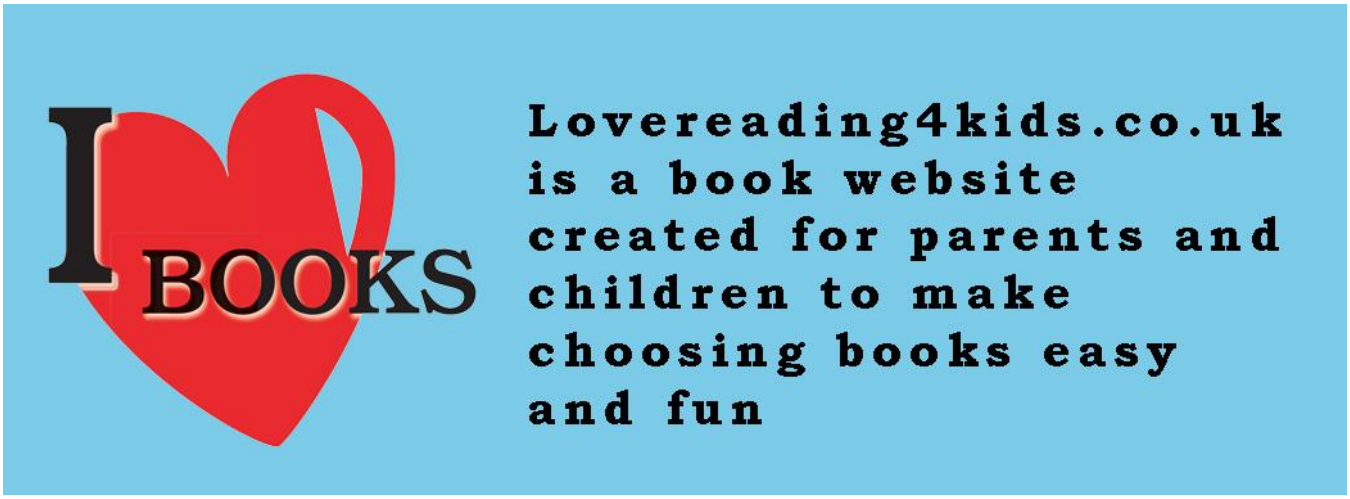

Opening extract from

A Miscellany of Magical Beasts

Written by

Simon Holland

Illustrated by

David Wyatt, Kev Walker, Gary Blythe & others

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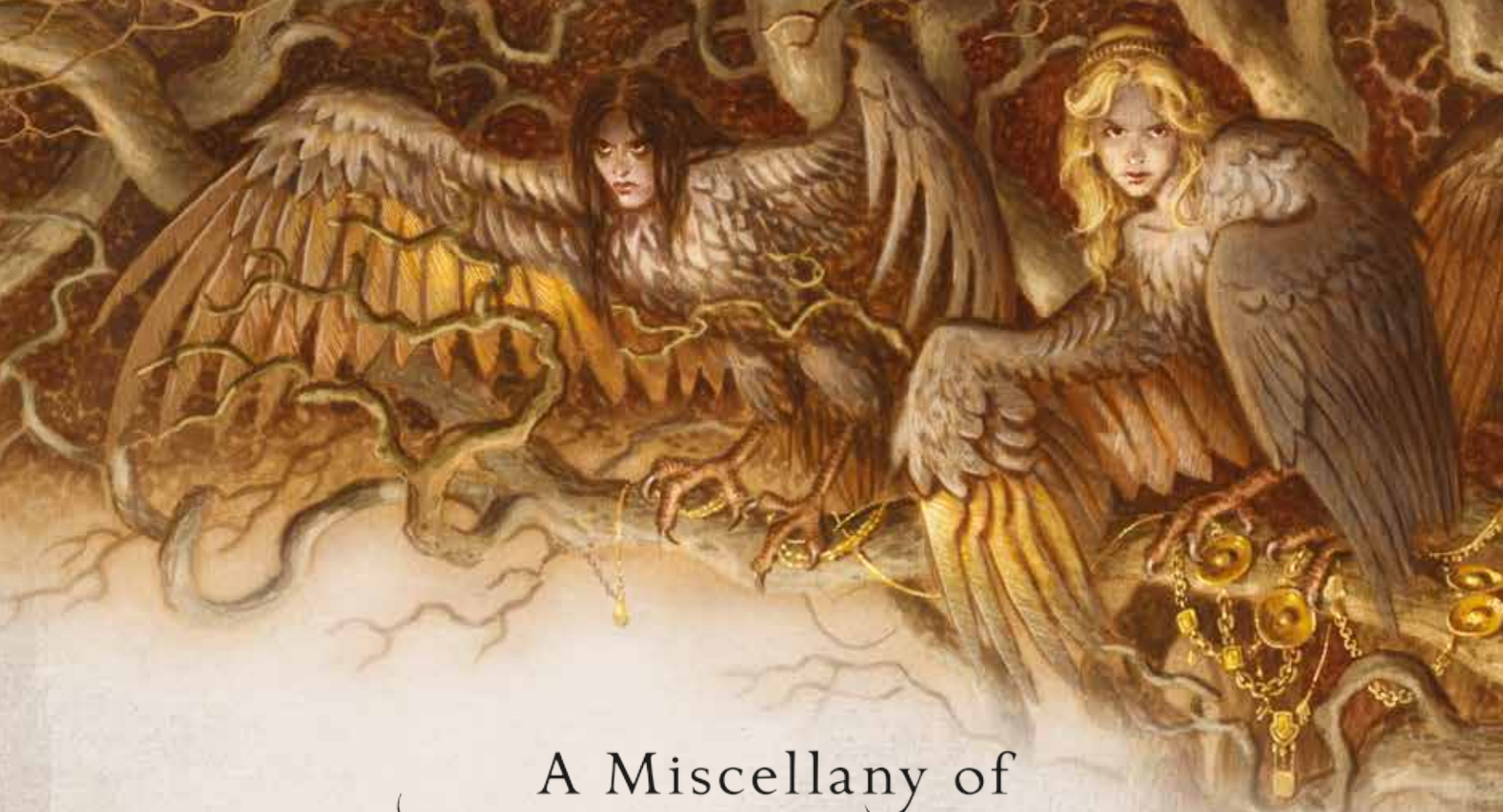

A Miscellany of MAGICAL BEASTS

SIMON HOLLAND

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A World of Magical Beasts

Welcome to an enchanted world of strange and magical beasts. For many hundreds of years, people have told stories about creatures that lurk in mysterious places that are beyond our control, such as caves, mountains, rivers, lakes, the air and the ocean. Legends give us the idea that supernatural beings can weave their magic in all these places. Watch out for a fairy who might bring bad fortune, give you nightmares or make food go bad, or an angry giant who carves out valleys and scatters mountains across the land. Or perhaps you might meet a dragon or a magical serpent who can simply conjure rain, sleet, snow and storms from the air?

The many exotic beasts you'll meet in this book have human features, or are part-human and part-animal. Some of them are a medley of different animal parts. There is the terrifying basilisk, part-serpent and part-cockerel; the noble griffin, part-lion, part-eagle; and the mighty centaur, half-man, half-horse. There are alluring selkies, beautiful creatures who switch from human to seal, and mischievous werewolves, who shift their shape from human to wolf and back again. Prepare to be enchanted, frightened and amazed, all at the same time, when you dare to enter this spellbinding realm.

"Glorious phoenix," cried the Sun [god]. "You shall be my bird and live forever!"

The immortal phoenix is a powerful symbol of hope – the triumph of new life over death.

The true home of the phoenix is Paradise. In our world, only one such bird can live at any one time.

The Phoenix

Fantastically beautiful birds often appear in mythological stories connected to ideas of death, rebirth and immortality. The phoenix is one such bird, from the Middle East. Every five or six centuries, the bird senses it is time to die, and it builds a 'funeral nest' out of sweet-smelling sticks and herbs from Arabian spice groves. The phoenix then lies down to rest and sings an enchanting song, as the Sun rises and sets fire to the nest. Both the bird and the nest are turned to ashes – but a seed of life remains...

A tiny worm crawls from the ashes and grows into a new young phoenix. This chick collects the ashes into an egg made from myrrh, a gum-like material that comes from trees. According to some versions of the legend, the phoenix takes to the sky – surrounded by other birds – and carries the egg to Heliopolis, the Egyptian City of the Sun. Here, the egg is delivered to priests at a temple, where the ashes may be buried. The bird is now free to return to Arabia and begin its new life.

In ancient Egyptian mythology, the phoenix is a female firebird, with dazzling, red-and-gold feathers, that lives for either 500 or 1,461 years. This bird is sometimes pictured as a heron, or a flamingo-like bird from East Africa, and can also regenerate itself if wounded by an enemy. In ancient Greek and Roman legends, the bird looks more like a peacock or an eagle. Most of the phoenix stories feature a Sun god, riding across the sky in a horse-drawn chariot, who stops to listen to the bird's haunting song.

Giants

Giants are all around us in the worlds of magic and mythology. They often have a close connection with nature. In some cultures, stories are told of giants who build mountains or become parts of the living landscape. In Scandinavia, frost giants create the highlands and carve out the valleys in between them. Russian giants, known as the Asilky, dig out huge spaces for rivers and lakes, then pile up the earth and rocks into mountains.

These giants of folklore have battles that make the earth shake. Once, an Irish giant called Finn McCool wanted to pick a fight with his enemies the Scottish giants. He shaped the coastline by picking up great chunks of the landscape and hurling them into the sea, towards the Scottish giant Benandonner. His aim was to form a pathway so that he could march over to the other giant and fight. Finn retreated when he saw how massive his opponent was, but Finn's wife saved the day by playing tricks on Benandonner – so that he ran back home. The two giants then tore up the causeway, hurling rocks at each other and into the sea.

The giant Finn McCool (or Fionn mac Cumhaill) calls out to his enemy across the water, challenging him to fight.

It is said that the Giant's Causeway, a natural stone pavement in Northern Ireland, is what's left of the path built and then torn up by giants.

Benandonner is so huge that his advance across the Causeway makes the earth tremble and Finn shake with fear.

Fearsome Giants

Giants are powerful forces of nature. They do battle with gods by hurling immense pieces of the landscape at them, or cause great alarm to human beings by fighting amongst themselves. Huge rocks or standing stones are sometimes said to be the leftovers of a skirmish between two giants, who argued and threw boulders at one another. Other stories tell of giants who shape or turn into parts of the natural world – or who use the winter weather to travel from place to place while altering their physical shape.

CYCLOPS

The one-eyed Cyclops of Greek myths were skilled blacksmiths who forged weapons for gods to use in their war against their fellow giants, the Titans.

ASILKY

The Asilky, mighty frost giants from Russia, designed and put up the mountains on Earth. They had to be destroyed when, having become too proud, they rose against the gods.

WINDIGO

In southern Canada, the Algonquin people have told stories of the Windigo, an evil being that can take the form of a tree-sized man or a giant timber wolf. He uses blizzards and winds to travel without being seen, so that he can harm humans.