

The Huldufólk Come to Gimli

Kathleen Arnason's Living Mythology

KATRÍN NÍELSDÓTTIR

Arnason, Kathleen. *The Gimli Huldufolk and the Secret Lore*. Illustrated by Sean Newton. Seena Publications, 2020.

Arnason, Kathleen. *The Huldufolk: Forever Friends*. Illustrated by Jerry Johnson. Saga Publishing Company, 1997.

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Kathleen Arnason's *Gimli Huldufólk* trilogy begins with an Icelandic name but creates something distinctly its own. Her *huldufólk* are small, colourful beings who inhabit the landscape and imagination of Gimli, Manitoba, travelling through a mythology that draws connections among Iceland, Ireland, Canada and other cultural traditions.

They are not, however, simply the *huldufólk* of traditional Icelandic folklore transported unchanged to Manitoba. That distinction is important to understanding Kathleen's work.

Traditional Icelandic *huldufólk*—literally “hidden people”—are generally described in folklore as resembling humans in size and appearance, often exceptionally beautiful, and normally invisible unless they choose to reveal themselves. They live alongside humans in a parallel world associated particularly with rocks and hills. Their stories form a significant part of the nineteenth-century folklore collection of Jón Árnason, who recorded and published traditions already circulating in Iceland rather than creating the beings himself.

Kathleen's *huldufólk* look and behave differently. In *The Huldufolk: Forever Friends*, Freya introduces herself and Fjóla as “small spirit people from Iceland.” Snorri and Snæbjörn, familiar characters from Kathleen's earlier stories, are likewise part of this imagined community.

Katrín Níelsdóttir is Editor-in-Chief of *Icelandic Connection* and Editor of *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, in addition to being the Icelandic Liaison Librarian at the University of Manitoba Libraries, and Vice President of the Icelandic Canadian Frón.

The difference has occasionally caused confusion, particularly because Kathleen's little *huldufólk* have become so strongly associated with Gimli. Her characters are not intended as literal representations of the *huldufólk* found in Icelandic folklore. Rather, they belong to a mythology Kathleen has developed over more than 30 years.

That mythology has inspired enthusiastic responses from readers in Canada and Iceland. Reviewers Kendra Klausen, Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir, and Kim Holl approach the books from different perspectives, but all three respond to Kathleen's ability to combine fantasy, cultural references, and a strong sense of place.

Kendra Klausen describes the trilogy as unlike anything she has read before. For her, the books offer "an enchanting, yet grounding journey" into a hidden world beneath Gimli. Kendra is particularly drawn to the warmth, humour, and familiarity of Kathleen's storytelling. Icelandic names and references sit alongside recognizable Canadian places, while fantasy emerges within a community readers can identify.

"If you're looking for a series that blends folklore with heart, humour, and heritage, *The Gimli Huldufólk* is a gem," Kendra writes. She adds that the trilogy encourages readers to look twice at the world around them and describes Kathleen as her new favourite local author.

For me, that sense of discovery is one of the books' most interesting qualities. Kathleen turns familiar places into locations where another story might exist just beneath the surface. Children perceive things adults may no longer notice, and ordinary locations acquire extraordinary histories.

Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir of the University of Iceland focuses more closely on the geographical and mythological journey Kathleen constructs. Within Kathleen's fictional mythology, fairies settled in Ireland's Underworld thousands of years ago. Some later followed a changeling fairy princess and a Viking to Iceland, where they became Kathleen's *huldufólk*, eventually travelling onward to Canada.

This is Kathleen's own origin story, not the traditional Icelandic explanation for the *huldufólk*. Icelandic folklore contains different accounts of their origins, including the familiar story in which Eve hides some of her children from God and they consequently become hidden from humankind. Recognizing that distinction helps make clear what Kathleen is doing. She is constructing a new mythology through encounters among stories rather than reproducing a single Icelandic tradition.

The trilogy follows Snorri, Snæbjörn, Freya and Fjóla as they join ancient friends and former foes to stop the rapidly spreading Following Spell. Guðrún praises Kathleen's combination of mythology, suspense, and adventure and draws attention to the magical powers found within animals, nature, and familiar landscapes. Guðrún also identifies cooperation as an important element of the trilogy. The characters cannot overcome the threat individually; their different abilities and relationships become essential to resolving it.

To me, that makes community one of the recurring strengths of Kathleen's world. Transformation in the books is not limited to magical events. Characters repeatedly discover what becomes possible through relationships with others.

Kim Holl of *Stories Told on Film* approaches the trilogy from another direction. She is particularly interested in its visual storytelling and in Kathleen's blending of the landscapes and stories of Ireland, Iceland and Canada. "What makes this series truly exceptional is Kathleen's skill in making ancient myths resonate with modern readers," Kim writes. The distinction between inspiration and source material is useful here as well. Kathleen draws on older mythic and folkloric traditions, but the particular mythology of the Gimli *huldufólk*—including their appearance, character, and migration story—is her creation. Kim sees cinematic potential in Kathleen's transformations, landscapes, allies, and adversaries, believing that the world of the books could translate effectively to the screen.

My conversation with Kathleen helped explain the thinking behind that world. At the heart of her writing is a simple idea about migration. "We don't leave our stories behind," she told me. "We bring them with us."

Kathleen describes her approach through three related ideas: integration, migration and adaptation. When people move, she argues, their stories travel as well. They encounter different places, different people and different stories, and eventually something new can emerge. That provides a useful way of understanding the Gimli *huldufólk*. Kathleen is not claiming that Icelandic immigrants historically believed in tiny *huldufólk* exactly like Snorri, Snæbjörn, Freya and Fjóla. Instead, she asks an imaginative question: what might happen if stories travelled with people and then developed within their new surroundings?

Gimli becomes particularly important in that process. The first Gimli *huldufólk* stories were written more than 30 years ago, and Kathleen's characters have since become part of local imaginative life. In her stories, the *huldufólk* inhabit the attic of the old Gimli school. Children can encounter them; messages can be left for them and real community locations become part of the fictional world. There is a fascinating consequence to that success. For some readers in Manitoba, Kathleen's little people may now be more familiar than the human-sized hidden people of Icelandic folk tradition.

That is also why the distinction between the two is worth making clear. The traditional *huldufólk* remain part of Iceland's centuries-old storytelling tradition. Kathleen's Gimli *huldufólk* are a modern literary creation inspired partly by that inheritance. One does not need to describe the latter as traditional folklore to recognize the cultural connections Kathleen is exploring.

Her world has also expanded far beyond Gimli. What began as three books is developing into a seven-book series. "They just keep attaching to each other," Kathleen told me. Later stories carry the *huldufólk* across Western Canada, from Saskatchewan and Drumheller towards the west coast, before eventually turning back towards Iceland.

Along the way, Kathleen introduces regional stories, new beings and new landscapes.

When working with traditions outside her own cultural background, particularly Indigenous teachings and beings, Kathleen says she seeks guidance and permission. That consideration is particularly important in a project based upon stories meeting other stories: adaptation does not eliminate questions of where a tradition comes from or who has the authority to tell it.

The expanding series also develops an increasingly environmental focus. Lake Winnipeg and its health become part of the mythology, while animals, water and the landscape possess powers of their own. Community action, care for the natural world and restoration become intertwined with the characters' adventures.

Kathleen's long experience working with children is equally apparent. Her books preserve the possibility that children can see something adults have forgotten how to see. Huldufólk sleep in books, the natural world contains unexpected powers and ordinary places may be entrances into much larger stories.

This is perhaps where Kathleen's work is most interesting as Western Icelandic storytelling. It does not preserve Icelandic folklore unchanged. Nor should the Gimli *huldufólk* be mistaken for an accurate description of the traditional hidden people of Iceland. Instead, Kathleen demonstrates one of the things that can happen after cultural inheritance reaches another country: writers use it, question it, combine it with their surroundings and sometimes create something entirely new.

The three previous reviewers recognize different results of that process. Kendra finds warmth, humour and heritage. Guðrún sees a journey built through mythology, transformation and cooperation. Kim sees a visual world capable of moving beyond the page. I see something else as well: the emergence of a local mythology.

Traditional Icelandic *huldufólk* and Kathleen Arnason's Gimli *huldufólk* are not the same beings. Understanding that difference makes the story of Kathleen's work more interesting, not less. One belongs to a long Icelandic folk tradition. The other began in Gimli with an author asking what might happen if stories travelled too. And more than 30 years later, Kathleen Arnason's *huldufólk* are still travelling.

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