

Chapter 1

The Truth About Myths

In This Chapter

- ▶ Seeing what makes a myth
- ▶ Examining common mythical themes and ideas about them
- ▶ Introducing common mythical characters
- ▶ Looking at famous American myths

First things first. Before you read any more of this book, we want you to know this: We take myths very seriously.

Now, we're not saying that myths aren't funny — many myths are really funny, and they're supposed to be. Neither are we saying that our entire discussion of myths will be serious, because it won't. This book is supposed to be engaging and entertaining, so we plan to have fun talking about mythology with the hope that you have fun reading about mythology.

But when we say that something is a myth, we're *not* saying that it's false or wrong. In other words, we don't think that science and history belong on the one correct side and mythology belongs on the other. (We don't have anything against science and history. They teach the world a great deal, and we profit from them every day; we just don't think people should elevate them above myths simply because they seem more verifiable.)

When we were growing up, we were taught that people used myths to explain the world before science became an established field. The assumption was that once people became rational, they didn't need myths. We know better now.

Mythology is a way of understanding the world, and it is just as important and just as "true" as the scientific or historical ways. In fact, science, history, and other logical ways of thinking simply fail to describe some very important things — things that we think are true. But myths can do the job.

Chris's father was lucky enough to have known Paul Tillich, a Christian thinker who fled from Nazi Germany and ended up at Harvard University. Tillich, who really knew a thing or two about what is important, used to say: "Never say something is *only* a myth. Say, rather, it is *nothing less than* a myth."

That's what we think — that myths are important and worth taking seriously. And anything worth taking seriously should be fun to think about as well. So, here we go. . . .

How to Spot a Myth a Mile Away

A myth is a story. The Greek word “mythos” means “story.” That's the basic concept. But, of course, not just any old story can be a myth. Amy (one of the authors of this book) was served a whole pig's head for dinner in Thailand — this is a good story and one worth telling, but it isn't a myth. Chris (the other author of this book) once got shot at by some lunatics in the woods — another good story, but not up to the standards of mythology. You may know a myth when you see it, but you still need some kind of definition before you can get down to the business of fully appreciating myths.

Experts love to argue about difficult, hard-to-define subjects, and mythology has been a popular topic for argument for the last two centuries. Scholars argue about what is a “true” myth as opposed to some other kind. They insist, however, that no one confuse myths with other similar types of stories, such as legends, sagas, and folktales.

Specifics of mythological proportions

So what's special about a myth? Well, *myths* are stories about gods and goddesses and supernatural entities and human relationships with them. This definition can expand to include stories that explain universal truths or values and stories that help groups of people (such as Americans) identify themselves and define their values. Myths help validate the social order, such as hereditary kingships or social class structures. They also can provide a “history” of a kingdom that makes it seem inevitable.



Because myths are about humans and the gods, then they're also always about religion. Every myth in this book was or still is part of a religion that people practiced seriously.

The word “myth” has come to mean “untrue” in some contexts; people say something is “just a myth” if no factual basis exists for it. But myths do have their own truths. They provide people with a view of the world and a set of values that can be as important as any scientifically verifiable fact. (For some examples, see Chapter 3.)

Legends

Legends are similar to the myth, but they're based on history. It doesn't have to have much of a historical basis — lots of legends hardly jibe with the historical versions at all. A legend or saga, however, does have to include something that may actually have happened. For example, the story of King Arthur is a legend because there (probably) was an actual man who served as the basis for the King Arthur we know of today.

Folktales

A *folktale* is a traditional tale that is primarily a form of entertainment or in some cases is used to instruct. Folktales involve adventures and heroes and magical happenings, but they don't usually try to explain human relationships with the divine.

Most stories known as myths have elements of legend or folktale in them and vice versa. These terms are useful in helping decide what is a myth and what isn't, but you shouldn't get too hung up on them.



Fairy tales look like myths and folktales, but they're a little different. Fairy tales came out of the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century, when people such as the Brothers Grimm collected stories from local people and wrote them up in romanticized versions. The Grimm fairy tales, however, are nothing like the sanitized, modern ones — the original versions are full of blood and brutality.

Which Came First, the People or the Myths?

People haven't always had access to big books of Greek mythology or world mythology to refer to for mythological information. But these myths nevertheless have moved down through the ages through the spoken word and through art. After writing was invented, people preserved the myths on paper. What could be more interesting — for authors in antiquity or even yesterday — than writing stories from myths?

The oral tradition

Myths are stories, and stories get told. Stories that are passed down from one generation to the next are stories told in the oral tradition.

In places and times where people don't use written language, oral tradition is one of only two ways of preserving knowledge from one generation to the next (the other is art, which we talk about in a minute).

In cultures with oral traditions, people tend to have better memories. In cultures that write down their material, people don't need particularly good memories because they have books, self-stick notes, and other ways of reminding themselves of things that they otherwise might forget. Societies with oral traditions often turn stories into poems or songs, which are easier to remember and to repeat word for word.

This is the most traditional way for myths to start, to spread, and to develop. Because each generation that tells a myth has its own unique needs and its own unique experiences, myths tend to evolve over time and tend to exist in different versions.

One modern equivalent to the oral tradition is the material that passes from person to person by e-mail. Stories can spread across the world from computer user to computer user, changing slightly all the while. Some of these tales may become the myths of the twenty-first century.

Archaeological evidence

People who don't read or write can tell stories, and they can make art. Art is another way that myths can survive from generation to generation, even if they aren't written down.

Art can survive long after the people who made it have died, enabling archaeologists to uncover, restore, and interpret it. Art that helps preserve myths doesn't have to be fancy or sophisticated art. Ordinary household objects often feature decorations that can tell modern archaeologists a lot about a society.

Literature

Eventually, of course, people put myths in writing. The poetry of Homer, a great source for Greek mythology, began life as an oral tradition of songs that singers would perform publicly. Those poems ended up as written text for



people to read. In the case of Homer, scholars argue endlessly about how the oral material came to be preserved on paper in one specific version.

Mythographers existed even in ancient times. They recorded myths for later generations.

Myths can serve as the inspiration for other kinds of literature. Greek tragedies, written texts intended to be performed as plays, often take their plots from Greek mythology. William Shakespeare used mythological themes for many of his plays, borrowing from the mythology of the Mediterranean world and from northern European myths. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set at the court of the Greek hero Theseus during his marriage to the Amazon queen Hippolyta (read about him in Chapter 7); and *Romeo and Juliet* is based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (see Chapter 13 for that).

In more recent times, people have sought out oral traditions to record in writing for the purpose of study. So anthropologists might visit the indigenous people of Brazil or the people who live in the Sea Island community in South Carolina to listen to their stories and write them down. This written documentation helps preserve a culture and can provide insight into how myths evolve.

Looking at the Different Types of Myths

Myths are tricky. Myths from around the world, from long ago and from recent times, often seem similar. Most myths appear to fall into certain categories, regardless of whether different cultures had much to do with each other. Why? What's up with that?

Comparative Mythology 101

Any time that scholars find several factors that appear to follow a pattern, they try to find the rules that govern the pattern. During the twentieth century, several scholars tried to explain what myths were all about and answer the age-old question: What is the purpose of all these stories? Because that truly is an unanswerable question, they devised several different theories, which gradually were incorporated into the fields of psychology, comparative literature, and anthropology.

Here's a quick summary of some of the more important theories about myths:

- ✓ Myths define social customs and beliefs.
- ✓ Myths are the same as ritual.

- ✔ Myths are allegories, similar to parables in the Christian Bible.
- ✔ Myths explain natural phenomena.
- ✔ Myths explain psychological phenomenon such as love, sex, and anger toward one's parents. (Sigmund Freud bought into this theory.)
- ✔ Myths contain archetypes that reveal the collective unconscious of the human race. (Carl Jung bought into this theory.)
- ✔ Myths are a way of communicating and helping people work together, or they're a way for people to talk about things that cause anxiety. (The theory of "structuralism," which was first observed by Claude Levi-Strauss, falls into this category.)

Not too much thought is needed to figure out that not one of these approaches explains each and every myth. But, taken together, they can make thinking about myths more fun. (We tend to find the symbolic/allegorical theory of myths to be most satisfactory, mainly because it covers almost all of the others, without being too narrow.)

Major types of myths

One reason so many scholars have tried pinning down the definition of myths is that myths can be similar across cultures, even in distant cultures. For example, Greece and Japan have stories about men who visit the underworld to retrieve their dead wives. The coincidence is freaky, as if some universal knowledge resides in human memory from the days when all people lived in caves.

Anyway, some stories frequently recur in all cultures. Here are a few of them:

- ✔ **Creation myths:** Everybody wants to know where the world and its creatures came from. Generally the world emerges from primordial darkness, often in the shape of an egg, through the work of a creator deity.
- ✔ **Cosmogony:** Many myths describe the way the world, the heavens, the sea, and the underworld are put together and how the sun and moon travel around them.
- ✔ **The origin of humanity:** Humans had to come from somewhere, and many mythologies describe their origin. They're often the pet creation of a deity dabbling in mud.
- ✔ **Flood stories:** Many mythologies have a story about gods who were unhappy with their first version of humans and destroyed the world with floods to get a clean start. Usually one man and one woman survive.
- ✔ **The introduction of disease and death:** Myths often describe the first humans as living in a paradise that is marred when someone introduces

unhappiness. The Greek story of Pandora's box is one of the best-known myths.

- ✓ **Afterlife:** Many people think that the soul continues to exist after the body dies; myths explain what happens to the soul.
- ✓ **The presence of supernatural beings:** Every body of mythology features deities and other supernatural entities. Individual deities often are in charge of particular aspects of the world or human life. Some supernatural beings are good, and some are evil; humans and the good gods fight the evil ones.
- ✓ **The end of the world:** Although the world has already ended at least once in most mythologies (usually through a great flood), some myths also have a plan for how it will end in the future.
- ✓ **The dawn of civilization:** Humans had to learn to live like people, not animals, and often the gods helped them. A common story tells of the theft of fire by a deity who brings it to humans.
- ✓ **Foundation myths:** People who founded empires like to believe that historical reasons help to explain why it was inevitable that they vanquished their enemies and built a city in a certain place. A myth can help explain these reasons.



One reason that myths recur is that people have always moved around and talked with one another, even in the days before they started writing things down. People carried myths to one another just as they brought trade goods and disease. For example, many North American Indians have flood stories as part of their mythologies. Some of the first Europeans they encountered were Christian missionaries, who told them Christian stories, including, no doubt, the biblical story of Noah and the flood. The North American Indians may not have heard of the idea of the destruction of the world in a great flood before being exposed to Europeans, but instead they may have borrowed the story from the Europeans.

The details of these stories are significant and have had far-reaching consequences. For example, many people have used myths to justify male domination of women (think of Eve emerging from Adam's rib in the Bible — he was there first). Myths also have been used to justify the oppression of one social group by another, and it's still happening today.

A Who's Who of Mythological Players

Myths have a fairly standard cast of characters. They always include divine beings, called deities or gods. Also present are humans who interact with

gods; some of the extraspecial humans get to be heroes. Magical animals and tricksters, who live to stir things up, complete the list of players.

Deities

All bodies of myth have supernatural entities that hold power over the world and the people in it. These entities often are called gods and goddesses — the word *deity* is a neutral term that means god or goddess. Some cultures have many deities, and some have only one. Generally a culture has at least one creator deity and several other divine beings who divide up jobs such as driving the sun and moon, herding the dead, making crops grow, and so on. With this division of labor, people automatically knew which deity to ask for help — for example, a woman seeking help in childbirth knew not to waste her time praying to the rain god.

Antigods

The supernatural world isn't home only to benevolent deities; negative beings also live there and walk the earth with humans. Myths contain stories of devils, demons, dragons, monsters, and giants; these creatures fight both the gods and humans.

Heroes

Many myths feature heroes, who perform amazing feats of daring, strength, or cleverness. Some heroes are human, some are gods, and some are half-and-half; they're usually male. One feature common of mythological heroes is that their definitive characteristics are evident from childhood.

Culture heroes appear in myths bringing specific benefits to humans; for example, Prometheus was a culture hero to the ancient Greeks because he gave humans fire. See Chapter 7 for more on about this ancient Greek. In the mythology of Native Americans, the man who discovered tobacco on the spot where he had (earlier) discovered sex was doubly a culture hero. Chapter 23 has the complete lowdown.

Other heroes served as models of human accomplishment; for example, the Greek hero Heracles (also known as Hercules) was the biggest, strongest, most heroic guy ever. You can read more about him in Chapter 7. Heroes often played a role in *foundation myths*, myths that explain how kingdoms came to be where they are and why the people who lived there before don't deserve to live there anymore.

Tricksters

Myths are full of trickster characters. Some of these tricksters are helpful to people by outwitting their enemies and bringing them gifts such as fire. Others are not so nice — Loki in Norse myths is sometimes downright evil. See Chapter 14 for more about him. Tricksters subvert the social order, stirring things up either to thwart someone or for their own entertainment.

Tricksters are popular mythical characters. Native American tricksters were often animals that also could seem human-like; they were ambiguous creatures. Examples include the Coyote in the Southwest, the Mink in the Pacific Northwest, and Wisakedjak, or Whiskey Jack to the Europeans, a rabbit trickster hero known to Eastern tribes. Whiskey Jack may well be the mythological ancestor to Br'er Rabbit. Br'er Rabbit may also have had an African ancestor; in many parts of Africa, myths feature a rabbit trickster. See Chapter 23 for more about North American Indian myths.

Two American Myths

Some myths are firmly rooted in historical fact, and others are entirely made up. The easiest way to see the difference is to look at two American myths. One of these myths is based on a historical character and his historical actions. And another one is entirely fictional but an important myth nevertheless.

Johnny Appleseed, a cultural hero

Johnny Appleseed is a figure of mythology. He is also 100 percent historically factual. His real name was John Chapman, and he was a professional nurseryman (that is, he grew plants and sold them). He collected apple seeds from cider-making operations in Pennsylvania and then moved westward, planting a series of orchards between the Allegheny Mountains and Ohio. He gave away seeds to pioneers, but he also made a tidy profit off his enterprise.

But none of these historical facts are nearly as important as the mythological “truth” of Johnny Appleseed. As a figure of myth, he represents the pioneering spirit of the early history of the United States as people moved west to settle in new lands. He represents the conquest of the wilderness as settlers turned wild forests into productive farms. And he represents a set of values that Americans like to associate with the early builders of the nation: piety, charity, closeness to the earth, and independence.

Br'er Rabbit, American trickster

The myth of Br'er Rabbit is entirely fictional. Br'er (that is, "Brother") Rabbit (see Figure 1-1) and his tricks and adventures first appeared in print in 1879 in an Atlanta newspaper. This was the first of a number of stories about the tricky rabbit who outsmarts Mr. Fox, Mrs. Cow, and others again and again.



Figure 1-1:
Br'er Rabbit
could have
taught some
human
heroes a
thing or two.

These stories were part of the folklore of the American Southeast before the Civil War and during the period of Reconstruction. All segments of the population, particularly African-American communities, enjoyed these stories. The Br'er Rabbit tales can be called myths because they convey important truths. For the slaves, Br'er Rabbit represented a hero who won, again and again, despite being in the power of others. When Joel Chandler Harris brought these stories to the attention of a wider American audience, Br'er Rabbit became a shared American myth. Americans like to root for underdogs and to believe that a hero can use his wits and his initiative to overcome obstacles. Br'er Rabbit never existed, of course, but he represents truths that are important to Americans' ideas about themselves.