

“The material was in my head and it had to come out”

A CONVERSATION WITH TOMMY KRAPPWEIS*

How did you come up with Mara and the Firebringer?

Krappweis: I was actually supposed to write a television mystery series, something along the lines of *Super Natural*, for a large German private broadcaster. I felt that vampires and so on had been done to death, forgive the pun. When thinking about what kind of mystery series I could create, I stumbled upon Nordic Germanic mythology. But I didn't want an obvious hero – I mean the typical 25- to 35-year-old student of Nordic mythology – that would have been boring. So I came up with the 14-year-old grouchy Mara, who does not believe she is – or should be – the one to save the world. It was a combination that fascinated me, but unfortunately it wasn't necessarily suitable for the 8.15 pm slot on Thursdays. So I was facing a problem: it was already in my head and it had

to come out – somehow. That was the crucial moment, when creativity, or the enlivening of creativity, or this urge to now pour it into some sort of mould, was greater than the task that had actually been set.

Why Germanic mythology?

Krappweis: It was a very specific experience. There's a theory that cultural groups have a collective memory. A good example would be “Siegfried the Dragon Slayer”: everyone in Germany knows him, but I don't think everyone has read the Nibelung legend. And somehow you feel you know it; it belongs to your cultural group, but actually you don't really know anything specific about it.

And when I started reading around the subject of Nordic Germanic mythology I had a lot of moments like this when I felt a jolt and thought,

“For God's sake, that's brutally close; that's actually much closer than Greek mythology, which is dealt with much more in film and television.” The Greek adventures are clearly catchier, but this was something that resonated so strongly within me in a way I had never experienced with similar things. And that ignited my creativity so intensely that I thought, “I have to do something with that! Why does no one around me know that 3 of the German weekdays are named after Nordic gods?¹ That's just unbelievable!” And all these things were so extreme and suddenly so present that I really felt like a gold-digger who comes across such a thing and suddenly somehow a vein of gold gapes open before him, while to the left oil splutters around the source. It really was magnificent. So this is how the book trilogy of *Mara and the Firebringer* started.



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Ill. 1: Mara's “mental cinema” becomes reality: without wanting to she finds herself in historical sites and scenes from Germanic mythology, where she tries to avert the threatening danger from the demi-god Loki



Ill. 2: Administrative constraints that led to an even greater scene: Mara thinks of Fafnir, the lindworm from the Nibelung legend, and it appears on a medieval market in Munich

spectacular, and it gave us the chance to involve various fans of the *Mara* book from the medieval and the fantasy fan scene in the film. A hundred people came, and for 3 days they hurled themselves around the Fountain Courtyard with us with the kind of vehemence and delight you can't even demand of an extra. It wouldn't have worked like that. In this respect, what was actually a problem was transformed by a creative approach into something so much greater than we could have previously anticipated.

A completely different kind of creativity is needed to pack a very fat book into a screenplay.

Krappweis: Yes, it was really laborious, particularly the decisions: "What should I leave out? What do I need to simplify somehow so it fits into 90 minutes?" I was pleased I had the dramaturge at my side, who every now and then was able to say, "Important" – "Not important". In the book, for example, visions are constantly raining down on Mara. In her "mental cinema" she sees significant moments from mythological narratives, and she plunges into some of them (Ill. 1). That often doesn't really have anything to do with progressing the story around the "Firebringer". In the film the viewer expects every sentence and every scene to be linked to the plot and plot progression. This means we only included those visions that allow the viewer to acquire knowledge necessary to the plot. That was terribly important and, at the same time, extremely difficult.

Does the film outdo the book in terms of creativity at all?

Krappweis: Sometimes that came from the constraints we were under. In the book Mara accidentally brings Fafnir, the lindworm from the Nibelung

legend (Ill. 2), with her onto the Ludwig Bridge in Munich, the city's main arterial road. We of course wanted to convert that into film exactly as it was depicted in the book. Unfortunately the Regional Administration Office would not allow us to do it in that way, or rather, we would have had to airbrush out the various cyclists and the tram later.

So we had to ask ourselves: "Where else can we go? Where would be an interesting place in Munich?" Deadlines were approaching fast, so in a process of elimination we decided on the Fountain Courtyard of the Munich Residenz. In the end, this proved to be much more

Mara and the Firebringer

14-year-old Mara actually just wants "to be normal", but branches speak to her; she can plunge into the Germanic mythological world and change it.

"Just" because she is thinking about it, a lindworm appears in the city center in Munich: *Mara and the Firebringer* is a trilogy centered on a reluctant seer who discovers her connections to the Germanic mythological world and ultimately has to rescue it.

What do you need in order to be creative?

Krappweis: Right at the point when I find something interesting, I am able to work with it straight away. My biggest problem is that if I don't have that, and – to exaggerate a little – I find something boring or I feel I am just executing something, I immediately fall asleep for 100 years. I just can't do it! I suddenly lack the discipline, which isn't always helpful, I must say. But as long as there is something to interest and challenge me, it goes swimmingly, and then sometimes I don't actually need any sleep. ■

NOTE

¹ Tuesday, Thursday and Friday are named after Týr, Thor and Frija. In English there is also Wednesday, named after Wodan/Odin.

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