



Looking for the Hidden Folk: How Iceland's Elves Can Save the Earth

Nancy Marie Brown

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For decades, cultural historian Nancy Marie Brown has been fascinated by Iceland, a nation of natural and supernatural wonders. Her book *Looking for the Hidden Folk* is a mischievous guide to reclaiming sacred connections to places as a way of sparking environmentalist commitments.

Brown first visited Iceland in 1986 and saw her first volcanic eruption there in 2010. The country's dramatic landscape and endemic legends lured her back, time and again. Although Icelanders' matter-of-fact talk of ghosts and witches took some getting used to, she suggests that science can be just as much of a matter of faith. And she posits that Iceland's folk beliefs and sagas, and the fantasy worlds they've inspired, can promote belonging and spur protective actions. For instance, a Friends of the Lava group arose on the outskirts of Reykjavík to protest a planned road that would cut through the Galgahraun lava field—designated a protected natural area in 2009, though construction proceeded. Then Ragnhildur Jonsdottir wrote a letter on behalf of the Hidden Folk and sent it to prominent politicians. She earned Galgahraun a temporary stay of execution.

Brown's points of reference range from Mary Oliver, whose poetry treats nature with reverence, to J.R.R. Tolkien, whose novels borrow Icelandic motifs. Brown asserts that legends make places sacred, not vice versa: "It's the stories themselves that make Helgafell holy earth." Her own writing is often lyrical, employing rhymes and alliteration: "the sea fog rolled in ... A great, roiling, boiling, billowing gray mass lit to gold at its heart."

Brown delights in the fact that, in Icelandic, the word for home is the same as that for world: *heima*. An impish literary handbook, *Looking for the Hidden Folk* takes Iceland as a model of how to treat the whole world as a precious, awe-inspiring home.

REBECCA FOSTER (September / October 2022)

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