THE

WORLD OF MERMAIDS

All over the world, wherever there's water, there are stories, legends and eyewitness accounts of mermaids. These magical, mesmerizing people of the deep have been well known for thousands of years, and almost every country and culture has a tale to tell about them. People have written, sung and passed on rumours about mermaids since ancient times, and often reported their own mermaid encounters, too. But mermaids are shy and elusive, and often prefer to stay hidden.

In this book, you'll meet mermaids of every description, from every part of our planet. Many mermaids swim in the seas and oceans, but just as many live in fresh water, making their homes in the world's rivers and lakes, ponds, streams and waterfalls.

Some mermaids are beautiful, with long hair and glittering scales on their fishy tails, and some are helpful and kind. But others are very, very different. There are scary mermaids, spooky mermaids, and some very strange and surprising mermen too!

WHAT IS A MERMAID?

While a typical mermaid is female, with flowing hair and a fish's tail, that's far from the only type. There are plenty of male fish-people, or mermen. There are also stories of twin-tailed merfolk, fish-humans with webbed hands and feet, and mermaids who are part-seal, part-octopus or part-dolphin. Some merpeople can even assume human form for a while, step on to the land and walk among us, undetected.

TAKE CARE!

A mermaid may protect her own island, rescue lost sailors, send plentiful fish supplies or warn of bad weather. If you're lucky, a mermaid might even grant you a wish! But beware: not all mermaids are good-natured, and some are distinctly dangerous.

Remember, mermaids are magical, and often extremely powerful. Some can control the weather at sea, sink ships or kidnap humans and take them to their homes under the waves. A mermaid may lure sailors to a watery grave with her haunting singing, or cast a deadly curse on those who have upset her. Even kind-hearted mermaids can become angry, if they are not shown enough respect!

FINFOLK

MAGICAL MERFOLK OF ORKNEY

THE ORKNEY ISLANDS

Around the Orkney Islands live the magical, fearsome Finfolk. In summer, the Finfolk live on Hildaland, a mysterious island that often sinks beneath the waves. In winter, they retreat to Finfolkaheem, their fabulous underwater kingdom. Finfolkaheem is never dark: it's lit up by thousands of tiny, glowing sea creatures, and scattered with silver and sea pearls. In the oceans around it, the Finfolk herd and milk whales, just as the farmers of Orkney herd and milk their cows.

Every young Finwoman longs to marry a human husband, because this will allow her to remain a mermaid forever. If she does not, she will grow old and be forced to live ashore. But one story tells of a young Orkney woman, Annie Norn, who went to live with the Finfolk.

One evening, Annie went down to the shore to collect some salt water for cooking. She never returned. The villagers searched for her everywhere, but there was no sign of her. People said she must have been taken by the Finfolk.

Several years later, a ship from Orkney was caught up in a terrible storm. After the winds died down, a thick mist descended, and the sailors had no idea where they were.

Then they saw a small boat approaching, rowed by just one woman. "It's a Finwife!" yelled one of the sailors. But another of the crew was Willie Norn, one of Annie's cousins, and he recognized the woman as Annie. She climbed aboard and sailed the ship safely to Hildaland.

There the men met Annie's Finman husband, who welcomed them to a feast and gave them soft, warm beds to sleep in. When they woke up, another Finman was waiting in his boat to guide them home. Willie asked Annie if she would come home with them, but she said no. She had three children with her Finman husband, and would never leave.



BLUE MEN OF THE MINCH

THE MINCH, OUTER HEBRIDES

The Minch is a wide, stormy sea strait between the Scottish mainland and the islands of the Outer Hebrides. Boats crossing these waters risk being capsized by a tribe of merciless mermen, the Blue Men of the Minch. Strong and muscular, they have blue skin, green hair and green beards, and swim and spin around like porpoises as they chase after ships. When they are close enough, their chief shouts out the first two lines of a verse, and the ship's captain must immediately reply with another two lines that rhyme perfectly. If he fails, the Blue Men attack.



SELKIES

SCOTLAND, FAROE ISLANDS AND ICELAND

Across the far North, you'll hear tales of the seal-woman, often known as a Selkie. Selkies swim in the sea as seals, but once a year they can shed their skins and take human form. Sometimes a Selkie will fall in love with a human man, marry him and come to live with him. If she has children, they may be born with webbed fingers and toes. A Selkie's husband can make her stay on land, and keep her human shape, by hiding away her seal skin. But she will always long for the sea. If one day she finds her skin, she will put it on and escape back into the waves, never to be seen again.



THE LITTLE MERMAID

DENMARK

This well-known mermaid was made famous by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen. The Little Mermaid was a mermaid princess who fell in love with a human prince. When his ship sank, she rescued him, but he did not notice her. Desperate to be with him, she begged an old sea-witch for a potion that would give her human legs and the ability to walk on land. Some versions of the story say she married the prince; in others, he married a human woman, leaving the Little Mermaid bereft. A famous statue of her sits on a rock in Copenhagen, Denmark's capital city.

MELUSINE

THE STRANGE TALE OF A SECRET MERMAID

FRANCE

Melusine was half fairy, half human, and secretly a mermaid. She was the daughter of a water fairy and a human king, and had a long fish's tail. However, she could change her shape and make herself look human – except on Saturdays, when she would transform into her true mermaid shape.

While out hunting, Raymond, Lord of Poitou, saw Melusine sitting beside a sparkling spring in the forest, her natural home. He was enchanted by her lively spirit, and fell in love with her at once. When he begged her to marry him, Melusine agreed, as long as he promised her one thing. "You must never look at me on a Saturday," she said. Raymond agreed at once, and they were married in a beautiful ceremony.

Raymond's kingdom, Poitou, was a poor place, but after he married Melusine everything changed. She ruled alongside him, with kindness, wisdom and her secret magic.

On the farms, the crops and animals thrived, and the people grew prosperous. Melusine built cities and palaces, and a castle for herself and her husband.

She and Raymond had ten children, all boys. Some of them did have slightly webbed toes, but hardly anyone noticed. And every Saturday Melusine hid herself in her chamber, where she took her true mermaid form. She spent the day relaxing in her bath, her glittering tail draped over the bathtub, replenishing her strength.

For many years Raymond kept his promise, and stayed away. But eventually he began to worry. What was Melusine doing every Saturday? What if she were seeing another, secret husband, or plotting against him? So, one Saturday he crept up to the window of her chamber and peered inside.

Raymond was shocked to see a writhing, shining tail, glittering with scales. He quickly hurried away before she could hear him. But later he argued with Melusine, and in a moment of anger, he called her a serpent. Horrified, she realized what had happened – he had seen her long, scaly mermaid's tail.

Immediately, Melusine took her mermaid shape and grew a pair of powerful wings. Flying up into the air, she told Raymond that now he knew her secret, she must leave him forever. And with that she flew away, never to be seen again. But it's said that her weeping can still be heard at the spring in the forest...as she cries for her husband and sons.







ASIA



Asia is the world's biggest continent, stretching from Arabia in the west, all the way across Russia, to the far shores of China, Japan and Korea, and south-east to India, Thailand and the many islands of Indonesia and the Philippines.

This is a continent made up of thousands of islands, beaches and craggy coastlines, thundering rivers, and the world's biggest and deepest lakes. It also has a huge range of countries and cultures, many with long histories stretching back to ancient times. Their folklore is full of tales of magical and mysterious creatures. There are dragons, many-headed serpents, giant birds and bats, and every kind of half-human, half-animal beast. So it's no wonder that so many mermaids feel at home there.

As in other parts of the world, Asia's mermaids are complicated beings, who can either be helpful or spookily sinister. Be careful about where you go swimming, and even what you are given to eat ... the mermaids there have some eerie and unusual powers.



MERMAID MAGIC

Unlike witches and wizards, a mermaid probably won't read a book of spells or mix up a magic potion. But mermaids have a wide range of magical powers, whether they're whipping up the sea into a storm, granting you three wishes or casting a deadly curse. If you're lucky, a mermaid could even give you magical powers of your own.

MAGICAL MUSIC

The mermaid's haunting singing voice has the power to enchant and hypnotize people, especially sailors. A mermaid might use her singing to lure men to a watery grave, like the Lorelei of Germany (see page 131). Or she might sing to warn sailors that a storm is on its way, like the Sinjfke mermaid of Korea (see page 260).



Not all merfolk sing; some play magical instruments instead. When the Greek merman Triton blows his seashell trumpet, it can calm the waves or scare away sea monsters. The Neck, a Swedish merman, lures people into the water with his magical harp.



TELLING THE FUTURE

For many sailors and fishermen around the world, seeing a mermaid is a bad omen, because it usually means a storm is on the way. An old Norwegian book called *The King's Mirror* explains how a mermaid's actions can predict your future:



If the mermaid eats a fish, or throws it away from your ship, there will still be a storm, but you'll make it home safely.



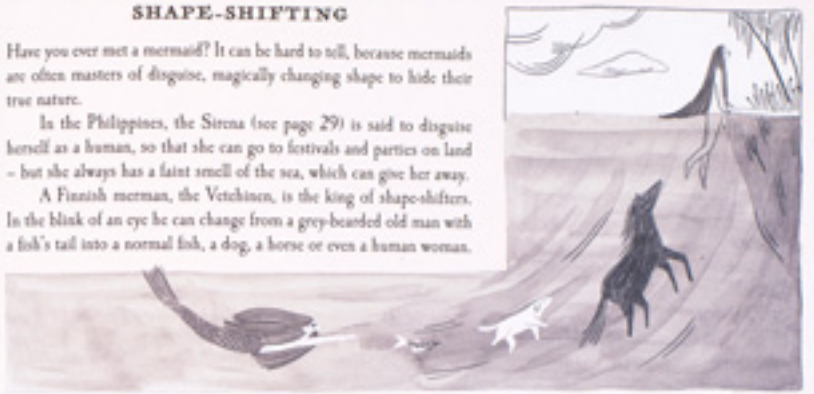
If the mermaid catches a fish and throws it at your ship, it's bad news. You'll be shipwrecked, and probably won't survive.

SHAPE-SHIFTING

Have you ever met a mermaid? It can be hard to tell, because mermaids are often masters of disguise, magically changing shape to hide their true nature.

In the Philippines, the Sirena (see page 29) is said to disguise herself as a human, so that she can go to festivals and parties on land – but she always has a faint smell of the sea, which can give her away.

A Finnish merman, the Vetehinen, is the king of shape-shifters. In the blink of an eye he can change from a grey-bearded old man with a fish's tail into a normal fish, a dog, a horse or even a human woman.



POWER OVER THE WAVES

Most of all, mermaids have the magical ability to control the sea: its waves, weather and storms, and its wild sea creatures. They may use this power to help humans, by sending them calm weather and shoals of fish. But if you upset the merfolk, they may cause terrible storms, sink ships and even destroy cities.

In 1584, for example, the Dutch land of Saeftinghe was flooded and washed away by the sea. Legend tells how a fisherman from Saeftinghe caught a mermaid and refused to let her go. The mermaid's merman husband was so angry that he cursed the towns of Saeftinghe, and sent a tidal wave to swamp and destroy them. To this day, all that's left of Saeftinghe is a muddy, marshy swamp, known as the "drowned land of Saeftinghe".





YAWKYAWK

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

In the Kunwinjku culture of northern Australia, Yawkyawks are mermaids of freshwater streams, ponds and billabongs – temporary lakes that fill with water only in the rainy season. They guard water sources and bring rain, which is very important in this hot, dry land. A Yawkyawk has long strands of green pondweed for hair. In fact, if you see trailing pondweed below the surface of the water, you could be looking right at one! They are shape-shifters, too, and sometimes change into dragonflies, a sign that the rainy season is coming to an end. Yawkyawks are said to keep barramundi fish as pets.





DAKUWAQA

FIJI

In the islands of Fiji, Dakuwaqa is a powerful shark-human god who guards the sea and protects fishermen. According to legend, Dakuwaqa liked to think of himself as the king of the sea, until he decided to conquer the island of Kadavu, which is guarded by the octopus goddess Rokobakaniceva. They fought a battle, but the octopus queen managed to catch Dakuwaqa and squeeze him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. He begged her to do a deal with him: in return for his freedom he would protect the island, and ensure that its people were never attacked by sharks.

JI-MERDIWA

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

These mysterious sea people are said to be cruel, monstrous-looking and able to change shape. They guard both the sea and the shore, and send sickness and disease to anyone who fails to look after the coast carefully. The Ji-Merdiwa are so feared and respected that the locals say you must never create images of them! That's why you can't see one here. But at night, they say, if you go to the beach by moonlight, you might hear the mermaids talking or wailing, see ripples, and perhaps catch a glimpse of a tail.









PANIA OF THE REEF

NEW ZEALAND

Pania was a beautiful Māori mermaid who fell in love with Karitoki, the son of a Māori chief, and agreed to marry him – but she would come ashore only at night, and return to the sea every day. Karitoki was upset that no one believed he had a wife, because they never saw her. A wise man told him that if Pania ate cooked food, she could never return to the sea. So, as she slept, Karitoki put cooked food in her mouth – but the hooting of an owl woke her up, and she discovered his plan. She ran into the sea, and never returned. Some say that to keep her in the sea forever, the mermaid king transformed her into the reef that lies just off the shore.

VATEA

COOK ISLANDS

According to the legends of the Cook Islands in the Pacific Ocean, Vatea is the first man, father of all other humans. He's a merman, but a very unusual one. One side of him is human, with half a human head and face, an arm and a foot. The other side is a dolphin, with fins and a dolphin tail. He has power over light, the sun and the moon, and some say the sun and moon shine from his two eyes.

THE RI, ILKAI OR PISHMARY

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

In Papua New Guinea, especially around the islands of New Ireland, the locals speak of the fish-people, whom they often spot swimming in the sea or catch accidentally in their nets. Depending on the area, these mermaids are known as the Ri, the Ilkai or sometimes the Pishmary.







MERMAIDS OF LAKE TITICACA

BOLIVIA AND PERU

Titicaca is the highest large lake in the world, 3,800 metres (12,500 feet) up in the Andes mountains, between Bolivia and Peru. Many mermaids are said to live around the lake, in the rivers that flow into it, and in mountain springs nearby. They have a special skill: playing the charango, a kind of small guitar. In this area it's traditional for young men to play the charango as a way to impress the women they like – and the local mermaids can help them improve their playing. When a man gets a new charango, he wraps it up and leaves it next to the water with gifts of food, so that a mermaid will play it and tune it overnight.

THE MERMAID OF GOCTA FALLS

PERU

One of the world's highest waterfalls was unknown to outsiders until the year 2005 – thanks to its resident mermaid. Local people refused to take explorers to the waterfall because they were afraid of the mermaid who lived in the pool at the bottom of the falls. The mermaid of Gocta Falls keeps a stash of secret treasure in her pool and is said to have kidnapped a local man, who went to see her and never returned.



IARA

AMAZONIAN WARRIOR MERMAID

BRAZIL

Long, long ago, the legends say, Iara was a strong, brave young woman, daughter of a chief, and the best warrior in her tribe. Her brothers, jealous that she was a better fighter than them, hatched a plan to kill her as she slept. But as they crept towards her, Iara woke up.

In her terror, she fought and killed them both in self-defence. When she realized the attackers were her own brothers, Iara was heartbroken. She tried to explain what had happened, but her father blamed her, and had her thrown into the river to drown. But the fish took pity on her, and lifted her up to the surface.

There the bright moon bathed her in magical light, and transformed her into an immortal, green-haired mermaid. She became the mother of a whole tribe of mermaids, who still lurk in the rivers of the Amazon jungle. They are dangerous creatures, and are blamed for sinking boats and making people disappear.

At night, the locals say, an Iara will leave the water and wait by the shore. When she senses a man nearby, she enchants him with her beauty and singing, then pulls him into the river to drown, in revenge for the first Iara's suffering.