales, which Lindow distinguishes from folk legends, trolls are characterised as stupid and easily fooled: gallant heroes such as the *Askeladden* or Ash Lad can usually get the better of them. Lindow shows how Asbjørnsen and Moe's mid-19th-century collections of fairy tales reshaped the concept of the troll with vivid word-painting and a taste for the fantastic. From this point, trolls possess eyes 'like pewter plates, and a nose as long as a rake-handle' (70), or just one eye between three of them, or multiple heads. As these popular collections began to be illustrated, a succession of artists developed and reinterpreted the image of the troll. Chapter 4 reproduces over twenty striking illustrations, from stiff mid-century

wild men to fluid, atmospheric paintings in which trolls emerge out of the landscape of which they are part.

One 'troll' artist, Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914), wrote and illustrated his own original fiction, and towards the end of the 19th century trolls began to take on more of a role in literature and culture. Lindow touches on Ibsen's plays, the music of Grieg, the beautiful and eerie short stories of Jonas Lie, stories by Selma Lagerlöf, and the haunting modern novel *The Forest of Hours* by Kerstin Ekman, as well as the 2010 film 'Trollhunter', before moving to his final chapter on trolls in children's books, the phenomenon of the Moomins, and trolls as iconic toys. In these last chapters, perhaps because the subject is so large, I had for the first time a sense that Lindow is only skimming the surface: though Tolkien, J.K. Rowling and even the comedian Bill Bailey receive a mention, T.H. White and Terry Pratchett do not. He concludes with a glance at the continued use of the word 'troll' to denote unwanted or disruptive elements of society: homeless people (who may even live under bridges!) or Internet trolls who deliberately cause trouble and provoke arguments.

Charming, unsettling and informative, packed with fascinating details and anecdotes, this little book is a delight to read, and an indispensable introduction for anyone interested in what trolls are, what they meant to our ancestors and what they mean today. After all, as Professor Lindow says, 'Trolls have been around for 1,000 years, and they are not going away.' (13)

Author: John Lindow.
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