

The Legend of Baba Yaga

Swooping through forests in a flying mortar and pestle, Baba Yaga has haunted the nightmares of children in Eastern Europe for generations. Hideous and fearsome, the witch has appeared in Slavic folklore since at least the seventeenth century. Despite her appearance, Baba Yaga defies easy classification as a villain. While she might eat those who are rude to her, she also offers guidance to the pure-hearted and is a maternal guardian of the forest.

Bones
Baba Yaga's favorite accessory, bones can be found on her person and in her home.

Mortar
Baba Yaga doesn't fly with a broom. Instead, she sits in a giant mortar as she traverses the forest.

Wrinkled Face
Frequently described as "ugly," Baba Yaga has rotting teeth and a large nose. She is typically represented with unkempt gray hair.

Ragged Clothing
Baba Yaga has lived alone in the forest for an untold number of years, so she is not the most fashionable.

Gnarled Hands
Baba Yaga has veined, knotted hands with dirty fingernails.

Pestle
In order to steer her mortar, Baba Yaga uses a pestle as a rudder.



Home Sweet Home

Travelers seldom find Baba Yaga's home twice, as it stands on chicken legs and wanders around the forest. Some stories say Baba Yaga's home is surrounded by a fence made of skulls and bones.

What's in a Name?

Linguists have long debated the origin of Baba Yaga's name, written below in Russian. While the first word's meaning is clear, the second's is less obvious.

Баба
Яга

Baba
A Slavic babble word, "Baba" means "grandmother" or "old woman."

Yaga
Some scholars believe "Yaga" comes from a Sanskrit word for "snake," but others say its Slavic roots mean "horror," "pain" or "disease."

Baba Across Europe

Baba Yaga is most famous in East Slavic countries, or Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. But variations of Baba Yaga appear in almost all Slavic countries. This map shows the names of related characters by location.

Russia, Belarus, Ukraine
Baba Yaga

Poland
Jedza

Slovenia, Czechia, Slovakia
Ježibaba

Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia
Baba Roga

Bulgaria
Gorska Maika

Modern Influence

In recent years, Baba Yaga has achieved global popularity among artists and authors, who often draw inspiration from her grotesque appearance and complex morality.



Yubaba

The antagonist of Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 film *Spirited Away*, Yubaba is an ancient bathhouse proprietor who turns her enemies into pigs. Like Baba Yaga, Yubaba embraces the morbid while also showing moments of maternal warmth.

John Wick

In the 2014 neo-noir film, Keanu Reeves stars as the titular Belarusian assassin. Nicknamed "Baba Yaga" because of his ferocious power, Wick is the worst nightmare of his targets—once they fall in his clutches, there's no hope of escaping. Mercifully, Wick does not eat his victims.

