

GIRLS WHO SLAY MONSTERS: DARING TALES OF IRELAND'S FORGOTTEN GODDESSES

Ellen Ryan

Illustrated by Shona Shirley Macdonald

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Themes

- Diversity
- Feminism
- Identity
- Family
- Relationships
- Tradition
- Body positivity
- Mythology
- Empowerment

Summary Join author Ellen Ryan as she rediscovers and reinvents ancient Celtic goddesses with a firm eye on today's issues. From the edge of Kerry to the top of Scotland, twenty-four goddesses are presented to us as modern archetypes – from fashionista to eco-warrior to peace negotiator. Glowing illustrations and a page of facts and ideas for places to visit accompany each one.

Judges' Comments This outstanding book brings oft-forgotten goddesses and heroes of Irish mythology out of the depths of an ancient past and into the reader's present. Ryan's wonderfully rich (and well-researched!) text and Macdonald's sophisticated palette combine beautifully to create an innovative book that celebrates storytelling, curiosities and female power. Firmly anchored in the landscape of this island, the book reminds us that these tales are forever etched into our hills and valleys and lakes and beaches; our mythic past is present in the everyday.



About the Author Ellen Ryan is an Irish journalist with a passion for Irish mythology and archaeology. She lives by the sea in Wicklow with her husband and daughter. This is her first book.

About the Illustrator Shona Shirley Macdonald is an award-winning children's book illustrator and author from Scotland, who also lives by the sea in Waterford. This is her third children's book, following *The Pooka Party* and *Cluasa Capaill ar an Rí*, written by Bridget Breathnach.

QUESTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. Look at the cover. What do you notice? Do you like the image?
2. How do you think the illustrator made this image? What techniques might she have used?
3. What does the title tell you about the book?
4. Is this a book you think you will enjoy?
5. Do you already know any of Ireland's goddesses? Which ones?

AS YOU READ

1. Look at the endpapers (these are the pages immediately inside the front and back covers of the book).
2. What do the endpapers tell you? Do you think from the endpapers that this will be a traditional retelling or a modern updating of these myths?
3. Now read the contents page. Has your opinion changed?
4. Which goddess comes from nearest to your home? Have you heard of them before?
5. Now begin to read the book. For each goddess, consider:
 - Have you heard about this goddess before?
 - Which parts of the story do you think are traditional, and which parts do you think have been changed?
 - Do you think this goddess is good, or bad, or somewhere in between?

Bé Binn – Fashionista

Bé Binn is celebrated at home and is proud of her large body, which she takes great pleasure in adorning with silks and jewellery. When she visits another culture, they have a different idea of what is beautiful and mock her cruelly. Which saying do you think is a more fitting summary of the tale: 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder' or 'Pride comes before a fall'?

If you chose the second option, whose pride were you thinking of?

Eithne – Supernatural Scholar

In this retelling of the legend, Eithne feels unsafe at home. Naturally a quiet child, it takes her time to build up the courage to leave home and find a trustworthy adult to confide in. Once she does, her circumstances change and she flourishes. Can you think of any other stories about children flourishing once they leave their original homes?

Morrígan – Monstrous Protector of Ireland

In this telling of the legend, after being rejected as a romantic partner Morrígan attacks Cú Chulainn, trips him up and eggs on his enemies – this is described as helping him. What do you think about this? Would you think differently if the roles were reversed?

Bríg – Artist and Inventor

After the retelling of this legend, the author describes how Bríg has been reinvented across time and space – as St Brigid by the Catholic Church in Ireland and as Maman Brigitte by Haitian Vodouists. What is your favourite story about Bríg? What do you think of this reinvention? What traditions do you know that are still practised on St Brigid's Day?

Fand – Eco-Warrior

Fand is a loving goddess who prizes equity and values the lives of animals equally to those of humans. In this retelling, she puts a curse on Cú Chulainn when she sees how selfish he is. Years later, when he returns looking for her, she falls in love with him, thinking he has changed. But when Emer, his wife, appears to win him back, Fand relinquishes him, realising that he has not changed from the selfish boy she initially met. Do you think she was right to have given him a second chance?

AFTER YOU HAVE READ

1. Did the book meet your expectations, or did you expect something else from the cover?
2. What did you think of the book overall? Would you recommend it to a friend?
3. How did the illustrations enhance the book?
4. Which goddesses, if any, were new to you?
5. Which goddess was your favourite? Which did you like the least?
6. Do you think the modernisation of the stories was a success?
7. What do you think about the male gods and mortals in this book? How are they portrayed?

ACTIVITIES

- Research other Irish myths and legends online or in your local library. Compare stories of Bríg, Morrigan and Medb that you find with the stories in the book. Which telling do you prefer and why?
- Ask an adult in your life to tell you about their favourite Irish myth, and make an illustration of the story they tell you.
- Design a Halloween costume of your favourite character from Irish mythology.
- Invent a myth of your own, and tell it to your fellow junior jurors.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- For more reading recommendations, check out the Children's Books Ireland Folklore, Myth, Legend curated list for readers aged 0–14: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/folklore-myth-legend>
- Go to your local library and borrow *Glorious Goddesses of Ancient Ireland* by Karen Ward and Paula McGloin. Compare how the two books retell the stories of the goddesses.
- Read illustrator Shona Shirley Macdonald's discussion of her work on *Cluasa Capaill ar an Rí* by Brigid Bhreathnach: <https://shonashirleymacdonald.com/cluasa>
- Read this interview with author Ellen Ryan on [Writing.ie](https://www.writing.ie/interviews/girls-who-slay-monsters-daring-tales-of-irelands-forgotten-goddesses-by-ellen-ryan/), in which she describes the inspiration for her book: <https://www.writing.ie/interviews/girls-who-slay-monsters-daring-tales-of-irelands-forgotten-goddesses-by-ellen-ryan/>