



[Home](#) > The Sleeping Army

The Sleeping Army

Books Reviewed:

[The Sleeping Army](#) [1]

Issue:

[190](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Caroline Sanderson](#) [3]

Editor's Choice:

off

BfK Rating:

4

Shuttled between her bickering divorced parents, twelve year old Freya finds herself stuck with her dad on his Thursday (sic) night shift as a security guard at the British Museum. Bored, she blows a ceremonial horn exhibited next to the Lewis Chessmen, and gets the shock of her life as three of the ivory pieces transform into living, breathing Vikings. Slaves Roskva and Alfi and Berserker warrior Snot spirit Freya off to Asgard, land of the Norse gods, from whence she is dispatched on a death-defying quest to restore their eternal youth. If she is to succeed, she must fend off giants, trolls, dragons, and all the perils of Hel (sic). If she refuses or fails, she too will face the future as a walrus ivory chess piece. And this is a girl who feels nervous off concrete.

The glum and worried expressions of the real Lewis Chessmen inspired Francesca Simon to come up with a story to explain why they look so unhappy. The result is a feisty and funny saga which draws cleverly on Norse mythology, and dwells with relish on some of its more grotesque elements. For any former 'Horrid Henry' readers now hooked on Percy Jackson, it will be a must-read. But there's more to this intelligent novel than runes, Ragnarok and ravens. Simon also invites us to imagine a contemporary Britain in which Christianity was merely a cult that died out by the end of the 34th century. The state religion is Wodenism, with the Norse and Anglo-Saxon gods still worshipped by some. Richard Dawkins gets a name check, and absolutely no-one is called Christopher. And running through the novel is the theme of individual fate, and what will remain of us, after 'the sword, or sickness, or old age' ends our lives. Simon gives us almost too much to think about in one short novel. Perhaps a Ring Cycle starring Freya is required?

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Links:

[1] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-sleeping-army>

[2] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/190>

[3] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/caroline-sanderson>