

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Are Unicorns Real?

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[Jane] This is *But Why?: A Podcast For Curious Kids*, from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this podcast, we take questions from kids just like you and we find answers. We enjoy tackling questions about pretty much anything, from the scientific to the silly.

Today, we're answering questions about some things some of you might already know a lot about, or at least, think you know a lot about.

[Emmalynn] – Are unicorns real? That was 6-year-old Emmalynn from Beaufort, South Carolina. And she's not the only one wondering that. So today we're going to go deep into the world of unicorns, dragons and other mythical creatures. And we found the perfect person to help answer your questions.

[Adam] My name is Adam Gidwitz, I'm an author of books for young people. I write books for kids seven years old, really, through about 13-year-olds. Specifically, the books that are relevant to this show is a series that I have called *The Unicorn Rescue Society*. And, in *The Unicorn Rescue Society*, it's about two kids who travel around the world rescuing mythical creatures from danger. Each book, they go to a different place. They learn about the mythology, the culture, the language, the food, and about a mythical creature. And they have to rescue it.

[Jane] And Elliot and Uchenna also have an adult who they go around the world with - their teacher who helps them - right?

[Adam] That's right. His name is Professor Fauna. And, for the adults out there, he's sort of a cross between Doc Brown from *Back to the Future* and The Most Interesting Man in the World from the Dos Equis commercials. He's eccentric and he is brave, and he's not very good at focusing, because Professor Fauna is obsessed with unicorns. So, they may be rescuing a dragon in the Basque country, or a family of sasquatches in Washington state. But always, Professor Fauna really, really wishes he were rescuing a unicorn. The problem, the great tragedy of his life is, he's never actually found one.

[child] My question is, are unicorns real?

[child] Are unicorns real?

[child] Why do unicorns not exist?

[child] I wonder if unicorns are real.

[Jane] That was Esmé, Ala, Kai and Madeleine asking if unicorns are real. Adam, have you ever seen a unicorn?

[Adam] So, I haven't. But that doesn't mean that they don't exist. A hundred and fifty years ago, scientists were pretty convinced that gorillas were a myth. They had heard stories about gorillas from explorers and from the native people of West Africa. But "scientists",

the Europeans and Americans who wrote down the science books, were pretty sure there was no such thing as gorillas. They were just a story. And then, of course, they were discovered and now we know gorillas are really very real. So, I've never seen a unicorn and unicorns show up in some books, but not really in science books. That doesn't mean they don't exist. It just means scientists haven't seen them yet.

[Jane] So, we now know gorillas are real, but still, as far as I know, no one has proven the existence of a unicorn. Are they real?

[Adam] Like gorillas, 150 years ago, we don't know for sure. Most scientists would say that unicorns are not real, that unicorns are a creation of the myths, stories, legends, beliefs of cultures all around the world. But cultures all around the world do have stories of unicorns, from China, to India, to the Middle East, to Africa, certainly in Europe, and now, in the United States. So, many of these cultures came up with the idea of the unicorn, it seems, independently. Why would they all be telling a story about a creature that is pretty much the same all the way across the globe? Maybe because at one point they really existed? Maybe because they still truly exist? Or maybe because unicorns speak to something inside of ourselves, something that believes in beauty and believes in the rareness of nature and believes in magic. And so, in one way or another, I think that they're real, whether you see them or whether they exist inside of you.

[Jane] So, I was going to ask you that. What do YOU personally think? So, you think they're real, but maybe not a physical animal, real.

[Adam] I think that's quite possible. I think that unicorns are really important to millions and millions and millions of people around the world. So, to say that they're not real would be silly. To say whether we could ever find one and put it in a zoo, I'm not sure about that. But if somebody came up to me and said there's no such thing as unicorns, I would say, you haven't spoken to many people.

[Jane] Adam Gidwitz isn't the only person we reached out to on this question.

[Dana Simpson] Hello, my name is Dana Simpson. I am the cartoonist and writer responsible for *Phoebe and Her Unicorn*. I think unicorns are real if you want them to be. Unicorns are real to me. I spend every day hanging out with a unicorn and going on adventures with her and deciding on adventures for her to have. She's as real to me as anybody else in my life. If you believe in unicorns, unicorns are everywhere. We've had a lot of years of a lot of different people writing and drawing about unicorns. If you draw a unicorn or if you write a story about a unicorn, you're part of a very long tradition.

[Maddie] Hi, my name is Maddie, I live in West Point, New York. My question is, why did people not think unicorns are real?

[Dana Simpson] Well, the reason is the "shield of boringness". Shield of boringness is a magical spell that unicorns use so that when they walk around among us, we don't think there's anything interesting about them, so we leave them alone. Because sometimes even unicorns just want to be left alone to go about their business. And they're so amazing and wonderful and beautiful that if they didn't have the shield of boringness, we'd all just be around them all the time, going "ooh, a unicorn" and taking pictures with our phones and stuff. And, no one wants that. Even unicorns don't want that. So, as a result, a lot of people don't think they're real. Which is exactly the way that unicorns want it.

[Jane] That was graphic novelist Dana Simpson, author of *Phoebe and Her Unicorn*, about a 9-year-old and her best friend, a very vain unicorn named Marigold.

These days, it seems like a lot of the talk about unicorns and the shows and movies and even some of the stuff, like backpacks and T-shirts about unicorns, are geared toward girls. Some people even say unicorns are a girl thing. But, Adam Gidwitz says he totally disagrees.

[Adam] I mean, look, if boys aren't interested in big, powerful creatures with magical horns that can charge through the forest, defend themselves, and also hide from people, I mean, sure, if a boy or a girl doesn't want to be interested in an awesome creature like that, well, that's their loss. I actually decided to write *The Unicorn Rescue Society* series when I was at a middle school speaking to kids who were, you know, 11 through 13 years old. And we were doing a schtick with a few other authors.

[Jane] What's a schtick?

[Adam] Oh, thank you. We were all sort of making jokes, doing a routine, a little bit of a play. And one of the authors - a male author - had a journal. And on the cover of the journal was a unicorn. And, another author said, "why do you have a unicorn on your journal"? And the author was about to turn to the audience and say, why, when a seventh grade boy, in the middle of this huge auditorium, shouted out, "because unicorns are awesome!". That kid was right.

[Jane] Yeah, well, I want to hear more about them. And so do the people who have sent us questions, because there's a lot that we might imagine we know about unicorns, but, I mean, I have a lot of questions. So, let us take, for the purposes of this show, the idea that unicorns, if they're not real, they're at least worth exploring, and we should try to figure out what might be known about them from different cultures, mythology, and from your research. Does that sound good to you?

[Adam] That sounds good, but I would like to impose one condition.

[Jane] Okay.

[Adam] I will answer your unicorn questions. But every time I do, I get to tell you about a different mythical creature, that maybe, your listeners have not heard of, that are, if not as cool as unicorns, pretty darn cool. And I think, more people should know about. Is that fair?

[Jane] I suppose I can live with that rule.

[Adam] Okay, great.

[Jane] Okay. All right. So Lily has a question.

[Lily] ... and I'm seven years old, and I live in Ashburn, Virginia. And my question is, who made up unicorns?

[Ainslee] I'm Ainslee. I am five years old. I am from West Virginia. I want to know, where do unicorns come from?

[Adam] Those are great questions and there are a bunch of different answers. The most famous accounts of unicorns come from ancient Greece. Pliny, Aristotle, Herodotus all spoke about unicorns, and that would have been more than 2,000 years ago. Their versions of the unicorn traveled throughout Europe and throughout the mythology and culture that we're used to - in fact, became a part of Christian mythology, as well. So, most of us think of the unicorn the way that Aristotle, Herodotus and a little later, Pliny, talked about them in Greece and in Rome. But, probably, the first account of a unicorn comes much earlier. Reportedly, 5,000 years ago in China, when the qilin, which is a kind of unicorn, was talked about. And, in fact, the first emperor of China was supposed to have seen one of these unicorns on top of a mountain. So, they go back much, much farther than ancient Greece, which was already a really long time ago. People think that the ancient Greeks were actually describing something that they saw in India or in Tibet. So those cultures have also had a unicorn-like creature for a very, very long time. But, we see that that unicorn travels, as I said, to Africa, Europe, even the United States. All over the globe. So, at this point, it's hard to say any one culture gets to claim the unicorn, any one location gets to claim the unicorn.

[Jane] Are there different breeds of unicorn?

[Adam] Well, that is a matter of great debate. I believe so. In *The Unicorn Rescue Society*, at the end of each book, in the paperback versions, we have what I call "The Secret Order of the Unicorn", which is a story about a thousand years ago in Europe, as people were trying to save the unicorns ... as forests were getting cut down, as people were trying to hunt them (which is a terrible idea), they wanted to save them. And as they collect the unicorns, they find unicorns of all different species, colors, types, sizes. So, I believe so. But in different traditions, in, you know, the qilin is one kind of unicorn, the European unicorn tends to look like one kind of unicorn in the traditional stories. But I think, you know, like there are many different kinds of monkeys, there are many different kinds of horses, there must be many different kinds of unicorns.

[Jane] All right. So we've been talking about unicorns. Who else do you wanna tell us about?

[Adam] Well, I'd like to tell you about a creature from the island of Cyprus, which is in the Mediterranean Sea, very near Greece. And, it is called a pyrausta. And a pyrausta is a tiny dragon no larger than a butterfly. The pyrausta is born in fire and lives its whole life in fire. And if it leaves fire for more than a couple of moments, it crumbles into ash. So, the tiny, butterfly-sized fire dragon, the pyrausta, is pretty cool. I think people should know about that, too.

[Jane] Butterfly-sized. That's so cool.

[Adam] Yeah.

[Jane] And, you haven't seen one of those either?

[Adam] No, but I do look very closely at fire. You know, I was making oatmeal this morning and I was just, like, staring at the flames. And my wife and daughter asked me what I was doing and I was looking for a pyrausta.

[Jane] Aw, maybe someday.

Coming up, we'll have more answers to your unicorn questions, including what they eat and whether or not they really have rainbow-colored manes. And, have you ever heard of a Herensuge? Well, stay tuned.

This is *But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids*. I'm Jane Lindholm. Today, we're talking about unicorns and other mythical creatures with Adam Gidwitz. Maybe you've read some of his books. [00:13:39] He's the creator of *The Unicorn Rescue Society* series and *A Tale Dark & Grimm*, to name just a couple.

[Brooke] Hi. My name is Brooke, I am four years old, I live in Westport, New York. And my question is, why do unicorns have rainbow hair?

[Adam] Well, I'm not sure that we've documented that unicorns have rainbow hair. A lot of people do believe that they have rainbow hair and some species might, but some other species almost certainly don't. Some of them have reddish hair - the ones in Tibet have reddish hair. Many of them have white hair. Many of the unicorns are pearly white, all over. So, rainbow hair has become very popular recently. To be honest, I think it's easier to sell unicorn toys if they have rainbow hair. And so a lot of toy companies like to make them have rainbow hair. But, my belief is, that's just one kind of unicorn. And in the mythology of the world, it's actually a very new kind of unicorn.

[Jane] Before you tell us about another creature, though, do all unicorns have one single horn that comes out of the same place on their forehead?

[Adam] Yes, that is the definition of a unicorn. It has is one horn. It almost always comes out of the middle of their forehead. A lot of people believe that historically, the unicorn stories were inspired by different kinds of creatures. So, one kind of creature is a rhinoceros, the single-horned, white rhinoceros. And that horn, obviously, comes out of the rhinoceros's nose area. But these days, almost every mythology has the single horn of the unicorn coming out of its forehead and unicorn means one horn.

[Jane] Okay, who else do you wanna tell us about?

[Adam] I would love to tell you about a mythical creature from southern Japan, known as the basan. The basan is a tiny chicken, or a turkey, and it eats coals and can breathe fire. That's right. It is a fire-breathing chicken. So, you may love unicorns, and I do, too, but you got to give a little bit of love to the basan, the fire-breathing chicken.

[Jane] Lots of fire animals.

[Adam] I think I just like fire animals. You know what? The next one will be a water animal, I promise.

[Jane] Okay. So, what size are unicorns? I mean, I think of them as kind of horse-size. So, pretty big and very much horse-shaped. But is that the way every unicorn looks?

[Adam] No, that's actually – there are a lot of different versions of the size of a unicorn. So, in European Christian mythology, they are much smaller. They're about the size of a goat. But in many other mythologies and, sort of the way I like to think about them, is quite large horses. And because some of the stories of unicorns were inspired by rhinoceroses, some people imagine them to be quite large, indeed. So there's a big range of how big a unicorn could be.

[Jane] And can they have wings or is that a different animal?

[Adam] That is a different animal. So, there is the Pegasus - the winged horse - and then there's the unicorn. And these days, there is also some talk of a creature that has wings AND a horn that looks like a horse. Some people call that the alicorn, which is interesting because in fact, the word alicorn has often been used to mean the horn of the unicorn. So, the horn of the unicorn is sometimes called the alicorn. But I've heard a bunch of kids tell me that the winged horse with a horn is called an alicorn, too, which is something I hadn't heard before.

[Jane] All right. Take us to the water.

[Adam] In West Africa, there is a river creature called the Ninki Nanka.

[Jane] Ninki Nanka

[Adam] The Ninki Nanka, and it is an aquatic predator. It lives in the water and it eats meat and fish. It has a body like a crocodile, but a neck like a giraffe. And it has three horns - two on the sides and one on the top of its head. So, that's not like a unicorn, it's like a tri-corn or something like that. And Ninki Nanka is just a really cool name for a creature.

[Jane] You mentioned that the Ninki Nanka is a predator. What do unicorns eat?

[Adam] That's a wonderful question. I believe that the unicorns eat grass, like a horse would. My feeling is that they most like wildflowers.

[Jane] Who else do you want to tell us about?

[Adam] All right. I think I should tell you now about the wyvern. Wyvern is a kind of dragon. It is a two-legged dragon with wings, and it comes from the British Isles. Now, it is important that you learn the difference between a wyvern and a more traditional dragon. In fact, I'll tell you about another one of those. The second book in *The Unicorn Rescue Society* is about a dragon called the Herensuge. The Herensuge is from the Basque Country, which is in the north of Spain and France. And the Herensuge has got wings and four legs and breathes fire and loves treasure. The Herensuge is, in many ways, the most traditional kind of dragon there is, the one that we all expect. A wyvern does not love treasure and does not breathe fire. So, if you see a dragon flying at you through the air, look closely. If it has four legs, it is a Herensuge or a dragon like that, and it will breathe fire and could potentially burn you to a crisp before it eats you. The wyvern, on the other hand, if you look closely, it only has two legs. Do NOT worry, it will NOT burn you to a crisp. It will just eat you raw.

[Jane] (laughs) Oh, only that?

[Adam] Only that. So don't worry about it if it's got two legs. So that's the difference between a wyvern and a Herensuge, or a more traditional kind of dragon.

[Jane] Are there any friendly dragons who really like to be with humans and are less likely to be dangerous?

[Adam] Well, that's a great question. So, in fact, the Herensuge, if you are kind to it, will probably not eat you. Herensuge does love treasure and shiny things. And, so if you have something shiny and sort of wave it in front of the Herensuge's face, it will calm down and it will pretty much follow you wherever you go. But just treat it very kindly and try not to talk too loud or startle it. If it even sneezes, it could burn you up.

[Jane] Oof. Yeah. Okay. So be very careful with a Herensuge.

[Adam] Exactly.

[Jane] Adam says, ultimately, the most important thing about unicorns is not really whether they actually exist or not.

[Adam] I think for me, the most important thing to know about the unicorn is not a fact, but rather, the spirit. These days, a lot of people are selling a lot of things using unicorns: backpacks, socks, toys, even book series. But the spirit of the unicorn is not about selling and buying and making money. The spirit of the unicorn is about the preservation of nature and of beauty. If we really care about unicorns, what we will do is we will protect the world in which they live. We will protect the global cultures that have created the myths of the unicorns that perpetuate their stories, that tell their stories. So, as much as it is fun to buy a unicorn backpack and I think we should all have a unicorn backpack, I certainly want one, I think what we should really do is think about the way that we treat the world around us, both in our own backyards and across the world, and the way that we respect people from other cultures and other places, who speak different languages ... people who come to this country and bring their stories from somewhere far away. When we respect the people of the world, and the earth itself, we are respecting the spirit of the unicorn.

[Jane] That was Adam Gidwitz. He's the author of many books, including *The Unicorn Rescue Society*, where you can enter the world of many mythical creatures through the chapters of those books. By the way, Adam Gidwitz also has his own podcast. It's called *Grimm, Grimmer, Grimmest*. It's maybe a little scary sometimes, but Adam says he will always warn you if something scary is coming up. Thanks to Adam and to Dana Simpson. Dana is the creator of *Phoebe and her Unicorn*, a comic strip and a series of books for kids. And remember, it's about Phoebe and her best friend, who is a unicorn named Marigold, but Marigold is very vain.

If you have a question about anything, have an adult record it. Then they can email the file to us at questions@butwhykids.org. It's great if you tell us your first name, where you live and how old you are. Now, we can't answer all of the fantastic questions you send us, but we do listen to them all. Melody, especially, listens very carefully to every single one of your questions. And we love to hear your voices and what you're thinking about. *But Why* is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.