

## Baba Yaga

Baba Yaga is a character from Slavic (Eastern European) folklore. She appears in hundreds of folk stories, dating back to at least the eighteenth century. Her origins may be far older; Baba Yaga has been linked to ancient mythological characters, such as the Slavic Mistress of Birds, and deities such as *Yaga zmeya bura*, the Slavic Goddess of Death.



*Baba Yaga by Ivan Bilbin, 1900*

In Slavic languages the word ‘Baba’ usually means ‘old woman’, although the word has also been used to describe female demons, some illnesses (e.g. *Baba Šarka* is a folk name for measles), some concepts of time (e.g. *Baba Marta* is a personification of March), astronomical phenomena (e.g. *Baba Gale* is the moon), and meteorological occurrences (e.g. *Baba’s belt* is a rainbow, and *Baba’s millet* is hail).

The origins of the word ‘Yaga’ are unclear, although some experts have suggested the word may mean ‘evil’ or ‘horror’.

Baba Yaga’s appearance in folk stories varies; in some tales she is a fiery flying serpent, an angry storm, or three sisters. But she is most commonly described as an old woman with iron teeth, bony legs (or sometimes only one leg; made of clay, iron, or gold), and a long (often beak-like) nose. Many of the phrases used to describe her rhyme in Russian (e.g. ‘*Baba Iaga Kostianaia Noga*’, which means Baba Yaga Bony Leg).

Baba Yaga lives in a hut deep in the forest, and she is so linked to her home that in some stories they have grown together to become one being. When she is inside her hut, Baba Yaga often lies on the stove (traditional Russian stoves are large enclosed fireplaces used for heating and cooking, and they often have nooks to sleep on in winter). Baba Yaga sometimes stretches from one corner of the hut to the other, with her nose growing into the ceiling or out of the chimney.

Baba Yaga’s hut is surrounded by a fence of human bones, with skulls on posts. The hut usually has chicken or hen legs, although in a few tales it has goat legs or a spindle heel (a pointed rod to turn on). Visitors use a traditional phrase to make the hut turn around and face them, “*Little hut, little hut! Stand with your back to the forest and your front to me!*”

Baba Yaga often travels in a giant mortar (a dish used for grinding), propelling herself along by rowing with a pestle (a long grinding tool with a rounded end), and sweeping away her tracks with a broom.

Baba Yaga's role in folk stories is often as a cannibalistic witch - she often comments on the smell of her visitor's blood! But she is an ambiguous character (meaning she can be interpreted in different ways, and play different roles).

In some stories she is very cruel; kidnapping and murdering characters, or acting as an antagonist – hindering the story's hero in some way. But in other stories she is kind and compassionate; offering advice, or donating magical objects. Sometimes she tests the hero of the story by setting them challenges and the chance to earn a reward.

Baba Yaga is a fascinating mixture of wise woman and fairy tale witch. She understands the mysteries of birth, life and death; and often protects the forest and the creatures within it; but she also has the unusual ability to both help or hinder the heroes of a story.

Examples of Slavic folk tales featuring Baba Yaga include:



*Vasilisa the Beautiful* by Ivan Bilibin, 1899

*Vasilisa the Beautiful*, in which a young girl completes seemingly impossible tasks set by Baba Yaga, with the help of a magical doll given to her by her mother on her deathbed, to eventually earn a skull with burning eyes that frees her from her evil stepmother.

*Baba Yaga and the Girl with a Kind Heart*, in which a young girl escapes Baba Yaga by being kind to Baba Yaga's maid, cat, dog, and birch tree. Baba Yaga chases the girl when she flees, but the girl throws down a towel that turns into a river, and a comb that turns into a forest.

*The Bride of Finist the Falcon*, in which three Baba Yaga's help a young girl rescue her shapeshifting lover, by giving the girl advice and magical items (such as a silver spinning wheel and an enchanted needle).

*Baba Yaga and the Brave Youth*, in which a kidnapped boy escapes being eaten by Baba Yaga, by tricking her into her own oven.