

The Monstrous Child

Francesca Simon

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Hel, Norse goddess of the Underworld, tells her story, on her terms, in *The Monstrous Child*.

Born in a cave with a snake and a wolf for brothers, Hel is the daughter of a giantess and of Loki, the god of mischief—it's no wonder that Hel is unusual too. While her torso is normal, her legs are those of a corpse.

Her mother proves to be hateful, and her brothers are terrifying. Her absentee father appears and disappears for much of her life. She has never known affection; Baldr, a god, surprises her with that. But it cannot last. She is already jaded and cynical by the time that she comes to live among other gods, before she is cast down into the Underworld—a place she later names after herself.

Hel's voice is definite and strong. She's a sarcastic and bitter lead, and unapologetic. Why should she be, when she was born half dead and sent to live with only the dead for companions? Hel often seems to be a victim of her circumstances—of her parentage, her rotting and painful form, and a lack of love. But she is also derisive of nearly everyone and sometimes seems suited to her awful fate.

Most of the book takes place in the Underworld, where those who have not died in battle go to spend eternity. Not much happens in the land of the dead; Hel keeps it interesting, and her scenes hold attention.

Hel's story is unique; her toughness carries the story, and her inner monologue is absorbing.

HANNAH HOHMAN (July/August 2017)

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