

Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea

CLASSICAL  
MYTHOLOGY  
AND CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE...

AN ALPHABETICAL  
ODYSSEY



Illustrations by  
Steve K. Simons

A CLASSICAL  
MYTHOLOGY  
AND CHILDREN'S  
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ODYSSEY Z

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea (University of New England, Australia), illustrations by Steve K. Simons (University of Roehampton, London, UK / Panoply Vase Animation Project, UK), *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey*, in the series "Our Mythical Childhood", edited by Katarzyna Marciniak (University of Warsaw, Poland)

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## THERE AND BACK AGAIN, OR, A FOREWORD BY THE SERIES EDITOR

Odysseus πολύτροπος (*polútropos*). His name gave the title to one of the foundational epics of human civilization – Homer's *Odyssey*, which entered many languages of the world as the common noun "odyssey". Its "essential meaning", to quote the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is 'a long journey full of adventures', but also 'a series of experiences that give knowledge or understanding to someone'.<sup>1</sup> Both denotations are close to Odysseus' Homeric epithet, built from πολύς (*polús*; many) and τρόπος (*trópos*; turn): someone who is 'much-turned', who is 'much-wandering',<sup>2</sup> with a focus also on the versatility of mind. Odysseus the Traveller *par excellence* becomes a metaphor of the human fate. "Each of us is an Odysseus / coming back to their Ithaca", writes Leopold Staff (1878–1957) – the Polish poet nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950.<sup>3</sup> We relate to this ancient hero, we know his myth, we admire his bright mind.<sup>4</sup>

Odysseus is brilliant, indeed, and his *polútropos* genius no doubt made his ever so desired return home possible – beyond the gods' playground at Troy, through all the bloody battles, and out of the terrible monsters' lairs. Yet a mind

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<sup>1</sup> See *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "odyssey", <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/odyssey> (this and all the subsequent websites cited in this foreword were accessed on 21 December 2021, unless stated otherwise).

<sup>2</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, s.v. πολύτροπος (online version via the Perseus Digital Library Project: [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aalphabetic+letter%3D\\*p%3Aentry+group%3D182%3Aentry%3Dpolu%2Ftropos](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aalphabetic+letter%3D*p%3Aentry+group%3D182%3Aentry%3Dpolu%2Ftropos)).

<sup>3</sup> "Nomination Archive: Leopold Staff", The Nobel Prize, [https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show\\_people.php?id=8719](https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show_people.php?id=8719) (accessed 25 September 2022). For the poem, see Leopold Staff, "Odys" [Odysseus], in his collection *Dziewięć Muz* [Nine Muses], Warszawa: PIW, 1958, 19, vv. 11–12: "Každy z nas jest Odysem, / Co wraca do swej Itaki".

<sup>4</sup> See also Bob Dylan's Nobel Lecture at "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016", The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/lecture/>: "In a lot of ways, some of these same things have happened to you. You too have had drugs dropped into your wine. You too have shared a bed with the wrong woman. You too have been spellbound by magical voices, sweet voices with strange melodies...".

is not enough for a dream to come true. Homer makes a strong point in this respect. Or rather his Muse does – the one he asks for help in the invocation to the *Odyssey*: “Of these things, goddess, daughter of Zeus, beginning where thou wilt, tell thou even unto us”.<sup>5</sup>

The Muse gladly takes the liberty offered by the Poet and indeed starts where she wishes to. The first scene in which we meet Odysseus unfolds on the island Ogygia. The hero has been stuck there for seven years now, in this opulent realm of the beautiful nymph Calypso – and he is desperate, dejected, and deprived of his agency. Not what we would expect from the much-wandering and resourceful hero famous for being able to cope with the most difficult circumstances. What is more, after the part of the epic known as the *Telemachia*, the scene of Odysseus’ helplessness returns, thus making this image even stronger. When Hermes comes to his rescue, by Zeus’ and Athena’s doing, “the great-hearted Odysseus he found not within; for he sat weeping on the shore, as his wont had been, racking his soul with tears and groans and griefs, and he would look over the unresting sea, shedding tears”.<sup>6</sup>

That is how Homer (or his Muse) challenges the views we have acquired without even knowing when. After all, the *Odyssey* should counsel that we “keep on keepin’ on”, shouldn’t it? A seven-year lockdown hardly lines up with our stereotypes. Thus Homer takes us by surprise in this very first (preserved) literary portrayal of Odysseus. But is this surprise effect lasting in our memory? For the most part, probably not. The Classics have been accompanying us since time immemorial, including via the institution of school,<sup>7</sup> and so we display an overall good knowledge of Greek myths – so good that it can even spawn the false conviction that we have mastered our lesson. However, this kind of lesson is never to be mastered. That is why it is of paramount importance to constantly come back to the Classics – our Ithaca – to let Homer and his disciples surprise us (ever again). For the reading of the masterpieces is a never-ending process,

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.11: τῶν ἀμόθεν γε, θεά, θύγατερ Διός, εἰπέ καὶ ἡμῖν. All English quotations from Homer’s *Odyssey* are given in the translation by A.T. Murray, vol. 1, “Loeb Classical Library”, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1919, via the Perseus Digital Library Project: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0136%3Abook%3D1%3Acard%3D1>. This is also the source of the Greek fragments. On the *Odyssey*’s particular invocation, see Victoria Pedrick, “The Muse Corrects: The Opening of the *Odyssey*”, *Yale Classical Studies* 29 (1992), 39–62.

<sup>6</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.81–84: οὐδ’ ἄρ’ Ὀδυσσεῖα μεγάλητορα ἔνδον ἔτετμεν, / ἄλλ’ ὅ γ’ ἐπ’ ἀκτῆς κλαῖε καθήμενος, ἔνθα πάρος περ, / δάκρυσι καὶ στοναχῇσι καὶ ἄλγεσι θυμὸν ἐρέχθων. / πόντον ἐπ’ ἀτρύγετον δερκέσκετο δάκρυα λείβων.

<sup>7</sup> On this issue see below, n. 21.

as the Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–1883) observed.<sup>8</sup> At each encounter we may uncover something we had not noticed during our previous contact with the given work. We may also recall what we had forgotten or what we (unconsciously) dismissed as irrelevant for our earlier stage of life. The effect of surprise that occurs during this process makes us pause for reflection. Thus not without reason does the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* contain, as a full definition example, the phrase “an odyssey of self-discovery”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Classics (nearly all fed on the crumbs from Homer’s table<sup>10</sup>) have the paradoxical potential both for offering us a comfortingly familiar base to rely on and for surprising us with an infinite number of meanings in response to our needs at various moments in life.

So if we turn back to the *Odyssey* now and ask again what is necessary to make a dream come true, we will discover – despite all the blocking efforts by Calypso (her name originating from καλύπτω/*kalúptō*, ‘to hide’) – that the mind, albeit crucial, is not enough – not even in the case of Odysseus, one of the wisest and most clever of heroes. Let us notice that the gods were moved to help him by his tears flowing from emotions that we may easily relate to still today: longing for home, family, friends... But the issue is more complex. These emotions flow from Odysseus’ heart, so, in short, to make a dream come true the heart is needed to complement the mind.

Homer chooses a clear example in order to emphasize this point. The beautiful nymph, willing to keep Odysseus on her island, offers him immortality – and he rejects it. Above all he desires to go back home to his wife, as he says. The hero’s decision cannot be explained rationally. Odysseus, who embodies the acute intellect, does not use his mind where his fate is at stake and thus he takes by surprise even the divine Calypso. She is aware of her superiority over Penelope: “Surely not inferior to her do I declare myself to be either in form or stature, for in no wise is it seemly that mortal women should vie with immortals in form or comeliness”.<sup>11</sup> And Odysseus does not deny it: “Mighty goddess, be not wroth with me for this. I know full well of myself that wise Penelope is meaner to look upon than thou in comeliness and in stature, for she is a mortal, while thou

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<sup>8</sup> See Jerzy Axer, “Z Horacjusza” [From Horace], in Stanisław Makowski, *Cyprian Norwid. Interpretacje* [Cyprian Norwid: Interpretations], Warszawa: PWN, 1986, 59–70.

<sup>9</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> As the saying ascribed to Aeschylus goes (*Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, vol. 3, *Testimonia* 112a–b).

<sup>11</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.211–213: οὐ μέν θην κείνης γε χερσίων εὐχομαι εἶναι, / οὐ δέμας οὐδὲ φρενὴν, ἐπεὶ οὐ πῶς οὐδὲ ἔοικεν / θνητὰς ἀθανάτησι δέμας καὶ εἶδος ἐρίζειν.

art immortal and ageless".<sup>12</sup> Odysseus quite simply chooses with his heart. He understands not only the irrationality of his rejection of eternal life at Calypso's side, but also the risk of a new journey at the mercy of the "wine-dark sea" and Poseidon. "But even so", he declares, "I wish and long day by day to reach my home, and to see the day of my return".<sup>13</sup> Thus, he soon gets to work (building a raft) – again with his mind in the lead – in order to make use of the opportunity to leave the island.

Also in this sense is each of us an Odysseus. We travel there and back again, guided both by our heart and mind (in changing proportions), with not a few stops to weep on the shore, but also to reflect there and to gather strength for the next stages of our travel. One of the sources of this strength can be the stories from the past that teach us perseverance in pursuing dreams. Odysseus assures Calypso: "And if again some god shall smite me on the wine-dark sea, I will endure it, having in my breast a heart that endures affliction".<sup>14</sup>

The hero's journey and the life journeys of many other heroes and heroines are to be found in books – in the Grand Library of human civilization, as Joseph Campbell demonstrates.<sup>15</sup> Also Norwid, writing about the constant coming back to the masterpieces, did not mean only the Classics, even though their frequent mythical component makes their impact particularly strong. The Grand Library contains texts from very many cultural areas and traditions. It is also clear today that we should include children's literature in this collection. In our times, books for young readers are the first to show us how to use the mind and heart in life. They encourage us to follow our dreams. And they take us by surprise, too – sometimes even in a two-fold way, that is, with the primary reading in childhood and the subsequent readings many years later, when we turn back to them from our adult perspective.

To study various aspects of these phenomena is a challenge worthy of Odysseus and it demands both an acute mind and a steadfast heart. Precisely these qualities characterize Prof. Elizabeth Hale from the University of New England

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<sup>12</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.215–218: πότνα θεά, μή μοι τόδε χῶεο: οἶδα καὶ αὐτὸς / πάντα μάλ', οὐνεκα σεῖο περίφρων Πηνελόπεια / εἶδος ἀκιδνοτέρη μέγεθός τ' εἰσάντα ιδέσθαι: / ἢ μὲν γὰρ βροτὸς ἐστὶ, σὺ δ' ἄθανατος καὶ ἀγήρω.

<sup>13</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.219–220: ἀλλὰ καὶ ὥς ἐθέλω καὶ ἐέλδομαι ἥματα πάντα / οἴκαδ' ἐλθέμεναι καὶ νόστιμον ἦμαρ ιδέσθαι.

<sup>14</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.221–222: εἰ δ' αὖ τις ῥαίησι θεῶν ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντῳ, / τλήσομαι ἐν στήθεσιν ἔχων ταλαπενθέα θυμόν.

<sup>15</sup> See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1949. Of course this phenomenon concerns not only books, but other texts of culture as well (a topic for another kind of research).

in Australia, who, with her colleague Dr Miriam Riverlea (PhD from Monash University), has brought this volume to fruition.

The *Alphabetical Odyssey* did not come out of the blue. It is the fruit of many years of research conducted by Prof. Hale, who honoured me with her company on our mythical journey commenced as early as 2012, owing to the Loeb Classical Library Foundation. The grant for which I had applied there in 2011 – for the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Children's Literature between East and West* (2012–2013) – permitted me to develop what later grew into the multidisciplinary and international *Our Mythical Childhood* programme. While searching for collaborators, I had come across Prof. Hale's fascinating publications on classical reception in nineteenth-century children's culture. And so I sent her an email with an invitation to the first of our mythical conferences at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales", University of Warsaw. This was a time when she conquered Charybdis – in this case, her mailbox, which had devoured my email, as it had reasonably decided that my invitation must have been spam. For how else could you explain an enthusiastic message asking you to travel 15,352 km in May 2013 to jointly discuss children's literature inspired by Greek mythology? In that Charybdis challenge again both a mind and a heart were needed and, fortunately, it was only natural to Prof. Hale to use them. She retrieved my email from her spam folder and came to Warsaw, where she shared her ideas on New Zealand children's writers influenced by classical mythology.<sup>16</sup> Then, our journey continued thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Alumni Award for Innovative Networking Initiatives for the project *Chasing Mythical Beasts... The Reception of Creatures from Graeco-Roman Mythology in Children's and Young Adults' Culture as a Transformation Marker* (2014–2017).<sup>17</sup> In the meantime, a gap in research manifested itself – that is, the lack of a guide joining the classicists and children's literature scholars. In sum – the need for this guide lay at the origin of the idea for the *Alphabetical Odyssey*, which soon was mature enough for an opportunity to come into the world. Such

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<sup>16</sup> For the results of this project, see, e.g., Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, in Open Access at <https://brill.com/view/title/32883>.

<sup>17</sup> See the project's website: <http://mythicalbeasts.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/> and the page of the joint (ERC and Humboldt projects) publication in Open Access: Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020: [https://www.winter-verlag.de/en/detail/978-3-8253-7874-5/Marciniak\\_Ed\\_Chasing\\_Mythical\\_Beasts\\_PDF/](https://www.winter-verlag.de/en/detail/978-3-8253-7874-5/Marciniak_Ed_Chasing_Mythical_Beasts_PDF/).

opportunity was offered by the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant for the project *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* (2016–2022), which enabled us to collaborate further.<sup>18</sup> Prof. Hale invited as the co-author Dr Miriam Riverlea, whose work she knew from Australian conferences devoted to classical reception studies and from her doctoral thesis, *My First Book of Greek Myths: Retelling Ancient Myths to Modern Children* (2017). Together, using a method of integrating the approaches of classical reception and children's literature studies, they developed the *Alphabetical Odyssey*. Their shared enjoyment of children's literature informed their study, as did a deep respect for the authors and illustrators whose works are created with children's needs so carefully addressed.

As a result, a unique amalgam was formed. On the one hand, the *Alphabetical Odyssey* is a guide showing the breadth of the creative field of children's literature that blends the ancient and the modern for readers of all ages, thereby making it possible for them to travel beyond time, to learn about new things, but also to rediscover what may already seem familiar. Short chapters on classical and childhood-specific themes are complemented with recommendations of crossover trips and further reading suggestions, with a special focus on the English-speaking world, but with some excursions also to other parts of the globe.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, this volume stimulates scholarly reflection on what classical culture contributes to children's literature and, reciprocally, how children's literature enriches our reception of classical material. The alphabetical arrangement of the chapters symbolizes the journey through a sea of ideas. This structure results from the inspirations by both Homer's *Odyssey* and the popular form of a children's alphabet book. As befits a "classical" adventure story, this volume comes with a map prepared (along with a set of illustrations in the form of mythological initials) by Steve K. Simons from the University of Roehampton in London – the co-creator with Dr Sonya Nevin of amazing vase animations for the *Our Mythical Childhood* project<sup>20</sup> – who displayed for this volume his painting talent.

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<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., the project's website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/>.

<sup>19</sup> For formal bibliographical references to these works, see the bibliography at the end of the book.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., the "Animating the Ancient World" section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/animating-the-ancient-world>, and the Panoply Vase Animation Project website: <https://www.panoply.org.uk/>.

I wish to thank all of them warmly, as well as our mythical team members: Prof. Lisa Maurice from Bar-Ilan University in Israel, who brought to life a pioneering volume on the use of myths in education;<sup>21</sup> Prof. Susan Deacy from the University of Roehampton, who never ceases to inspire us with her research on Greek mythology as a tool for inclusive education in the context of autism;<sup>22</sup> Prof. Daniel A. Nkemleke, Prof. Divine Che Neba, and Prof. Eleanor Anneh Dasi from the University of Yaoundé 1, who engage not only in researching various mythical traditions, but also in educating future teachers for the big cities and small villages in Cameroon and nearby countries.<sup>23</sup> My gratitude also goes to all our wonderful friends and colleagues from the Universities all over the world who build with us Our Mythical Community – the most precious treasure from our journey. I thank the ERC Executive Agency staff and especially our project officers: Ms Sandrine Barreaux, who took great care of the project at its first stage, and Ms Katia Menegon, who piloted us amazingly through the next stages.

The ERC Grant has also brought into existence a database – *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, with over 1,500 entries (so far) on works for children and adults inspired by Classical Antiquity.<sup>24</sup> This is a huge team effort of all the contributors from various parts of the globe. I wish to thank them for their involvement in this Herculean labour. Prof. Hale and Dr Riverlea's volume is a perfect example of how our tasks and ventures complement each other, for the readers who will be interested in specific books analysed in the *Alphabetical Odyssey*,

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<sup>21</sup> For details, see, e.g., the "Our Mythical Education" section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/our-mythical-education>, and the volume in Open Access: Lisa Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.9788323546245>.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see, e.g., the "Autism and Mythology" section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-autism>. See also Susan Deacy, *What Would Hercules Do? Lessons for Autistic Children Using Classical Myth*, ill. Steve K. Simons, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> For details, see, e.g., the "Myths from Cameroon" section of the *Our Mythical Childhood* website: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myths-from-cameroon>.

<sup>24</sup> See the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* at <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey>. This database, the joint effort of our team from the University of Warsaw (Host Institution), Bar-Ilan University, University of New England, University of Roehampton, and University of Yaoundé 1, along with our collaborators in various institutions the world over, originates from Katarzyna Marciniak, Elżbieta Olechowska, Joanna Kłos, and Michał Kucharski, eds., *Polish Literature for Children & Young Adults Inspired by Classical Antiquity: A Catalogue*, Faculty of "Artes Liberales", Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2013, available online at [http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/omc\\_catalogue](http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/omc_catalogue), prepared within the Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant.

might wish to continue their journey and check on these titles in the *Survey* to get still more hints through our tags and search engines.<sup>25</sup>

This volume passed through the expert hands of the reviewers – Prof. Dorota Michulka from the University of Wrocław and Prof. Christine Walde from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, whom I deeply thank for their time and important remarks. I am full of gratitude, as always, to Prof. Jerzy Axer and Prof. Jan Kieniewicz from the Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, for their minds and hearts for the *Our Mythical Childhood* programme ever since its very beginning. I also highly appreciate the collaboration with our publisher – University of Warsaw Press: its Director, Ms Beata Jankowiak-Konik, and the excellent editorial team: the commissioning editors, Mr Szymon Morawski and Mr Jakub Ozimek, the copy editor, Ms Ewa Balcerzyk-Atys, Mr Zbigniew Karaszewski – a graphic artist and the designer of the present series and its covers, and Mr Janusz Olech – a master of the art of layout. I wish to thank Ms Małgorzata Sudoł – an attorney-at-law and specialist in international cooperation and copyright, who kindly offered her most precious expertise at various stages of this project. My gratitude goes also to the “Artes Liberales Institute” Foundation that supports pathbreaking educational initiatives of the University of Warsaw. Last but not least, for the help with this volume – I am grateful to my colleagues from the University of Warsaw part of the *Our Mythical Childhood* team: Dr Elżbieta Olechowska, who embarked on this adventure as early as in 2011 and on whose wise advice I can always count, and Ms Magdalena Andersen and Ms Maria Makarewicz, who supported us with amazing care in all the procedures. A very special mention of gratitude is reserved for our three team members: Dr Hanna Paulouskaya, who carefully read the first proofs, Ms Marta Pszczolińska, who supplied the references to the ancient sources for this volume, and Ms Olga Strycharczyk, who helped prepare the bibliography and obtain the images from the discussed books – *gratias ago!*

Prof. Hale and Dr Riverlea finished this stage of their odyssey (I use the term “stage” here, as I deeply believe that they will soon take us on further travels) in the most difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is still raging around the world as I write my introductory words, exactly two years after the discovery of the virus. During my Grant Seminar at the University of Warsaw in the first term of the pandemic, I proposed to my students to reflect

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth adding that many of the ideas discussed in the *Alphabetical Odyssey* were first tested out through the *Antipodean Odyssey* blog established and led by Prof. Hale: <https://antipodeanodyssey.wordpress.com/>.

on the ancient sources from our times' perspective. I called this task a bit provocatively *Antyk w kryzysie* [Antiquity in Crisis] – to challenge the opinion of the decline in importance of the ancient tradition for our society and instead to show that the Classics do indeed help us in our crisis. The students responded with remarkable eagerness and we prepared together (even though online) a set of essays published on the project's website along with some questions formulated for our potential readers on the base of Greek and Roman literature.<sup>26</sup> One of the participants and now a team member in the *Our Mythical Childhood* project – Marta Pszczolińska – wrote about Circe, so another divine creature who managed to stop Odysseus, however "only" for one year, and she posed an interesting and very timely question for the readers of her essay: "Is it possible to undergo quarantine in such luxurious conditions as to forget our normal life and suspend the fulfilment of our life's dream?" Personally, I do not think so, and Odysseus' case confirms my hypothesis. But books are a tempting option. They make us, paradoxically, stop and press on at the same time – for they are both an Ithaca and a new odyssey, as this volume by Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea beautifully demonstrates.

"The Road goes ever on and on", as a great twentieth-century *aoidos* wrote,<sup>27</sup> and indeed, Odysseus also embarked on another journey not long after his return home. His mind was telling him to stay, his heart – to press on. For the point is, to quote Staff's poem again, to keep going.<sup>28</sup> We may add that the point is also to keep reading – both the Classics and children's literature, and all the high piles of books to which we are led on our journey. This is also what this volume is about – reading new things and reading old things anew, as they nourish both mind and heart – both being necessary to pursue one's dream. Thus, *Our Mythical Reader*, by opening this volume, you are embarking on a very particular odyssey, there and back again, including an odyssey of self-discovery, beginning where thou wilt.

Warsaw, December 2021

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<sup>26</sup> AA.VV., *Antyk w kryzysie: Praca zbiorowa uczestniczek i uczestników seminarium „Nasze mityczne dzieciństwo” na Wydziale „Artes Liberales” UW w II semestrze r. ak. 2019/20* [Antiquity in Crisis: A Collective Work of the Participants of the "Our Mythical Childhood" Seminar at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" UW in the Second Term of the Academic Year 2019/20], <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/assets/files/pages/5c65715bbd9b4af72cbffc3803ed03dbb716b443.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020 (ed. pr. 1956), 36.

<sup>28</sup> Staff, "Odys", vv. 5–6: "O to chodzi jedynie, / By naprzód wciąż iść śmiało".



## NOTES ON THE AUTHORS AND THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Elizabeth Hale** is Associate Professor of English at the University of New England, Australia, where she teaches children's literature and fantasy literature. She has published on topics in children's literature, including edited volumes *Marvellous Codes: The Fiction of Margaret Mahy* (Victoria University Press, 2005) and *Maurice Gee: A Literary Companion. The Fiction for Young Readers* (Otago University Press, 2014). She currently leads the Australian wing of the *Our Mythical Childhood* project, which surveys the reception of Classical Antiquity in global children's culture. She is also General Editor of the forthcoming six-volume set of *Routledge Historical Resources in Children's Literature, 1789–1914*.

**Miriam Riverlea** is a researcher and writer with a lifelong interest in classical mythology and its reception in contemporary culture. She completed her PhD, entitled *My First Book of Greek Myths: Retelling Ancient Myths to Modern Children*, at Monash University in 2017, and has taught classical studies and children's literature at several Australian universities. Other research projects have explored the reception of the myth of the Trojan horse in ancient and modern contexts, and examined the mythic elements of computer adventure games from the 1980s. Beyond academia, she has worked in libraries and archives, and as a researcher in the field of cultural interpretation. She has been the editor of a community newspaper, and is now studying early childhood education.

**Steve K. Simons** is an animator and graphic artist. He specializes in creating animations from ancient artefacts and is the co-creator of the Panoply Vase Animation Project ([www.panoply.org.uk](http://www.panoply.org.uk)), with Dr Sonya Nevin. He has worked with collections including the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology at the University of Reading, and the Classical Museum at University College Dublin. For *Animating the Ancient World* within *Our Mythical Childhood*, Steve has created five vase animations from the

collection at the National Museum in Warsaw, a series of short documentaries, and activity sheets featuring illustrations of artefacts. His other materials created for *Our Mythical Childhood* have included illustrations and animation for the *Autism and Mythology* project. He is also a contributor to Prof. Véronique Dasen's ERC project *Locus Ludi*, creating animations of frescos, vases, and relief sculptures. He illustrated *The Idea of Marathon: Battle and Culture* by Sonya Nevin (Bloomsbury, 2022), creating maps and drawings of Greek and Persian artefacts. Steve is a member of the Cluster "The Past for the Present – International Research and Educational Programme" and is in partnership with the University of Cambridge's Cambridge School Classics Project. He lives in Cambridge in the UK.

## A NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

The illustrations for this volume are designed as emblems of each chapter, which transform into islands in the map of our *Odyssey*. They were designed by Steve K. Simons, who, with Dr Sonya Nevin, is part of the Panoply Vase Animation Project (see “V is for Visual Storytelling”).

Who better than Steve to illustrate the *Alphabetical Odyssey*? We consulted with him and with Sonya about appropriate images that found a balance between classical and modern ideas and concepts – of myth and of childhood. As for style: we agreed on a slightly old-fashioned story-book look, to convey the idea of a wondrous adventure, common in children’s stories.

“A is for Adaptation” is an image of transformation. Just as stories continually transform into new modes and styles, so do readers, as they read, and as they discover the treasures within a book. Here, a girl reading a book finds a tree growing out of it – is it a pop-up book, that form so loved by children? Is it a book finding its new form? Or is its original form (a tree) breaking through?

“B is for Beasts”, with its irresistible alliteration of bear and butterfly, shows the delicacy and strength of creatures in the animal kingdom. Bears are familiar faces in Greek mythology, as well as being popular as modern cuddly toys. Butterflies are called “psyche” in Ancient Greek, meaning ‘soul’, and associated with the lovers Eros and Psyche.

“C is for Childhood” draws on ideas of real and imaginary play: the child pulling a life-sized toy horse, but one with wings, alluding to everyone’s favourite flying horse, the magnificent Pegasus. Though the toy dwarfs the child, the child is in control, and his stance, with head down, shows how serious he is about his play.

“D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects” presents the familiar figure of Sisyphus, pushing a giant D up a hill. Difficulties are continuous in life and striving to overcome them is a never-ending process. Accepting their presence is an important element of growing up and moving towards adulthood.

“E is for Emotions” shows children playing with oversized dramatic masks – one showing the face of tragedy; the other the face of comedy. These masks

have stood for generations as expressions of human emotions, and their performance in theatre – and here, in play, as children try out different ways of being and feeling.

“F is for First Encounters” shows a child looking through a window, and seeing Icarus looking back, to express the idea of an early encounter with the world of mythology and the imagination. Obvious echoes of well-known stories such as *Peter Pan* are visible here – the child touches the glass, becoming aware of new worlds outside. Icarus’ multicoloured wings suggest the feathers of different seabirds, scavenged by his father, Daedalus. A hint of danger is present in this image – it is tempting, but dangerous, to enter the world of adventure and mythology.

“G is for Girls and Boys” further explores the idea of play, this time with two children trying on the contents of a dress-up box. A girl dresses as a pirate brandishing an old sword; a boy is trying out a dress (an Elsa princess dress from the Disney film *Frozen*). In childhood, gender roles can be fluid, and contested. Play, dress-up, and costumes offer ways to explore identities. Other identities in the box can be seen – a Snow White dress, butterfly wings, a tiger costume, and a hobby horse.

“H is for How to Be Heroic” playfully domesticates the idea of heroism by depicting a heroic “to-do list”, alongside the accoutrements of the Theseus myth – a sword and a ball of thread, representing different approaches to overcoming challenges (fighting alone, problem-solving with help).

“I is for Being Informed” shows a child going straight to the source – using her magnifying glass to look closely at nature, in this case a flower and a honeybee.

“J is for Journeys” shows a trireme ready to go to sea – on board, tied to its mast, is Odysseus, his ears plugged against the beautiful music of the Sirens. Journeys can be in company; they can be solitary. They can be exciting, and they can be dangerous.

For “K is for Kidding Around”, we toyed with different pairs of well-known figures from the myths – Odysseus and the Cyclops, Theseus and the Minotaur, before ending up with Persephone and Cerberus. The first pairs have adversarial relations, and the image of Persephone and Cerberus playing hide-and-seek in the Underworld adds a happy note to the famous story. Who would win? After all, Cerberus has three pairs of eyes.

“L is for Labyrinth”. Perhaps this is Theseus, making his way into the dark of the famous underground maze. He carries a torch, and, we hope, he treads carefully.

"M is for Mythical and Magical Beings" presents childlike versions of Medusa and the Minotaur, playing marbles. Many children's versions of the myths soften the monstrous associations of these famous figures, as authors feel sorry for them, continually doomed in story after story. Are these figures frightening, or vulnerable, or something else? Repeated readings of the myths make us think about what it means to be monstrous, mythical, or magical.

"N is for Nature" nods to the Australian origins of this volume. A kangaroo and her joey stand in the outback, in front of a eucalyptus tree, and holding a wreath of eucalyptus leaves. The word "eucalyptus" comes from Ancient Greek, meaning 'beautiful' (*eu*) and 'hidden' (*calyptum*), referring to the cap-like lid of the eucalyptus flower that hides its beauty until maturity. Perhaps this connects to the often hidden beauties of nature, which come in so many forms, and from all around the world.

"O is for the Olympians" takes us to a tea party with some of the best-known gods of the Olympians. While Hermes pours some tea for Zeus, Athena hands him some grapes. Her famous owl slumbers, like the dormouse in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in a bowl. These figures draw on real statues of the gods and connect with John Tenniel's illustrations of the Mad Hatter's tea party. Do the Olympians have time for an eternal tea break, much like the figures in Carroll's novel? Or are they gathering strength before going back to causing mischief among the mortals? Here, Athena's image is inspired by a trio of statues: the Piraeus Athena, fourth century BCE, by Kephisodotos or Euphranor, held at the Archaeological Museum of Piraeus in Athens; the Mattei Athena, a Roman copy from the first century BCE, held at the Louvre in Paris; and the statue of Athena located in front of the Parliament Building in Vienna, Austria. Zeus is inspired by the statue of Jupiter at the Campana Museum in Rome.

In "P is for Philosophical Approaches", a man with a long beard is reading in the shade of an olive tree. Near him is an apple – where it came from, we do not know, but it hints at the famous story of the scientist Newton, who supposedly discovered gravity when an apple fell on his head. It is an image of contemplation in nature, the value of reading and thinking, of discovery and peace.

"Q is for Quality". Here, the goddess Athena assesses two works of art in very different style (realistic and modernistic). Which is better? How do we evaluate? Again, the image of Athena is inspired by the trio of statues: the Piraeus Athena, the Mattei Athena, and the statue of Athena at the Parliament Building in Austria.

"R is for Relationships". What stronger image could there be for relationship than the handshake, which was used in Classical Antiquity as well as today? Greetings, sealing a business deal, finding comfort, and expressing friendship.

"S is for Speculation" shows a Cycladic "stargazer" statuette, staring up into the sky. It sees the Pleiades constellation – a constellation that is visible around the world (and known as the Seven Sisters in Australia, Matariki in New Zealand, and Subaru in Japan). Speculation involves looking far away to see new things – through science, through fantasy, through imagination, and through curiosity.

"T is for Time". Here, we have three ways of looking at time: a wagon wheel represents the idea of the wheel of time, which offers a circular view. The scythe represents mortality, and was also wielded by the Titan Cronus, to begin a new era. The stopwatch hanging from the scythe is a modern way of measuring time, in a linear way. It's all relative.

"U is for Underworld Adventures" uses the idea of the fun-fair ride to express the sense of adventure and fear that accompany a journey to the world below. A gondola sits by a jetty, ready to take the departed to the Underworld through a sinister carnival arch (inspired by the entrances to the Australian Luna Park fun fairs in Sydney and Melbourne). On the jetty is a kiosk selling honey cakes and wine, traditional offerings given by the Ancient Greeks to the dead. The jetty lamp has attracted *psychai*-like moths (*Psychidae*). They are the essence of the dead beginning their passage to the Underworld. The Ancient Greeks represented the dead in multiple ways: as life-size figures who would travel in the boat, and as butterfly-like versions of our human selves.

"V is for Visual Storytelling" uses the image of an ancient vase being painted before it is fired in a kiln. Ancient Greek vases, which were highly decorative, often represent important myths and legends and elements of ordinary life. Here, the image refers to the story of Hercules and the Erymanthian Boar. Hercules has captured the Boar and is delivering it to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns, the man who set the famous Twelve Labours. The image is inspired by the vase held at the National Museum of Warsaw (no. 198042).

"W is for Weaving" presents the loom – important in several myths, notably in the story of Arachne, a mortal weaver who was punished by being turned into a spider when she beat Athena in a weaving competition and boasted of having superior skills.

"X Marks the Spot". This chapter explores the possibilities of mythic travel around the world and through many cultures. "X Marks the Spot" refers to the idea of the treasure map – digging at the spot marked X can lead one to find all sorts of valuables. Another X, formed by the directions on a signpost connects with the idea of the crossroads, and the idea of travel around the ancient world in search of different adventures. Colchis (the Golden Fleece), Ithaca (the home

of Odysseus), Knossos (the Minotaur's Labyrinth), and Troy (the site of the Trojan War).

"Y is for Young Adulthood". A skateboarder leaps with youthful strength and concentration. His not-very-ancient skateboard is decorated with a palmate, or Acanthus leaf, which appears on many Greek vases and images of Ancient Greek furniture.

"Z is for Zest". What could be more zesty than Zeus peeling an orange? (Again, Zeus is inspired by the Campana Zeus, in Rome.)



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We have been extraordinarily fortunate to be supported in our work by the inspirational Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak. She has been the Athena of our Odyssey. Her vision and drive have led her to draw together a global team of researchers in the *Our Mythical Childhood* project (funded by the European Research Council's Horizon 2020 programme): finding ever more creative ways to bring us together, and acquiring the funding to do so. With her Warsaw team (Dr Elżbieta Olechowska, Dr Hanna Paulouskaya, Dr Anna Mik, Dr Karolina Kulpa, Agnieszka Maciejewska, Dorota Rejter, Marta Pszczolińska, Angelina Gerus, Olga Strycharczyk, Magdalena Andersen, Maria Makarewicz, Ewa Balcerzyk-Atys), Katarzyna has provided ongoing support, encouragement and friendship, and we are very grateful.

In writing this book we have worked alongside the other teams in the *Our Mythical Childhood* project: in the United Kingdom, Prof. Susan Deacy, Dr Sonya Nevin, and Steve K. Simons, at the University of Roehampton; in Israel, Prof. Lisa Maurice and Dr Ayelet Peer, at Bar-Ilan University; and in Cameroon, Prof. Daniel A. Nkemleke, Prof. Divine Che Neba, and Prof. Eleanor A. Dasi at the University of Yaoundé 1 – all have contributed insights and ideas about how classical material makes its way into children's culture which have extended our frames of reference and challenged our modes of thinking.

In Australia, Prof. Marguerite Johnson (University of Newcastle) contributed to valuable early discussions which helped the book take shape. Dr Anne Rogerson and Dr Tamara Neal (University of Sydney) and Prof. Alastair Blanshard (University of Queensland) were supportive and kind listeners, and there are many others who have helped us think our way through our work. In Canada, Dr Sarah Winters and Dr Alice Petersen were a supportive cheer squad. In Germany, Dr Karoline Thaidigsmann (University of Heidelberg) was generous in her time and insights. We are extremely grateful for the precision and elegance of Marta Pszczolińska's assistance with the classical referencing of source texts, and Ewa Balcerzyk-Atys's editing skills. Elizabeth's colleagues and friends at the

University of New England, in particular Prof. Adrian Kiernander, Associate Prof. Jennifer McDonnell, Natalia Tobin, Dr Diana Barnes, Dr Jennifer Hamilton, and Dr Yvonne Griggs, were very supportive, giving of their time for conversations and brainstorming. Elizabeth is especially grateful for administrative support from Gill Willis, Elizabeth McClelland, Joy Kirby, Libby McGann, Kathryn Dougall, Dan Waqa, Mejbah Uddin, Jonathan Watson, Rachael Brooks and Nicholas Sanders, all of whom provided assistance at crucial moments. In Armidale, Kent Laverack provided kind and friendly support and encouragement. Elizabeth is also very grateful to the University of Otago's Classics Department for support in the form of a Visiting Senior Lectureship (2018–2022) and to the staff of the Internationale Jugendbibliothek in Munich, Germany, for expert assistance in early stages of the research.

Steve K. Simons's wonderful illustrations provide important guidance – a storybook version of the kinds of intersections between Classical Antiquity and childhood: we cannot thank him enough for encapsulating the concepts so brilliantly.

The *Odyssey* ends with Odysseus' return home to his family, and we would like to conclude by thanking our own families, without whose encouragement, support, and inspiration this work would not have been completed. So, our thanks and love go to Miriam's family: Rory Wood-Ingram, Leo Wood-Ingram, Milo Wood-Ingram, Audrey Wood-Ingram, Jill Wood-Ingram, Laura Brearley, and Dion Riverlea; and to Elizabeth's family: John and Beatrice Hale, Katharine Hale, John and Amy Hale, Lucas Hale, Juliet Hale, Harry Hale (and Cocoa, the Argos of this story). Just as Odysseus' story takes place against a background of cataclysmic events, we have written against a background of droughts, fires, floods, to say nothing of the pandemic that has changed our world. And we feel very fortunate that, unlike Odysseus, who seems to have lost all his sailors on his voyage, together we have stuck to our oars, rowing towards our own version of Ithaca, with our families alongside, and making many friends along the way.

# INTRODUCTION

Long ago, in the time of myths and legends, the Greek hero Odysseus was returning from triumph in the Trojan War, having used his wits to bring down the city of Troy. As he sailed home to Ithaca, where his family and kingdom waited, circumstances intervened to delay his homecoming. Waylaid by storms, capricious gods, monsters, witches, alluring nymphs, and more, Odysseus took ten long years to complete his journey. When he finally reached home, he found it under threat (though his resourceful wife, Penelope, was skilfully keeping those threats at bay), and had to use his wits again, to protect his family and restore order.

If all had gone to his original plan, Odysseus would have been home quickly and without incident. His story, known as the *Odyssey*, might not have existed in the same way, and the word “odyssey” would certainly not have had the same sense: of a winding, curious journey, involving unexpected and interesting encounters. Nor might it have been so often retold, in quite the same way, to adults and children, especially children.

The *Odyssey* appeals greatly to children and to writers of children’s stories, which draw inspiration mainly from Books 9 to 12, the stories that Odysseus himself tells, while on the island of Scheria: the adventures he had at sea while trying to return to his home of Ithaca. These stories have a tight frame – the focus on an individual adventurer (and his crew), and a wonderful setting – a scenic voyage through a beautiful and mysterious seascape, as well as the series of seemingly random encounters with mythical and magical beings. On the one hand the *Odyssey* has a simple narrative line and a clear goal, being the story of a journey home – something that is appealing to children, who are interested in travelling away, but also returning home. On the other hand, it encourages readers to look around them – to think about emotions (fear, joy, enchantment, longing), and to think about exploration and the wider world. Writers are also inspired by other parts of Homer’s *Odyssey*: the wider story of the Trojan War’s aftermath, the minor characters who feature only fleetingly

in Odysseus' retelling, and the characters at home who wait patiently for him, facing challenges of their own. There are hundreds of retellings of the *Odyssey* for children and young adults: as novels, as story collections, with illustrations and without. Its interesting settings and magical plot inspire writers and artists to retell, adapt, and write their own versions, for readers of all different ages. There are hundreds, even thousands, more works inspired by other parts of the classical world in children's literature: a veritable sea of retellings, adaptations, and rewritings, bringing the ancient past to modern audiences.

Classical myths are extremely influential in children's literature: they deal with the fundamentals of life (birth, growth, death, love, nature, war, identity), and they express succinctly issues that concern children and young adults. Many of the stories involve rites of passage, transitions from childhood to adulthood, including journeys, facing fears, fighting battles, coming of age, transforming, and finding out one's identity. The capriciousness of life is expressed by the paradoxical gods – who are powerful but inconsistent – kind but dangerous. Major moments in life (such as falling in love or facing death) are expressed through powerful stories that help us understand our emotions and learn to handle them. The myths are not sentimental: indeed, they are thought-provoking, offering insights rather than resolutions.

Myths and their reception are part of an important literary tradition: in Ancient Greece and Rome, retellings, adaptations, and new versions of old stories were an accepted and vibrant part of literary and artistic culture, infusing art, music, and writing. The art of *imitatio*, for instance, was an important aspect of proving one's ability as a writer – taking on the forms of admired precursor texts and incorporating them into new ways of telling familiar tales.<sup>1</sup> Emulating the great writers would not only educate one in ways of writing well, but also inspire one to enrich and expand the stories available. This is a tradition that has continued through to the present, though perhaps for some writers the idea is less to engage in imitation or emulation, and more to write new versions, to adapt and expand in relation to modern ideas and concerns.

When we engage with classical reception, there are multiple layers and approaches to take into consideration: the myth or legend that inspires the text; the versions that the author may be drawing on; and the transformations or adaptations that occur in it (and the reasons and contexts for them). Is a writer

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<sup>1</sup> Described in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* as 'the study and conspicuous deployment of features recognizably characteristic of a canonical author's style or content, so as to define one's own generic affiliation' (Gian Biagio Conte and Glenn W. Most, "imitatio", *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3266>).

referring to the ancient world in order to provide a cultural touchstone, or to connect to a rich and constant heritage? (See, for instance, Lise Lunge-Larsen's picture book *Gifts from the Gods* [ill. Gareth Hinds; 2011], which explains how Ancient Greek myths and legends influence modern ideas in language and expression.) Are they bringing them up to date for modern children so that they seem more relevant and accessible? (Terry Deary's "Horrible Histories" series for children [1993–2013], including *The Groovy Greeks* [1996] and *The Rotten Romans* [1994], both illustrated by Martin Brown, offers warts-and-all accounts of history using satire and gross-out humour.) Are they correcting the record in light of new ideas about the ancient world? (The young adult novels of Jennifer Cook, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* [2004] and *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess* [2005], recast the ancient myths from the perspective of teenage characters.) Or are they using the core structures and patterns of the myths in new forms of storytelling? (See the novels of Margaret Mahy, which recast well-known legends in the lives of modern New Zealand teenagers – for example, *The Catalogue of the Universe* [1985] draws on aspects of the *Aeneid* in imagining a life for Dido's daughter.) Funny, serious, peculiar, and puzzling, these texts reveal an exciting but daunting array of approaches, in literature written for children of all ages, from babies to new adults.

The influences of the ancient world are visible in a sea of modern texts, moved by lapping and overlapping waves of topics and concerns, styles and types, genres and forms, inspirations, influences and revisions, retellings and adaptations. How does one find one's way through this ocean of meaning, without being tumbled and tossed, waylaid and held up, or without missing something important along the way? How much could we cover, in this book, and how could we keep things clear? How would we present a world of literature that is so various in its styles and approaches, and how could we do so while retaining a sense of objectivity and neutrality? For not only are there so many approaches to classical subject matters, there are so many different styles of children's books. There are also so many readers, with changing likes and interests, dependent on their age, reading ability, reasons for reading, and their needs. The ocean becomes bigger every time we consider it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For our study, we decided to focus on children's books published (mainly) in the past fifty years: the texts that we grew up reading, and those that came after we grew up. For a historical study of earlier texts influenced by children's literature, see Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts's excellent *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), a book that we admire greatly and that provides a superb overview of the field.

Which is where the shape of this book came from. We realized we were heading out on a literary odyssey, sailing through the multiple seas of texts, readers, contexts, and scholarly traditions (see below). Our goal has been to write a work that draws on these contexts, and groups the themes and issues we discuss in manageable sections. We have arranged our chapter-islands alphabetically, by theme, as we explain below, in what we see as a combination of an alphabet book (popular for familiarizing learner-readers with the components of written language), a dictionary, an encyclopaedia, and even a traveller's guidebook, which use the alphabet to put information in an easily consultable order.

### **How to Use This Book (Island-Hopping Encouraged!)**

In the course of his long wanderings, Odysseus stops at many islands. Some are close to one another, others are far from civilization. Some he visits only briefly, while on others he remains for a long time (for example, he spends years with the nymph Calypso). He even returns to some places, such as the kingdom of Aeolus. This idea of island-hopping, allowing lingering, skipping, and revisiting, appealed to us in our presentation of the book, and we have provided a map of our chapters as islands (beautifully illustrated by Steve K. Simons), which readers can move amongst. Although arranged alphabetically, the twenty-six chapters of our guide can be navigated however the reader likes, to be read and revisited in any order, each chapter-island offering a place of meaning and context, a point from which to survey the scene, and a different perspective from which to view the material. As in the *Odyssey*, island-hopping is encouraged! Some chapters contain thematic links that become clear when considered next to one another (for example, "C is for Childhood" is a companion to "Y is for Young Adulthood"), while other chapters are delineated by different subject matter (while "B is for Beasts" covers real animals, "M is for Mythical and Magical Beings" focuses on hybrid, fantastical creatures).

The opening chapter, "A is for Adaptation", establishes the conceptual framework for our book, identifying kinds of mythic retellings, from direct and literal to allusive and symbolic, and emphasizing that change is a core aspect of classical mythology and its ongoing reception. "B is for Beasts" concentrates on the enduring appeal of Aesop's animal fables, as well as examining the way that other creatures, both wild and tame, have been used in children's stories to reveal the essence of what it is to be human. In "C is for Childhood" we look

at the ways that children in literature are thought to have a special affinity with the world of myth, and how literary associations with nature, animals, innocence, and freedom align to create a space for them in their reading. In contrast to the idyllic conception of childhood presented in "C", "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects" reveals that the confronting and challenging elements of classical mythology have regularly been employed to support children and young adults in overcoming issues and experiences they face in the contemporary world. The chapter that follows, "E is for Emotions", extends this line of inquiry to examine how children's and youth literature draws upon mythological material to promote empathy and social connection, and to acknowledge the power of the emotions in myth, in storytelling, and in childhood.

A significant number of retellings are motivated by the desire to introduce young readers to the mythological corpus, and in "F is for First Encounters" we explore the formative influence of encountering these stories at a young age, as well as the implications of what is often a didactic agenda. The next chapter, "G is for Girls and Boys", addresses the role played by gender in both traditional and revisionist versions, and examines the ways that some books and series are marketed to engage a specific audience of male or female readers. "H is for How to Be Heroic" outlines the key elements of hero stories, identifying character traits and experiences that are intended to inspire and instruct young readers. In "I is for Being Informed" we expand our focus on mythology to address other elements of the ancient world, and examine how children's literature represents history with both respect and irreverence.

"J is for Journeys" examines the ways in which a pervasive narrative trope gives shape to the relationship between what is known and unfamiliar, and how a journey, whether physical or emotional, aligns with the experience of coming of age. Humour and silliness pervade children's books, and "K is for Kidding Around" addresses how storytellers use comedy to offer young readers an appealingly off-kilter presentation of the ancient world.

"L is for Labyrinth" studies how this compelling, confounding edifice (and its monstrous inhabitant) plays such an important role in mythology and literature. The discussion of the Minotaur anticipates the other terrifying and captivating creatures who figure in "M is for Mythical and Magical Beings", some of whom, we argue, have been reimagined as sympathetic figures who possess their own subjectivity and challenge the status quo.

In "N is for Nature" we address the role of the natural environment in mythic retellings, with a focus on dystopian and ecocritical literature. The following chapter, "O is for the Olympians", reveals the immortal gods and goddesses

as powerful but flawed figures, members of a dysfunctional family or a kind of collectible set in which each individual has distinct attributes and accoutrements. "P is for Philosophical Approaches" explores the ways that children's and youth literature engages with existential questions, highlighting the appearances of ancient world thinkers and their ideas within modern narratives.

In "Q is for Quality" we step back a little from the mythical scene to comment on the staggering amount of material being published in this field, the undeniable fact that some works are more successful, appealing, and popular than others, as well as offer some pointers for thinking about what might make a book good, valuable, or interesting – for children, and for the adults who are interested in what children read. "R is for Relationships" returns to a focus on the classical myths, with an examination of how stories consider social connections between friends and family members, with the intention of guiding readers as they navigate their own relationships. In "S is for Speculation", we examine the ways that the genres of fantasy and science fiction draw upon mythological material, while "T is for Time" addresses stories of travel between the modern and ancient spheres. The following chapter, "U is for Underworld Adventures", explores the recurring theme of the katabasis, the descent into the underworld, and the topography of the realm that fascinates and terrifies ancient and modern readers alike.

"V is for Visual Storytelling" concentrates on picture books and graphic novels, and the influence and impact of the illustrations and other pictorial elements. "W is for Weaving" addresses the significance of stories in which mythic women are represented weaving, which link the act with the craft of storytelling. In "X Marks the Spot" we examine the power of place within these retellings, charting unexpected appearances of mythological motifs far from the Mediterranean, and considering how writers from different places and backgrounds are influenced by, and challenge, classical models. "Y is for Young Adulthood" locates youth as a more complex successor to the simplicity of childhood, and reveals how the genre of young adult fiction engages with the classical world in ways that are often darker and also sophisticated. The final chapter, "Z is for Zest", concludes our journey through this corpus of mythological stories for children and young adults by summing up their genre's distinct qualities and attributes, reflecting on the profound and enduring appeal of the myth itself, and considering the pure fun of exploring the field. While the original *Odyssey* involves a quest to go home, in concluding with "Z", we suggest that odysseys are never quite over, that the journey and the topics we have discussed offer a way of launching readers into new journeys and realms.

## Literary Odysseys: How the *Odyssey* Appears in Literature for Children

Even babies (and those who read to them) can enjoy the *Odyssey*. Board-book retellings, such as *Little Master Homer: The Odyssey. A Monsters Primer!* written by Jennifer Adams and illustrated by Alison Oliver (2017), present simple highlights from the original, with appealing pictures: “Off you go to your pigsty, and stay there!” cries a smiling Circe; “I’ll eat all your friends first, and then I’ll eat you!” warns a lounging Cyclops, who is reading a cook book (“the joy of cooking humans”) while sheep play at his feet. Such simple retellings do not give the full context; however, they enjoy playing with popular elements of the story. While they may introduce well-known figures to very young readers, they also provide adult readers with the enjoyment of recognition, and in-jokes.

As children grow, their introductions to the material become fuller, presented in primers, early readers, picture books, and attractive collections of myths and legends. Marcia Williams’s comics-style retelling of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (1996) offers an expurgated version of both epics, lingering on famous or interesting scenes, and highlighting the gruesome, scary, or funny aspects of both. Gillian Cross and Neil Packer’s illustrated retelling of the *Odyssey* (2012) makes heavy use of strong imagery, conveying excitement and power. Meanwhile, Giorgio Ferrero’s simple retelling of Homer’s original (2016) is accompanied by Manuela Adreani’s lyrical and dreamy water-colour and digital illustrations, which capture the story’s emotional depth. That the original inspires such different visual interpretations shows the story’s range of appeal and response.

Retellings are only one part of the *Odyssey*’s story, however. Writers and illustrators are always interpreting and adapting the original work, whether that involves simplifying for young readers or extracting highlights for short versions. But great stories also invite and inspire new versions. Some writers offer myths from the point of view of minor characters. Kate McMullan’s novel for ten-to-twelve-year-olds, *Get Lost, Odysseus!* (2015), is narrated by the god Hades, and takes a slightly cynical look at Odysseus’ character, emphasizing his arrogance and manipulation of the truth alongside his more heroic qualities. On the other hand, Adèle Geras’s *Ithaka* (2005), a novel for older teenagers, offers Penelope’s perspective on the *Odyssey* as she waits, and weaves, at home. And Phillip W. Simpson and Ralph Hardy both rewrite the story from the point of view of Argos, Odysseus’ faithful dog, in novels (both called *Argos*, and both published in 2016) for dog-lovers (and dogs?) of all ages.

Other works adapt the *Odyssey* to modern times, as in Cynthia Voigt’s 1981 novel *Homecoming*, which contains echoes of Odysseus’ wanderings as a family of abandoned children make their way along the east coast of America, or Neal Shusterman’s *Challenger Deep* (2015), in which the hero is involved in a mysterious science-fiction underwater odyssey taking place deep inside his own mind. Francesca Lia Block tells the story from Penelope’s perspective, setting it in a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles, in *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013). And outer space and fantasy realms provide fertile ground for other revisionings, such as American Christopher Ford’s cartoon epic *Stickman Odyssey, Book One: An Epic Doodle*

(2011), set in the magical kingdom of Sticathia, or Australian Terry Denton's wacky comic-strip adventure series, "Storymaze" (1999–2003), in which three surfers from the planet Ithaca travel the universe in search of the perfect wave. *Useleus: A Greek Oddity* (2017), a comic by British duo Alexander Matthews and Wilbur Dawbarn, shatters the idea that Odysseus is clever, by presenting him as the dim-witted Useleus, tutored by a hapless Minotaur who tries and fails to keep him out of trouble. Other kinds of imaginative fancy appear in the Norwegian graphic novel *Mulysses* (2017), by Øyvind Torseter, which follows the adventures of a protagonist called Mule Boy, on his first sea voyage, with a captain on a quest for the eye of a strange sea monster.

Some of these stories contain only a germ of resemblance to the original, and very few of them require a detailed knowledge of classical mythology to be understood. They function mostly as pure entertainment, though entertainment that provides a touch of classical learning, and an entryway into the world of myths and legends.



### Storytelling on Scheria

At the end of the fifth book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is washed up on the island of Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians. Poseidon has destroyed his homemade raft, and he arrives desperate and destitute, without even his clothes, to be discovered by the princess Nausicaa and her handmaidens. Her father, King Alcinous, models the correct way of welcoming a guest, underscoring the contrast with the appalling behaviour of the marauding suitors on Ithaca. According to the customs of *xenia*,<sup>3</sup> it is not polite to not ask a guest who they are, and so Odysseus remains incognito as he is welcomed into the palace and honoured with an elaborate feast and athletic games.

Demodocus, the revered blind bard, is brought out to entertain the guests. This figure has helped to shape the popular conception of Homer, and his songs serve as an example of the oral performance of epic poetry. Over the course of the celebration, Demodocus recounts the fight between Odysseus and Ajax over the armour of Achilles, the love affair of Ares and Aphrodite, and finally the story of the wooden horse and the sack of Troy. Each time Demodocus sings of Odysseus' exploits, the hero begins to weep and hides his face, though only Alcinous observes his reaction. Each of Demodocus' songs celebrates the victory of cunning over brute force, a distinctly Odyssean technique.

Finally, Odysseus declares who he is, and proceeds to recount the story of his adventures since departing Troy, where he leaves behind the known world of the Aegean and enters a realm of magic and monsters. The stories he tells promote his heroic qualities, but also

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<sup>3</sup> The bond of friendship, known as *hospitium* in Latin. See Gabriel Herman, "friendship, ritualized", *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, via Oxford Reference, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001/acref-9780199545568-e-2729> (accessed 18 March 2022).

reveal the flaws of his character. These four books of Homer's *Odyssey* have inspired a myriad of children's retellings, some traditional and others that radically reinterpret the core elements of this famous myth.

### **Ismarus (*Odyssey* 9.39–61)**

Odysseus begins his account of his wanderings by describing how his fleet of twelve ships arrive on Ismarus and how they sack the city of the Kikonians. This violent encounter contains echoes of the destruction of Troy, and marks Odysseus' departure from the real world. Importantly, Ismarus is the source of the wine that subsequently plays such an important role in overcoming the Cyclops Polyphemus.

### **Lotus Eaters (*Odyssey* 9.82–104)**

Odysseus and his crew then arrive in the land of the Lotus Eaters. The three crew members who consume the lotus plant enter into an intoxicated state where they forget all thoughts of home, and want only to consume more of the plant. This memorable episode is used in Sulari D. Gentill's *Chasing Odysseus* (2011) to expose the flaws in Odysseus' character. In Francesca Lia Bock's *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013), the drug-addled Lotus Eaters occupy a seedy hotel in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles.

### **Cyclops (*Odyssey* 9.105–566)**

Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus is told in detail. The story reveals his characteristic cunning as well as his propensity for self-promotion, for it is the revelation of his true identity that results in him incurring the wrath of Poseidon. The Cyclops' distinctive visage has been played with in children's adaptations, with Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming* (1981) and Neal Shusterman's *Challenger Deep* (2015) both featuring one-eyed characters based on Polyphemus.

### **Aeolus and the Bag of Winds (*Odyssey* 10.1–79)**

Their next stop on the journey is at the floating island of Aeolus, who presents Odysseus with a bag of winds, to grant him a brief and straightforward homecoming. The foolishness and greed of Odysseus' crew is revealed when they open the bag while their master sleeps, causing the ships to be blown far off course again. When they petition him a second time, Aeolus refuses to assist them, certain that they must be cursed. In Carolyn Hennesy's "Mythic Misadventures" series (2007–2013), featuring a young Pandora and her friends, Aeolus appears, mixing up the winds, and throwing the protagonists off course.

### **Laestrygonians (*Odyssey* 10.80–132)**

This race of man-eating giants are responsible for destroying all but one of Odysseus' ships. This horrific confrontation highlights the dangers of the world Odysseus is travelling through and serves to again underscore the importance of the rituals around welcoming guests in the correct fashion.

**Circe (*Odyssey* 10.133–574)**

Odysseus' lone ship then arrives on Aiaia, the island of the witch Circe, who turns half of Odysseus' crew into swine (a fitting punishment given their boorish nature) before Odysseus, aided by Hermes, confronts her and demands that she restore them to their human form. The group remain with the powerful sorceress for a year before continuing their adventures. Paul Shipton's *The Pig Scrolls* (2004) is an irreverent response to this episode, centred on Gryllus, a member of Odysseus' crew who remains in the form of a pig.

**Underworld (*Odyssey* 11.1–640)**

A katabasis is an essential component of a hero's journey, and Odysseus undertakes his journey to the Underworld (west, rather than down), to consult the prophet Tiresias about how to get home. While there, he encounters the shades of former comrades and learns that his mother has died. Kate McMullan's *Get Lost, Odysseus!* (2015) rewrites the traditional version of events to credit Hades and the other gods with Odysseus' success, and brings together two of the most famous dogs of mythology – Cerberus and Argos, who become playmates in the Underworld.

**Sirens (*Odyssey* 12.165–200)**

Having been forewarned by Circe, Odysseus is already aware of the threat posed by the Sirens, who lure sailors to their death with their enchanting song. Odysseus plugs the ears of his men with beeswax and has them lash him to the mast so that he can hear their music, instructing his crew to ignore his pleas to be untied. The Sirens call to Odysseus that they will sing his own story, once again appealing to his desire for fame. Annie Sullivan's young adult novel *A Touch of Gold* (2018) replays this encounter through a gendered lens, with the Sirens' song highlighting the harm men have done to women.

**Scylla and Charybdis (*Odyssey* 12.201–259)**

As the idiom implies, it is difficult to choose between a six-headed monster and a huge whirlpool, but, following Circe's instructions, Odysseus elects to sacrifice six of his crew to Scylla rather than lose his entire ship in Charybdis' gaping maw. These two monsters are characterized as female, part of a tradition that consistently aligns the monstrous with the feminine throughout Homer's poem. In their picture book *Greece! Rome! Monsters!* (2002), John Harris and Calef Brown feature Scylla and Charybdis in their anthology of mythological monsters, while in Margot McGovern's young adult novel *Neverland* (2018) these underwater threats are part of seventeen-year-old Kit Learmonth's repressed childhood trauma.

**Cattle of the Sun (*Odyssey* 12.260–419)**

Odysseus and his men make it to Thrinakia, where the cattle of the sun god Helios graze. Both Tiresias and Circe had instructed Odysseus not to harm the cattle. But when unfavourable winds prevent their departure and food becomes scarce, the greedy crew ignore their warnings, and slaughter some of the beasts, they incur the wrath of Zeus himself, who blasts them with a thunderbolt. Only Odysseus is spared, and after facing Scylla and

Charybdis once more, manages to reach Ogygia, the home of the nymph Calypso, where he remains marooned for seven years. In *Odysseus* (2016), the third in Simon Spence's "Early Myths" series of picture books for children three to eight years old, the fate of Odysseus' men is softened: it is Poseidon who washes them away in a storm, suggesting that they survive to live another day.

## Mapping the Themes

On our map, the islands are subtly coloured in green, grey, and brown, representing three broad approaches to the subject. The green chapter-islands (A, C, F, G, K, Q, S, V, Y) discuss themes that are more literary in nature (that is, issues of adaptation, of children's literature, genre, literary quality, visual storytelling, and more). The grey ones (B, H, L, M, N, O, T, X) focus on the more overtly classical themes (beasts, heroism, labyrinths, etc.). Brown islands (D, E, I, P, R, W, Z) connect with social themes important in children's literature (dealing with difficulties, emotions, providing information and philosophical approaches, and so on). (J, the Journey, and U, the Underworld, of course are not islands.) These divisions reflect the different ways in which we see writers and readers engaging with classical material for children: their subtle shading also suggests that they are subtle distinctions, and even overlapping categories.

In the spirit of a guidebook, we provide summary information alongside the main text – which gives simple summaries of relevant myths, contexts, scholarly approaches, and types of children's books that connect with each chapter's theme, suggesting avenues for further exploration.

## Choice, Quality, and Childhood – Odysseys of Their Own

In "Q is for Quality", we discuss ideas about literary and educational value, ideas that are continually important when working with children's literature: because children are impressionable and inexperienced, parents and educators often take great care in choosing what their children read, considering texts' topics, production values, themes, and ideologies. Children's literature can be seen as a "colonized" zone, in which adults control the space of production and reception. It is rare for a child to find a book entirely unmediated by an adult – whole industries of adults work on writing, illustrating, publishing, producing,

reviewing, selling, cataloguing, mediating, purchasing, teaching, and reading texts for young readers (though there are avenues for young writers and artists to produce work – for example through fan-fiction sites, in class, at home, in children’s journals and galleries; they are, however, often private, and not disseminated widely). This does not mean that children lack agency as readers: indeed, children are often highly discerning and critical readers. Nevertheless, questions of quality are often part of the adult conversation – which book is the “best”? Which is the most popular? Which is the most affordable, or available? Which has been recommended by what reviewer? We try to note aspects of this kind of mediation and reception in our volume, without necessarily endorsing one approach over another. We are also aware that children’s literature can be ephemeral, meaning that certain texts may not be in print for very long or circulate very widely. They may not even outlast the possession of a single child: especially in the case of infants’ books, which can be treated roughly, or read to bits (a sign that a book is loved, but one that makes life difficult for the researcher). In choosing texts to discuss, we try to focus on the best examples of particular issues, with the intention that readers are able to extrapolate from our discussions and apply ideas to the works they consult themselves.

Elements of presentation are part of this conundrum in considering quality. Gorgeous illustrations may be alluring, but may be accompanied by disappointing written elements, and vice versa. Scruffy paperbacks may contain wonderful narrative treasures within. And readers have different interests and tastes, which may change over time. We do our best to remain neutral and objective, pointing to books’ merits, and styles, and indicating the contexts that explain them. It is up to you, the reader, to decide what you like and want to read further.

Another element in this conundrum is the idea of childhood. Children’s books are written, nominally, for children, meaning that ages and stages of childhood are associated with kinds of production. So the very simple, in the form of the brightly coloured board book for infants, is made to be visually stimulating, and to withstand grabbing and chewing, to have tactile elements (such as rough or smooth surfaces to stroke), and perhaps to have pop-ups and flaps to lift to stimulate children at a very tactile and visual age. As children grow and their reading abilities develop, stories have a way of leaving behind the visual and becoming increasingly written, encouraging solitary reading, and using narrative to deliver ideas. Some visual storytelling continues, in graphic novels, with more complex storylines, and denser picture structures, leaving behind the simplicity of picture books and early readers. And the treatment of classical

material is necessarily shaped by the demands of audiences, and the publishing conventions associated with different genres and ages (see below for “Categories and Genres”).

## Categories and Genres

*The genre of children's and youth literature contains many different types of books. While not all of them are straightforward to categorize, most can be distinguished into the following categories.*

Genre	Recommended reading age	Features	Examples
Board books	Babies and toddlers (new-born to age 3)	Printed on thick, durable cardboard. Bold, appealing graphics. Minimal text in simple language.	Joan Holub, <i>Be Patient, Pandora!</i> , ill. Leslie Patricelli (2014); Joan Holub, <i>Play Nice, Hercules!</i> , ill. Leslie Patricelli (2014)
Picture books	Children (generally aged 3–8, though not limited to this group). Often intended to be read aloud, and frequently contain wordplay and elements that come to life in oral performance.	Short in length (in accordance with limited attention spans). Average 32 pages. Contain pictures alongside written text. The illustrations are as important as the words.	Rosemary Wells, <i>Max and Ruby's First Greek Myth: Pandora's Box</i> (1993); Robert Burleigh, <i>Pandora</i> , ill. Raul Colón (2002); Victoria Turnbull, <i>Pandora</i> (2016)
Chapter books	Intermediate readers (generally aged 7–10)	Narrative is structured into short chapters. Intended to be read over several sittings. Usually contain some illustrations, although not on every page.	Francesca Simon, <i>Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They've Never Been Told Before!</i> , ill. Ross Asquith (1999); Tony Bradman, <i>Hercules the Hero</i> (2008); Stella Tarakson, <i>Here Comes Hercules!</i> , ill. Nick Roberts (2017)
Anthologies	Age range more general than for other genres. Children aged 5–10.	Collection of short stories, poems, or other material. Usually illustrated, often lavishly. A popular format for presenting a selection of myths, either from one or multiple cultures.	Saviour Pirotta, <i>The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths</i> , ill. Jan Lewis (2003); Françoise Rachmühl, <i>Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology</i> , ill. Charlotte Gastaut (2018)

Young adult novels	Teenagers (usually classified as 12 to 18 years old), though it has been estimated that up to half of all young adult readers are adults.	Subject matter usually reflects the age and experiences of the target audience. Tend to feature more complex themes exploring relationships and identity. Longer length – usually 200+ pages.	Adèle Geras, <i>Troy</i> (2000); Francesca Lia Block, <i>Love in the Time of Global Warming</i> (2013)
Graphic novels	Older children/young adults/crossover	Tend to feature cartoon or comic style illustrations and format	George O'Connor, “Olympians” series (2010–2022)

These ideas pervade our volume, but are particularly visible in “C is for Childhood”, “D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects”, “E is for Emotions”, “F is for First Encounters”, “X Marks the Spot”, and “Y is for Young Adulthood”. In these chapters we discussed how ideas about what children know or need to know – about the world and their places in it – are shaped by adults and reflect conventions about what is appropriate or inappropriate for young readers. Again, we tried to retain an objective stance, to identify what each text offers in its approach.

To take as a case in point, the “Goddess Girls” series of tween-age chapter books (2010–present) by Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams. These simple stories, set on “Mount Olympus Academy”, feature tween-age goddesses and gods, retelling their well-known myths as adventures involving friendship, fitting in, understanding one’s identity, and occasionally finding love. They are told in a common genre format: the coming-of-age narrative and school story, and presented in highly collectible candy-coloured formats, with titles like *Athena the Brain* and *Persephone the Phony*. Despite this stereotypical appeal to girls, and the highly commodified presentation of the series, the cleverness with which Holub and Williams connect the classical myths to coming-of-age stories and readily digestible morals is undeniable. And they offer a perspective on myths that can give pause for thought (for example, in *Athena the Brain* Athena is given a classroom project for her “Hero-ology” class, where she has to guide Odysseus homeward from the Trojan war; assessment criteria are “manipulation, disasters and quick saves”<sup>4</sup>). Distracted by a squabble with Medusa and Poseidon,

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<sup>4</sup> Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *Athena the Brain*, “Goddess Girls” 1, New York, NY: Aladdin, 2010, 42.

Athena occasionally neglects her hero: this offers an amusing perspective on the trials of Odysseus and the gods' behaviour towards humans. Similarly, following her contest with Arachne<sup>5</sup> in *Athena the Wise*, Athena wonders about her own behaviour: "[S]he'd lashed out in a way that was more like Heracles than like her, using violence to solve her problem. Still, she couldn't help wondering if, instead of delivering justice, she'd simply been vengeful. How did one tell the difference?"<sup>6</sup> It is possible to consider these books rather slight, and to wonder about the emphasis on the social pecking order, and the romance format for young readers. However, the cleverness with which the writers have connected the original myths to this genre is undeniable: and importantly these books offer an entertaining entry point into the world of classical mythology for girls.

Quality is in the eye of the beholder, then, and we urge readers to think about their own definitions, and how they come by them. Many children's books may seem trite to adults, but a closer inspection can reveal very clever and insightful work by writers in condensing the myths, in identifying key elements, and in adapting them for modern readers – and one should never discount what it is that sparks an interest – in the classical world, in reading, or in any future endeavour.

### Our Mythical Childhood Odyssey?

This book is not written for children specifically: indeed, most academic books are not. We hope this book may cross over, however, and appeal to a more general readership. We also hope that some children may find it interesting to map their own reading odysseys, perhaps in consultation with their parents. We encourage readers to add their own knowledge to the book, perhaps scrawling in the margins, adding further texts and examples.

We recommend readers interested in following up any of the texts mentioned in our book take some time to look through the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey: Children's and Young Adults' Culture Inspired by Classical Antiquity* (<http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey>). This *Survey* is hosted by the *Our Mythical Childhood* research project, funded by the European Research Council's Consolidator Grant No. 681202, and led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak of the Faculty of "Artes Liberales", at the University of Warsaw. It provides summaries and analyses of over 1,500 children's and young adults' texts inspired by Classical Antiquity.

<sup>5</sup> For the contest with Arachne, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.5–145.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *Athena the Wise*, "Goddess Girls" 5, New York, NY: Aladdin, 2011, 193.

## **Overlaps and Crossing Over (Topics, Approaches, Audiences)**

Extending this idea about choice, quality, and selection, is the idea of crossing over. The boundaries between genres, approaches, audiences, topics, and focus points can be blurry, and one way we have dealt with this is to separate ideas out into component chapters or sections – hence our alphabetical structure by topic. But categories are seldom absolute: there will be overlaps between them – we discuss some texts in more than one place, because, of course, stories are often not only about one theme or idea, and figures and motifs are not easily confined to only one literary genre.

Depictions of the Minotaur, for instance, range from cuddly to terrifying to tragic. They reveal the power and reach of this influential myth; they also show the power of creative interpretations, operating in many ways. Some Minotaurs are “tamed” for younger readings, others retain a simple monstrosity in exciting action stories, and others still are given deep introspective subjectivity. Their presentations raise issues about what we regard as monstrous – is it the Minotaur, who, many versions argue, is an innocent victim of others’ malice and mischief? Or is it King Minos, who set the events in motion? Or Theseus, a callous and brash hero who is legendary for his thoughtlessness?

Overlaps and changes of perspective thus show how inspiration can cross genres, times, and places – an exciting and dynamic process that is constantly breathing new life into how the classical world can be seen. It is exciting, for instance, to see adaptations that address ideas about identity (something that is so important for young readers), encompassing reflections on gender, sexuality, ability, race, class, and culture. Classical myths themselves offer ways of thinking about what it feels like to be individual, or “different”, about the nature of power and perception, and while they have long had an association with certain kinds of elitism, familiarity with the myths is not the preserve of the powerful, but offers inspiration for creators and audiences, both to understand how some things work, and to challenge others. In our discussions, we include stories from multiple perspectives, and note their insights, which transform the myths, and their receptions. Perhaps children’s literature helps myths cross from culture to culture, facilitating ever more inspirations and ideas (we discuss this in more detail in “X Marks the Spot”).

Returning to the issue of coverage and boundaries, then: we cover as much territory as possible, while being aware that we are likely only scratching the surface, limited as we are by working mainly in English. We encourage readers

to think broadly – for example, about how these stories connect with literature for general audiences, or for adults more specifically. A main contrast between children's and adults' literature is that adult representations of myths are less constrained by the need to protect: they have room to confront the difficult aspects of the myths more directly, and to discuss the implications in greater depth. Consider Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* (1998), about the battle of Thermopylae between the Spartans and the Persians. Its depiction of violence and bloodshed is detailed and specific, capturing the harshness of war. Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* (2018) recasts the myths of the *Odyssey* from the perspective of the sorceress Circe, exploring her maltreatment at the hands of the gods and men, and the vengeance she takes upon them. Both are powerful works and may well be read by teenagers (indeed, children and teenagers often read "up" – that is, reading works for older age groups). But they are not specifically intended for young readers, and that is where we draw our line. The texts in our volume are written directly for young audiences, and thus reveal distinct hallmarks – as indicated in the themes we identify, and the handling of the concerns we focus on.

Occasionally, we discuss a work that can be considered a "crossover" text: this term is often used for texts that appeal to all ages, "crossing over" between age groups. There is a long history of crossover literature, often written for adults but read by children: early examples in English include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which became popular with young readers.<sup>7</sup> Some crossover texts involve child characters, which can appeal to children and adults equally (for example, many nineteenth-century novels begin in the protagonist's childhood), and many fit into what we would consider fantasy literature – that is, using themes of magic, or supernatural, or other animal fantasy. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are read by children and adults alike, as are Richard Adams's *Watership Down* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. And, of course, if we look back to the classical world, it is hard not to see the appeal of Homer's *Odyssey* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to readers of all ages, with their exciting adventures and evocative myths.

Adaptations of classical material cross over age groups as well: the *Ashterix* comics, for instance, find a ready audience with both children and adults, who enjoy in different ways the storylines, humour, slapstick, and meticulous

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of crossover literature, see the work of Sandra L. Beckett: e.g., *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

depiction of life in Ancient Gaul. Different versions of myths are read at school and beyond, including influential collections such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*, Roger Lancelyn Green's *The Tale of Troy*, or Stephen Fry's *Mythos* and *Heroes*. Graphic novel versions, such as George O'Connor's "Olympians" series, use visual storytelling to represent the myths clearly to readers young and old, while *Brick Greek Myths* by Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, recasts the myths using LEGO dioramas. Alongside this attractive and witty visual presentation runs a clear written representation of the myths. For example, Zeus' complicated sex life is not glossed over, presenting his multiple marriages and their offspring in the context of a larger creation myth, organizing the world's structure of beings.

Zeus settled down and got married. His wife was Metis, the Titan woman who had helped him poison Cronus. His grandparents, Gaia and Uranus, told Zeus that Metis was destined to bear a very powerful child who would overthrow his father. Improving on his father's example, Zeus decided to solve this problem by swallowing Metis before she gave birth.<sup>8</sup> When he devoured her, he absorbed her great wisdom and good counsel. Soon Zeus was plagued by a terrible headache that pained him greatly. Suddenly his daughter Athena sprung out of his head fully grown and shouting a war cry; she was to be the goddess of war. Zeus then married his second wife, named Themis, which means steadfast or firm. She was another Titaness and was connected to the ways of the earth [...]. Their union created prosperity and order, and their combined focus on justice helped them to establish the new government that Zeus had created.<sup>9</sup>

While this summary of Zeus' exploits is simple and clear, unusually for children's versions of the myths it also offers an informative, slightly detached approach that contextualizes his multiple marriages and infidelities as part of a creation myth setting up a world order. It is a delightful kind of crossover, where the fun of children's storytelling modes connects with the informative complexity of adult literature.

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<sup>8</sup> For the swallowing of Metis, see Hesiod's *Theogony* (886–900).

<sup>9</sup> Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, *Brick Greek Myths: The Stories of Hera-cles, Athena, Pandora, Poseidon, and Other Ancient Heroes of Mount Olympus*, New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014, 22–25.

## A Scholarly Odyssey

Not so long ago, the authors of this book were intrigued by the way that the ancient world made its presence felt in children's literature. We had grown up on the stories of the classical world, in retellings such as Roger Lancelyn Green's *Tales of the Greek Heroes* or Blanche Winder's *Once Upon a Time*. We had read the *Asterix* comics and passed them on to the children in our lives. And when we read other works, such as Rosemary Sutcliff's novels set in the ancient world, or Margaret Mahy's fantasy novels recasting the major myths in stories about New Zealand teenagers, we picked up on other aspects of classical myth, legend, and history. These encounters with classical elements may have meant that we were attuned quite early to the idea of studying the ancient world and ancient languages. At school and at university, in New Zealand and the United States (Elizabeth) and Australia (Miriam), we pursued our interests in classical reception. Elizabeth wrote her doctoral dissertation, *Semicolons and Parentheses in His Blood: The Marginal Life of the Victorian Classical Scholar* (Brandeis University, 2001), on how nineteenth-century British novelists depicted classical scholars, exploring genres ranging from school stories to domestic epics, to tales of overseas adventure. In her doctoral dissertation, *My First Book of Greek Myths: Retelling Ancient Myths to Modern Children* (Monash University, 2016), Miriam explored the different treatments of Classical Antiquity in a range of children's novels, arguing that they are a significant cultural phenomenon, and deserving of further examination. The scholarly field obviously agrees with Miriam! Since 2016 a number of very interesting books, mostly written by classical scholars, have further explored how Classical Antiquity is represented in children's literature. As we have researched our book, and other articles on the subject, we have read these works with great interest.

Furthermore, from the literary side of the topic, there is also a large field of scholarship focusing on how children's literature uses myth to engage with different literary and thematic approaches. This field is more concerned with how children's literature works – as texts, as cultural products shaped by the needs and abilities of their intended audiences (both in terms of what adults think children need, and in terms of what children enjoy and find useful). To that end, this approach is interested less in the precise transmission and reception of classical material, and more in the uses to which it is put for children.

In the somewhat subtle space between these two approaches is where *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey* sits: informed by classical and children's literature scholarship, interested in ideas

about classical reception (the way that classical material is treated and modified), but also in the purposes to which classical material is adopted. We intend this book to be readable by different audiences: scholars of both fields may find it useful to have a map of the territory, but so too may students and teachers of Classics and of literature. We hope general readers will find this book illuminating, and that it offers a guide to a rich and ever-growing field. We are aware, too, that the field *is* ever-growing. Every day we discover that a new novel or picture book inspired by the ancient world has been published. Every trip to a second-hand store or school fete results in new (to us) discoveries. Perhaps it has always been this way; perhaps we are simply so attuned to the idea of mythical themes that we see them everywhere now; perhaps their popularity is at a pitch right now – perhaps there is even more great literature to come. This is an exciting thought, and we hope that accompanying us on our odyssey through this wonderful world of children’s literature inspired by classical mythology will help you navigate future, ever-expanding oceans of texts and find new islands of your own.

### Recent Scholarship on Classical Reception in Children’s Literature

Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children’s Literature: Heroes and Eagles*, “Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity” 6, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015.

Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, “Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity” 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016.

Owen Hodkinson and Helen Lovatt, eds., *Classical Reception and Children’s Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture*, “Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children’s and Young Adult Literature” 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020.

Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Hope: The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture*, “Our Mythical Childhood”, Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2021.

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### **Recent Scholarship on How and Why Children's Literature Draws on Classical Mythology**

Maria Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children's Literature*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1991.

John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*, New York, NY: Garland, 1998.

Holly Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, "Children's Literature and Culture" 80, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

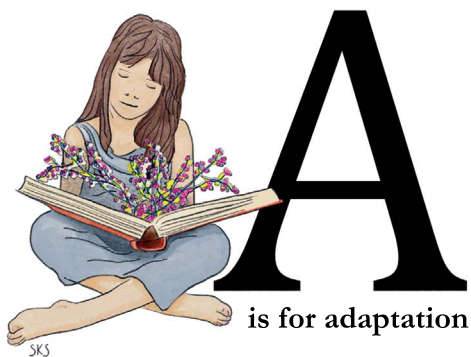
Claudia Nelson and Anne Morey, *Topologies of the Classical World: Palimpsests, Maps and Fractals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Georgia L. Irby, *Epic Echoes in The Wind in the Willows*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022.



*is for adaptation*





From the most carefully researched and detailed retelling, to the most lightly sketched or allusive story, every text we discuss in this book is an adaptation of classical myth and culture aimed at bringing the ancient world to young minds. This is inevitable – the processes

of translation and interpretation alone mean that most versions of the myths we read are adapted, filtered through the lenses of their authors' cultures and contexts. But the shaping of material for young readers involves several specific approaches, including paring myths down to their essences for clear retelling; considering the effect of particular stories on young audiences; selecting and in some cases softening them; and modifying them or applying them to modern life. Adaptations can be very close to the original. Or they can travel such a long way that only the reader with a keen eye for story types, or a handy reference tool, can find their classical contexts. The power of classical myth is such that it is useful for storytellers of all sorts of genres, from all around the world.

Since the first artist drew the first image of Athena, or the first playwright dared to write the stories of the great houses of Greece, classical myth has been adapted for listeners, readers, and theatregoers. It is in a state of constant adaptation, of transformation and reformation. The classical myths themselves are not a single monolithic body, but rather pieced together from fragments of urns and inscriptions, images and literary works, quotations and passages of history. Through this piecing together, which has taken place over generations, we have a picture of gods, heroes, and monsters, told through great stories that explain our world to us: both the natural elements we live among, and the human emotions that make us tick. And these stories sometimes contradict one another, providing shape and dimension to the pictures we have, showing that the myths are themselves adaptations, modified for different demands and occasions.

We know, for instance, that Zeus, the king of the gods of Olympus, strikes the earth with thunderbolts, that the eyes in the tail feather of the peacock originally belonged to a monster named Argus, who served as a security guard for the goddess Hera, until he was lulled to sleep by the tricky god, Hermes.<sup>1</sup> We know that the march of the seasons re-enacts the bargain between Hades, the god of the Underworld, Persephone, the goddess of spring, and her mother, Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, whereby Persephone spends half of the

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<sup>1</sup> For the myth of Argus, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.583–750.

year in the Underworld, and half above.<sup>2</sup> Though this does not entirely work for those of us living outside the Northern Hemisphere, the myth is resonant and compelling. The echoes from the Greeks and Romans continue to this day. When we go on an adventure, we call it an odyssey; when we get lost in a complex pattern of streets, or buildings, or trees, we call it a labyrinth. Our emotions are often caught between Eros (love) and Psyche (soul); our fears and worries are eased by prophecy, and so on.

The young adult novels of Francesca Lia Block capture how powerfully and continually the myths relate to how we think about ourselves. Her novel *Psyche in a Dress* (2006) adapts the myths of Psyche, Persephone, and Eurydice, three young women drawn into relationships with deities (Eros, Hades, and Orpheus). Psyche, the daughter of a Hollywood film-maker, tries on different roles, becoming versions of Persephone and Eurydice, growing older, having a child, and becoming Demeter. At the end of the novel, having made her film, Psyche is out dancing with Joy, her daughter, when she meets Eros again:

“Eros,” she said.

When she opened her eyes, he was standing there. Had she conjured him with her dancing? He looked older now; his hair was close-shaven, nearly all gray. There was nothing about him that screamed “ancient power of the cosmos, love god, son of Aphrodite, son of Chaos.” He was a man, getting older, her daughter’s father. He was also her first lover, her secret, her storyteller. And he was a god, yes. But she was a goddess and a storyteller too. A soul in a new dress now.<sup>3</sup>

For Block, mythical figures appear in California, wearing the clothes of writers, directors, actors, musicians, and poets – acting like teenagers in love, dealing with issues of gender, sexuality, love, and power – wearing new dresses for their different roles. The influence of the myths is everywhere, even thousands of years after the passing of the Greek and Roman empires, and they appear scattered throughout literature in almost all Western languages, in invocations, and allusions, and retellings.

Classical myths are adapted throughout the world, across genres, and age groups. In our book we are concerned with how they appear in children’s literature. Some myths lend themselves well to nursery stories, to simple explanations about how the world came to be. Some are ideal as cautionary tales,

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<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.565.

<sup>3</sup> Francesca Lia Block, *Psyche in a Dress*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 2006, 116.

teaching behaviour and morality. Some are more suitable for older children, explaining aspects of sexuality, or gender, and of dark emotions and events. Some are funny, and some critique the vagaries of human behaviour (greed, egotism, selfishness, boastfulness). Some are tragic, showing how death is inevitable and inexorable, that there are ills in the world. Myths help us to face the world, and also to face ourselves.

### **Odysseus and the Odyssey**

*Having triumphed at Troy, Odysseus sails home to Ithaca. His journey takes ten years and he has many adventures (and faces many trials) along the way. Finally, he is reunited with his wife and son, and reclaims his kingdom. This is one of the most influential of all the classical myths and stories, and makes its presence felt in literature for all ages.*

**Retelling – Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Wanderings of Odysseus: The Story of the Odyssey*, ill. Alan Lee (1995)**

This illustrated chapter book is a traditional retelling of Homer's epic that highlights Odysseus' courage and craftiness as he strives to return to his beloved wife and home.

**Revision – Sulari D. Gentill, *Chasing Odysseus* (2011)**

In this young adult novel, Odysseus is presented as a vain and flawed figure. As they track him across the Aegean in an effort to clear their name, Hero and her brothers are credited with involvement in the key events of the *Odyssey*.

**Adaptation – Francesca Lia Block, *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013)**

This young adult novel plays out the *Odyssey* in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. Having lost everything, seventeen-year-old Pen navigates a dangerous world in search of a new home.

**Allusion – Cynthia Voigt, *Homecoming* (1981)**

First in the "Tillerman Cycle" of young adult novels: after their mother abandons them, Dicey leads her younger siblings across America to their grandmother's house, facing many challenging encounters along the way.

## **Retell, Revise, Adapt, Allude**

Adaptations of classical myth for children take many forms, from poems to plays, from short stories to novels. They appear in different ways: retellings, revisions, adaptations, and allusions. Retellings, for example, give (relatively) faithful presentations of the original myths. They may vary in style, in depth or length, but for the most part they deliver a recognizable version of the myths with which

we are familiar. In retellings, mythical figures appear as themselves, and behave according to convention. Zeus is mighty, Hera is jealous, Athena is wise, Artemis scornful, Hercules brave.<sup>4</sup>

Many retellings are influenced by two nineteenth-century writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charles Kingsley, whose popular collections of myths for children have been in print since the 1850s. Both collections emphasize myths of adventure and morality, focusing on exciting stories, such as Perseus' quest to slay the Gorgon, Theseus' quest to solve the riddle of the Labyrinth and slay the Minotaur, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, and excerpts from the *Odyssey*. Many of the stories involve heroes slaying monsters. Many of them are stories of morality, such as the tales of Pandora's Box and Midas (illustrating the consequences of excessive curiosity, greed, and carelessness) or the stories of Atalanta and of Baucis and Philemon (celebrating positive qualities, such as kindness, wisdom, and hospitality). And all are told with an awareness of the interwoven nature of classical myth, its twists and turns, and ability to be adapted to different purposes. So influential were these collections that many retellings follow their lead. Some even highlight their influence, as in Kathryn Hewitt's lavishly illustrated picture book *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1987), which has an image of Hawthorne on its dedication page.

Retellings for children usually focus on several core stories: the Theseiad, the Perseiad, the *Argonautica*, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well on elements from Hesiod's *Theogony*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Aesop's *Fables*. For the most part they focus on simple stories of adventure, love, and transformation. They generally soften or omit sex and violence. Writers and illustrators can also be critical of the actions of the gods and heroes, and have increasing sympathy for ordinary folk, for heroines, for those who fall victim to the demands of a hero's actions, and also for the monsters. Although they soften some elements to be suitable for young audiences, they do not hold back from pointing out the flaws of heroes and gods. Picture book retellings are a particularly interesting case, as they often both retell and critique at the

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<sup>4</sup> In this division of categories, we are influenced by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's analysis, which notes that children's reading engaging with classical material includes classical fables (commonly associated with reading for children); adaptation of classical myths and epics, including faithful and modernized versions; and, increasingly, intertextual allusion to classical elements. History makes an appearance, in retellings and allusions, time travel, and fantasy texts. Kümmerling-Meibauer notes too the power of the "Pan and the *puer aeternus*" theme, which is strongly felt in works such as *Peter Pan* and *The Secret Garden*. See Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Children's and Young Adults' Literature", in Manfred Landfester, ed., *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World. Classical Tradition*, vol. 1: A–Del, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006, 750–754.

same time, using the tension between image and text to highlight or challenge different aspects of a particular myth or legend.

### **Influenced by Hawthorne I**

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) are regarded as the first English-language retellings of classical myth to be written specifically for children. Though rarely acknowledged directly, Hawthorne's influence on contemporary retellings is profound and widespread. He can be credited with placing emphasis on children and childish characters, as well as the use of an internal narrator and frame narrative to link the collection of myths. His invention of Marygold, a daughter for King Midas, has become so pervasive in children's retellings that it is difficult to believe that there is no ancient source for her character.

Laura Geringer's picture book *The Pomegranate Seeds: A Classic Greek Myth* (1995), illustrated with dreamy, diaphanous paintings by Leonid Gore, draws closely on the version told in *Tanglewood Tales* in casting Persephone as a playful companion for lonely Hades, rather than as his bride. Sally Grindley and Nilesh Mistry's *Pandora and the Mystery Box* (2000) replicates elements of Hawthorne's version, including referring to Hermes as Quicksilver and the contents of the box as "Troubles". And like Hawthorne in "The Chimaera", in *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths* (ill. Jan Lewis; 2003) Saviour Pirotta lets children tell Bellerophon where to find Pegasus, while the adults deny his existence.

Unlike these books, which remain close to Hawthorne's retelling but do not refer to his influence explicitly, Kathryn Hewitt's postmodern picture book *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1987) names him on the cover and credits Hewitt as an adaptor rather than author. In addition, the dedication page features a framed portrait of Hawthorne looking aghast in response to the prospect of Hewitt's irreverent, highly intertextual treatment of his classic work.

Often drawing on standard versions, such as those of Kingsley or Hawthorne, or Roger Lancelyn Green, the British writer whose 1950s stories and novels were very influential in Britain and the Commonwealth, picture books combine short stories with illustrations. The flexibility of the format, and the demand to be entertaining for very young readers as well as their parents, make for interesting interpretations (see "V is for Visual Storytelling"). For instance, John Warren Stewig and Omar Rayyan's picture book *King Midas: A Golden Tale* (1999) offers in the text a straight retelling of the Midas myth.<sup>5</sup> Although small elements reveal their inspiration by Hawthorne – Midas' daughter, for instance, is named Marygold, after Hawthorne's version – there is room for

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<sup>5</sup> For the myth of Midas, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.85–145.

new interpretations. While Stewig's words retell the myth simply and clearly, Rayyan's illustrations set the action in a palace suspended in the clouds, supported by mythical beasts, and populated with exotic animals. His King Midas wears round John Lennon glasses, which are among the first of his objects to be turned to gold and eats "Poseidon Puffs" for breakfast.<sup>6</sup> Words and illustrations work together to humanize King Midas, offering a story that is both a standard version, and one that is characterized as belonging to an unusual mythical and magical place and time.

Indeed, the Midas myth adapts readily to different contexts. Al Perkins's retelling for early readers, *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (ill. Harold Berson; 1969), has a bouncy rhythm and simple but evocative phrasing:

King Midas jumped up,  
And he wished with all his heart.  
He put out his hand.  
He touched his cold, gold daughter.  
His wish came true.  
He had turned his daughter back from gold!<sup>7</sup>

Illustrators for different editions of Perkins's text add their interpretations: Harold Berson (1969) employs a bright, cartoonish style, in which the King, who is dressed in the style of the French court of Louis XIV, prances around turning things to gold. Haig and Regina Shekerjian's more sober take (1966) transfers the King to a medieval castle, and highlights the parallels with European fairy tales, whereby Dionysus becomes a "strange little man", not unlike Rumpelstiltskin. Adaptations and retellings can be played for laughs, or for sympathy, foregrounding folly or vice as the author decides.

### Golden Girl: King Midas, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Invention of Marygold

The story of King Midas and his golden touch famously features in Book 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but it is the version told by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) that has significantly shaped contemporary children's versions of the myth.

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<sup>6</sup> John W. Stewig, *King Midas: A Golden Tale*, ill. Omar Rayyan, New York, NY: Holiday House, 1999, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Al Perkins, *King Midas and the Golden Touch*, ill. Harold Berson, New York, NY: Beginner Books, 1969, 27.

Hawthorne gives Midas a daughter, Marygold, “whom nobody but myself ever heard of”,<sup>8</sup> in the words of the narrator, Eustace Bright. The gift of the touch is revealed to be a curse when Midas discovers that he is unable to eat or drink, and then, when he tries to comfort his beloved daughter, that she has been transformed into a golden statue. In addition to its cautionary message about the dangers of greed, this adaptation of the myth celebrates the innate wisdom of children, who understand things more clearly than their adult counterparts.

Midas’ daughter appears in most modern retellings of this myth. “Marygold became part of the Midas legend in many people’s memories”, writes Elizabeth Cook in *The Ordinary and the Fabulous: An Introduction to Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales for Teachers and Storytellers*,<sup>9</sup> noting that even the eminent scholar Robert Graves includes her in his account of the myth, despite the fact that no ancient text refers to her. Geraldine McCaughrean’s “The Golden Wish” in *The Golden Hoard* (1995), part of the “Myths and Legends of the World” series, follows Hawthorne’s version closely, presenting the transformation of an innocent child into a golden statue as the ultimate horror. Other books play around with her role to parody or extend the mythic tradition. In Francesca Simon’s chapter book *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They’ve Never Been Told Before!* (ill. Ross Asquith; 1999), the time traveller Susan and her younger brother are mistaken for Midas’ children. When he accidentally turns them into golden statues, they suffer Marygold’s fate, an experience that Susan finds extremely dull, as they wait to be brought back to life. Annie Sullivan’s young adult novel *A Touch of Gold* (2018) imagines the life of Kora, Midas’ daughter, after she has been revitalized. Though restored to human form, her skin retains a golden sheen, and her father is a guilt-ridden shadow of his former self. These adaptations highlight how the myth of Midas continues to transform, much like the figure of Marygold herself.

Many adaptations offer a revision of the myth, in order to highlight contemporary ideas of how morality should work. These revisions are often presented as the “real” story, whereby the original, or traditional, version is a false story that needs correcting. New heroes come to the fore, villains are recuperated, original heroes turn out to have feet of clay. In Kate Hovey’s picture book defending Arachne, *Arachne Speaks* (ill. Blair Drawson; 2000), the mortal weaver Arachne conflicts with an equally headstrong creator, the goddess Athena. Hovey highlights the parallels between the two figures, mortal and goddess (both weavers, both creative, both strong-willed), and shows how Arachne’s famous tapestry of the gods justifiably, but rashly, highlights the damage they

<sup>8</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, ill. Walter Crane, Project Gutenberg e-book, 3 May 2010, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32242/32242-h/32242-h.htm> (accessed 11 March 2022), 28.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous: An Introduction to Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales for Teachers and Storytellers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 86.

do to mortals (Blair Dawson's illustrations show her weavings featuring Apollo's vanity, Poseidon's violence<sup>10</sup>). When Athena is offended, and transforms Arachne into a spider, it would seem the goddess has won, but Hovey points out that the gods of Olympus, being immortal, have lived to see their influence wane. The story ends with Athena sitting idle and lonely in her isolated temple, while Arachne's descendants busily spin their webs to this day. This is a considerable revision from some versions, in which Arachne is doomed to have her handiwork scorned by generations of humans who are frightened by the sight of cobwebs.

Many revisions reflect the changing politics and ideals since the time of the original myths: gender equality being one of the most obvious, but also racial and national politics, as well as increased sympathy for animals and for monsters, who often appeal to writers by virtue of being blameless victims, or who are taken to symbolize types of human or child problems, situations, or identities. For instance, Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (2005–2009) and "The Heroes of Olympus" (2010–2014) two series feature the story of Percy Jackson, a dyslexic American boy who discovers he is a demigod son of Perseus and joins an epic battle between the Olympians and the Titans. Percy's dyslexia is a sign that his brain is wired to understand Ancient Greek rather than Modern English – suggesting a vision in which disabilities can be understood as superpowers, if viewed sympathetically.

Such revisions are increasingly conscious of diversity, including characters of different races, sexualities, backgrounds, and abilities. Nancy Loewen's picture books retell myths, legends, and fairy tales from the perspective of the loser or the villain. *Cyclops Tells All: The Way Eye See It* (ill. Ryan Pentney; 2014) presents the Cyclops Polyphemus as misunderstanding the phrase "You are what you eat", and eating Odysseus' men in a vain attempt to become human. In *Pandora Tells All: Not the Curious Kind* (ill. Ryan Pentney; 2014), it is Pandora's cat who is unable to resist temptation to open the famous vase. These revisions aim to see the famous stories from fresh perspectives and are influenced by modern assumptions. Kate McMullan's "Myth-O-Mania" series (2002–2014) rewrites the Greek myths from the point of view of a brooding and shy Hades, who is frustrated by his irresponsible and brash brothers, Zeus and Poseidon:

My bro Po [Poseidon] and I have the same mom and dad. We grew up in the same dark, damp, overcrowded cave of our dad's belly. But right from the

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<sup>10</sup> For Arachne's work, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.115–124.

get-go, we were different. I like peace and quiet. Po's the original party god, always arranging picnics at some temple.<sup>11</sup>

"Myth-O-Mania", aimed at middle-grade readers, uses Hades as a device to narrate an alternative version of the Greek myths (see also "H is for How to Be Heroic", "U is for Underworld Adventures"). This self-professed introvert, withdrawn from the main action, offers a more cynical take on the gods' and heroes' behaviour, and softens the original tale of Hades' abduction of Persephone: as further proof that he's a nice guy, Hades is devotedly in love with Persephone. In works for older readers, such as Rachel Smythe's web comic, *Lore Olympus* (2018–present), Hades becomes a Byronic hero – brooding, lonely, soulful – perfectly matched with a dreamy Persephone who is eager to escape the confines of life with her bossy mother, Demeter. As Holly Blackford notes in *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature* (2014), the Persephone myth is useful for storytellers exploring girls' maturation stories – the relationship between daughters and mothers at this time, and also the attraction (and perils) of sexuality for young women.<sup>12</sup> Retellings and adaptations of myths connect not only with the original stories, but also with their impact on contemporary readers and writers.

Such revisions reflect changes in attitudes – to the gods, to the myths, to gender and family relations, to authority, and to individual behaviour. They often reveal authors' sympathy for the underdog – a tendency to explore the lives and minds of figures that are overlooked, or brushed aside, or considered monstrous. (After all, in these revisions are possible new stories!) Sulari D. Gentill, for instance, retells the *Odyssey* from the point of view of Hero, a teenage girl, in her "Hero Trilogy" (2011–2013). Hero is the daughter of Agelaus, chief of a tribe of herdsmen who have been secretly supplying food to the besieged Trojans. When he is falsely accused of betraying the Trojans and executed, Hero and her brothers set out to find Odysseus to clear her father's name. The novels are focalized through Hero's eyes: in the first novel of the trilogy, *Chasing Odysseus* (2011), Hero witnesses key aspects of the *Odyssey*, and offers her own interpretation of the events. For instance, as Odysseus' boat passes between the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, Hero meets the eyes of the monstrous Scylla, and feels immediate sympathy for her:

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<sup>11</sup> Kate McMullan, *Get Lost, Odysseus!*, "Myth-O-Mania" 10, North Mankato, MN: Stone Arch Books, 2015, 16–17.

<sup>12</sup> Holly Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, "Children's Literature and Culture" 80, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

For some reason that she could not understand, the ferocious eyes of the monster touched Hero deeply, and she wept.

"What happened to you?" she asked tearfully.

The grotesque heads spoke in unison. "I was beautiful once... and I loved the God of the Sea. He desired me, and took me to his bed... but when his wife wreaked her vengeance he left me to answer alone for what we did."

The multiple jaws smiled wistfully. "Ahh pious Hero, heed my words. Do not lie with a god... die before you lie with a god."

And then Scylla was gone and the little ship continued close to the edge of the rocks, until they were clear of the strait.

The sons of Agelaus emerged and comforted their sobbing sister, rebuking themselves for exposing her to such distress.

"She was not always a monster," Hero told them.

"How do you know?" asked Cadmus, surprised that this was the cause of her tears.

"She spoke to me," Hero replied. "She is being punished because she loved Poseidon." Hero's voice trembled and she whispered, "Have the gods no pity?"<sup>13</sup>

By presenting Scylla's tragic backstory,<sup>14</sup> Gentill encourages readers to think critically about the casual violence of the gods towards humans, and to have sympathy for monstrous figures. Like her, many authors find ways to present moments that overturn or challenge ideas about what is monstrous, and who deserves to be considered, or turned into, a monster. What is monstrous to one person, or culture, can be heroic to others, and vice versa.

Revisions have a purpose, and offer new ways of thinking about classical material. Presenting the Theseiad from the perspective of Ariadne or the Minotaur, or offering a Gorgon's-eye view of the Perseus myth, storytellers for young readers grapple with ideas about heroism, gender roles, the roles of the gods, the balance between morality and the harshness of life, and more. Even as they continue to find inspiration in the myths, changing social attitudes, creative attitudes, and adaptations and revisions continue to influence the modifications that occur in new tellings.

That inspiration can be seen in other ways, such as in adaptations that move the mythical figures into new settings, configurations, times, and places. Young adult fiction in particular seems to revel in bringing myth into contact

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<sup>13</sup> Sulari D. Gentill, *Chasing Odysseus*, "Hero Trilogy" 1, Seaforth: Pantera Press, 2011, 298.

<sup>14</sup> For the story of Scylla, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.1–74.

with modern teenagers. In British author David Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014), the musician-hero Orpheus falls in love with a Cumbrian teenager, and re-enacts the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.<sup>15</sup> Rick Riordan's series "Percy Jackson and the Olympians", featuring the adventures of Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon, proposes that Olympus has moved to the United States, reflecting its dominance in world culture, and the action of the novels, in which the Olympians fight the darkness of the Titans, takes place against many famous places in American culture. Joanne Horniman's *Loving Athena* (1997) features Erato, the muse of poetry, who accompanies nineteen-year-old Keats on his coming of age in the Australian town of Lismore, New South Wales, and watches as he falls in love with a girl whom he decides is Athena, the goddess of wisdom. For these writers, whose work can broadly be described as magic realism, mythical elements offer commentary on adolescent concerns – love, loss, family, hope, fear, ambition – and provide a metaphoric way of thinking about life. Indeed, for these writers, mythical elements can symbolize the challenge of *being* a teenager – of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, of finding one's path, of dealing with emotions and sexuality, and more (see "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects", "E is for Emotions", "G is for Girls and Boys", "Y is for Young Adulthood"). New Zealand writer Margaret Mahy, for instance, uses mythical underpinnings to explore the coming of age of her young protagonists: in *Memory* (1987), her young adult novel set in the South Island city of Christchurch, a nineteen-year-old dancer named Jonny Dart undergoes a Dionysian ritual to overcome a trauma-induced amnesia about the circumstances in which his sister died some years before. A Dionysian figure himself, hovering on the brink of madness, he encounters an old woman, Sophie, who he believes is an oracle, who is certainly suffering from dementia, but who in her insights may stand for Sophia, the goddess of wisdom. Together they help one another find ways to be safe, and to become whole. Whether either of them *is* a mythical figure is not entirely certain – what is clear, however, is that the mythic imagination inspires Mahy's work as she explores the preoccupations of adolescent characters and readers.

Stories for adolescents often engage with ideas about identity, sanity, sexuality, and fitting in to society, and mythical material adapts readily to such concerns. Stories for younger readers, such as British author John Dougherty's amusing series featuring the adventures of Zeus in a modern British school

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of Almond's treatment of the Orpheus myth, see Owen Hodkinson, "Orphic Resonances of Love and Loss in David Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey*", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Hope: The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2021, 645–668.

(*Zeus on the Loose* [2004], *Zeus to the Rescue!* [2007], and *Zeus Sorts It Out* [2011]; ill. Georgien Overwater) show the intrusion of mythical figures into everyday life, and the disjunction between classical and modern attitudes. As Zeus adapts, or rather fails to adapt to the modern world, the British boy who he stays with has to come up with ways to hide him from his parents and teachers, and to solve problems that occur when he and his classmates find themselves re-enacting scenes from the *Iliad*. Stella Tarakson's "Hopeless Heroes" series of children's novels (2017–2020), also sees an ordinary boy, Tim Baker, cope with the intrusion of Hercules into his world, when he breaks an old vase belonging to his mother. Together, Tim and Hercules re-enact different elements of the myths, in Tim's (or rather our) modern world, and in Hercules' world of legends and mythology.

Adaptations of myth can take place elsewhere as well, as famous fantasy novelists, such as C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling, demonstrate when they incorporate mythical elements into well-realized alternative worlds. In the seven *Narnia* books (1950–1956), Lewis's child protagonists travel to an alternative world called Narnia, where mythical figures (satyrs, fauns, centaurs, flying horses, talking animals) live alongside humans. In this world, where magic is as real as myth, their quests (to conquer evil and save the world) take on an epic importance, where the fight is on between the forces of light and darkness. For young readers, entering a fictional world where the stakes are high offers a kind of imaginative workout, in which they may see how protagonists solve problems and mature.<sup>16</sup>

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) also offers epic adventures set in a magical world that coexists alongside our own. In it, figures from myth and folklore are real, and having good Latin will help you cast spells accurately. The *Harry Potter* novels offer children the vicarious pleasure of spending time outwitting Cerberus, flying a hippogriff, dealing with basilisks, learning from phoenixes, and becoming a hero, and as they do so picking up many a useful piece of knowledge about myth, history, and literature.

Adaptation does not require a wholesale engagement with a myth or a legend – here we have examples of literary worlds in which myth is part of a general sense of magic, wonder, and fantasy. Incorporating mythical figures with such distinguished pedigrees might be a tactical choice for authors who wish to give

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<sup>16</sup> See Anna Mik, "Magizoology: The Magical Creatures Studies J.K. Rowling's Postulates on Animals in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* on Examples from Graeco-Roman Mythology", *Magazyn antropologiczno-społeczno-kulturowy MASKA* [Anthropological-Sociocultural Magazine Maska] 33 (2017), 21–33.

credibility to their fantasy worlds. But it also reveals that mythology is *fun*, and learning about it and playing with it is also fun. Rowling's books offer a treasure trove of mythical information for the child who is interested in hunting for magical beasts, as highlighted in her spin-off guide book, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001). Within exciting plots, works such as the *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* books promote the value of learning and knowledge (which may be one reason they retain such devoted followings), and do so in a framework of fantasy and fun that provides important cultural knowledge.

In previous generations, knowledge of classical myth was a marker of social class, a sign of education and literacy, and to some extent that is still true. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century school stories, for instance, are peppered with references and allusions to Classics, to Latin class, and to learning aspects of Greek and Roman history, and Rowling's books play on in-jokes about exams and translations, but in a mythical context.<sup>17</sup> Knowing Latin becomes a kind of secret code or mark of distinction. In Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" series, the hero Percy Jackson's dyslexia turns out to be caused by his demigod brain being hard-wired to read Ancient Greek (reversing the phrase, "It's all Greek to me"). Of course, one does not have to know Latin or Greek to be knowledgeable about classical myth. Reading books in which mentions of it are important or meaningful offers a final form of adaptation – namely, allusions.

Realist novels, in particular, employ allusions to show how myths underpin modern stories. For instance, Ursula Dubosarsky, herself a former Latin teacher, employs mythical allusion throughout her young adult novel *The Golden Day* (2011). This novel, about the disappearance of a teacher from a private girls' school in Sydney, is filtered through the perceptions of two students, Cubby and Icara, who have differing opinions about what happened to her. Throughout the novel, Cubby, who is inclined to dreaming, and Icara, who is inclined to realism, observe the strange events around their teacher's disappearance. Classical allusions pervade their coming of age, from Icara's name (alluding to Icarus, the boy who fell from the sky<sup>18</sup>), to Cubby's guinea pig, Agamemnon. They are carved in stone, set in examination papers, and more. As the girls grow up, and as Cubby comes to share Icara's understanding that their teacher is dead, they

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<sup>17</sup> See Lisa Maurice, "'I'd Break the Slate and Scream for Joy if I Did Latin Like a Boy!' Studying and Teaching Classics in Girls' and Boys' Fiction", in Owen Hodgkinson and Helen Lovatt, eds., *Classical Reception and Children's Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2017, 181–202; Elizabeth Hale, "Truth-Telling Englishmen: Classics as a Test of Character in Victorian School Stories", *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 3 (Spring 2008), 47–60.

<sup>18</sup> For the fall of Icarus, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.223–235.

incorporate classical knowledge into their lives, along with reflections about what it is to live in modern Australia. In *The Golden Day*, this reflectiveness is a key part of the story, along with its allusiveness, rewarding a reading that is alert to literary details. Of course, not every book for young readers is as highly intertextual as this one (which also plays with a retelling of a famous Australian novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*). But for the young reader, recognizing the allusions may provoke further thought, and adds to the richness and reflectiveness of the work.<sup>19</sup> *Speak* (1999), Laurie Halse Anderson's powerful novel about rape and trauma, set in an American high school, employs mythological allusions to even more powerful effect, drawing on the myths of Apollo and Daphne<sup>20</sup> and Philomela<sup>21</sup> to express the pain inflicted on the victims of rape, and also the power they draw on to survive the effects of trauma. The protagonist, Melinda, a survivor of rape, finds a way to overcome her trauma when an art class project inspires her to express herself in new ways: like Philomela, who uses her weaving to tell her story.

In the chapter "W is for Weaving", we discuss this further, exploring the idea of literature as a web of meaning, and employing the critical concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to the way that texts speak to one another, creating a network of allusions, references, and shared ideas. It is an age-old idea, and can be seen in classical literature through the idea of weaving. Classical literature has strong connections to ideas about weaving and making, through its many women (and goddesses) interested in the craft. (It would be while weaving that women would tell stories, for instance, and woven patterns also tell stories, drawing together individual strands into a whole.) Participating in the process of reading, writing, storytelling, and thinking about the classical world takes one into this sense that the myth and legends, heroic figures and ordinary people of the ancient world are part of a giant, interconnected web of meaning and feeling. While not all children's adaptations invoke this sense, many do, and to interesting effect.

When we read any one of the kinds of adaptation, retelling, or allusion, and we recognize it as such, we hold in our heads the story we are reading, and the stories to which it refers. But even very young readers may pick up on the

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<sup>19</sup> For more on *The Golden Day*, see Elizabeth Hale, "Mystery, Childhood, and Meaning in Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Golden Day*", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Hope: The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2021, 451–469.

<sup>20</sup> For the myth of Daphne, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.452–567.

<sup>21</sup> For the myth of Philomela, see Apollodorus, *Library* 3.14.8.

echoes and allusions that exist from story to story, or text to text, and many children's books are written to appeal to this sense, partly from the understanding that parents may be reading along, too. Later, readers may remember fondly their first encounter with a particular version. They may also enjoy tracing stories back to their classical precedents, or find it fun to see what happens next to a particular figure or motif in new versions.

Adaptations of classical material come in many packages, and involve a range of approaches, in which retelling, adapting, revisioning, and making allusions all invoke the myths and legends of the ancient world. Other entries in this volume will explore what themes and ideas they draw out, what comment they make on classical material, what aspects of that material they focus on, what uses they put it to, and more. The interplay of myth, story, telling, retelling, and adaptation gives access to a richly textured sense of story, where all versions connect and join up in a web of meaning.

### **Some Further Reading on Adaptation and Reception**

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Children's and Young Adults' Literature", in Manfred Landfester, ed., *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World. Classical Tradition*, vol. 1: *A–Del*, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006, 750–754.

Christopher Stray and Lorna Hardwick, eds., *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, London: John Wiley, 2007.

Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2013 (ed. pr. 2006).

Shane Butler, *Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Benjamin Lefebvre, ed., *Textual Transformations in Children's Literature: Adaptations, Translations, Reconsiderations*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2019.

is for beasts





Once upon a time, there was a dog called Argos.<sup>1</sup> He was great friends with the hero Odysseus, who raised him from puppyhood. Then Odysseus was called away from Ithaca to the Trojan War, and got lost on his way home, while Argos remained on Ithaca and did

his best to guard the household. They were reunited only at the very end of Argos' life. The friends instantly recognized one another, even though Odysseus was in disguise and Argos was very old. Odysseus met the eyes of his beloved dog and wiped away a tear. Argos wagged his tail and flattened his ears. Then death came to Argos. He had seen his friend again, after twenty years.

This story of canine fidelity should soften even the hardest of hearts. Small wonder that Argos makes an appearance in so many retellings of the *Odyssey*. And small wonder that writers reimagining the *Odyssey* for young readers find themselves telling it from Argos' perspective. In Ralph Hardy's *Argos: The Story of Odysseus as Told by His Loyal Dog* (2016), Argos pieces together what his master has been up to – informed by birds and other animals who have witnessed his adventures. Phillip W. Simpson's novel, *Argos* (2016), shows him keeping a caring eye on Telemachus and Penelope and standing up for himself in the face of challenges from the Underworld. Kate McMullan's chapter book *Get Lost, Odysseus!* (2015) shows Argos playing happily with another solitary dog, Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of the Underworld. Argos is faithful, loyal, and protective. In Francesca Lia Block's *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013), it is Argos who cares for the heroine's younger brother, while she roams a post-apocalyptic California searching for her missing family. In *Ithaka* (2005), her young adult retelling of the *Odyssey*, Adèle Geras emphasizes the passing of time through Argos' reflections: "sun and moon day and night sleep and waking more and more waiting more days more nights";<sup>2</sup> he waits for Odysseus to return, showing the household's yearning for things to return to normal. Symbolizing the values of caring, of home, and of love, Argos is a dog for the ages.

In "B is for Beasts", we consider how animals appear in children's books influenced by Classical Antiquity. By "beasts" we mean non-magical or mythical animals – that is, "real" animals (as opposed to the "mythical and magical beings" we discuss in "M"). The distinction needs to be made because both kinds

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<sup>1</sup> For the story of Argos, see Homer, *Odyssey* 17.290–327.

<sup>2</sup> Adèle Geras, *Ithaka*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005, 218.

of creatures appear in myth and children's literature, with overlapping but also separate uses and meanings. While mythical creatures express what might be, animals are part of the "real" world: from the smallest beetle to the largest bear, they are with us, in our worlds and our stories, be they classical or contemporary. Classical Antiquity complicates matters by including mythical and magical and monstrous beasts – part animal, part human, part something else, as well. Children's literature, too, uses animal figures in multiple ways – from the educational and realist to the allegorical and fantastic. All of these approaches work with certain ideas about what animals are, what we are, and what we might be. Humans are animals, too, but our acceptance or rejection of that fact is what makes beasts' representation in literature interesting and challenging. Finding our way through a mythical bestiary of children's and ancient literature, then, asks us to think about what authors are intending to achieve in their representations of the wild, of the animal, of the beastly, and what we take from those representations – to understand them, or to understand ourselves.

There has long been an association between children and animals. Children are viewed as closer to nature than adults: stories that feature animals are seen as more suitable for them. As Tess Cosslett suggests in discussing the representation of talking animals in nineteenth-century children's literature, one theory runs like this: "If the child is seen as nearer to Nature than the adult, nature stories must be especially suitable for childish readers".<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, children are also more closely associated with the imagination than adults, and children's literature is generally seen to indulge them with fantasy and make-believe. This assumes all sorts of things about adults that we know cannot always be true: that they are "divorced from nature, rational, logical and scientific".<sup>4</sup> Representing animals in books inspired by antiquity, especially but not only myth, requires us to think about these boundaries, partly because they are continually being tested.

The fierceness of animals is contested in *The Great Bear* (2011), a picture book by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder which tells the tragic story of a female bear, trapped by humans and made to dance for their entertainment (see also "N is for Nature"). Grotesque villagers poke and prod her, and make her "dance", until she is no longer able to endure it, and breaks free, roaring loudly. She climbs the village maypole and leaps into the stars, where she becomes

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<sup>3</sup> Tess Cosslett, "Child's Place in Nature: Talking Animals in Victorian Children's Fiction", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 23.4 (2002), 475, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905490208583554>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 476.

the constellation Ursa Major. This is a story of torment, endurance, and blessed escape, though also perhaps a story of suicide – of a gentle soul pushed beyond hope. Who is the “beast” in this scenario? We are asked to think about this through a highly emotional story. The word “beast” conjures up ideas of bestiality, of viciousness, of wildness, and of violence. It is often used to signify an opposite of “humanity”, where humanity is considered rational and controlled. In *The Great Bear*, it is clear how problematic humanity is: the bear is tortured for her “wildness” by creatures who should know better, but who give into their cruel impulses for pleasure. When pushed too far the bear roars, powerfully and wildly, scattering the bestial figures who have tortured her, and using her animal power to save herself. This tragic work ends on a note of mythical sublimity – it echoes the myth of Callisto,<sup>5</sup> a nymph in the entourage of Artemis who is seduced by Zeus, transformed into a bear by Hera, and hunted by her own son before being transformed into the constellation Ursa Major (thus rendering the story an aetiological myth, or a story of *katasterismos* – how a constellation was formed). While the myth of Callisto is less about the vulnerability of animals at the hands of humans, it too recounts a tale of tragic abuse of power, and suggests that the stars are a place of refuge.

Sublimity gives way to comedy in Kate DiCamillo’s humorous chapter book *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (ill. K.G. Campbell; 2013), set in an American suburb and involving a mixture of magic realism, philosophical reflection, and human–animal connections. Ten-year-old Flora, a self-professed “cynic”, saves a squirrel from an accident with a vacuum-cleaner and a book of poetry. She gives him the kiss of life, and names him Ulysses, and together they go on a quest to heal their little corner of the world. Flora is angry with her parents who have recently divorced. Her mother, worried that Flora is becoming disturbingly unconventional, sees Ulysses as a threat and plots to have him killed. The stakes are high for Ulysses, but he survives a number of attacks by humans and other animals, including a knife-wielding donut chef and a vicious landlord’s cat. Humans are not necessarily more vicious than animals in this story, but they misunderstand one another and project their problems onto the animal world. Ulysses’ strength comes from the combination of his innate squirrel drives and instincts, and a poetic (human) sensibility given him by his exposure to poetry. On the one hand he is constantly ravenous and driven by the need to survive; on the other, he is mesmerized by the beauty of the world, and finds ways to express this sense by typing poems on Flora’s mother’s typewriter.

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<sup>5</sup> For the myth of Callisto, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.409–507.

(As well as being inspired by the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, the squirrel is both a kind of Homer, writing his own *Odyssey*, and a kind of James Joyce, writing his own *Ulysses*.) Squirrels have epic powers in this lovely story, which asks us to think more carefully about the world around us. While Ulysses' adventures are framed as a kind of domestic epic, Flora's story presents a lonely young girl blossoming by having someone to nurture: caring for Ulysses sends her on her own coming-of-age adventure, during which she gains a supportive circle of friends and comes to terms with her parents' divorce. Together, humans and animals can make a powerful team. (Noticeably, Flora is named after the Roman nature god, Flora, a figure of spring, growth, rebirth, and plant life. Her name hints at her nurturing qualities.)

Given the association of classical literature with high erudition, sweeping narratives, deep thought – all the things that seem very *adult* – very human rather than animal – proceeding from the rational, intellectual, and manufactured, rather than the instinctual and natural, what we see in both of these stories is writers bringing together different sides of the equation, shaking up our ideas about where we stand in relation to animals, and acknowledging that we have much to learn from the natural world. Which may be one reason why children's literature is full of animal stories that teach all sorts of messages – about wildness, character, and self-control; about individuality and about relationships. And they find overlap in classical myths, such as the ones in which animals care for humans when no one else will – the she-wolf who raised the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, or the bear who raised Atalanta,<sup>6</sup> the princess of Calydon – and transfer some of their wild fierceness to them in the process.

### Canine Companions

*The various myths featuring dogs explore the bonds of loyalty between pets and human masters, as well as the interplay between canine ferocity and gentleness.*

**Three-headed Cerberus**, who guards the entrance to Hades, figures prominently in stories about the Underworld. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) features an incarnation of Cerberus – Hagrid's three-headed puppy, Fluffy.

**Odysseus' loyal dog Argos**, who patiently waits for the return of his master. Ralph Hardy retells the events of the *Odyssey* from his perspective in *Argos: The Story of Odysseus as Told by His Loyal Dog* (2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 3.9.2.

**Actaeon's hounds**, who hunt him down in a case of mistaken identity. In Diana Wynne Jones's *The Game* (2007), Hayley is enchanted with the playful puppies who will grow up to destroy their master.

**Sirius**, who was placed alongside his master Orion amongst the stars. Diana Wynne Jones's *Dogsbody* (1975) tells the story of the star being sentenced to return to earth in the form of a puppy.

**Laelaps**, a dog who always caught his prey. The story is retold in Shoo Rayner's *Deadly Target* (2011).

## The Power of Atalanta – Raised by Beasts, and Challenging the Rules

The champion runner, Atalanta, is an unusually powerful girl and woman, an excellent huntress, and determined not to marry. Retellings of her story suggest that she is “half-wild”, as Vashti Farrer posits in *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World* (ill. Naomi Lewis; 2004). As she grows, that wildness turns into a fierceness – she is a powerful markswoman, shooting wild centaurs who try to attack her, and ridding the country of the monstrous Calydonian boar. Atalanta's fierceness protects those around her, at least those who do not come too close. Where does that wildness come from? Like so many figures of classical mythology, Atalanta is strongly individual, singular even. It may be that her story makes her a human version of the goddess Artemis, and yet many of her attributes connect her to the natural world. The famous story of her marriage draws on other animal attributes, namely, fleetness of foot and fierceness. Refusing to accept a suitor who cannot beat her in a race,<sup>7</sup> the athletic Atalanta is finally only bested by trickery, in the form of the golden apples, given to Hippomenes by the goddess Aphrodite. Normally Atalanta would shoot the suitors she beat – quickly and mercifully, say Priscilla Galloway and Normand Cousineau, in their *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World* (1995) – but the golden apples distract her and slow her down: she agrees to marry Hippomenes, despite his trickery. In some versions of the myth, Aphrodite, angry that the couple fails to worship her, turns them into lions, as befits their fierceness in human form.

Atalanta pushes against the normal rules for women, expressed most clearly in her reluctance to marry, and her love of the hunt and of nature. Children's

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<sup>7</sup> For the race of Atalanta, see Apollodorus, *Library* 3.9.2.

stories about her show the tension between her own desires to be out and about and active, and social pressure to stay at home weaving, and to be domestic and nurturing. Hers is a useful story for writers wanting to show different options available to girls (see “G is for Girls and Boys”). It is not a coincidence that several stories emphasize her running abilities (for example, the repeated titles which call her “The Fastest Runner in the World”). Atalanta does not play by normal rules: Galloway in particular shows her pushing against the expectations for women – she does not wish to marry, or stay at home weaving, but loves the thrill of the hunt, and to be out in nature. She is caught between two impulses – hunting and home-life, between the wild and the tame, between fierceness and nurturing. Atalanta’s association with wild beasts – large, fierce, and dangerous – shows one way of thinking about animals: viewing them as wild, and as other. It is a kind of projection, and a kind of essentialism, whereby certain animal and human attributes overlap, for purposes of storytelling, moralizing, and also thinking about the world.

In the contexts of children’s adaptations of the myths, when we talk about beasts, then, we talk about human interactions with them. And animals are chosen deliberately to highlight particular qualities and elements. Bears, wolves, squirrels: all have qualities that transfer to humans, or offset against them, showing that human ideas about the animal kingdom, and our own morality, are inseparable, at least in our own minds.

### Aesop’s Fables

*This collection of familiar fables features a cast of talking animals, including dogs, rabbits, wolves, lions, foxes, donkeys and various insects. Their experiences teach important lessons about wisdom, courage, and fairness, and highlight the foolishness of greed, laziness, and poor judgement. Retold in myriad forms across the world, for their didactic and appealing aspects alike.*

#### **Retelling – Aesop’s Fables, ill. Manuela Adreani (2017)**

Illustrated with Adreani’s surreal, dreamy paintings, this collection includes twenty of Aesop’s well-known fables, concluding with gentle moral messages.

#### **Revision – Toni and Slade Morrison, *Who’s Got Game?* trilogy, ill. Pascal Lemaitre (2003; *The Ant or the Grasshopper?*, *The Lion or the Mouse?*, and *Poppy or the Snake?*)**

Drawing on the language of rap music, and referencing American folk tales and contemporary pop culture, these three comic books challenge and upend the traditional morals linked to Aesop’s fables.

**Adaptation – Jon Scieszka, *Squids Will Be Squids: Fresh Morals, Beastly Fables*, ill. Lane Smith (1998)**

This postmodern, parodic picture book expands the cast of animal characters to include obscure creatures such as walruses, slugs, and platypuses, and features contemporary, funny fables that highlight Aesop's enduring cultural influence.

**Allusion – Jęf Czekaj, *Hip & Hop, Don't Stop!* (2010)**

This quirky, clever comic book references Aesop's famous fable of the hare and the tortoise in its story about two rap artist animals, but replaces the maxim that slow and steady wins the race with a conclusion that promotes friendship and diversity.

## Fables

Balancing ideas of our own morality with observations of animal behaviour are the fables. Greek fables, originally gathered and written by Aesop (ca. 650 BCE), are profoundly influential in Western civilization, and in children's literature. Indeed, it may be from the fables (and fables and myths from other First Nations), that the association of children's literature with animal stories gets its impetus. As Edith Hall notes, the Greek fables are adapted for children more than any other myth, legend, or piece of literature from the ancient world, even including the *Odyssey*.<sup>8</sup> Hall sees the continual replication of the fables, particularly the animal fables, as teaching children lessons about power and negotiation – that life, like nature, involves moments of cruelty, of engagement with beings of different levels of power and ingenuity, and offers advice and ways to cope with this fundamental imbalance.<sup>9</sup> Far from being cute and sentimental, the animal stories offer useful ways to consider the major challenges of life.

Most of the fables commonly retold for young readers feature anthropomorphized animal characters, who face simple moral dilemmas or learn a lesson. A lion is persuaded to spare the life of a mouse he has caught; the tiny creature repays the debt by gnawing through the ropes when the lion is captured in a net.<sup>10</sup> What does this mean? That even the largest and fiercest may need help from the smallest among us? Another reciprocal story involves a mouse,

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<sup>8</sup> Edith Hall, "Our Fabled Childhood: Reflections on the Unsuitability of Aesop to Children", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 171–182.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 177.

<sup>10</sup> "The Lion and the Mouse" (Perry 150).

who enjoys a sophisticated life in the city, visiting his rural cousin.<sup>11</sup> He is rude about the simplicity of life in the country, but when he shows off the city in return, they are assailed with dangers and the country mouse flees back to the safety of home. Each to their own, might be the message. The race between the Tortoise and the Hare,<sup>12</sup> in which a “slow but steady” tortoise wins a race against a fast but erratic hare, draws on the characteristics of both animals to make a point about how we do tasks, and how we judge one another. In “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”,<sup>13</sup> a naughty shepherd-boy pranks his village by pretending that wolves are harassing his flock. When wolves really do come, the villagers are so fed up that they do not come to his aid until his sheep are all killed. The moral, “Liars will never be believed, even when they speak the truth”, applies to human behaviour – animals tend not to be deceitful for the mere pleasure of it. Wolves, symbolic of all that is dangerous, merely act as wolves do, and the poor sheep, all that is gentle and in need of protection, lose their lives because of the boy’s foolishness.

Perhaps their bluntness and openness to the harder lessons of life, coupled with their “softer” representation through animals, mean that Aesop’s fables have travelled far around the world from Europe. They became popular in Japan, crossed over with African myth, found expression in American myth as well. One can find parallels in other Indigenous myths around the world, suggesting that the fables engage with some kind of core or essential set of problems to be figured out by humans more generally.<sup>14</sup> This approach is popular in recent retellings of the fables, many of which do not modify their texts greatly, but use many different styles of illustration to draw out interpretations. In his illustrated collection of *Aesop’s Fables* (1990), Rodney McRae uses artistic styles from around the world (from the Lascaux Caves to Javanese woodblocks) to capture the emphasis of the different fables. Maggie Rudy’s picture book *City Mouse, Country Mouse* (2017) sets hand-made felt mice against elaborate backgrounds made of found objects, creating a mouse-eye view of the worlds in which they live; her plot, which shows the mouse friends deciding to live together in a small town halfway between the city and the country, is one of few interpretations that

<sup>11</sup> “The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse” (Perry 352).

<sup>12</sup> “The Tortoise and the Hare” (Perry 226).

<sup>13</sup> “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” (Perry 210).

<sup>14</sup> See Hall, “Our Fabled Childhood”, as well as Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi, “Aesop’s Fables in Japanese Literature for Children: Classical Antiquity and Japan”, and David Movrin, “Aemulating Aesopus: Slovenian Fables and Fblers between Tradition and Innovation”, both in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, “Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity” 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, respectively on pp. 189–200 and 208–220.

resolve the difference between city and country, and suggest compromise. Jess Stockham’s *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* (2012) retells the story using “lift-the-flap” technology which shows the mice coping with unexpected aspects of town and country life. Manuela Adreani takes a soulful approach, in her large-scale picture book *Aesop’s Fables* (2017) with surrealistic illustrations that highlight the emotional aspects of the fables: in “The Wolves and the Sheep”, in which a group of wolves trick sheep to dismiss their guard dogs, then kill the “undefended flock”, six white sheep pick their way across a sloping brown hill – which turns out to be the back of a crouching dog, meant to protect the sheep: the wolves try to persuade them to leave the comparative safety of this dog, whose own menace is implicit in its narrowed eyes, pricked ears, and sharp claws.<sup>15</sup> Ray Ching’s *Aesop’s Kiwi Fables* (2012) modifies the fables for a New Zealand setting, recasting some of the stories with local wildlife. “The Hare and the Tortoise” becomes “The Old Tuatara and the Possum”, and a fable in which the very old native lizard, the Tuatara, beats a cheeky foreign interloper, the Possum, in the proverbial race. “The race is not always to the swift”, is the moral, but additional morals in Ching’s work involve warnings about ecological pests and about the need to respect the elderly and disabled. Visual interpretations add a great deal of meaning to the fables, highlighting the animals’ traits and characteristics.

**Archetypal Animals in Aesop**

*Animals are endowed with particular characteristics in many of the fables.*

Animal	Character
Lion	Noble and proud, but not invincible (as in “The Lion and the Gnat”, Perry 255)
Fox	Cunning and intelligent, yet sometimes susceptible to the tricks of others (as in “The Fox and the Stork”, Perry 426)
Wolf	A violent predator with an insatiable appetite (as in “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing”, Perry 451)
Dog	Loyal and steadfast, sometimes gullible (as in “The Dog and His Reflection”, Perry 133)
Crow	Clever, but vulnerable to flattery (as in “The Fox and the Crow”, Perry 124)
Mouse	Heroic in spite of diminutive size (as in “The Lion and the Mouse”, Perry 150)
Lamb	Innocent and truthful (as in “The Wolf and the Lamb”, Perry 155)
Stag	Regal but vain (as in “The Stag and His Reflection”, Perry 74)
Ass	Stubborn and dumb (as in “The Ass and His Driver”, Perry 186)
Hare	Fast yet lazy (as in “The Hare and the Tortoise”, Perry 226)

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<sup>15</sup> *Aesop’s Fables*, ill. Manuela Adreani, trans. Tper Tradurre, Milan: White Star Kids, 2017, 14.

## Brutality and Anthropomorphism

The fables, and their retellings, are as much about human behaviour as they are about the natural world. They lend themselves well to anthropomorphism, whereby animals are represented as taking on human characteristics: wearing clothes, living in houses, cooking dinner, playing musical instruments. Lou Kuenzler's lively rhyming version of *The Grasshopper and the Ants* (ill. Jill Newton; 2011) presents the grasshopper as a dreamy hippie, and the ants as efficient business-types, who are eventually persuaded to accept his guitar-playing as a trade for food and shelter. Kevin O'Malley's version of "The Hare and the Tortoise", *The Great Race* (2011), recasts the story as a grudge-match between a brash and boastful hare (Lever Lapin) and a grumpy introvert, Nate Tortoise, who spend time hosting lavish parties in nice restaurants (Lever), or quietly reading newspapers in cafes (Nate). The story builds up to a groan-inducing punchline in the animals' local paper: "Better Nate than Lever". Toni and Slade Morrison's *Who's Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (ill. Pascal Lemaître; 2003) casts the battle between the lazy grasshopper and the hardworking ants as a friendly tussle between indolent artist "Foxy G" and his hard-working buddy "Kid A", using rap stylings to dramatize their contest. Jon Scieszka's *Squids Will Be Squids: Fresh Morals, Beastly Fables* (ill. Lane Smith; 1998) satirizes the whole genre of fables, and their intended moral purpose, and makes clear that the animals are merely stand-ins for people:

This book, *Squids Will Be Squids*, is a collection of fables that Aesop might have told if he were alive today and sitting in the back of class daydreaming and goofing around instead of paying attention and correcting his homework like he was supposed to... These are beastly fables with fresh morals about all kinds of bossy, sneaky, funny, annoying, dim-bulb people. But nobody I know personally.<sup>16</sup>

Scieszka captures the bluntness of Aesop's fables, updating them to a modern world. The title story, "Squids Will Be Squids", for instance, shows a group of friends in conflict: three of them (Deer, Rabbit, and Mouse) want to do fun activities, while Squid sullenly refuses to take part in them all, oozing off home while her friends go shopping and play frisbee. The moral of this story – "Squids

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<sup>16</sup> Jon Scieszka, *Squids Will Be Squids: Fresh Morals, Beastly Fables*, ill. Lane Smith, London: Penguin, 1998, 2.

will be squids” – encapsulates the problem of getting others to go against their nature: a tussle of wills ends in a stalemate.

As Edith Hall notes, Aesop’s fables are about power, will, and nature. She argues that many of the fables represent the idea of absolute laws of nature, such as *force majeure*, in which larger, more powerful animals beat smaller, weaker ones.<sup>17</sup> But others show that smaller creatures can use their wits to argue their way out of tricky situations. And others still suggest ways to manage one’s resources (that is, by not giving in to greed, as in “The Fox and the Grapes”<sup>18</sup>). Furthermore, the fables are not always consistent – in one, a lion may be strong and brave, in another it may be cowardly. In some, animals behave like animals, and in others, we recognize human behaviour (greed, or gullibility). Similarly in children’s stories, some animals are better than humans, and vice versa: we can learn from animals, but we can also recognize our difference from them. One theory as to why so many children’s stories feature animals is that they represent a stage in development whereby children begin separating themselves from the animal world, not just by acquiring human language, but by becoming acculturated into human society.

## **How Animals Help Us Think about Rules**

Beyond the fables are a host of didactic stories featuring animals, such as Rosemary Wells’s humorously didactic “Max & Ruby” picture book series about a pair of young rabbits, rambunctious little brother Max and bossy older sister Ruby. Neither is fully socialized, but in their interactions we can see them testing boundaries and learning about rules. In *Max and Ruby’s First Greek Myth: Pandora’s Box* (1993), Ruby tries to teach Max to respect other people’s possessions, by telling him the story of Pandora, a story about “sneaking and peeking”. In *Max and Ruby’s Midas: Another Greek Myth* (1995), she tries to teach him to eat more healthily, by telling the story of a King Midas who turns everything he touches into desserts. These charming stories apply rabbit life to the world of the Greek myths, and in their illustrations, we see rabbits cavorting in ancient armour, or striking famous poses, such as the Discobolos and the Athena Parthenos.

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<sup>17</sup> Hall, “Our Fabled Childhood”, 176.

<sup>18</sup> “The Fox and the Grapes” (Perry 15).

Gary Northfield's comedy-epic series of illustrated novels, "Julius Zebra" (2015–present), pits animals against humans in a story that challenges the power structure of the Roman Empire. In them, a dreamy zebra named Julius is abducted from his home in Africa and taken to Rome to entertain the emperor Hadrian. As his stories unfold, Julius finds himself and his friends (also African animals) combating the emperor – in Rome, in Britain, in Egypt, and in Greece. Julius becomes a kind of Spartacus-figure, standing up for the rights of animals, enslaved throughout the Roman world: and the battles between his team and the emperor provide very funny explorations of what it means to challenge authority, and to come into his own as a brave, even heroic figure. And yet at the same time, the animals are enjoyably *basic* in their needs and wants, being smelly, greedy, lazy, cowardly, and grubby. In contrast, the over-sophisticated greed of Hadrian and his imperial cohorts reveals humanity as the true villains of the piece. This series subverts the idea of colonialism, showing the animals pushing back against their Roman overlords.

It may also be that writing about animals makes us think differently about what it means to be human, as allegorical work such as Matt Ottley's *Requiem for a Beast: A Work for Image, Word and Music* (2007) communicates. This multimedia text (picture book, graphic novel, music composition) meditates on the myth of the Minotaur in the context of the treatment of the Australian Aborigines at the hands of European settlers. The protagonist, a young stockman (cowboy), rounding up cattle during an annual muster, faces off against a magnificent bull that has evaded capture, and finds himself having to kill the beast when it slips and falls. It is a mercy killing of a kind, but it forces the boy to think about what has brought him to this point, and his story, told through layers of memories, involves generations of harm done to the Aborigines and to the land by new settlers. Who is the "beast" of this story? That is the main question, and the answers are multiple – the settlers who took over the land and dispossessed its First Nations, their descendants who carried on their work, and became bestial themselves through their actions. Ottley shows this kind of bestiality in the representation of the Minotaur and of the centaur – creatures who are human–animal hybrids, of a painful and troubling kind, showing the consequences of breaking the boundaries of decent behaviour. Most children's literature does not challenge the status quo so directly – and indeed, Ottley's work is hybrid itself, being a picture book intended for young adults and adults, rather than for children. But in its darkness, it exposes the important question – what does it mean to be human, and where do the boundaries lie? Certainly, the animals of this book behave with far more sensitivity and insight than do the humans.

Children's stories about animals are as much about what it means to be human as they are about the natural world. And while some proffer a division between humans and animals, others see that the boundaries can be blurred, for good reasons. When we read these stories, it is worth keeping in mind that we can learn a great deal from observing animals, and from understanding our own behaviour as part of the natural world ourselves. In "N is for Nature", we discuss this idea further: the myths and children's representations of those myths ask us to think about our role in nature – as part of nature, ourselves, and our obligations to the natural world.

### **Further Reading on Animals in Children's Literature and Beyond**

Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.

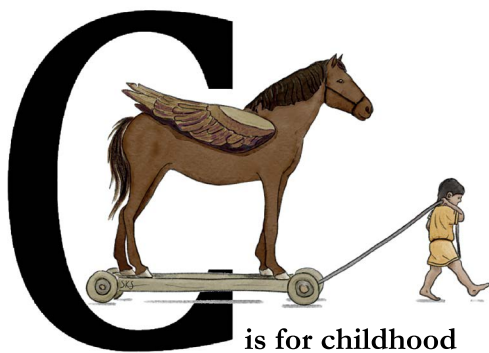
Amy Ratelle, *Animality in Children's Literature and Film*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Tess Cosslett, *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction, 1786–1914*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016.

C



is for childhood



It sometimes seems, when we consider children's literature, that the concept of childhood itself is a kind of myth: an idealized vision of protected innocence, and yet a place in which danger lurks and adventures can happen even to the most carefully guarded child.

Childhood as a literary concept tells us more about what adults (and society) think childhood should be, than what it actually is. It taps into a set of ideas that view children as mysterious and wonderful beings – closer to nature (as we have seen in “B is for Beasts”, and will see in “N is for Nature”), closer to the spiritual realm (in many traditions being freshly arrived on Earth from other dimensions, such as Heaven), or simply undergoing a time of intense growth and development. Ideally, children are protected and educated in this time, and given space to be free of the demands of the adult world. Ideally, too, they will not have to worry about their security, food, or living conditions. Ideally, they will have time to read or to hear stories, and they will have time to learn a little more about the world before they enter it as adults. But even in stories that show the problems and challenges of life (see “D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects”), we find a pervasive sense that children are important and valuable, and that they can make a difference in the world.

## The Case of Portly Otter

One summer evening in England, a baby otter named Portly goes missing on the river Thames. His father's friends Ratty and Mole go out on the river to try to find him. They discover Portly fast asleep on an island, curled up at the feet of the god Pan, who is playing his pipes to the little creature. Overcome by awe at the god's majesty, Ratty and Mole join in a chorus of nature worship. Although in the morning they do not remember what has happened, the animals are still filled with a sense of mysterious joy. These events occur in Kenneth Grahame's novel for children, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), in a chapter called “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn” (see also “N is for Nature”). It is a curious interlude in a novel better known for frenetic activity and comic adventures. However, it plays an important thematic role, crystallizing a sense that the divine exists in nature, and that it protects the animals of the story, especially the youngest ones. Portly especially, being a very young animal,

is a bundle of senses and instincts, associated closely with nature and also with the divine.

In much literature for and about young people, children and animals are represented as closely connected, and also connected strongly with the symbolic elements of the natural world. In their newness to the world, their innocence and vulnerability, they are separate from the bustle of adult society. They live in a different kind of time: a “mythic” time, suggests Maria Nikolajeva, which contrasts with the “linear” time of grown-ups.<sup>1</sup> Where the adult world is concerned with progress and watches time march by, the world of the child exists in the moment, and in the world of the imagination. And while they are generally considered more open to fantasy and make-believe than adults, the children of literature also have an instinctual directness that contrasts with the complicated (over-complicated?) qualities of grown-up life. All this connects with the way children are viewed as having an affinity with the world of myth: novelist Rosemary Sutcliff observes that the “young have a strong feeling for the primitive and fundamental things of life”.<sup>2</sup> Myths are powerfully fundamental, and their connection with children can be strong and immediate – especially as retold in works for young readers.

In “B is for Beasts” and “N is for Nature” we discuss how children are often associated with animals and with nature. The association with mythology and the spiritual realm is another element of their representation in literature and philosophy. Contemporary ideas about childhood are influenced by Romantic-era conceptions of childhood as an especially important time in humans’ development, with a kind of spiritual glow about it (which gradually fades as we enter adulthood). Childhood is a kind of Golden Age, and many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers of children’s literature draw on that idea, as can be seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), regarded as the first English-language retellings of classical myths for children. In the “Paradise of Children”, which retells the story of Pandora, Hawthorne associates the myths themselves with the “tender infancy”<sup>3</sup> of the world, describing the Golden Age of a world without sorrows,

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children’s Literature*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Sutcliff, “History and Time”, in Fiona M. Collins and Judith Graham, eds., *Historical Fiction for Children: Capturing the Past*, London: David Fulton, 2001, 112.

<sup>3</sup> Hawthorne, *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, 78.

quarrels, or pain, where food and flowers grow in abundance, and time itself stands still, for “everybody was a child”.<sup>4</sup>

Pandora flung open the windows and doors to try and get rid of them and, sure enough, away flew the winged Troubles and so pestered and tormented the people everywhere about that none of them so much as smiled for many days afterward. And the children of the earth, who before had seemed ageless, now grew older, day by day, and came soon to be youths and maidens, and men and women, and then old folks, before they dreamed of such a thing.<sup>5</sup>

For Hawthorne, the age of eternal childhood is brought to a close by the Pandora story – in opening the box and releasing into the world the Troubles (embodied as a swarm of stinging insects), Pandora (and through her Zeus) ushers in our own reality, where childhood is temporary, a short spell before a longer adult existence.

This change, we might argue, means that childhood is even more precious than before, and one mark of its preciousness is the way that children in stories are connected to the worlds of myth and the imagination. If we consider how many children’s writers, from Hawthorne to the present, show child characters able to cope with the mythical in a way that the adults in their lives cannot (having left the age of the imagination), we see how influential this idea is. Edwardian-era writers, such as J.M. Barrie and Frances Hodgson Burnett, for example, show children able to understand and participate in classically inflected magic. Barrie’s creation, Peter Pan, unites the spiritual energy of youth with that of the mythological: a boy who will never grow up, and who has much of the god Pan’s mischief and magic about him. In Hodgson Burnett’s influential novel *The Secret Garden* (1911), an unhappy orphan named Mary becomes friends with Dickon, a boy who embodies the spirit of Pan-like nature, and finds herself growing more youthful by association with him. Robert Louis Stevenson’s essay “Pan’s Pipes”, published in his collection *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881), sees in Pan the expression of wild and natural impulses, and so closer to the untrained qualities of childhood:

To reckon dangers too curiously... to hold back the hand from the rose because of the thorn, and from life because of death: this it is to be afraid

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 94.

of Pan. Highly respectable citizens who flee life's pleasures and responsibilities and keep, with upright hat, upon the midway of custom, avoiding the right hand and the left, the ecstasies and the agonies, how surprised they would be if they could hear their attitude mythologically expressed, and knew themselves as tooth-chattering ones, who flee from Nature because they fear the hand of Nature's God!<sup>6</sup>

The joys of childhood, expressed as freedom from care, and freedom from the constraints of society (social rules, industrialization, work), find voice in these works, and in children's literature in general. It is both an idealistic and empowering vision of this stage of life: ideally, children should be protected and carefree, and their ways of understanding the world empowered and reinforced. So many seminal works of children's literature connect childhood with an idealized classical mythology that we might think the two are inevitably linked. Certainly, children's openness to fantasy and the imagination is part of this. In more recent retellings of myths, such as Saviour Pirotta's *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths* (ill. Jan Lewis; 2003), wise and open-hearted child characters are contrasted with sceptical adults. Here is their myth of Bellerophon:

"Pegasus – what's that?" asked one man.

"A flying horse!" said another. "Are you mad?"

But a small boy told him, "Every night when the moon is shining brightly, Pegasus lands to drink from a spring in the hills."

"It's true!" said a small girl. "He stays on the ground for a few seconds, then he's back up in the air, flapping his enormous wings."

While adults deny the existence of myth (in a theme common in a great many children's fantasy novels), children know exactly what Pegasus is, and what he does. This is what Marina Warner describes as "children's intimate connection, above all, to a wonderful, free floating world of the imagination",<sup>8</sup> what Lilia Melani notes is children's ability to believe "in the infinite possibilities and fulfilments of life".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, "Pan's Pipes", in Robert Louis Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers*, London: C. Kegan Paul and Co, 1881, 285.

<sup>7</sup> Saviour Pirotta, *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*, ill. Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2003, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Marina Warner, *Six Myths of Our Time: Managing Monsters*, London: Vintage, 1994, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Lilia Melani, "A Child's Psyche: Recollections of Fairy Tales, Myths and Romances", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 3.1 (1979), 14.

## Pandora

*The gods create the first woman, Pandora, and give her to mankind. Though told not to open a forbidden box, she is curious and cannot resist the temptation. Trouble is released into the world, but Hope remains behind. This story's morality connects strongly with ideas about self-control and curiosity, and is retold, adapted, and revisioned in many forms.*

### **Retelling – Robert Burleigh, *Pandora*, ill. Raul Colón (2002)**

This allusive picture book recounts the myth of Pandora in a combination of prose and verse, accompanied by Raul Colón's textured sketches.

### **Revision – Kate McMullan, *Keep a Lid on It, Pandora!* (2011)**

This chapter book for older children claims to tell the real version of the myth, and charges Zeus, not Pandora, with the blame for the release of evil into the world.

### **Adaptation – Rosemary Wells, *Max and Ruby's First Greek Myth: Pandora's Box* (1993)**

Bossy big sister Ruby rabbit tells her wayward little brother, Max, the story of Pandora in an attempt to teach him not to go into her room and peek in her jewellery box.

### **Allusion – Dub Leffler, *Once There Was a Boy* (2011)**

This allusive picture book about a young Indigenous boy living on a tropical island that is visited by a white girl explores the theme of reconciliation within a postcolonial setting. The book contains multiple intertextual allusions, including to the myth of Pandora, alongside fairy-tale narratives, including Goldilocks and Bluebeard, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the biblical story of Adam and Eve.



## Influenced by Hawthorne II

*Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence on recent retellings is profound, though not often acknowledged directly. He can be credited with placing emphasis on children and childish characters, and the use of an internal narrator and frame narrative to link the collection of myths.*

Kathryn Hewitt, in *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1987), parodies Hawthorne on the book's dedication page, implying he is aghast at what has happened to his story. Hawthorne is responsible for the invention of Marygold, a daughter for King Midas, an addition that has been so pervasive in contemporary versions of the myth that it is easy to forget that there is no ancient source for her.

Sally Grindley and Niles Mistry's *Pandora and the Mystery Box* (2000) presents the contents of Pandora's Box as a swarm of stinging insects.

Saviour Pirotta and Jan Lewis's *First Greek Myths: Pegasus the Flying Horse* (2008) follows Hawthorne in celebrating the special connection that children have to the world of myth, in contrast to adults.

Laura Geringer and Leonid Gore's picture book *The Pomegranate Seeds: A Classic Greek Myth* (1995) follows Hawthorne's version closely, but updates the relationship between a headstrong teenage Persephone and an overworked, single-mother Demeter.

## Colonized Childhood?

Since most children's literature is written by adults, the picture of childhood is shaped by their observations and theories about what this stage of life is, and means. Which may explain why so many representations are tinged with a sense of nostalgia (adult writers look back fondly upon their own childhood) or yearning (adult writers think about what they wish their own childhoods might have been or wish to escape adulthood for a while), or even a sense of didacticism (what childhood *should* be, but is not). Some scholars see the irony that literature for young people is not produced by young people as indicating the "colonized" or controlled aspects of childhood: Perry Nodelman, for instance, asks what it means that children's books are so permeated by a sense of nostalgia (are they encouraged to be nostalgic for a period of life that they are still in the middle of living?), and that there exists a kind of "hidden adult" in children's books – directing, explaining, teaching, colonizing.<sup>10</sup> Roberta Seelinger Trites suggests that literature for young adults goes further: directing young people how to feel, and be, and expect to be, in order to fit in to adult society – instead of empowering children (and therefore future adults) to be themselves, they are indoctrinated into a desire to fit in.<sup>11</sup> Such paradoxes and tensions mark a field of literature that as well as entertaining and encouraging exploration, also has responsibilities to be educational for young readers – to tell them stories that are true, or good, or healthy, to balance interpretation with factual accuracy, to appeal to child readers of many ages, and also to encourage them to learn and grow. This can mean helping them shape their future selves, suggesting pathways to follow, and giving them the tools to make their own way into adulthood.

Furthermore, not all childhoods are happy or comfortable, and not all children have equal access to literature that reflects their experiences or outlooks, or offers them a way into other worlds. Children's literature is changing, however:

<sup>10</sup> See Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Children's Literature*, Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2007.

great strides have been made in providing stories that give children entry into literacy. Just like children, children's literature is not static, and it changes and develops. While the concept of childhood as a protected space (one in which children are free from onerous responsibilities, such as earning a living, or caring for adults) is an ideal rather than a reality for all children, it is nevertheless important in children's literature, which provides scope for thinking about what life looks like, and how to find one's path in the world. Indeed, child protagonists in children's stories spend a great deal of time facing significant challenges, be they mythical or "real" – facing trials, fighting for survival, overcoming loneliness or bullying, working out how to get along with family and friends, and figuring out one's place in the world. Whether their stories take them into fantastic realms, or are set in the world of mythology, or simply take place on a suburban street, children are valuable protagonists and valued readers.

*Diana: Princess of the Amazons* (2020), by Shannon and Dean Hale and Victoria Ying, illustrates this point gently in a story about the childhood of Wonder Woman. The only child on the island of Themiscyra, Diana feels lonely and lacks a specific role. Her Amazon mother, Queen Hippolyta, is too busy planning strategy to spend much time with her, and life seems full of lessons and responsibilities. When Diana makes herself a friend out of some clay, the sorceress Circe takes over the creature and becomes a naughty best friend, getting Diana into trouble that threatens the island. With Circe's encouragement, Diana opens the gateway to the Underworld, releasing fierce monsters onto the island. Realizing the error of her ways, Diana helps her mother and Amazon aunties to push the creatures back into the Underworld, and banishes Circe again. The story concludes as Diana reaches a closer understanding with her mother.

Diana: [Circe] never could have tricked you like she did me.

Hippolyta: Oh she's fooled me before. Over the years, she's fooled the best of us. Diana, you are the best of us.

Diana: Maybe when I was little...

Hippolyta: No. Now. Right now.

Diana: I... I don't feel like that. Not anymore.

Hippolyta: Then that's my fault. I got busy and forgot to show you how precious you are to me. Every day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Shannon Hale and Dean Hale, *Diana: Princess of the Amazons*, ill. Victoria Ying, Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2020, 132.

Diana also takes up a role as the island's first wildlife steward, caring for the animals of Themiscyra, an island home that now seems "not too bad a home for a kid like me".<sup>13</sup> Victoria Ying's sweet illustrations capture the idyllic qualities of Themiscyra – reinforcing the idea that children happily associate with animals and nature.

## Children's Needs

Listening to children's needs is a key requirement for adults in picture books, many of which think through ideas for young readers by showing protagonists achieving goals or understanding. Jessica Love's gentle picture book *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018) features a New York boy who is inspired to dress up as a mermaid in his *abuela's* (grandmother's) curtains. When she discovers what he is doing, instead of chastising him as he fears, she helps him finish his costume, puts on her finest dress herself, and walks proudly with him through the streets to the nearby Coney Island Mermaid Parade. This lovely book reinforces the creativity of children, while making important points about non-traditional family structures, gender expectations, and trans-positivity. And while its setting is firmly urban, Julián's connection with nature can be seen in his trip to the swimming pool, and his enjoyment of the myths of the sea.

Some stories offer the mythical realm as an explicit answer to a child's problems. British author Lucy Coats's "Beasts of Olympus" series (2015–2018), illustrated by David Roberts, features a boy named Demon, a son of the god Pan, who is sent to Mount Olympus to care for the legendary animals of mythology. Under the guidance of Hephaestus, he looks after creatures such as the Nemean Lion, the Stymphalian Birds, the Horses of Diomedes – creatures traditionally killed by the great hero Heracles. But where most retellings are on the side of the heroes, *Beast Keeper* (vol. 1 of the series) sympathizes with the animals, fed up with continually coming under fire from Heracles – and Demon vows to help them. Demon is an anxious child, who works hard to look after the magical animals, and is worried by the way that the heroes treat them. But Coats shows him solving problems with the help of Hephaestus and later of Chiron, suggesting that support can come from beyond the family. Other retellings pair children and animals, such as Kallie George's *Winged Horse Race* (2019), in which an unloved Athenian orphan named Pippa (short for Hippolyta)

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 134.

is elevated to Mount Olympus to take part in a competition to identify Zeus' next flying horse. As she perfects her mid-air horse-riding skills, Pippa learns about friendship with the other jockeys, and also learns about following and breaking rules. Another lonely child, Tim, the protagonist of Stella Tarakson's "Hopeless Heroes" series (2017–2020), travels through time to the world of the ancient myths to help Hercules solve problems – learning different models of masculine behaviour from the gods and heroes. When he returns to his own world, he is able to stand up to the school bully and to accept his mother's new boyfriend into his life. If the ideal for childhood is a period free from concern and responsibility, it is striking how many children's stories show children contending with worries and cares. The narrative structures of a hero's journey or a home-away-home story (see "J is for Journeys") demand that protagonists face and overcome trials, and trials of course are difficulties and challenges (see "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects"). But the essential optimism of literature for young children means that endings are generally happy: child protagonists find a way through their problems. Be they fantasy, realism, or a mixture of the two, their narratives give the promise of hope – of resolution, balance, and comfort.

### For Children, by Children

Unlike other literary genres, which tend to be classified by theme, children's literature is shaped by its intended audience. Yet as Perry Nodelman and others have highlighted, what children are given to read is strictly controlled by adults. Virtually all children's book authors and illustrators are adults, as are the other members of the publishing industry who determine what books will be published. Similarly, parents, teachers, librarians, and bookshop staff all play a part as gatekeepers, guardians, and, at times, censors of what children read.

But there are exceptions, and some very young authors have drawn upon the themes and characters of classical mythology in their early works. New Zealander Ben Spies was only twelve years old when *The World of Greek Mythology* (2018) was published. Spies is the author of several books, supported by his parents, who founded a company, Spies Publishing, to nurture and promote his creative writing talent. UK writer Helen Oyeyemi was seventeen when her debut novel, *The Icarus Girl* (2005), was published. Featuring supernatural themes, the story draws upon Nigerian mythology, gothic elements, and explores a cross-cultural encounter between African and Western traditions. Under the pen name Tobias Druitt, UK mother-and-son duo Diane Purkiss and Michael Dowling wrote the *Corydon* trilogy of fantasy novels (2005–2007), in which a Greek shepherd, Corydon, is ostracized for his unusual appearance and put in a freak show with other mythological monsters. He helps them escape, and then rally to fight off the "heroes" who try to control them.

## Children's Voices

As times move on, ideals of childhood change, and these changes are seen in the literature for children. Old mores, such as the idea that children should be “seen and not heard”, give way to narratives that encourage children to find their own voices, and to stand on their own two feet, and we can see these ideals in operation again and again. Christopher Myers’s picture book *Wings* (2000), for instance, shows two isolated children becoming friends: one, the narrator, is a shy and quiet girl, who admires a vibrant new classmate, a winged boy named Ikarus Jackson. But Ikarus stands out too much for others’ comfort: his wings block the blackboard in class; the kids in the playground make fun of his flying, and call him strange. “I don’t think he’s strange”, says the girl. She finds her voice, telling everyone:

“Stop!” I cried.

“Leave him alone.” And they did.

I told him what someone should have long ago. “Your flying is beautiful.”<sup>14</sup>

Smiling, Ikarus Jackson soars into the sky; the girl points proudly to her friend: “Look at that amazing boy!” This lovely book uses collage for its vibrant illustrations – a black boy soars through the air, his wings aloft, while the girl, outlined in gold, points to the sky. It is a story of mutual empowerment – how helping Ikarus helps the girl find her voice; how being valued for his true self helps Ikarus accept himself. “Are you brave enough to be your true self?” asks the book on its front flap. For Ikarus and the narrator, childhood takes place in a busy urban setting, where children are monitored – by teachers or police – suggesting a frustrating over-protection and control that inhibits creativity rather than giving it a safe space to flourish. And yet, Ikarus Jackson cannot hide his wings, and the girl finds her voice to speak up for him, and also for herself and her own visions of beauty and friendship.

Stories for children present childhood as a place and time in which identity is formed, and in which the self is at its most authentic, but also its most vulnerable. While Ikarus and the girl stay true to themselves – what about the other children? An early image in *Wings* shows Ikarus surrounded by gossiping and cat-calling children – eerily monstrous in shape, with elongated necks and many heads – a kind of bullying Hydra. Myers leaves it to us to decide if these children are being their own “true” selves or are warped by some kind of societal

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Myers, *Wings*, New York, NY: Scholastic, 2000, 37.

Their words sent Ikarus drifting  
into the sky, away  
from the glaring eyes  
and the pointing fingers.  
I waited for them  
to point back at me  
as I watched Ikarus  
float farther and farther away.



**Figure 1:** In *Wings*, Christopher Myers uses the image of Icarus to symbolize the beauty, and also the fragility, of childhood. Christopher Myers, *Wings*, New York, NY: Scholastic, 2000, 18. Used with the Author's kind permission.

expectation. Ikarus' name carries a kind of warning – the punishment that happens when a child flies too high for adults' liking. *Wings* subtly interrogates the idea that children are not responsible for their own actions, but also shows how insidious group mentalities can be. Childhood is not always idyllic, and some children suffer and endure significant problems – even in Neverland there are problems to overcome.

## Big Issues

Handled carefully, children's literature can explore morality and justice and other important ideas, and do so in a way that empowers children to think through issues for themselves. The stories considered in this chapter, and throughout *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey*, take different approaches, but they have at their core a concern for what it means to be a child. To return to *The Wind in the Willows*: Portly Otter wakes from his

dreaming at the feet of Pan, who has faded away leaving Ratty and Mole dazed with the vision of a lost Golden Age:

Portly woke up with a joyous squeak, and wriggled with pleasure at the sight of his father's friends, who had played with him so often in past days. In a moment, however, his face grew blank, and he fell to hunting round in a circle with pleading whine. As a child that has fallen happily asleep in its nurse's arms, and wakes to find itself alone and laid in a strange place, and searches corners and cupboards, and runs from room to room, despair growing silently in its heart, even so Portly searched the island and searched, dogged and unwearying, till at last the black moment came for giving it up and sitting down and crying bitterly.<sup>15</sup>

Portly is crying because he has had the taste of the Golden Age of divine childhood: at a base level he knows he has lost something splendid and that he must return to living in the real world (insofar as the world of *The Wind in the Willows* is real). But children's literature also knows that children have to live in the real world too, and so even the most idyllic or mythical story offers insights into how to learn and grow, how to face challenges, and to find a sense of oneself. If childhood is a preparation for adulthood, then literature needs to find a way both to celebrate its joys, or to offset its discontents, and to give children tools to face the future.

### Myths NOT Often Retold to Children

*Some mythic stories, particularly those in which children are hurt or harmed, are considered unsuitable for young readers, though a small number of books, including Jeanne and William Steig's *A Gift from Zeus* (2001), do not avoid confronting themes such as lust, incest, and homicide.*

- ☞ Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother. The early part of his story, when he successfully solves the riddle of the Sphinx, does feature in some children's collections.
- ☞ The rape of Philomela by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who cuts out her tongue to prevent her from telling her story; her vengeance, with her sister Procne, by killing his son.
- ☞ Medea, the sorceress-princess wife of Jason, who kills her children in revenge for his divorcing her.
- ☞ Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia in order to placate Artemis and gain favourable winds for his ships to head to Troy.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Grahame, *The Annotated Wind in the Willows*, ed. Annie Gauger, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009 (ed. pr. 1908), 179–180.

### Further Reading on Concepts of Childhood

Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Children's Literature*, Iowa City, IA: Iowa University Press, 2007.

Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.



### Some Useful Introductions to the Study of Children's Literature

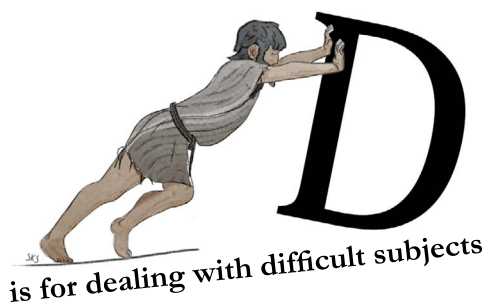
Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella, *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2013.

Karen Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

is for dealing  
with difficult subjects



SKS



"It's sad, but sometimes brothers hate each other. Pelias hated his older brother, Aeson, because Aeson was the King of Thebes. 'I want to be king,' said Pelias, and took the throne from his brother and put him in prison".<sup>1</sup> With this frank admission, Geraldine Mc-

Caughrean introduces the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. Sometimes brothers hate each other. Sometimes they do wicked things, which cause difficulties for other people. Pelias and Aeson of course are not alone in Greek myth for behaving badly. Indeed, the corpus of ancient myth is full of difficulties: battles to be fought, monsters to be overcome, fears to be faced. Some elements, however, are especially confronting, and storytellers have to think hard about what to include, and what to leave out. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates advocates the careful selection and censoring of the stories mothers and nurses tell young listeners, citing the disturbing qualities of some of the myths, such as the treatment of Cronus by his children:

The doings of Cronus, and the sufferings which in turn his son inflicted upon him, even if they were true, ought certainly not to be lightly told to young and thoughtless persons; if possible, they had better be buried in silence. But if there is an absolute necessity for their mention, a chosen few might hear them in a mystery, and they should sacrifice not a common (Eleusian) pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim; and then the number of the hearers will be very few indeed.

Why, yes, said he, those stories are extremely objectionable.

Yes, Adeimantus, they are stories not to be repeated in our State; the young man should not be told that in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that even if he chastises his father when he does wrong, in whatever manner, he will only be following the example of the first and greatest among the gods.<sup>2</sup>

Myths, like fairy tales and folk tales, are problematic, and the debate about their suitability is a perennial. Maria Nikolajeva makes the point that "most oral

<sup>1</sup> Geraldine McCaughrean, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, London: Orchard Books, 2015 (ed. pr. 1991), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic* 2.378, in Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888, 60, via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/a604578400platuoft/page/n303/mode/2up> (accessed 22 December 2021).

folktales are not suitable for children because they often contain violence and child abuse".<sup>3</sup>

But life often contains violence, and horrible things happen in the world all the time. Childhood, ideally a protected space, is just as vulnerable to difficulties as adulthood. And the myths and legends confront many difficulties, and are readily retold for young audiences. To repeat Rosemary Sutcliff's comment that we quoted in "C is for Childhood", "the young have a strong feeling for the primitive and fundamental things of life. That is why myths and legends certainly not meant for children in the first place have been largely taken over by them".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in our own time, children have become one of the primary audiences, if not *the* primary audience for classical mythology. How retellers and adapters of classical mythology work with difficult issues – both within the stories, and using the stories to help think about problems – is thus a pressing issue.

Depending on the target audience, some myths are avoided or particular elements suppressed or sanitized. Works for children (that is, up to about the age of twelve) tend not to retell the more tragic and violent stories: there are almost no picture books about Philomela and Procne, for instance, and very few works mention the infanticides of Medea and Hercules, for obvious reasons. Retellings of the *Iliad* are a case in point, glossing over violence and warfare, and displaying some discomfort over the sexual politics at the heart of the war.

Let us take as an example the popular anthology *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths* (ill. Jan Lewis; 2003) by the British author Saviour Pirotta. Aimed at readers aged five to eight, it features light-hearted storytelling, appealing illustrations, and simple moral messages. There is no reference to sex, and love is presented in matter-of-fact terms. Helen "should have been happy and content" with her comfortable life with Menelaus, but "she fell in love with handsome Paris", says Pirotta, somewhat glossing over the subtleties behind the Trojan War.<sup>5</sup> Jan Lewis's illustrations deliberately lighten the atmosphere, showing Helen and Paris gazing into one another's eyes, a small blue cartoon heart beating between them; and as in many children's versions, Pirotta and Lewis focus on the appealing toylike wooden horse as a device to show the Greeks taking the city of Troy without harming anyone. Their Trojan enemies are drunk and fast asleep, and as Odysseus and his companions tiptoe through the streets to open the gates to the rest of the army, the biggest threat they

<sup>3</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic*, New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 1996, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Sutcliff, "History and Time", 112.

<sup>5</sup> Pirotta, *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*, 44.



**Figure 2:** Anna Gkoutzouri offers a delicate take on poor Iphigenia's fate. Anna Gkoutzouri, *Trojan Horse*, Amersham: Papadopoulos Publishing, 2020, 1b. Used with the Author's and Publisher's kind permission.

encounter comes from a dog eating the leftovers of the feast. After a decade of fighting, the Greek victory is a bloodless affair accomplished in three short sentences: "Slowly, the great gates of Troy swung open. Thousands of Greek soldiers poured into the city. They had captured Troy at last".<sup>6</sup> Presumably, a book of "first Greek myths" tries not to frighten or otherwise put off young readers, and Lewis's illustrations emphasize a world in which monsters can be cuddly rather than threatening, and good and bad characters are easily distinguished (though in what might unconsciously draw on racist stereotypes, good characters have fair, open countenances; villains have scowling eyebrows and heavy beards).

Sometimes a difficult issue involves the behaviour of heroes. Geraldine McCaughrean's *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths* (ill. Emma Chichester Clark; 1991), aimed at older children (that is, aged eight to twelve), still presents an appealing mythical world, with a bright Mediterranean palette and friendly-looking characters. But McCaughrean is less likely to gloss over the problematic behaviour of the heroes. She explains how Heracles killed his family while drunk on wine<sup>7</sup> and shows some of Medea's viciousness in action (poisoning Pelias<sup>8</sup>). Her Theseus, for instance, shows his calculating side, abandoning Ariadne, whose looks he does not fancy, and in his hurry to get away forgetting to change the black sails of his ship to white ones. Theseus' selfishness causes his father's death, of course:

King Aegeus, watching day after day from the cliff below Athens, saw the ship as it hove into view. He saw the black sail full of wind. And in that moment, he believed that his son Theseus had been killed and eaten by the Minotaur. He threw himself off the high white cliff into the water below. And ever afterwards the sea was called the Aegean Sea, after the father of that ungrateful hero, Theseus.<sup>9</sup>

McCaughrean does not shy away from the troubling aspects of the myths, especially the background of family tragedy against which many of the myths are set. Interestingly, she allows herself to comment on Theseus' character – his ingratitude and selfishness.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Euripides, *Heracles* 967–1015; Apollodorus, *Library* 2.4.12; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4.11.1–2.

<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.297–349.

<sup>9</sup> McCaughrean, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, 64–65.

Retelling the myths for the very young requires a sensitivity to children's experience, literacy levels, and cognitive abilities, to say nothing about different cultural backgrounds and family expectations about safety and information. Older children are better able to respond to more complex ideas, and to fuller representations of the difficulties of life. The myth of Icarus is particularly challenging in this regard. In many ways it is a singular story in the myths, being one of very few stories in which a fully-realized child protagonist gets into trouble and dies. Certain elements of the story make it palatable for retelling: in contrast with the vicious child-killing that occurs in the Medea and Philomela myths, Icarus' death seems bloodless, and does not occur at the hands of any one person. It can be viewed from a distance: many illustrators show Icarus falling, a small figure in a large landscape, or the death can be glossed over – showing not the moment of impact, but feathers floating on the sea. Icarus' death can be presented as the moral consequence of ignoring instruction, and is often also presented as a cautionary tale about paying attention to one's parents. And its appealing elements – the cleverness of Daedalus, Icarus' joy in flight, the opportunity to fill the illustrations with beautiful images of the Mediterranean – mean it is retold continually. For some, such as Jane Yolen in *Wings* (ill. Dennis Nolan; 1990), the story is one of human folly and tragedy. For others, such as Robert Byrd, in *The Hero and the Minotaur: The Fantastic Adventures of Theseus* (2005), Icarus is a casualty of a larger story, involving the house of King Minos. Some retellers for very young readers, such as Joan Holub in her "Mini Myths" board book *Be Careful, Icarus!* (ill. Leslie Patricelli; 2015), solve the problem by removing Icarus from the main action, turning the story into a cautionary tale about kite-flying. Lisl Weil saves Icarus by showing his inventor father, Daedalus, catching him in a ready-made contraption that he has prepared with foresight. Marcia Williams, on the other hand, lays the blame for Icarus' death squarely on Daedalus, who has a record of carelessness with young lives. And the Icarus myth has ready application to children and teenagers facing challenges and difficulties, as Christopher Myers's *Wings* (2000) shows, in a story about a boy with wings who is bullied and ostracized by the children in his class. As we shall come to, Paul Zindel's *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* (1984) shows the appeal and also the dangers of the myth in the story of a boy whose desire to reform the world leads him to his accidental death in the grip of delusion.

But to return to the world of illustrated texts, occasionally, we find a mismatch between style and content, as in *Brick Greek Myths*, by Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, which uses staged photographs of LEGO

figurines to retell the myths. This volume is admirably thorough, providing a detailed cosmology. It does not gloss over the violence and incest of the creation myths, for instance, showing the violence from which the cosmos was born. Perhaps this book is intended as a crossover book, aimed at both adults and children. It may have its roots in graphic novels, often targeting older readers, and its captions have an ironic tinge that at least recognizes when moments are difficult or uncomfortable. (Even more than Marcia Williams, the *Brick Greek Myths* team views Daedalus as a callous and selfish obsessive, whose actions hurt others.)

### Overcoming Difficulties in Picture Books

*These picture books use strong visual imagery and entertaining approaches to the morality of the ancient myths to show child protagonists overcoming difficulties.*

Issue	Book
Sharing	Joan Holub, <i>Please Share, Aphrodite!</i> , ill. Leslie Patricelli (2015)
Bullies	Joan Holub, <i>Play Nice, Hercules!</i> , ill. Leslie Patricelli (2014)
Respecting other people's belongings	Rosemary Wells, <i>Max and Ruby's First Greek Myth: Pandora's Box</i> (1993)
Listening to instructions	Joan Holub, <i>Be Careful, Icarus!</i> , ill. Leslie Patricelli (2015)
Being greedy	Rosemary Wells, <i>Max and Ruby's Midas: Another Greek Myth</i> (1995)
Making friends with neighbours	Bob Graham, <i>Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten</i> (1992)

## Young Adult Fiction

The older the intended audience, the more complicated the representation of difficult issues. Young adult fiction is a case in point, partly because of its emphasis on helping young readers find their way out of childhood and into adult life. Where children's books tend to simplify their presentation of the world, stories for young adults highlight more awareness of the challenges and complexities of life (see "Y is for Young Adulthood"). This awareness of complexity and emphasis on finding one's way means that difficult issues are often foregrounded, especially in fiction, which often focuses on individual characters' experiences and coming of age. Because of these factors, mythological narratives act well as a point of contact for writers, and characters, thinking about the difficulties of life. This is partly because mythological narratives synthesize universal

elements of the human experience (from the ancient world to the present day), allowing young readers a feeling of connection. It is also partly because they present powerful stories of hardship and difficulty, which resonate with the challenges that teenagers face. These challenges can broadly be identified as: growing up, finding a place in society, relating to family, developing sexuality, and coping with trauma (such as violence, war, abuse, suicide). Many of the issues listed above find their way into other areas of our book (see “E is for Emotions”, “N is for Nature”, “R is for Relationships”). For the purposes of our discussion here, we focus on two particularly pervasive issues: mental health and sexual violence, both of which feature in many retellings and adaptations of myth in young adult fiction, and both of which are often presented as issues that concern young adults and those who care for them.

**Dealing with Difficult Issues in Young Adult Fiction**

*Many works of fiction for young adults engage with the problems of life, through dramatic narratives in which teens confront serious challenges. Stories drawing on mythology often find parallels and resonances between the ancient world and modern problems.*

Issue	Book
Suicide	Sally Christie, <i>The Icarus Show</i> (2016)
Self-harm	Margot McGovern, <i>Neverland</i> (2018)
Sexual abuse	Irini Savvides, <i>Willow Tree and Olive</i> (2001)
Death of a parent	Sabrina Malcolm, <i>Zeustian Logic</i> (2017)
Domestic violence	Carolyn Meyer, <i>Beauty’s Daughter: The Story of Hermione and Helen of Troy</i> (2013)
Teen pregnancy	Adèle Geras, <i>Dido</i> (2009)
Dementia	Maz Evans, <i>Who Let the Gods Out?</i> (2017)
Schizophrenia	Paul Zindel, <i>Harry and Hortense at Hormone High</i> (1984)
Rape	Laurie Halse Anderson, <i>Speak</i> (1999)
Cancer	Barbara Dee, <i>Halfway Normal</i> (2017)

**Mental Health**

The theme of mental health is so far reaching that it might be impossible to pinpoint. But authors try in different ways, concerned by statistics in youth suicide or depression, worried about the effects of social difference and isolation. Using

stories from classical mythology gives a particular focus to these stories, that is both specific and universal. In re-imagining the *Odyssey*, for instance, Neal Shusterman's *Challenger Deep* (2015) takes young readers on a journey into the mind of Caden, a fifteen-year-old suffering from schizophrenia. While outwardly Caden is spending time in a psychiatric hospital, inwardly he is going on an odyssey, on board a mysterious ship whose figurehead, Calliope, tries to keep him with her. His sister, Mackenzie, functions as the Penelope figure to whom Caden eventually returns. Shusterman uses the mythical world to express Caden's different realities and uses the structure of the *Odyssey* to express his conflicted desires. *Challenger Deep* uses postmodern fragmentation between Caden's inner and outer stories, to force the reader to piece together what is going on, mimicking the nature of alternative cognitive states. A similarly fragmented magic-realist novel, Laura Ruby's *Bone Gap* (2015), explores states of perception by drawing on Underworld myths (Orpheus and Eurydice,<sup>10</sup> Persephone and Hades), in which the protagonist, Finn, a small-town boy with prosopagnosia (an inability to recognize faces), travels through gaps in reality to rescue Roza, a beautiful immigrant, who has been abducted by Hades. Through allusions and echoes of different Underworld love stories, *Bone Gap* frames Finn's acceptance of his condition.

Paul Zindel's *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* (1984) integrates the myth of Icarus into a story about mental illness, trauma, and tragic loss of life, set in New York. Best friends Harry and Hortense befriend an eccentric new student, Jason, who believes he is the modern incarnation of Icarus. Hortense, who is interested in psychology and psychoanalysis, diagnoses Jason as both schizophrenic and suffering from post-traumatic stress. As a child, Jason had witnessed his father murder his mother before suiciding, and Hortense believes he has latched onto the story of Daedalus and Icarus, looking for an alternative loving and devoted father figure. As his delusions become more intense, Jason builds a hang-glider, powered by a repurposed lawn-mower engine and, like the wings in the myth, arrayed in white feathers. After blowing up the school records office, which contained a file detailing his history, he launches himself off the school roof. To the amazement of the students watching, his homemade hang-glider actually flies, but the craft becomes entangled in the cables of Stat-en Island Bridge, and Jason drowns in the river below.

Shocked by the death of their friend, Harry and Hortense find solace in Joseph Campbell's idea that the hero returns to his community with a boon. While

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<sup>10</sup> For the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.8–63.

Jason's philosophy was often confused and hysterical, his key message seems to be that the Ancient Greeks taught valuable lessons, cared for their children, and had a society that was more cohesive and successful than ours today. *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* is full of classical allusions, and promotes the ancient world as an important and useful model for a positive society. Yet it also suggests that it can be problematic to identify too closely with mythology on a personal level. Harry asks Hortense what "would have happened to Jason if he hadn't read about the myth of Daedalus – if he hadn't become Icarus?" She replies, "[T]hen he might have been no one at all".<sup>11</sup> Although this extreme form of identification is ultimately disastrous, with Jason – whether deliberately or accidentally – re-enacting Icarus' fatal fall, Zindel seems to be suggesting that an identity shaped by myth is better than no identity at all.

### Antigone

*Oedipus' daughter Antigone defies her uncle – the king – and buries her brother, who is considered a traitor. For this crime she is put to death, and her fiancé and his mother commit suicide. Antigone is mourned by her surviving sister, Ismene. A confronting story, more commonly told for young adults and adults.*

#### **Retelling – Ali Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, ill. Laura Paoletti (2013)**

Intended for a crossover audience, this illustrated novella is a retelling of the story of Antigone from the point of view of a cynical, aggressive crow.

#### **Revision – Natalie Haynes, *The Children of Jocasta* (2017)**

Also written for a crossover audience, this novel privileges female voices and agency in a feminist revisioning of Socrates' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*.

#### **Adaptation – Robin Bridges, *Dreaming of Antigone* (2016)**

This young adult novel draws on the dynamics between Antigone and Ismene as a paradigm for the modern relationship between guilt-ridden, moody teen Andria, who suffers from epilepsy, and her twin sister, Iris, who suicided the previous summer.

#### **Allusion – Kerry Greenwood, *Danger, Do Not Enter* (2003)**

With its themes of loyalty, speaking out, and defiance, the myth of Antigone is employed as an allegory and paradigm for a group of young Australian friends as they explore a local dilapidated house that is rumoured to be haunted.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Zindel, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*, London: Bodley Head, 1984, 149.

## Trauma

Indeed, the shaping qualities of myth are important in helping young protagonists cope with trauma, as several stories about teens coping with sexual violence indicate. This form of trauma is especially pervasive, in both classical mythology and young adult literature, and is visible both in primary and background stories. While some myths, such as the story of Persephone, can be retold in a way that minimizes the violent and traumatic aspects, and thus appear in picture books as well as books for older readers, others, such as the story of Philomela, are applied only for young adult or adult audiences. Indeed, the story of Philomela, with its emphasis on voicelessness and violence, makes for a uniquely perfect reflection on the silencing aspects of rape and trauma. Philomela was the princess of Athens raped by her brother-in-law, King Tereus of Thrace. Cutting out her tongue, so she is unable to tell anyone what has happened, he imprisons her in a hut in the forest. But she weaves a tapestry that depicts what has happened to her and sends it to her sister, Procne. In a shocking act of revenge, the sisters kill Procne's son, Itys, cook him, and present his remains to Tereus as a feast. As the king pursues the sisters, each is transformed into a bird: Tereus becomes a hoopoe, known for its crown and fierce beak; Procne a swallow, whose song mourns her lost son; and Philomela a nightingale, the female of which has no song.<sup>12</sup>

As Barbara Tannert-Smith observes, authors writing about trauma have a particular challenge, especially when depicting another's trauma: "If trauma is not experienced firsthand, and has to be represented via a textual conduit, in this case a young adult novel, a key question is how such a traumatized state can be narratively represented".<sup>13</sup> One method is by mimicking the narrative patterns of trauma – piecing together fragments of experience and expression (as Shusterman does in *Challenger Deep* [2015]); another is by referencing other stories of suffering, such as the tragic story of Philomela. By virtue of being both specific and universal, myths connect with many kinds of stories, and their emphasis on transformation and overcoming of suffering relate strongly to trauma narratives.

Margaret Mahy's *The Other Side of Silence* (1995), a novel for younger teens, tells the story of Hero, an elective mute frustrated by her noisy and

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<sup>12</sup> For Philomela's story, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.438–670.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Tannert-Smith, "'Like Falling Up into a Storybook': Trauma and Intertextual Repetition in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35.4 (2010), 400.

over-active family, who visits the garden of her neighbour, Miss Credence. Miss Credence, the disappointed daughter of a famous professor, resents her failure to achieve academic greatness herself, partly because of having given birth to a disabled daughter, Rinda, the product of an affair with her father's student. She keeps Rinda, who can only speak in bird-like noises, chained up in a bedroom, which Hero discovers when she goes into a forbidden part of the house. Shocked by Rinda's condition, and recognizing the level of trauma she and Miss Credence suffer, Hero reassesses her own muteness, finds her voice, and begins to speak. As a novel for younger teens, *The Other Side of Silence* elides elements of sexual violence from its allusions to the Philomela myth, emphasizing its connections to the Grimms' fairy tale "Jorinda and Joringel",<sup>14</sup> in which a young woman, Jorinda, rescues her lover from a witch who has transformed him into a bird. In finding her voice, however, Hero is like Philomela, using her observations and her art to communicate.

Finding one's voice is a key theme in another novel that draws on the myth of Philomela, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999). This novel, about the after-effects of rape, is set in an American high school, and focuses on a girl named Melinda, aged fourteen, who is raped by a popular senior student at a summer party, then blamed for ruining the party. Over the course of a year she becomes increasingly withdrawn and isolated; her unwillingness to speak about what happened becomes an inability to do so. Eventually, helped by a class project in which she is asked to explore different meanings of the word "tree", Melinda finds ways to express herself and to tell her story.

Anderson weaves classical allusions throughout the text of *Speak*, drawing upon Ovid's versions of two myths: Apollo and Daphne,<sup>15</sup> and Philomela and Procne,<sup>16</sup> as told in the *Metamorphoses*. Melinda's tree project recalls the story of Apollo and Daphne, where the sun god, desiring a woodland nymph, Daphne, pursues and attacks her. She calls for help to her father, the river god Peneus, who transforms her into a sweet-smelling laurel tree (which later becomes Apollo's emblem, and the emblem of poetry). As the novel proceeds, Melinda reflects on what happened to her, depicting her rapist, a boy named Andy, as Apollo-like in his good-looks and popularity, and also his cruelty, and seeing the parallels between herself and Daphne, rendered mute by his actions. At first, she is only able to depict trees as damaged, but this changes as she heals.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "Jorinde und Joringel", in Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812, 328–332.

<sup>15</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.452–567.

<sup>16</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.438–670.

As its title indicates, *Speak* is also preoccupied with ideas about communication. Like Philomela with her tapestry, in *Speak* Melinda uses her art to tell her story, and once she is heard, other girls from her school come to her aid – a sorority of support, in some ways similar to Procne. *Speak* is an unusually confronting and intense novel, focalized through Melinda's thoughts, interweaving myth and modern life, to show the workings of trauma and the recovery from trauma. It gives voice to the experience of young survivors of rape, and as such is an admirable and brave novel for young readers. It is widely studied in high schools, though presumably because of its confronting subject matter it also features on lists of banned books in the United States. (There is some irony in a book advocating speaking out about traumatic experiences being the subject of a censorship debate.)

One solution in marking out difficult issues is the use of the "trigger warning". Trigger warnings are intended to prepare for upsetting material, especially in case it causes distress for readers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. For instance, reflecting an awareness that some of her many readers may have experienced sexual assault, Rachel Smythe's web-comic *Lore Olympus* (2018–present) provides a trigger warning for an episode in which Apollo coerces Persephone to have sex. (Interestingly, this version of the Hades–Persephone romance pushes the role of sexual assaulter onto the serial-philanderer Apollo, while Hades is a somewhat purer character. As Annika Herb writes, paranormal romance draws on myths that can normalize abduction or rape as part of true-love stories.<sup>17</sup> The problematics of this in literature for young readers are significant.) Trigger warnings, at the very least, suggest an awareness that some myths confront serious difficulties.

Unfortunately, bad things happen. Traumas and difficulties are present in all sorts of realms, as young adult fiction and mythology both relate. Writers of children's and young adult literature are increasingly aware of the need to tell stories that give young readers tools to engage successfully with the world. They are also aware of the problematic and difficult issues present in classical mythology, and take steps to present it carefully. This may mean eliding problematic areas (such as Pirotta, sliding over the reasons behind the Trojan War), or confronting them (such as McCaughrean commenting caustically on the bad behaviour of heroes, or Smythe giving a content warning about the "themes

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<sup>17</sup> Annika Herb, "(Para)normalizing Rape Culture: Possession as Rape in Young Adult Paranormal Romance", *Girlhood Studies* 14.1 (2021), 68–84.

of physical and mental abuse, sexual trauma, and toxic relationships” that appear in *Lore Olympus*).<sup>18</sup> It may also mean using them, in all their difficult glory, to shed light on the real problems in the world today.

### **Some Further Reading on Dealing with Difficulties in Children’s Literature**

Eric L. Tribunella, *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children’s Literature*, Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2010.

Kenneth B. Kidd, *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children’s Literature*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

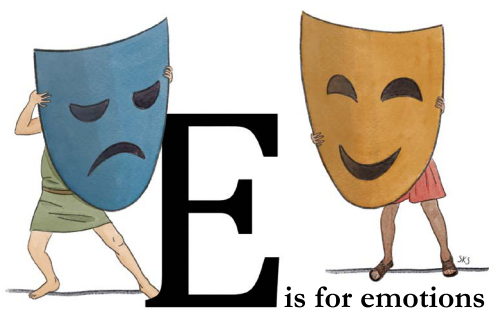
Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Story Cure: An A–Z of Books to Keep Kids Happy, Healthy, and Wise*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2017.

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<sup>18</sup> Rachel Smythe, *Lore Olympus*, vol. 1, New York, NY: Del Rey, 2021, front matter.

is for emotions





The great hero Hercules goes through the “full range of human emotions, including remorse, compassion, despair, self-criticism, and love”.<sup>1</sup> So does children’s literature, sometimes overtly, and sometimes as part of a storytelling process that aims to honour the rich-

ness of young people’s emotions, and experience, and to help give them some tools with which to face a challenging world. We all experience a range of emotions, and how to understand and manage them is a very important part of children’s literature.

Children’s stories talk about how wonderful it is to feel happy – how joyful it is to love and be loved. They show how hard it is to feel sad, to suffer from fear, anxiety, or anger. They show how it feels to be ambitious, or greedy, or jealous, to be enraptured by beauty, to want to share things, or to keep them for yourself. Emotions are not tidy – they spill out and over, and merge into one another. A fundamental aspect of childhood education involves learning what to do with them: how to enjoy being happy, and to share happiness with others, how to cope with sorrow, or manage anger. By reading about characters who overcome their fears, or confront and come through difficult situations, we may be able to recognize what to do when we face challenges ourselves. The emotions that often form part of a narrative are increasingly being recognized as useful in helping readers gain empathy, to understand how others might be feeling, again a crucial skill to be learned in youth.

Emotions are also vitally important in Greek and Roman myths, which show that humans are driven by the same feelings that children’s stories talk about. Mythical figures such as Eros and Psyche are literally named after states of emotion (Eros) and mind (Psyche). When Pandora opens the box containing the ills of the world, the powerful emotion of Hope remains in the box,<sup>2</sup> offering a counterbalance. The Minotaur symbolizes past shame,<sup>3</sup> disgrace, and fear; in slaying him, Theseus helps a culture put bad things behind them, and move into a brighter future. When Medusa freezes the unwary with a glance, she literally

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Hathaway, *The Friendly Guide to Mythology: A Mortal’s Companion to the Fantastical Realm of Gods, Goddesses, Monsters, and Heroes*, New York, NY: Viking, 2004 (ed. pr. 1994).

<sup>2</sup> For the myth of Pandora releasing plagues and leaving Hope, see Hesiod, *Works and Days* 94–98.

<sup>3</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 3.1.4; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.155–156.

petrifies them,<sup>4</sup> symbolizing the petrifying qualities of fear. The Centaurs, half human, half horse, continually struggle with the divide between animal instinct and the human mind, in a swirl of emotions and thoughts.<sup>5</sup>

Bringing ancient myth to child readers seems like a perfect match, enabling young readers to reflect (consciously or unconsciously) on how to handle different emotions. Cautionary tales are generally the most obviously didactic, such as Lisl Weil's picture book for children *King Midas' Secret and Other Follies* (1969), and show mythical figures being punished for their uncontrolled emotions. King Midas' vanity and desire for fame get him into trouble with Apollo, when he judges Pan to be the better musician: Apollo bestows ass's ears on the arrogant king, who then tries to cover up his ears, before his hairdresser spills the secret, to the king's great embarrassment. In witty illustrations (showing the king blushing beneath a range of elaborate hairstyles), Weil drives home the message that vanity can lead to embarrassment. Rhyming morals, delivered by a Greek chorus further confirm this:

Wise people say: Don't be conceited,  
or else the wrong fame  
might easily shine upon your name.<sup>6</sup>

Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli refine the emotional cores of different myths in their board book versions, such as *Play Nice, Hercules!* (2014). Here, the strength of Hercules is depicted in the form of a rambunctious toddler. Admonished by his father to "play nice", he responds "I am not nice. I am strong". But his selfish and uncontrolled strength means he knocks over his sister's toys, making her cry. Hercules is remorseful (much as the original hero is when he accidentally kills his family), and the two are reconciled. While it might seem ridiculous, or unscholarly, to reduce familicide down to a dispute over toys, Holub and Patricelli's work is emotionally true. The world of a toddler is small, reflecting their limited movement and dependence on their parents. Their emotions may seem simple, but they are also very strong.

As children grow, their worlds grow larger, and their emotions grow in complexity. So does their literature, which moves from the simple advice about

<sup>4</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 2.4.2.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Horst Kornberger, *The Power of Stories: Nurturing Children's Imagination and Consciousness*, Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Lisl Weil, *King Midas' Secret and Other Follies*, New York, NY, and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1969, 19.

controlling one's greed or vanity, to a more complex understanding of the subtleties of emotion. Neal Shusterman explores greed and fear in his horror stories for teenagers: *Dread Locks* (2005) and *The Eyes of Kid Midas* (1992). In *Dread Locks*, well-off teenager Parker Baer falls in love with the girl next door, Tara, who turns out to be the original Gorgon, Medusa. As she gradually turns the neighbourhood teenagers to stone, Parker finds himself becoming a Gorgon like Tara. Shusterman describes how Parker is hardened by power, finding himself losing empathy for Tara's victims. Before it is too late, however, he saves the neighbourhood by staring directly into her eyes and petrifying her in turn. The lovers are frozen together in joint petrification, a kind of gruesome Romeo and Juliet, united forever in their mutual destruction:

[I]f the night brings stars I cannot see them, for all I see is her, Tara. My friend. My enemy. My victim and my destroyer – our eyes fused in a frozen gaze until the rains erode the frozen stone of our bodies... until our hardened flesh is turned to sand and carried off, grain by grain, by the wind.<sup>7</sup>

In *Dread Locks*, Shusterman finds in the Medusa myth a specific emotional application: using ideas of petrification and predation to offer a morality tale for young readers – showing how power, wealth, and arrogance have a chilling, or hardening, effect on the human heart. In *The Eyes of Kid Midas*, he explores a different kind of predation – the voracious desire for fame and power that lies at the heart of the Midas myth. On a school hiking trip up a mysterious mountain, a lonely seventh-grader named Kevin Midas finds a pair of magical sunglasses and puts them on. Immediately he finds that he can command the universe. Most of his desires are social (Kevin lacks friends and confidence) but as he commands friendship and love from his classmates, he finds that things do not turn out as planned. His targets resent being manipulated, and the fabric of reality starts to be affected by Kevin's alterations of his universe, to the point that it all may collapse if he does not get control of his emotions. It is only an intervention from God that sets him on a path to self-respect and thus to restore the world. He begins to understand that his previous feelings come from his own perceptions, rather than from reality, and that his voracious greed can never be satisfied:

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<sup>7</sup> Neal Shusterman, *Dread Locks*, New York, NY: Dutton Children's Books, 2005, 164.

All this belonged to Kevin now: a kingdom stretching out in all directions, with no one to threaten Kevin's dominion. Yet as he strolled through the wealthiest mansions in town, he knew there was nothing to be found here that he really wanted. It had been that way ever since his first experiments with the glasses. It seemed the more he had, the more he felt was missing, and now that he had everything, he felt as if he had nothing. An overwhelming sense of emptiness cried out from inside him. *I need... I need...* but he didn't know what he needed any more.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Kevin breaks the glasses, and his world goes back to normal. In adapting the Medusa and Midas myths, Shusterman finds models to explore emotional difficulties that are commonly associated with the teenage years (loneliness, depression, antisocial behaviour). As with most young adult fiction, the didactic emphasis falls on socialization – on finding ways for young protagonists to learn to act for the common good rather than self-interest.

### Cupid and Psyche

*Venus is jealous of the beautiful princess Psyche. Her son, Cupid, falls in love with her, but Venus keeps them apart. Psyche is forced to wander the world and complete a series of impossible tasks before they can be together. This fairy-tale-like story explains how love involves the soul and the body.*

#### **Retelling – Marcia Williams, *Psyche and Eros* (1998)**

Presented in Williams's bold graphic style, this cartoon version retells the famous story of Psyche and her immortal lover, Eros.

#### **Revision – Doris Orgel, *The Princess and the God* (1996)**

Told from Psyche's point of view, this young adult novel reworks Apuleius' traditional account of the myth from a feminist perspective, fleshing out the life story of the central character to present her as a believable and compelling heroine.

#### **Adaptation – Babette Cole, *Cupid* (1989)**

This appealing picture book is a light-hearted imagining of young Cupid's mischievous antics when his family relocates to earth.

#### **Allusion – Tai Odunsi, *Cupid's Academy: The Miseducation of Mergatroyd, Love God in Training* (2011)**

This young adult novel tells the story of teenage god Troyd, who must prove himself worthy after being suspended from Cupid's Academy, where young gods learn to be match-makers for the human race.

<sup>8</sup> Neal Shusterman, *The Eyes of Kid Midas*, New York, NY: Tom Doherty Associates, 1992, 118.

## Finding One's Place

Moving on from the simpler lessons of childhood, the stories of young adult fiction focus on how teenage protagonists find their place in society. Where stories for children often valorize the individual *qua* individual, stories for young adults often valorize the individual who finds a way to connect with others: to understand their families, to make friends, to fall in love, to find a tribe, and to find a role. In other words, to come of age emotionally. Love stories are especially important, and emotions are writ large in them.

Bruce Coville's comedy-fantasy, *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love* (2003), is a case in point. When shy teenager Juliet Dove enters a mysterious antique shop and is given a pendant by Eris, the goddess of strife (masquerading as the shopkeeper), she is startled to find herself a magnet for every teenage boy in town. With the help of her best friend, her siblings, some magical rats, and the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, she discovers that she is wearing a pendant that belonged to Helen of Troy. To complicate things further, inside that pendant is trapped Cupid, the god of love, put there by his angry mother, Aphrodite. To release Cupid, and save the town from Eris, who is stirring up discord in the town, she has to carry out tasks to find Psyche, and unite the gods of love and soul.

For Juliet to succeed, she has to overcome her shyness and to perform at the poetry festival organized by her professor father. This she does, and she gives Cupid and Psyche the happy ending that every love story deserves. The novel ends with Juliet, at peace with the world, ready to join society as a whole person. In doing so, Juliet is embracing *agápē*, the Ancient Greek concept that is explained mid-novel by her father, Mr Dove, and their friend, the librarian Hyacinth Priest.

"They say that the more important something is to a culture, the more words the people have for it," said Mr Dove. "I've always wondered what it says about us that we have only one word for love."

"How many did the Greeks have?" asked Juliet.

"Well, there was *eros*, for romantic love," said Ms. Priest. "And *philia*, which was brotherly love... But the highest form of love was called *agapé*, the selfless love of one person for another. This is not the love that desires to possess, but the love that comes from an open heart and desires the greatest good for others."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Coville, *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love*, London: Hodder Children's Books, 2003, 86–87.

Perhaps because *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love* is aimed at young teenagers, Coville does not push his protagonist into a romantic relationship (that is reserved for the Cupid and Psyche story). In showing her gaining an understanding of *agápē*, he shows how Juliet has become integrated into society. She thus overcomes her shyness and tendency to isolation, and also defeats Eris, the goddess who thrives on discord. But love and discord are often closely related, as Ms Priest points out, "Given the amount of discord caused by romantic love, I've always thought it somewhat amusing that the name Eris and the word *eros* are so similar".<sup>10</sup>

The Cupid and Psyche story has much in common with fairy tales, and as such is often retold in collections, and in illustrated versions, such as Errol Le Cain's lavish picture book *Cupid and Psyche* (1977), which takes the text from Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. It is a story that contains both sensuality and beauty, as Le Cain draws out, with rich illustrations inspired by the Danish illustrator Kay Nielsen, and British Decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley. Most retellings highlight the fairy-tale elements, especially those aimed at very young readers, and elide the more troublesome aspects of love and passion. Young adult romantic fiction, however, thrives on exploring the interplay of Eros and Eris, especially in paranormal romances, which draw on classical mythology to explore love and sex in settings that move between real and magical or mythical settings. For instance, *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014), by British young adult writer David Almond, retells one of the most obviously emotional of the Greek myths: that of Orpheus and Eurydice. In this version, set in Northumberland in North East England, a group of teenagers encounter the wandering musician Orpheus on the beach, and one of them, Ella Grey, falls passionately in love with him. When she dies of a snake bite, Orpheus re-enacts his fruitless attempt to bring her back from the dead, observed by her friend (and former lover), Claire. *A Song for Ella Grey* is told through Claire's eyes, and is a meditation on the nature of life, death, grief, and hopeless passion, told with yearning, and a great deal of intertextual allusion to love and the afterlife.

### Mythic Lovers

*Although their stories do not always have a happy ending, the tales of these mythological couples have inspired many storytellers, often for a crossover audience.*

📖 Cupid and Psyche – Jendela Tryst extends this immortal romance into the young adult novel *Struck* (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 86.

- ▣ Helen and Paris – in Josephine Angelini's *Starcrossed* (2011), the famous love affair which incited the Trojan War is played out again in the unlawful attraction between sixteen-year-old Helen Hamilton and the new boy in town, Lucas Delos.
- ▣ Odysseus and Penelope – Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) gives Penelope an opportunity to reflect on her relationship with her wayward husband, Odysseus.
- ▣ Hero and Leander – their story is retold by Geraldine McCaughrean in *The Orchard Book of Love and Friendship* (ill. Jane Ray; 2000).
- ▣ Aphrodite and Adonis – Molly Ringle's "Chrysmelia Stories" (2013–2016) trilogy connects the love affair between Aphrodite and the mortal Adonis with the story of Hades and Persephone.
- ▣ Pyramus and Thisbe – famously told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of these ill-fated lovers has been reimagined in Bolu Babalola's collection *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales from Around the World, Retold* (2020).

Jane Abbott's young adult novel *Elegy* (2016) explores another form of doomed love, in her recasting of the Pyramus and Thisbe story.<sup>11</sup> *Elegy* is set in a small town in regional Australia, and it features the doomed love of Caitlin and Michael, teenagers who gradually discover they are reincarnations of Pyramus and Thisbe, doomed not only to be separated, but to re-enact their tragic love story over and over. Romances like these provide an emotional workout for young readers: as Suzanne Keen notes, novels draw readers in through characterization and situation.<sup>12</sup> Maria Nikolajeva suggests, too, that many young readers are drawn to fiction in order to understand how other people think and feel.<sup>13</sup> Readers empathize with characters, partly because of what they are like, and partly because of what happens to them. Exciting adventures arouse a kind of situational empathy, whereby a reader feels how it might be to ride Pegasus (for instance) or fight a many-headed Hydra, or have a god for a parent. Reflective stories, such as romances, arouse a kind of emotional empathy, in which the reader's compassion, or admiration, or identification, can be aroused, depending on the story's emphasis. Many young readers of Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" series featuring the adventures of Percy Jackson, a son of Poseidon and a mortal woman, are drawn not only to its exciting action, but also to its emotional arc. As they follow Percy's adventures, and observe him grow as a hero, they also empathize with his feelings about his absent father and

<sup>11</sup> For Pyramus and Thisbe's story, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.55–166.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy", *Narrative* 14.3 (October 2006), 207–236.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, "'Did You Feel as if You Hated People?': Emotional Literacy through Fiction", *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 19.2 (2013), 95–107.

vulnerable mother, and with his romance with fellow demigod Annabeth Chase (daughter of Athena and a mortal).

Humorous books also give readers an emotional workout. Emotional empathy can be aroused in stories with happy endings and silly plots, just as much as in sad books. So in John Dougherty's *Zeus on the Loose* (ill. Georgien Overwater; 2004), a chapter book for tweens, the hero, Alex, learns how to cope with anxiety and worry, when he accidentally invokes the king of the gods, Zeus, who joins him at his school and causes all kinds of mayhem. While readers may laugh at the scrapes Zeus gets the boys into, they also empathize with Alex's worries: his fears of sticking out, of not fitting in, of not being able to manage bullies or get his schoolwork done. They're on his side, and are pleased when he solves the problems, by managing Zeus, a comedy figure who dramatizes all kinds of unacceptable actions and feelings (such as being rude and demanding).

Humour breaks the tension when difficult feelings threaten to overwhelm. Mark Maciejewski's tween novel *I am Fartacus* (2017) uses comedy to explore friendship and enmity at junior high school. Chub, the protagonist, is an outsider ruled by anger. He feels betrayed by his former best friend, Archer, who caused Chub to lose his hair in an accident, and who now does not acknowledge him. Archer is the school's golden boy, and Chub is out for revenge. He finds out that the school's headmaster is caught up in a gambling ring and that Archer is blackmailing him. With his friend Moby, a vegan who eats a lot of lentils, Chub infiltrates the ring, and gains power over his enemies. As he does so, he makes new friends, and the novel ends with Chub, happily part of a new group, taking the blame for Moby's farts, in the same way that the slaves claimed to be Spartacus in the Stanley Kubrick film *I Am Spartacus*. Through this novel, full of gross-out humour, sarcasm, punning, and a convoluted plot, themes of loneliness and friendship play out. Mentions of the Spartacus legend underline that this is a novel about power and hierarchy, and that friendship offers its own kind of solidarity.

Young adult trilogies, such as Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games" series (2008–2010), also externalize emotional issues. The series' opening volume, *The Hunger Games* (2008), draws on aspects of Imperial Rome and classical myths such as the stories of Atalanta and Artemis. It is set in Panem, a futuristic dystopian nation ruled by fear, and features Katniss Everdeen, who overcomes her natural diffidence when she represents her district in the Arena, a televised gladiatorial combat where representatives fight to the death to win resources for their home regions. Katniss, who like Atalanta and Artemis is a skilled huntress with an affinity for nature, gains popularity with the spectators because she

is able to express her emotions. Countering the cruelty of the Hunger Games and the regime that supports it, she refuses to kill except out of self-defence, and uses her knowledge of plant life to heal. Despite her skills and her courage, Katniss doubts herself. The novel is narrated in first person, so readers have access to her inner thoughts, and the story is woven through with an examination of her emotions as she undergoes an increasingly epic series of battles (the trilogy culminates with the overthrow of President Snow, who presided over Panem's cruel regime).

*The Hunger Games* balances the epic action with Katniss's inner feelings – and indeed heroic narratives are open about heroes' emotions too (see "H is for How to Be Heroic"). Winning any battle comes at a cost, and heroes like Katniss (or Aeneas or Achilles or Hercules) have to contend with feelings of loss and grief, anxiety and fear, and even impostor syndrome. As Katniss's fame grows, she struggles to match her inner feelings with external pressure and expectations. In this, she is similar to Harry Potter, the hero of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007), who contends with pressure, expectations, and jealousy, as well as self-doubt and anxiety, but rises to the occasion, building an army of supporters against evil forces, before going on alone to face the villainous Voldemort. As Katniss and Harry grow in confidence, they are able to take on more challenging battles – but true heroes are never arrogant: being in touch with their emotions means they learn along the way to make the right choices.

Emotions drive children's stories because they are so intrinsic to human experience. Learning to understand and manage emotions is a key part of growing up, so it is little surprise so many stories offer guidance in this regard. In "H is for How to Be Heroic", we discuss this further, showing how heroic figures engage with their emotions as part of their trials and adventures.

### Some Further Reading on Emotions in Children's Literature

Kathryn A. Markell, Marc A. Markell, *The Children Who Lived: Using Harry Potter and Other Fictional Characters to Help Grieving Children and Adolescents*, ill. Morgan K. Carr-Markell, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

Elizabeth Bullen, Michelle J. Smith, and Kristine Moruzi, eds., *Affect, Emotion, and Children's Literature: Representation and Socialisation in Texts for Children and Young Adults*, London: Taylor and Francis, 2017.

F

is for first encounters



# F

is for first encounters



Do *you* remember the first time you heard about the ancient world? Did you hear about it from a book, or a story, a family member or a friend? Do you remember what kind of story it was, and what the ancient world looked like to you – in your mind, or in images?

What were the gods like, what were the heroes like, what was that world made of? Did it seem real? Or part of the fabric of storytelling? Did it stay with you, or did it disappear to resurface from time to time? Were you receptive, or did you feel a resistance to the ideas that ancient worlds have come and gone, or to ideas about mythology and belief systems? Perhaps you do not remember – perhaps the myths have always been in your mind: perhaps they have an air of a bedtime story, half-remembered, mostly forgotten, but with that sense of drifting and dreaming between waking and sleep. Perhaps you were like Wendy Darling of *Peter Pan* fame, who became aware of her mythical friend before she was properly aware of much else:

She thought Peter sometimes came to the nursery in the night and sat on the foot of her bed and played on his pipes to her. Unfortunately she never woke, so she didn't know how she knew, she just knew.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps your memories are clearer than Wendy's. One of our New Zealand friends had a classicist for a mother. As they walked home from school, up a very steep hill, to distract her daughter from the stiff climb, she would retell the Greek myths. For our friend, the myths are forever associated with these walks with her mother. Miriam remembers being entranced by the books of Roger Lancelyn Green, with their stirring and forceful retellings; Elizabeth was captivated by *Once Upon a Time* (1923), by Blanche Winder, a dreamy fairy-tale version that had belonged to her grandfather, in which the myths were intertwined and accompanied by delicate illustrations (the work of Harry G. Theaker).

The stories we encounter as children have lasting impacts, helping shape how we think about literature and storytelling, and in the case of classical matters, how we think about the ancient world itself.<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Miles writes of his

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Barrie, *The Annotated Peter Pan: The Centennial Edition*, ed. Maria Tatar, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011 (ed. pr. 1906, 1911, 1928), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Saxby, *Books in the Life of a Child: Bridges to Literature and Learning*, South Melbourne: Macmillan Education, 1998, vii.

"irrational conviction" that his first point of contact with mythology, Aubrey de Sélincourt's *Odysseus the Wanderer* (1956), was the "true version" of the myth.<sup>3</sup> Because children's minds are at their most impressionable, what we read when young forms part of our frame of reference. That is why the stakes are very high for parents and educators when thinking about what best to provide children to read: if what we read as children becomes a standard from which other information is a development or deviation, then it is very important that we read material that is good, or well made, or true.

However, there is no one standard for ideal children's reading, let alone for ideal literature overall: literature is written by so many people from so many places of knowledge and experience, that finding one's way through a veritable labyrinth of meaning, one can become hopelessly lost. We discuss this in more detail in "Q is for Quality", but the questions are relevant in relation to first encounters: how do adults make sure children read the "correct" material? How is that material purveyed to them? Do children have the right, or ability, to choose for themselves? And what do they do when their first impressions are challenged by later versions, and also by their own developing minds and enhanced experiences?

### **Lucy Coats on Padraic Colum's *Children's Homer* (<https://fivebooks.com/best-books/greek-myths-lucy-coats/>)**

Lucy Coats is the author of the "Beasts of Olympus" series, and *Atticus the Storyteller's 100 Greek Myths* (ill. Anthony Lewis; 2002). Here, she reflects on Padraic Colum's *Children's Homer*, and its influence on her reading as a child.

This was the most precious book I owned as a child, and it was my way into the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* at a very early age. I've got the copy in my hand now – it was given to my father in April 1921 and he passed it on to me. It is quite old-fashioned in tone but it's not preachy and the language is amazing. Like Ted Hughes, Padraic Colum was a poet. I think for me, the thing that links all these books, apart from the actual stories, is the way that language is used within them. In this one too, the way he uses language is wonderful. The illustrations too. They're black-and-white, very art deco, very spare. It's still how I imagine all those heroes, gods and goddesses to look.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Miles, "Chasing Odysseus in Twenty-First-Century Children's Fiction", in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature: Heroes and Eagles*, "Meta-forms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 6, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015, 213–232.

## Introducing the Ancient World

Children's introductions to the ancient world come with certain expectations. Adults pass them on in the hope that they will be engaging, interesting, and informative. Some parents are simply trying to find material to draw in their kids: to encourage them to read more and to read widely. An interest in the subject itself may be secondary. Some parents want their children to know material that is tried and true, perhaps to provide them with cultural capital, but also to make sure their children are reading "good" books. If a first impression is so influential, it is important to make sure it is a good one.

Children, like adults, read all sorts of stories – fun stories, silly stories, escapist stories, adventure stories, fantasy stories – not only retellings and collections. And so their first encounters with classical material can expand in many directions. The *Asterix* comics, for instance, are highly influential – presenting the Roman colonization of Gaul as a series of slapstick comedies, in which Julius Caesar is like an old-fashioned headmaster continually frustrated by the antics of naughty schoolchildren, and the Gauls, Asterix, Obelix, and Dogmatix, are on the side of the underdog everywhere. Vividly presented, with broad-humour, silly puns and lots of well-rendered visual detail from the ancient world, these stories have done more than many a serious tome to bring children to the study of the past.

It is no coincidence that so many children's books are vividly illustrated, and that the images – beautiful, solemn, awe-inspiring, funny, simple, or detailed – attract different kinds of readers and elicit different responses. Board books, such as Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli's "Mini Myths" series (2014–2016), reduce major myths and legends to simple tales featuring babies and toddlers: the images are so bright and stylish that it is hard to leave their pages. They distil the stories down to their core essence, removing the characters from a recognizably mythological scene, but retaining their morals and primary characters. In *Brush Your Hair, Medusa!* (2015), for instance, a child is talked into taming her unruly hair; *Be Careful, Icarus!* (2015) transforms the Icarus myth into a story about a boy flying his kite. Adults who know the myths already will be able to appreciate what Holub and Patricelli have done, and enjoy the joke that these powerful stories are transformed into lightly comic versions for very young readers. Will babies and toddlers remember these myths? Possibly, and what they may gain is a gentle enculturation into familiarity with the myths.

## Daedalus and Icarus

*The ingenious craftsman Daedalus fashions wings of feathers and beeswax to escape from Crete. He reminds his son, Icarus, not to fly too high, but the boy forgets the instruction. The hot sun melts the wax and Icarus falls to his death. This moral story advises young people to follow instructions – or face the consequences.*

### **Retelling – Jane Yolen, *Wings*, ill. Dennis Nolan (1990)**

A complex picture book with subtle messages embedded in both the written text and illustrations, this retelling centres on the hubris of the father rather than the disobedience of his son.

### **Revision – Pamela Butchart, *Icarus Was Ridiculous*, ill. Thomas Flintham (2019)**

This humorous four-part chapter book, published in collaboration with the British Museum, uses a contemporary frame narrative to revise the traditional version of the myth of Icarus, as well as the stories of Narcissus, the Trojan War, and King Midas.

### **Adaptation – Paul Zindel, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* (1984)**

Damaged by childhood trauma, a schizophrenic young man, Jason Rohr, becomes convinced that he is the reincarnation of Icarus. Though friends try and help him through his delusions, he constructs a hang-glider that he launches off the roof of their school.

### **Allusion – Lily Hyde, *Riding Icarus* (2008)**

Set in Kiev, this modern fairy tale is the story of a girl called Masha, who lives in a magical flying trolleybus called Icarus.



## Joan Holub, “Mini Myths” Series, ill. Leslie Patricelli (2014–2016)

📖 *Make a Wish, Midas!*

📖 *Be Patient, Pandora!*

📖 *Good Job, Athena!*

📖 *Don't Get Lost, Odysseus!*

📖 *Brush Your Hair, Medusa!*

📖 *Please Share, Aphrodite!*

📖 *Play Nice, Hercules!*

📖 *Be Careful, Icarus!*

Using minimal written text and brightly coloured, appealing pictures, these eight board books for babies and toddlers distil the essence of prominent myths into simple parables. Each of the stories is adapted to a contemporary context that is relatable to the experiences of a young audience. Rather than gold, the little boy Midas is obsessed with the colour yellow, while Hercules is too rough with his baby sister. The retellings aim to socialize readers, at the same time introducing them to the famous story, which is recounted in greater detail

on the final page of the book. Icarus does not listen to his father's instructions when they are flying a kite together, while Odysseus wanders off and gets lost at the shops. Some of the works travel further from the original myth and are more oblique in their adaptation. Medusa's story, for example, is transformed into a parable about a little girl who steadfastly refuses to brush her hair, terrifying and appalling her grandmother, while the Judgement of Paris is reframed as a lesson in which Aphrodite learns to share her toys with her friends. The gods and mortal characters are depicted as very young children, and are notable for their ethnic diversity. Several of the characters figure in each other's stories, consolidating the idea of the series, and each book features playful textual and visual references that underscore Holub and Patricelli's knowledge and appreciation of mythology.

For a more formal first encounter, texts that provide simple, clear, and engaging retellings are popular, such as Anna Gkoutzouri's "My First Greek Myths" series (2020). These brightly coloured introductions to the Olympians, the Trojan War, Theseus and the Minotaur, and the adventures of Heracles, use "lift and slide" technology, by which little fingers can open flaps and see new characters underneath, or play with images. Cardboard wheels reveal elements of the myths, such as Hector and Achilles fighting, in the Trojan War, or Theseus' boat, featuring sails that turn from black to white and back again, or a rotating dinner table depicting the food at the Olympians' feast. Simple text alongside vivid images with lots of things for little readers to notice and count (types of food, animals, flowers), offer entertainment, and the books' construction, on sturdy cardboard, means that they should stand up to repeated reading and playing. Similarly, Jennifer Adams's *Little Master Homer: The Odyssey. A Monsters Primer!* (ill. Alison Oliver; 2017) introduces material simply and clearly. Adams transforms the Lotus Eaters into friendly monsters, eating flowers and saying "nom nom" or "yum", and the Cyclops into a lounging reader wearing a set of spectacles for only one eye. Its appeal comes from the colours and shapes within (drawing on well-known preschool learning concepts), and enough allusions and in-jokes for the adults who are likely to be purchasing and reading the books. The "BabyLit Primers" series promotes itself as a "fashionable way to introduce your toddler to the world of classic literature";<sup>4</sup> suggesting it trades on an appeal to the canon to encourage adults to buy books they believe will be good for the children in their lives.

This educational consciousness is key: creators of even the most fun-filled approach to first encounters are highly aware that their work should have some

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<sup>4</sup> "Odyssey", BabyLit, <https://www.babylit.com/classic-lit/odyssey> (accessed 11 March 2022).

kind of educational impact. And that consciousness means that they are likely more aware that a story may be the first time a reader encounters classical material. In their myth collections for older children, Geraldine McCaughrean and Donna Jo Napoli, for instance, write forewords explaining the myths' power and relevance to modern readers:

So why, when we no longer believe there are gods living at the top of Mount Olympus, are we still telling their stories? Because they are full of the things that fascinate anyone, in any country, at any time. There are adventures and jokes, fables and fairy stories, thrills and happy endings. In short, the Greek myths are just too good to forget.<sup>5</sup>

In this book we find answers offered by the ancient Greeks to many of the questions humans long to understand. But we also find gods, goddesses, heroes and monsters who love and hate and grow jealous and get duped: they are blessed and cursed with all the emotions that enrich and plague ordinary humans. In reading the myths, we begin to understand that the ancient Greeks must have wanted more than just the big answers from their gods. They must have also wanted their gods to be a reflection that could help them understand themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In her foreword, McCaughrean highlights the fun and adventure of the stories; in her introduction, Napoli offers a more philosophical take. Depending on which version you read first, you might gain a quite different impression of the myths, as each writer lays a different emphasis on their retelling. However, not all introductions justify the principles of their collection: Françoise Rachmühl and Charlotte Gastaut, in *Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology* (2018), launch into a brief explanatory diagram of the creation of the universe and the genesis of the Olympians – their connection to the Titans:

The gods are their children and their grandchildren. They feed on nectar and ambrosia, which renders them immortal. Twelve among them are considered the most important. Because they live on Mount Olympus – a tall mountain in the north of Greece – we call them Olympians. In this book you will find their story.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> McCaughrean, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Donna Jo Napoli, *Treasury of Greek Mythology: Classic Stories of Gods, Goddesses, Heroes and Monsters*, ill. Christina Balit, New York, NY: Scholastic, 2011, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Françoise Rachmühl, *Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology*, ill. Charlotte Gastaut, St. Louis, MO: Lion Forge Publishing, 2018 (ed. pr. in French 2013), 2.

This approach of considering the Greek myths as parts of a single story means that the myths' emphases fall on the Olympians, rather than on the heroes, and major figures, such as Hades, are relegated to minor characters. But collections need a shape, and selections have to be made – especially for young readers, and also for those who are new to the myth cycle. Rachmühl and Gastaut provide neat summaries of each of the gods – their names, attributes, and activities, as, for instance, in this presentation of Demeter:

**Demeter: Goddess of the Harvest.**

Ceres in Latin. Daughter of Chronos and Rhea. In her hands she often held a sheaf of wheat and a sickle. Her emblem is the poppy. Demeter is a tall, beautiful woman, tanned by the sun. A crown of wheat holds her blonde hair, and she wears a long, yellow dress, the color of the harvest. She teaches men how to farm. She protects the common folk, and, if properly worshipped, she grants them a bountiful harvest.<sup>8</sup>

Other collections are more extensive: Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, authors of *Brick Greek Myths: The Stories of Heracles, Athena, Pandora, Poseidon, and Other Ancient Heroes of Mount Olympus* (2014), provide a comprehensive retelling of the major myths, and give a neat summary of the main figures in two pages of "Dramatis Personae", one page devoted to the "Twelve Olympians", and the other to "Other Gods and Goddesses, Titans, and Prominent Figures".<sup>9</sup> This handy guide allows readers to refer back and forward to the figures to clarify any confusion they may feel in reading a large book with many stories. Writers find different ways to make things clear for readers who may be new to the subject, or need prompts and reminders to stay on track.

We suspect that a major reason for the current popularity of mythical retellings and adaptations is the sheer wealth of material that can be handled – formatted in collections or series. The way that the figures of myth are readily recognizable by icons and symbols means they are vivid, and fun to work with – fun to play with, too, for children. Icarus with his wings; Medusa with her snakes; Hera with her peacock; Zeus with his thunderbolt; Apollo with his lyre; Artemis with her bow: they are individually compelling, and also part of a collectible set of interesting stories and characters.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Brack, Sweeney, and Thomas, *Brick Greek Myths*, 2–3.

### Introductions to Classical Mythology in English

Numerous books promote themselves as being the first point of contact young readers might have with the world of classical mythology. Many are lavishly illustrated and remembered with affection by readers.

- 📖 Kathleen Elgin, *The First Book of Mythology: Greek-Roman* (1955)
- 📖 Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire, *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths* (1962), referenced by Barbara Dee for its influence in her novel *Halfway Normal* (2017)
- 📖 Heather Amery, *Usborne Greek Myths for Young Children*, ill. Linda Edwards (1999)
- 📖 Saviour Pirota, *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*, ill. Jan Lewis (2003)
- 📖 Heather Alexander, *A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology: The Stories of the Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, Monsters, and Other Mythological Creatures*, ill. Meredith Hamilton (2011)

### Fidelity and Responsibility

A final question concerns the ideas of fidelity and responsibility – to readers, but also to the ancient stories. If works like those discussed above focus on retelling and adapting classical material with a view to familiarizing young readers with the myth corpus, what do we make of works that break the mould – assuming familiarity and playing around, or works that whimsically adapt classical material for different kinds of storytelling. What does it mean if a child's first encounter with the ancient world is through a book like Gary Northfield's "Julius Zebra" series (2015–present), full of talking animals and wacky characters instead of through an accurate summary of the reign of the Emperor Hadrian? Or the "My Busy Books" *Unicorns and Friends* by Erika White (2019), which is part toy, part story about a group of unicorns and their magical friends (including Horace the Hippocamp and Pegasus), which makes no real attempt to introduce the creatures as mythical beings? Some may worry that playful approaches impose anachronistic ideas and obfuscate a true appreciation of the ancient world's particular qualities.

Scholarly precision and good storytelling, however, are not quite the same, and our opinion is that it does not hurt a child to experience the imaginative impact of myths before they understand their historical realities. Like the White Queen in *Alice through the Looking Glass* (1871), children are more than capable of believing "six impossible things before breakfast". And we can see that capacity in operation in a great many children's fantasy texts: such as Christopher Myers's picture book *Wings* (2000), in which a schoolgirl narrator immediately marvels at her new classmate's wings. In contrast with her

suspicious and xenophobic classmates, she learns the impact of being open to new ideas, and both children flourish through their friendship. In A.J. Hunter's chapter book *Myth Raiders: Medusa's Curse* (2015), cousins Trey and Sam find themselves transported to the "mythic" realm when they put together the two halves of a magical disk and are anointed as Chosen Ones to help save the world from destruction. Their archaeological interests prepare them a little for the actions, but a lot of the novel's charm comes from seeing the children facing new and mysterious creatures and ideas and adapting to handle them. Alex, the protagonist of John Dougherty's comic fantasy *Zeus on the Loose* (ill. Georgien Overwater; 2004), has to contend with the irruption of the great god into his ordinary British school. Zeus' exuberant demands test Alex's ingenuity in meeting new and challenging situations – finding him clothes to wear (his mother's best nightie), feeding him appropriately (bacon crisps as an approximation of hecatombs of beef), and hiding him from the teachers (in the school toilet block).

Some children are put off by literature that has even a whiff of the educational about it, and for these readers, illustrated novels like *Zeus on the Loose* or the "Julius Zebra" series, or comics like the *Asterix* series, offer attractive ways to think about the ancient world – not directly, but slant-wise. Storytelling is a valid and vivid means of education, providing first encounters of many kinds beyond the scope of the purely informational, and will likely leave readers with a sense that there is much more to find out about the classical world.

### Further Reading on First Encounters

Francis Spufford, *The Child That Books Built: A Life in Reading*, London and New York, NY: Picador, 2003.

Maria Tatar, *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2009.

# G



is for girls and boys

# G

is for girls and boys



When the Arcadian princess Atalanta was born, her father, Iasus, wanted a son, and abandoned his baby daughter in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> There, she was taken care of by the goddess Artemis, who sent a bear to nurture her. Atalanta grew up to be a fierce hunter. When

she was reunited with her father, he decided she should marry. She protested, and they struck a bargain: she must take as a husband whoever could beat her in a footrace. Confident that she was the fastest runner in the world, Atalanta agreed. But a cunning prince named Hippomenes made a deal with the goddess Aphrodite, who gave him three golden apples to distract and slow Atalanta down. This worked, and Atalanta married Hippomenes, though she noted his trickery. Eventually they were turned into lions, by Aphrodite, not pleased that they neglected to worship her.

Atalanta is an appealing figure: an unconventional girl who does more than sit at home and weave. As a runner and as a hunter, she resists the restrictions placed on her by her father's patriarchal expectations, and though she may seem to be "tamed" in the end by Hippomenes' tricks, her transformation into a lion shows her wild fierceness is undimmed. She appears in picture books and collections of retellings, a singular figure who challenges traditional ideas about what it means to be a girl. In *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World* (ill. Naomi Lewis; 2004), a picture book for beginning readers, Vashti Farrer shows how clever Atalanta is, seeing through her father's arguments, and making choices for herself. Priscilla Galloway's retelling for older children, also called *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World* (ill. Normand Cousineau; 1995), emphasizes how Atalanta faces gender-specific expectations from her father and her stepmother, but gains strength and independence. The story ends with Atalanta asserting her choice, and reflecting on what she is giving up by marrying:

"I can't serve Artemis the way she wants any longer. It feels very strange. I hope she won't be too angry with me when we get married."

"Do you want to marry me?" asked Melanion. "Are you sure?"

"I promised to marry the man who could win the race, but I never said I'd want to. I think I want to marry you, Melanion, but I'm not sure."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Apollodorus, *Library* 3.9.2.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Galloway, *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World*, ill. Normand Cousineau, Toronto: Annick Press, 1995, 75.

Other writers challenge the myth further: Elizabeth Tammi's young adult novel *Outrun the Wind* (2018) retells the story from two perspectives – that of Atalanta, and of Kahina, a fictionalized huntress who protects her. Eventually the two fall in love, but not until Atalanta's traditional story has played out. While other retellings show Atalanta eventually giving into societal expectations, this recasting of the myth highlights the way that the original Atalanta myth challenges gender norms.

### Atalanta

*Abandoned by her father as a baby, Atalanta was raised by a bear. A skilled huntress, she devoted herself to Artemis and refused to marry. Hippomenes beat her in a footrace by distracting her with a trio of golden apples. Atalanta's story has proved popular with contemporary storytellers, who have cast her as a feminist figure.*

**Retelling – Priscilla Galloway, *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World*, ill. Normand Cousineau (1995)**

With illustrations influenced by Ancient Greek art, this picture book retelling of the myth of Atalanta divides the story into detailed chapters, highlighting the story of her coming of age.

**Revision – Jane Yolen and Robert J. Harris, *Atalanta and the Arcadian Beast* (2003)**

This chapter book imagines a new episode in the story of the young huntress Atalanta, who joins Orion in a hunt for a monstrous beast that is terrorizing the land, avenging the death of her adoptive father and uncovering the story of her origins along the way.

**Adaptation – Stephanie Spinner, *Quiver* (2002)**

Written for young adults, this novel extends Atalanta's story into a full-length novel, telling the story of the competition for her hand, with interventions and interference by the Olympian gods and goddesses.

**Allusion – Elizabeth Tammi, *Outrun the Wind* (2018)**

This young adult fantasy novel uses the story of Atalanta to explore the possibilities for female agency in the ancient world, bringing together mortal and immortal characters to examine the power of destiny and the propensity for mythic patterns to repeat themselves.

## Conforming or Challenging?

Gender is always important, always pervasive, in children's literature, which is perpetually working both within conventional ideas about gender, as well as working outside of them. The myths of the ancient world engage with gender,

reinscribing patriarchal norms, revealing matriarchal ideas, and finding room for protagonists who evade categories, providing useful inspiration for those who want to tell a simple story, or those who want to break loose. Take, for instance, Jessica Love's award-winning picture book, *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018), inspired by the mythology of mermaids, creatures who are half fish and half woman. Julián, the little boy of the title, goes to the pool with his *abuela* (grandmother), and on his way there is inspired by the "mermaids" he sees on the subway. These ambiguous figures, possibly male, possibly female, possibly transgender, possibly transvestite, have a mythical glamour that he wants to emulate. As he swims, he dreams of becoming one. At home, he dresses up in his *abuela's* curtains, and tries on her makeup while she is out of the room. When she comes back, she looks at him closely, then smiles and takes him out on a special expedition – through the streets of their New York neighbourhood, to the carnival at Coney Island, where an annual mermaid parade takes place. This is a picture book about finding one's tribe: in this case, Julián is lucky to have a supportive *abuela*, who knows what to do for a grandchild who wants to be a mermaid, and the book has rightly been praised for its sensitive representation of gender nonconformity.

Julián is not alone in contemporary children's literature. He is joined by the "Lumberjanes", five gender-diverse girls in a popular comic series (2015–2020) that bears their name, who go on adventures at a mysterious camp in the woods, where they encounter mysterious and mythical figures, including Apollo and Artemis, who are bent on causing trouble (see also "K is for Kidding Around", "N is for Nature", "X Marks the Spot"). "Friendship to the Max" is the girls' motto, and they use their wits and teamwork to solve puzzles and outwit the mischievous gods. Their gender styles vary: from girly-girl April who has significant fighting powers, using her hair-elastic to take out baddies, to best-friends-on-the-cusp-of-romance Mal and Molly. Mal is a punk, but is cautious and sensitive. Shy Molly is an excellent archer and protects Mal. Ripley, the youngest, gets into the most trouble, but is also attuned to others' emotions. And transgender Jo is the leader of the group, and solver of the main mathematical puzzles in the story. This quintet of friends, each one a realistic mixture of qualities, backgrounds, and styles, offers something unusual for girl readers, and has been praised for its representation of gender diversity, and its empowering storylines.

## Thinking about Gender and Diversity

*Gender plays a huge role in children's books, and some books are written specifically with diverse gender roles and norms in mind, gently and positively. Often, mythical elements contribute to the stories' presentation of individuality and diversity.*

In Katie O'Neill's *Aquicorn Cove* (2018), a love story between a fisherwoman called Mae and Aure, a woman from an underwater kingdom, is part of a graphic novel reflecting on how humans can live respectfully with the environment.

A picture book, Jessica Love's *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018), shows a little boy whose *abuela* supports him in his desire to be a mermaid and join the Coney Island mermaid parade.

"Lumberjanes" (2015–2020), by Noelle Stevenson, Grace Ellis, Shannon Watters, and Brooklyn Allen, is a series of graphic novels featuring a group of girl scouts at a camp in the middle of a mysterious forest who become involved in uncanny adventures with gods and magical creatures. The Lumberjanes, who present different types of femininity and abilities, team up to win the day: the overall message is "Friendship to the Max!"

*The Black Flamingo* (2019), by Dean Atta, presents the story of Michael, a gay, mixed-race boy, growing up in suburban London, and showing his life from childhood to the day he gives a drag performance for the first time (as the "black flamingo" of the title). Metaphors of transformation and metamorphosis are important in this story.

Stories like *Julián Is a Mermaid* and the "Lumberjanes" deliberately challenge convention, showing children finding ways to express their individuality and difference from the norm. Significant is their association with mythical figures and spaces – Julián's interest in figures from sea mythology, and the Lumberjanes' comfort in a wild wood where mysterious things happen. Indeed, liminal spaces can be used to represent a kind of "queer space", and many storytellers use mythological figures to help think through ideas and identities that can seem foreign, or outside of the norm. (This is not to say that anything other than the heteronormative "standard" is automatically a mythological creature – somehow non-human or unreal – but rather to say that mythology allows for a sense of exploration about identity and that authors who draw on mythology for these purposes find it productive.)

## Girls and Agency

What the norm is, of course, changes as culture changes, and as our understanding of the ancient world develops. Many contemporary storytellers for adults confront the limited roles available to girls in the ancient world, challenging the

depressing view that they are objects to be fought over, chattels of their fathers and husbands, victims of abuse or sacrifice, silently suffering and never at the centre of the story. And so do writers for teenage girls, finding ways to show girls in the ancient world living interesting and empowered lives, where they achieve agency.

Wendy Orr's novels *Dragonfly Song* (2016), *Swallow's Dance* (2018), and *Cuckoo's Flight* (2021), for instance, depict the lives of Minoan girls who take on powerful roles: Aissa of *Dragonfly Song* becomes a bull-dancer; Leira of *Swallow's Dance* saves her mother and grandmother from a catastrophic earthquake; while Clio of *Cuckoo's Flight* cares for her beloved horses and helps to prevent a war, while coping with the aftermath of an accident that has disabled her and stopped her being able to ride. Sulari D. Gentill's "Hero Trilogy" (2011–2013) retells the *Odyssey* from the perspective of a teenage girl who follows Odysseus in order to clear her brothers' name. Jennifer Cook's *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004) and *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess* (2005) retell famous myths from the perspective of often otherwise passive women, showing them to possess sharp wits and sly senses of humour.

Many of these retellings focus on relationships, a common theme in girls' fiction. In her historical novel *Dido* (2009), Adèle Geras recasts the story of Dido and Aeneas,<sup>3</sup> seen through the eyes of Elissa, a handmaiden in Carthage who becomes Ascanius' nurse, Aeneas' lover, and finds herself in competition with Dido for his affections. In *Beauty's Daughter* (2013), Carolyn Meyer offers a retelling of the Trojan War, as viewed by Hermione, the daughter of Helen and Menelaus. Both novels present epic narratives from the perspective of teenage girls: Hermione witnesses the events of the Trojan War; Elissa the events leading to Aeneas' founding of Rome. And while purists may wonder at the way that war is sidelined for more personal and romantic stories, prioritizing the perspective of minor players opens up a space for teenage girls to imagine how it might feel to be part of great mythical narratives. The novels also explore what it could be like to be growing up as a teenager in ancient culture. *Beauty's Daughter*, in particular, focuses on a "real" teenager: Hermione, who matures from a girl of eleven to a young woman, during the period of the Trojan War. While her narrative gives in, somewhat, to the demands of romantic fiction and bypasses much of the very real suffering of the war, there is much to be said about the desire to find characters who can offer a teenager's-eye view. Nevertheless,

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<sup>3</sup> For the story of Dido and Aeneas, see Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.305–756, 4.1–705.

*Beauty's Daughter* highlights how the process of writing girls into the fabric of myth is not always straightforward or successful.

Indeed, many romance novels aimed at teenage girls find themselves modifying or warping the original stories, in order to fulfil the demands of the genre, as shown by myriad retellings of the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice, Cupid and Psyche, or Persephone and Hades. Paranormal romances, enormously popular with young adult readers, recast these mythical stories according to modern constructions: Hades, in particular, reappears as a Byronic hero, brooding, misunderstood, a soulful loner in need of the right woman's healing touch, a kind of desirable forbidden fruit for young women. Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus* web comic (2018–present), for instance, takes this approach, presenting the Hades–Persephone story as a true romance. (Interestingly, her approach is sufficiently aware of the challenging sexual politics of a number of the deities to mitigate the soft-romance problematics – see our discussion of trigger warnings in “D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects”.) Francesca Lia Block's novels for older teens *Psyche in a Dress* (2006) and *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013) take a similar approach, highlighting the allure, but also the challenge, of sexuality. While *Love in the Time of Global Warming* draws together a group of teens with diverse sexual orientations, it does so in the context of a post-apocalyptic world. Not only have norms been shattered, but there are no parents around to help guide their children – suggesting that sexuality can only be explored far away from parental authority.

## Forbidden Fruit

Adolescence is when young people want to stretch their wings, and many of the original myths show clashes between teenagers and their parents' rules. Icarus fails to heed his father's warning to plot a middle course across the sky. Phaethon insists on driving the Chariot of the Sun even though he has neither the strength nor the experience.<sup>4</sup> Both myths play on the tensions in the father–son relationship, and versions of these myths written for children promote the lesson of obedience, showing the disastrous consequences for those who do not listen to their parents. As Holly Blackford notes, similar dynamics are at the heart of the Demeter and Persephone story, in which the forbidden fruit of the

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<sup>4</sup> For the myth of Phaethon, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.749–2.328.

Underworld (and also of sexuality) serves to separate the mother and daughter, at least temporarily.<sup>5</sup>

Several recent retellings cast Demeter as an overprotective ancient-world “helicopter” parent, who watches her daughter’s every move. Kate McMullan’s *Phone Home, Persephone!* (2002) offers a version in which Persephone, desperate to escape her mother’s control, hitches a ride with Hades to the Underworld and refuses to leave. In Jennifer Cook’s young adult novel *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess* (2005), Persephone explains how uncertain she is about her place in the world, and how she feels pressure from her mother to be the embodiment of purity and innocence when she also craves darkness. Loïc Locatelli-Kournwsky’s graphic novel *Perséphone* (2017) puts Persephone in conflict with Demeter, resenting her mother’s competence and finding her domineering and smothering. So too do Rachel Smythe in *Lore Olympus* (2018–present), Francesca Lia Block in *Psyche in a Dress*, and George O’Connor in *Hades: Lord of the Dead* (2012). The predominance of this motif suggests that the myth is extremely useful to help young adult readers think about how they relate to their parents, especially when they are embarking on new relationships and friendships. Children’s and young adults’ stories often show what happens when parents are not around, or when they are ignored. Many plots simply would not happen were parents available to keep their children safe, and stories about sexuality are no exception. Sanitizing the Hades–Persephone plot as an example of true romance runs the risk of glossing over the dangers of seduction or abduction.

## School Tension

Nevertheless, for younger readers (that is, tweens), safer depictions of romance and friendship are also important, and the school story is a perennial form of children’s literature, offering a strong structure in which to present the challenges of fitting in socially, finding friends, and negotiating romance. Mythological school stories are often aimed at younger audiences. Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams’s extremely popular “Goddess Girls” series (2010–present), written for tweens (aged nine to thirteen) presents an attractive vision of Olympus as “Mount Olympus Academy”, a school high among the clouds, furnished with “gleaming marble floor tiles and golden fountains”, where “Goddess Girls”,

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<sup>5</sup> Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls’ Fantasy Literature*.

teenage versions of the gods, learn how to master immortal skills, make friends, cope with enemies, fall in love, and manipulate heroes. These stories are directed at girls, presented in cute pastels and glitter-strewn box-sets, and sometimes with a complimentary bracelet, to “give ancient Greek myths present-day personality!”<sup>6</sup> They feature the best-known of the Greek goddesses. Each takes her turn at being the focus character in different novels, which recast the myths for a high school setting, and give insight into what may be the goddesses’ private feelings and teenage anxieties. These popular stories are generally quite conservative in their presentation of gender roles, perhaps because they are driven by a set of commercial imperatives that aims at a mainstream audience – factors to bear in mind when thinking about choice and readership.

Other writers use the tropes and settings of high schools to recast the myths and focus on the experience of teenage girls (mortal or divine), showing them negotiating high school society – friendship, romance, and identity. Clea Hantman’s *Heaven Sent* (2002) tells the story of three muses (Polly, Era, and Thalia) who are banished to earth by their father, Zeus. Before they can return to Olympus, they must prove themselves at mortal Nova High and overcome the wrath of the Furies. Tera Lynn Childs’s *Oh, My, Gods* (2008) features the opposite scenario, in which Phoebe, an athletic teenager, leaves California to start high school on a tiny Greek island, and finds that she is the only pupil who is mortal. Both stories involve fitting in and finding one’s identity in the process. In Jennifer Estep’s “Mythos Academy” series (2011–2013), seventeen-year-old Gypsy Gwen Frost goes to school with the descendants of Amazons, Spartans, and Valkyries. School fantasy novels like these exploit the appealing elements of mythology, and allow writers to explore the challenges facing girls.

Similar novels for boys include Rick Riordan’s “Percy Jackson and the Olympians” series (2005–2009), but the school story genre (despite the impact of the *Harry Potter* series on children’s fiction) is not quite so dominant for boys, at least where classical material is concerned. Instead, historical novels continually feature boy protagonists, who act as witnesses to history, and whose adventures show different elements of the ancient world. Ken Catran’s *Voyage with Jason* (2001) and Patrick Bowman’s *Torn from Troy* (2011) recount the exploits of teenage boys who accompany the heroes on their famous adventures, while David Hair and Cath Mayo imagine Odysseus’ youth in *Athena’s Champion*

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<sup>6</sup> “Goddess Girls Books #1–4”, Simon & Schuster Digital Catalogue, <https://catalog.simonandschuster.com/TitleDetails/TitleDetails.aspx?cid=1308&isbn=9781442482104> (accessed 17 November 2021).

(2018). Perhaps boys' adventures fit more neatly into the literature and culture of the ancient world, which offer more seemingly straightforward explorations of gender roles. Nevertheless, writers are conscious of the difference between ancient and modern ideas, about masculinity and femininity, about gender equity and available social roles.

### **Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, "Goddess Girls" Series (2010–present)**

Written for tween-age girls, this is a series of cheerful, cute chapter books, celebrated for giving "ancient Greek myths present-day personality!" Echoing Ann M. Martin's "The Baby-Sitters Club" books, the series centres on a group of girlfriends with diverse dispositions and interests. Athena, the youngest of the group, is smart and studious. Aphrodite is gorgeous and stylish, Artemis brave and sporty, and Persephone mysterious and kind. Each book in the series is focalized through one of their perspectives, giving insight into their private feelings and adolescent anxieties.

The friends attend Mount Olympus Academy, an illustrious school in the sky, built out of gleaming marble and decorated with frescoes and mosaics. Zeus is the Principal, while other mythic figures work as teachers and support staff (the multi-headed Ms Hydra is the multitasking school secretary). Mount Olympus Academy is where young goddess girls and god boys go to develop their divine skills, taking classes in hero-ology, beauty-ology, beast-ology and spell-ology. Along the way, they learn the value of friendship, honesty, and open communication. Readers, in turn, are introduced to the core elements of the major myths along with these important aspects of social behaviour.

Another inspiration is the many-volumed series of high school stories, the "Sweet Valley High" books, which are aimed at slightly older teenagers. Though less overtly focused on romance and gossip, the "Goddess Girls" series features many of the same tropes and clichés of American high school life – cute boys, mean girls, grumpy teachers, cheerleaders, school dances, and dramas in the classroom, corridors, and cafeteria. Over the last decade, twenty-eight "Goddess Girls" books have been released, with future books anticipated.

Holub is an important figure in the current craze for children's retellings of classical myth. In addition to the "Goddess Girls" series, she is responsible for the "Little Goddess Girls" books for slightly younger readers (aged five to seven), the "Mini Myths" board books for toddlers, and the "Heroes in Training" chapter books, which recast the Olympian gods as a group of teenagers on a quest. In an interview, Holub has emphasized her commitment to retaining the "core bones of an original myth", while also incorporating humour and themes that are relevant to modern children. The popularity of the "Goddess Girls" franchise suggests she has hit upon the right combination of fidelity and fun.

## Where Are All the Girls?

The Olympic Games, for instance, reveal the problem of gender inequity for modern readers, as several children's books point out. Terry Deary's *The Tortoise and the Dare* (ill. Helen Flook; 2017) is set in an Ancient Greek school in 750 BCE, just before the Olympic Games are about to begin. Two boys, Cypselis and Bacchiad, who are to compete in their school's version of the games, lay bets on the outcome: if Cypselis wins, he gets a new goat; if he loses, his twin sister, Elena, becomes Bacchiad's slave. Horrified by the prospect, Elena uses her skills and trickery to make sure Cypselis wins. Shoo Rayner's "Olympia" series of short readers introducing children to aspects of the Olympic Games (2011) shows another pair of Greek siblings, Olly and Chloe, learning different types of Ancient Greek sports. While Olly is able to compete officially, Chloe is continually frustrated at having her talents go unrecognized. Similarly, Mary Pope Osborne's time-travel adventure *Hour of the Olympics* (ill. Sal Murdocca; 1998) also explores the restrictions placed on young women in the Ancient Greek world. Modern-world siblings Jack and Annie travel back in time to witness the first ever Olympic Games. They meet Plato, who acts as a guide, introducing them (and the vicarious reader) to both the history and the myths of Ancient Greece. Because of her sex, Annie is not permitted to participate, but she sneaks in and demonstrates that modern girls can do everything that boys can. The children seem accepting of the gender roles of the ancient world, but return to their own time with an appreciation of the benefits of feminism and egalitarianism.

Many writers are conscious of the need to appeal to both boys and girls, and to show the ancient world's opportunities and restrictions. Caroline Lawrence's popular series of historical detective stories, "The Roman Mysteries", for instance, feature a team of young detectives: Flavia (a Roman girl who lives in Ostia), Nubia (a slave girl from Africa), Jonathan (a Jewish boy), and Lupus (a mute beggar boy). As well as showing teamwork from a group of disparate children, Lawrence uses her protagonists' different backgrounds and genders to offer insights into the complexities of Roman society.

## Boys Will Be Boys

Despite authors' efforts to present options for girls and boys, there are some broad differences in the presentation of the ancient world, some of which are

affected by contemporary publishing approaches. Stereotypically, books for boys feature high levels of action and excitement, often accompanied by silly jokes and slapstick humour. This is especially the case in retellings and non-fiction books, which try to emphasize the excitement factor of the ancient world. For example, Michael Townsend's *Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders* (2010), is fast-paced, rollicking through nine well-known stories from the classical corpus.

THE STORY YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ CONTAINS NINE BIZARRE AND  
WACKY TALES THAT TAKE PLACE IN A GREEK-TASTIC MYTH-O-RIFIC  
WORLD!!!<sup>7</sup>

This noisy book, styled with bold speech bubbles, graphic sound effects, and crude humour, introduces Ancient Greece as "a world full of stupid sheep and a land without skyscrapers".<sup>8</sup> Its gods and heroes are hyperactive and immature, with short attention spans, and consumed by base desires for food, gold, and success. The speech bubbles combine with the loud colour scheme, making sure that no reader can underestimate the excitement value of the ancient world.

This approach aims to draw in unwilling readers, and can be seen in scores of popular retellings, collections, and information books. In his *Ten Best Greek Legends Ever!* (ill. Michael Tickner; 2009), Terry Deary, whose bestselling "Horrible Histories" (1993–2013) series emphasizes the gross-out factor of different periods in history, uses a mixture of prose retellings, break-out boxes, comic illustrations, and jokes. Ranking the myths as the "best ever" appeals to the idea that boys (and girls) enjoy competition and collecting. Deary presents far more than the ten legends of the title, suggesting that he is aware of how to lure boys in with the promise of a quick read. And as with his "Horrible Histories", Deary's presentation of the myths is often critical: in *Ten Best Greek Legends Ever!*, he comments forcefully on the heroes' bad behaviour, offering the insight that even the greatest among us is flawed, and therefore human (a message that brings them closer to young readers).

Blake Hoena's "Gross Gods" series exploits the gross-out humour approach, with "hilariously disgusting" titles, such as *Jason and the Totally Funky Fleece*, *Hercules and the Pooper-Scooper Peril*, *Theseus and the Maze-O-Muck*, and

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Townsend, *Michael Townsend's Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders*, New York, NY: Puffin Books, 2014 (ed. pr. 2010), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 5.

*Medusa and Her Oh-So-Stinky Snakes* (ill. Ivica Stevanovic; all 2019). Jillian Powell's *The Gruesome Truth about the Greeks* (2011) and Susan Meyer's *The Totally Gross History of Ancient Greece* (2016) highlight the more revolting parts of ancient history, especially to do with diet, hygiene, and medical practices. Aimed specifically at reluctant readers is the "You Wouldn't Want to Be" series, from Salariya Press (*You Wouldn't Want to Be a Roman Soldier! Barbarians You'd Rather Not Meet* [2006]; *You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics! Races You'd Rather Not Run* [2004]; *You Wouldn't Want to Be a Roman Gladiator! Gory Things You'd Rather Not Know* [2001]). These glossy picture books with cartoon-like images, diagrams, and plenty of factoids about the ancient world emphasize the filthy underbelly of civilizations – unpleasant but intriguing details that make the past lively for young readers.

It is, of course, not only boys who find gruesome details fascinating. But the conscious aiming at a "frogs and snails" version of boyhood suggests that publishers have a set idea of what will appeal to boys, and a set idea that boys, more than girls, are reluctant readers. (Some publishers also seem to under-value boys' tastes and discernment, with shoddily produced slap-dash work.) Nevertheless, Terry Deary and Jon Scieszka proceed from a principled approach, in which they aim specifically at boys who may be reluctant to read because their world view is under-represented. Deary's "Horrible Histories", for instance, are more interested in underdogs than heroes, and deliberately present a view that includes broad swathes of society. Scieszka's "Time Warp Trio" series (1991–2017), which takes three American boys through history, is very funny, and full of clever jokes which may lead boys to read further and find out more (see "K is for Kidding Around").

Children of all genders deserve good books. They deserve to be entertained and informed, and to have books that encourage them to grow, and that validate or reflect upon their world views. Stereotypical or trite gender approaches can be a sign that a book is not carefully or thoughtfully produced. And while gender is not always the main issue at work, its treatment in stories about the classical world will nevertheless have an impact, even if only subtly or by increment. It is therefore useful to be aware of how it operates – in historical contexts, where the rules and restrictions of gender roles can be foregrounded in contrast with our own assumptions, or in mythical contexts, which often allow relative freedom to explore and challenge the assumptions of the ancient world, and also the assumptions of our own.

### **Some Further Reading on Gender in Children's Literature**

Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1997.

Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret R. Higonnet, eds., *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Kenneth B. Kidd, *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

is for how to be heroic





is for how to be heroic

The Greek myths depict a challenging and violent world, where gods are capricious and danger lurks at many a turn. They make it clear that heroes are mighty because of how they overcome those challenges. Heroes are also flawed, and some of their difficulties

come from those flaws. In Hercules' case (the Hercules of the myths), his great strength is also his great weakness. He kills his family in a fit of madness and spends the rest of his life atoning for this disaster – and his famous Labours are a kind of penance. Though Theseus bravely kills the terrifying Minotaur, saving his own kingdom from the cruelty of King Minos, he callously discards Minos' daughter, Ariadne, when she is no longer useful to him, and carelessly causes the death of his own father, King Aegeus, when he forgets to let him know he is safe. Odysseus makes his way safely home to Ithaca, overcoming many perils and avoiding many snares, but he also takes a long time about it, losing his crew, and engaging in dalliances along the way. Atalanta resists marrying to suit her father, but killing the suitors who cannot beat her in a race might seem unnecessarily violent to modern readers. Aeneas founds Rome, but at some cost to poor Dido, and to the Italians who inhabit the country already. Many heroines are less flawed; perhaps they represent the costs of sacrifice and endurance. Brave Penelope, who holds the fort in Ithaca while Odysseus lingers on the road home, is a case in point: her ingenuity and strength make her remarkable. Psyche is another heroine who atones for a small mistake (peeping at the face of her mysterious lover), by travelling a very hard road to prove her worthiness to be reunited with Eros. As Kathleen Rylant observes of the Psyche story:

It is possible to be heroic without ever wielding a sword, slaying a dragon, or dying for a noble cause. While heroism always involves the fight for something, the battle can take place within oneself as commonly as it can without. The battle within is a spiritual battle and requires making a choice about what is most important in one's life. That done, then comes the challenge to protect it.

For Psyche, the choice was about love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Rylant, "Psyche", in Kathleen Rylant, *The Beautiful Stories of Life: Six Greek Myths Retold*, ill. Carson Ellis, Orlando, FL: Harcourt and Houghton Mifflin, 2009, 51–52.

Heroic stories from the classical world offer rich source material for thinking about what it means to be heroic, and we see that richness expanded and explored in retellings and adaptations. There is not one single way to be heroic, and heroism is not limited to one definition. This is what makes them so useful and interesting to be retold for young readers, whose characters and identities are developing, and who are learning what it means to be part of human society.

In presenting heroic stories to young readers, writers and illustrators contend, therefore, with the many paradoxes and complexities of the myths. Heroism is a complicated business, and in the world of children's literature it is further complicated by the challenges of sharing what it means with young audiences. With that in mind, we have boiled heroism down to seven basic principles, showing how children's stories present heroic characters and their adventures, in varying scales and to various purposes. To be heroic in children's literature, just as in life (and in some myths), you do not have to be descended from the gods, or be from a noble house, or follow a particular chosen path. You do not have to come from anywhere in particular – you do not have to be a certain race or gender or age or even species. And you do not have to be perfect – certainly the heroes of the ancient world are far from being so. But what you can do (what we all can do) is try to do better, and to do well, and we suggest the following seven basic ideas:

- ▣ Face your fears.
- ▣ Be strong.
- ▣ Have a few tricks up your sleeve.
- ▣ Travel far and wide (scale the heights and plumb the depths).
- ▣ Fight for what is important.
- ▣ Be kind and accept kindness from others.
- ▣ Bide your time and be an inspiration.

## **Face Your Fears (Like Perseus...)**

When the hero Perseus was sent to bring back the head of the Gorgon Medusa for the horrible King Polydectes who had designs on Perseus' mother, Danae, he faced a difficult task: should he look into Medusa's eyes, he would be turned to stone – he would be literally petrified by her gaze. But with advice and help from the goddess Athena, Perseus found a way to fulfil his task: using the reflection in the shield she gave him, he was able to decapitate her. In some versions, he did this while she slept. If the Gorgon's terrifying gaze was so powerful that

it literally petrified those who met it, then in finding a way to face his fears, and to look safely on danger, Perseus was very clever and very brave. Rather than running away and hiding, he used his own wits and strength, accepted the help of the goddess, and took the head back home, using it as a weapon against the vicious king who had sent him out to die.

### **Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" Series (2005–2009)**

▣ *The Lightning Thief*

▣ *The Sea of Monsters*

▣ *The Titan's Curse*

▣ *The Battle of the Labyrinth*

▣ *The Last Olympian*

Since the release of *The Lightning Thief* in 2005, this series of young adult fantasy novels has become one of the best-known and commercially successful adaptations of classical mythology, with films, graphic novels, computer games, and even a musical part of the franchise. Riordan created the character Percy Jackson to entertain his twelve-year-old, Greek-mythology-loving son, Harley, who was having difficulties at school having been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. Percy struggles with the same conditions, which are revealed to be indicators of his status as a demigod. His ADHD is attributed to having the lightning-fast reflexes of a hero, and his dyslexia is explained as a consequence of his brain being hard-wired for Ancient Greek. The books are steeped in mythological detail, but do not adhere to the traditional versions recounted in ancient sources. Unlike his classical namesake Perseus, Percy is the son of Poseidon, not Zeus, and in the first book he fights not only Medusa, but also the Minotaur, and takes on the quests traditionally associated with other heroes. The books are based on the premise that as immortals, the Olympian gods have endured through time into the modern era, continuing to sire children with mortals, and relocating their headquarters in accordance with where the world's power resides. Thus, Olympus is located on the 600th floor of the Empire State Building in New York, and the realm of Hades lies beneath a recording studio in Los Angeles. Other mythic episodes are played out as Percy and his friends journey across America and, in the subsequent books, beyond, with an emphasis on mythological patterns and tropes repeating themselves, while also presenting possibilities for agency, self-determination, and different outcomes.

Riordan has followed the five books in the "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" series with other works that expand into Egyptian, Norse, and Roman myth, and feature an increasingly diverse cast of characters that include people of colour and those with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities. Through some of his characters Riordan also explores the experience of living with a physical disability, mental illness, and trauma, in stories that celebrate the notion that anyone can be a hero.

To become heroic is to face up to things: to face danger and difficulty, and not to give up. And in Perseus' heroic quest, we see this idea made literal: Perseus finds a way to look into the face of danger, and to avoid being petrified by it. Though many retellings and adaptations now find sympathy for the Gorgon (see "M is for Mythical and Magical Beings"), when we look at the story from Perseus' perspective, over and over we see him finding ways to look into Medusa's eyes, and not to be conquered by fear.

In a recasting of the myth in a modern Australian school yard, Melina Marchetta's short chapter book for children eight to ten years old, *The Gorgon in the Gully* (2010; see also "P is for Philosophical Approaches"), gives one of the clearest statements of this issue. The hero, Danny Griggs, overcomes his fear of danger, when he enters the Gorgon's "gully", that is, a garden near the school playing fields, where it is believed a Gorgon lives, to retrieve his team's football. He does so with the help of his dictionary and his mother (who function a little like Athena in offering guidance). In his dictionary, he finds the definition of Gorgon, which helps him think about what he is potentially getting into when he goes into the gully. And he does this with his mother's encouragement – she advises him to "look at whatever you're scared of from a different angle. Look at it up really close".<sup>2</sup> Like Perseus angling Athena's shield to look at Medusa's reflection, Danny uses his knowledge and the help of friends to brave the gully and retrieve the ball.

As we will see in "J is for Journeys", many heroes go out on adventures, where they must leave the relative safety of home, endure trials, and overcome danger. And while not every adventure encapsulates the idea of peril so literally, facing one's fears, risking the Gorgon's gaze, is an important part of heroism, requiring courage and strength.

### **Hercules**

*As punishment for harming his family, the immensely strong hero Hercules must complete a series of impossible labours. Using his brawn and occasionally his brain he overcomes many monsters, culminating in a trip to the Underworld to bring back Cerberus. The story of Hercules (or Heracles) is full of exciting adventures that make it popular with readers young and old.*

#### **Retelling – Ian Serraillier, *Heracles the Strong* (1971)**

An influential early retelling of the hero's labours, presented as a chapter book for young readers and accompanied by black-and-white woodcut illustrations that depict the drama of his encounters with monsters and gods.

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<sup>2</sup> Melina Marchetta, *The Gorgon in the Gully*, Camberwell: Puffin Books, 2010, 19.

**Revision – Francesca Simon, *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They’ve Never Been Told Before!*, ill. Ross Asquith (1999)**

A humorous time-travel story that sets the story straight that many of the exploits of Hercules and the other Greek heroes were in fact accomplished by an English girl, Susan, who is in possession of a magic coin.

**Adaptation – Stella Tarakson, *Here Comes Hercules!*, ill. Nick Roberts (2017)**

This chapter book and its sequels concentrate on the adventures of Tim, a young boy who befriends Hercules and his daughter, Zoe, and travels back and forth in time between the modern day and the ancient world of myth, solving mysteries and resolving problems in both worlds.

**Allusion – Connie Collins Morgan, *Hercules on the Bayou*, ill. Herb Leonhard (2016)**

Baby Hercules is born on the bayou in modern day Louisiana, and his exploits bring together Greek myth and Cajun legend in an amusing picture book.

## Be Strong (Like Hercules...)

The great hero Hercules is known for his physical strength. So mighty is he that “when huge snakes slithered into his crib to strangle him, he knotted and plaited them as if they were pieces of string, and threw them out again”.<sup>3</sup> That strength, of course, means that when things go wrong for Hercules, they can really go wrong, as we see in Geraldine McCaughrean’s version of the telling:

For Heracles was strong – fantastically strong – stronger than you and me and a hundred others put together. Fortunately, he was also gentle and kind, so that his friends had nothing to fear from him. His schoolteacher made him promise never to touch alcoholic drink, though. “If you were ever to get drunk, Heracles,” the schoolmaster said, “who knows what terrible thing you might do with that great strength of yours!”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> McCaughrean, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, 51. Lisa Maurice notes that McCaughrean, in considering how to present Hercules in her novel for young readers, found him such an unappealing character (violent, selfish, unfaithful) that she reinterpreted his story as a warning against the dangers of drunkenness. See Lisa Maurice, “From Elitism to Democratisation: A Half-Century of Hercules in Children’s Literature”, *Journal of Historical Fictions* 2.2 (2019), 81–101.

<sup>4</sup> McCaughrean, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, 51. Perhaps McCaughrean, eliding Hera’s role in the Hercules myth, creates a new kind of morality: about the value of soberness.

Hercules does give in to the temptation of drink, and driven mad by it, kills his family in a terrible rage. As punishment for his crime, he is forced to serve King Eurystheus, who gives him the famous Labours. Hercules' endurance and fortitude become clear in the way he conducts himself – doing what he is asked, however difficult: tasks requiring speed, accuracy, hard slog, and physical strength. Hercules is able to do it all, hunting mythical beasts, cleaning foul stables, and even holding up the sky. McCaughrean concludes:

After seven years, Heracles' hard labours came to an end, and he was free. But he was never free from his sorrow at taking that first glass of wine: not until the day he died.

Being only a man and not a god, he did die. But the gods did not forget him. They cut him out in stars and hung him in the sky, to rest from his labours for all time, among the singing planets.<sup>5</sup>

The Hercules myth enables writers to think about what it means to be strong – physically, mentally, and emotionally. Hercules is rewarded for his endurance, raised to the heavens for his heroism, and his name is synonymous with the idea of strength and fortitude. Strength also requires self-control, as Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli notice in their board book for toddlers *Play Nice, Hercules!* (2014), which distils his story to focus on the issue of self-control. The little boy Hercules is reminded by his father to play nicely with his younger sister, but responds: "I am not nice. I am strong! I can wham bam monsters!"<sup>6</sup> He destroys his sister's tower of blocks, and she begins to cry.<sup>7</sup> Hercules carefully tidies up the blocks (twelve of them, each of which has an image from his famous Labours), but in a neat twist, his sister knocks them all down again – girls can "wham bam" too.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 59.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Holub, *Play Nice, Hercules!*, ill. Leslie Patricelli, "Mini Myths", New York, NY: Abrams Appleseed, 2014, 2.

<sup>7</sup> In her analysis of this book for the database *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Sonya Nevin interprets this act of aggression as "a stand-in for ancient Heracles' destruction of his family". See Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: *Play Nice, Hercules!* (Mini Myths) by Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Dorota MacKenzie, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/341> (accessed 17 November 2021).

## Have a Few Tricks Up Your Sleeve (Like Odysseus...)

In board books like Holub and Patricelli's "Mini Myths" series, the lessons of the myths adapt neatly to basic behavioural lessons for very young children – Hercules learns to be nice; Pandora learns to be patient; Medusa learns to brush her hair. In *Don't Get Lost, Odysseus!*, a toddler version of the legendary hero learns what it is like to get lost, while out shopping in a mall with his mother (standing in for Athena or perhaps for Penelope?). Ignoring his mother's instructions, little Odysseus slips away while she is buying something, and wanders off to a tempting playground, where he happily plays until suddenly he howls with horror, thinking he is lost. Of course his mother has followed: she rescues him, and they go home. (This very simple story also hints at Odysseus' famous strong will and trickery: slipping away from his mother to play until he has had enough, then pretending that he wanted to go home all along.)

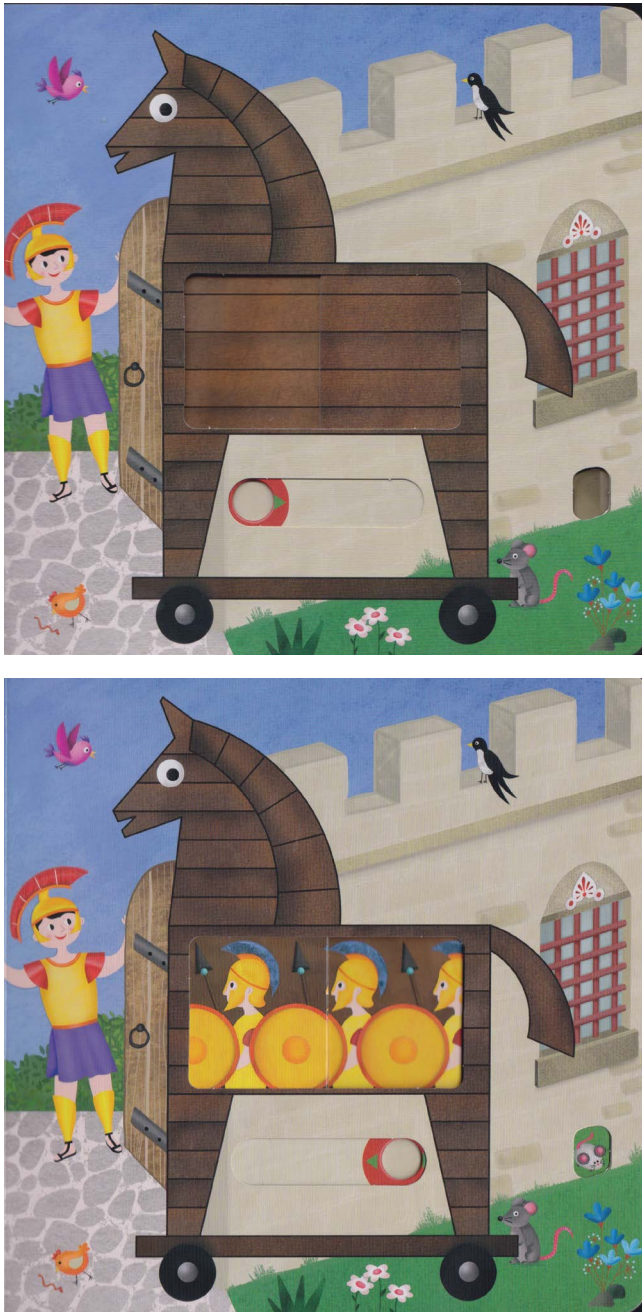
Odysseus is famous for key moments of cunning: such as coming up with the famous Trojan Horse (tricking the Trojans into thinking that the Greeks had given up on the siege of Troy, and had departed, leaving behind a gift in the shape of a giant horse):

The Trojans were amazed and sent out scouts to make sure that all the Greeks had left. One Greek was found, Sinon, who convinced King Priam that the horse, like himself, had been left as an offering to Athene for a safe journey home. So, as the Greeks had hoped, the Trojans pulled the horse into the city square and all day they celebrated beneath this symbol of their victory [...]. Later, as Troy lay sleeping, Sinon climbed the ramparts with a torch. Waving it high, he saw an answering signal from the returning Greek ships. Then he released Odysseus and a band of soldiers hidden in the belly of the wooden horse. Before any alarm could be sounded, Odysseus had captured the palace and killed the king. The Greek warriors from the ships swept through the city, looting and burning, until the whole of Troy was in flames.<sup>8</sup>

Marcia Williams's retelling is frank about the trickery involved in overcoming the Trojans, and the violence involved in warfare. Other retellings for young readers sometimes gloss over the violence and bloodshed involved, suggesting a discomfort with the real suffering of warfare, or, too, a discomfort with Odysseus' trickery. But retellings of his later encounter with the Cyclops, Polyphemus,

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<sup>8</sup> Marcia Williams, *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, London: Walker, 1996, 14.



**Figure 3:** The fun factor of the famous Trojan Horse, as seen through Anna Gkoutzouri's push-and-pull board book for very young readers. Anna Gkoutzouri, *Trojan Horse*, Amersham: Papadopoulos Publishing, 2020, 1a. Used with the Author's and Publisher's kind permission.

emphasize the one-eyed giant's viciousness, and Odysseus' cleverness in getting his men away is almost universally celebrated – even the moment when he tricks Polyphemus further by telling him that his name is “nobody”.<sup>9</sup>

So fearful were Polyphemus' screams that his neighbours rushed to the cave's entrance. From behind the boulder they asked who was killing their friend. But when the Cyclops cried, “The treachery of Nobody,” his friends left.<sup>10</sup>

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not simple stories, and like many of the great epics reveal the tragedies and compromises that are part of warfare. And the same may be said of Odysseus' trickery – as we have indicated before, he is *polútropos*: ‘much turned about’ – which can indicate the complexity of his character. In Kate McMullan's “Myth-O-Mania” series, narrated by a Hades who is frustrated by his brothers, Zeus and Poseidon, Odysseus is a liar:

Liar, liar, toga on fire! Odysseus lied to his crew, he lied to his wife, he lied to his ancient father. He lied to Athena, too, but of course the goddess saw right through him.<sup>11</sup>

Cleverness is not always ambiguous, but it can seem sneaky or underhand. And yet heroes need to use their wits as well as their strength. But not every hero has to be clever: sometimes intelligent kids or sidekicks offer their help to a hero whose strength comes from bravery and goodness. Francesca Simon's illustrated chapter book *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They've Never Been Told Before!* (ill. Ross Asquith; 1999), for instance, features a clever (and bossy) child called Susan, who travels into the world of ancient myths and helps a less-than-bright Hercules and other heroes solve problems and complete their quests. In Ian Trevaskis's chapter book *Medusa Stone* (2009), Australian teenagers Hannah and Jake are trapped in the ancient world by means of a mysterious game of hopscotch, and find themselves helping heroes such as Odysseus, Perseus, and Heracles, all of whom are easily flustered and in need of advice, especially from the quick-witted and practical Hannah. We will return shortly to the idea of help: for the moment, it is worth noting that stories like these allow modern children an agreeable fantasy – showing protagonists finding empowerment by helping famous heroes, who are less confident than might be

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<sup>9</sup> For tricking Polyphemus, see Homer, *Odyssey* 9.366, 9.408.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> McMullan, *Get Lost, Odysseus!*, 12.

expected. (Suggesting too the idea of the modest behind-the-scenes hero or heroine, who does good secretly, and without desiring fame.)

Cleverness is not the preserve of male heroes, of course: classical myth and legend contain many an intelligent woman. Odysseus' brilliant wife, Penelope, for instance, seems to equal her husband in wit and trickery – witness the story of how she held off the suitors who were trying to persuade her that he was never coming back, and that she should marry them and hand over the kingdom. Not until she had finished weaving the shroud of Odysseus' father, Laertes, would she consider a proposal.<sup>12</sup> At night, she would undo the work of the previous day. The suitors did not suspect that she was using delaying tactics, and she was able to keep them at bay. Penelope's story is one of intelligence and endurance: the fortitude that enabled her to keep going in the face of severe difficulty, to hold the fort until Odysseus returned. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad* (2005), written for a general audience, but often featuring on school curricula, suggests that Odysseus and Penelope are well matched in their cleverness and trickery: "[The] two of us were – by our own admission – proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either of us believed a word the other said".<sup>13</sup> But tricksters have a habit of survival – and while some heroes and heroines meet difficult ends, Odysseus and Penelope win through.

### (Un)Heroic Ends

*You may know about the heroes' famous adventures, but what happens after that?*

Hero	Death
Hercules	Dies a painful death after his wife, Deianira, gives him a tunic soaked in the blood of the Centaur Nessus, believing it to be a love potion. Following his cremation, he joins the gods on Olympus as an immortal.
Jason	Crushed to death when a rotten beam from his old ship, the Argo, falls on him. In Maz Evans's <i>Simply the Quest</i> (2017), he has reinvented himself as a morose rock star who prefers to sing about his former exploits than support Eliot in his quest.
Bellerophon	Tumbles off the back of Pegasus as he is trying to ascend to Olympus to join the gods. Survives the fall to live out a lonely life. He appears as a grumpy stablehand in Kallie George's <i>The Winged Horse Race</i> (2019).
Orpheus	Dismembered by an angry band of maenads after he spurns female company. For one representation of this moment, see David Almond's <i>A Song for Ella Grey</i> (2014).
Theseus	Loses the respect of the people of Athens and his throne. In an echo of his own father's untimely death, he is pushed over a cliff after trying to take Scyros.

<sup>12</sup> For Penelope's trickery, see Homer, *Odyssey* 2.96–105.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005, 173.

Odysseus

Killed in a skirmish with his illegitimate son, Telegonus. Roger Lancelyn Green recounts the story in *The Tale of Troy* (ill. Betty Middleton-Sandford; 1958), and Karen L. Carey fleshes the story out into a crossover work of historical fiction called *The Last Voyage of Odysseus* (1983).

Perseus

In *The Sea of Monsters* (2006), Percy Jackson explains that his mother named him after Perseus as he was the only hero who lived happily ever after, having defeated his enemies, while the other heroes were maimed, poisoned, betrayed, and cursed by the gods.

## Travel Widely: Scale the Heights and Plumb the Depths (Like Psyche and Demeter...)

Heroic figures often travel widely – Odysseus, Jason, Theseus, Perseus, and Hercules all journey through the Mediterranean, and landmarks are named after stages in their adventures. Other heroic travel patterns involve climbing to great heights or plunging to great depths. Take, for instance, the princess Psyche, whose beauty was so renowned that the people neglected to worship Aphrodite.<sup>14</sup> The goddess cursed Psyche, and the king asked Apollo for advice, who told him to place his daughter on the top of a mountain, “adorned as for the bed of marriage and of death”.<sup>15</sup> Weeping, Psyche went to the top of the mountain and awaited her fate. The gentle west wind, Zephyr, transported her from the mountain to the house of a god in a beautiful valley, where invisible servants did her bidding, and an invisible bridegroom came to her nightly. All went well until Psyche’s sisters persuaded her to try to see her lover – but she spilled hot oil on him from her lamp, and he fled to his mother. Miserable, Psyche searched through the lands for her true love (who is of course Cupid, the son of Aphrodite) until she reached the temple of Aphrodite, who gave her impossible tasks to do, the most fearsome of which required her to penetrate the Underworld and request Persephone’s beauty cream. This kind of hard work does not soften the heart of Aphrodite, but it restores Cupid to his true love’s side, and he seeks the aid of Zeus and the Olympians to elevate Psyche to immortality.

In a narrative that has much in common with folk and fairy tales, Psyche proves her love by heroically enduring many hardships: her special qualities mean that nature often comes to her aid. Her heroism comes from her loyalty

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<sup>14</sup> For the story of Psyche, see Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 4.28–6.24.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Pater, *Cupid and Psyche*, ill. Errol Le Cain, London: Faber & Faber, 1977, 6.

and love. Her name, of course, means soul, and her marriage to Cupid (or Eros) represents love's ideal union of soul and body.

When Psyche appears in children's and young adults' stories, it is either as the heroine of a fairy tale – elements of her trials such as sorting out a multitude of grains (until she is helped by the birds), or travelling to the Underworld in order to prove her devotion to her love, indicate her loveability (the birds of the air love her so that they help her), and her fortitude (it is no small feat to go to the Underworld, as we see in "U is for Underworld Adventures"). She offers an inspiration to writers interested in thinking about love's trials, and also its rewards. In Bruce Coville's fantasy for tween readers, *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love* (2003), shy twelve-year-old, Juliet Dove, learns about what it is to love and be loved when she finds herself re-enacting parts of Psyche's journey to help release Cupid, who has been trapped in a magic amulet. Through facing challenges, and through enlightening conversation with the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, Juliet finds her own voice, becoming a "mouse that roared",<sup>16</sup> helping save her town from the mischief of Eris when she speaks up at a crucial moment. While Juliet does not have a specific love interest, she nevertheless learns about different kinds of love (*érōs*, *agápē*, *phília*), and learns what it means to go through trials to help others.

Symbolic or real descents into the realm of death are among classical heroes' most difficult trials. Death is an "awfully big adventure",<sup>17</sup> to quote Peter Pan, and Greek mythology sends many figures "there and back again" (to quote the subtitle to Tolkien's *The Hobbit*). Hercules goes to the Underworld to fetch Cerberus, its guardian. Aeneas goes there to talk with his father. Orpheus goes there to win back his dead beloved, Eurydice. Demeter goes there to rescue her abducted daughter, Persephone. Nearly all of these figures are immortal, or semi-immortal: heroism takes them into this ultimately perilous realm, but they return, scarred, but also elevated. Perhaps this is a symbol of the way that heroic figures are willing to face death, and face it more closely than most. Perhaps it is a symbol of the nature of hardship – stories of ordinary heroism take their protagonists into dark realms, realms of great difficulty, close to death, if not literally into the Underworld: by plumbing the depths, they are able to climb again back to the rest of life, tempered and made stronger by their hardships. In Margaret Mahy's novel for young teenagers *Dangerous Spaces* (1991), thirteen-year-old Flora visits Viridian, an Underworld realm reachable through breaches

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<sup>16</sup> Coville, *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> "To die will be an awfully big adventure" – Barrie, *The Annotated Peter Pan*, 109.

in her family's haunted house: this time, it is to rescue her suicidal cousin, Anthea, who is being lured into the Underworld with the promise of rejoining her recently deceased parents. Like Demeter, travelling heroically to rescue Persephone, Flora becomes heroic in her journey to save her cousin – and in acting selflessly, paradoxically, gains in self-confidence. Love, friendship, family: all are part of this journey – in which Flora travels emotionally as well as through space and time: coming of age by learning to care for others.

### **Fight for What Is Important (Like Katniss Everdeen, and Theseus...)**

Fighting for others is key, therefore, to ideas of heroism – it seems that facing and surviving danger requires a kind of abnegation of self, and acting for the common good, at least at the moment of the fight (even if in doing so a hero is standing up for him- or herself). In Suzanne Collins's "Hunger Games" series (2008–2010), the heroine Katniss Everdeen becomes the leader of a revolution when she offers herself as a tribute (or sacrifice) in place of her sister, Prim, who has been selected to represent their district in the "Hunger Games". These are a series of televised gladiatorial games that transfix the world of the novel – a savage dystopia named Panem, held in thrall by a cruel imperial force. Representing her "district" in the games, Katniss uses her wits, her skills, and strength to survive in a fight to the death. As she does so, she becomes the focal point of the games, which are screened throughout her world, and used as a distraction from the abusive regime that rules Panem. Katniss is heroic in her fighting ability, but also in her honesty, her willingness to speak her mind, and in her kindness to others – such as the young tribute Rue. The "Hunger Games" novels, which fall squarely into the genre of young adult dystopian fiction, invoke the cruelty of the Roman Empire and its use of Bread and Circuses as a distraction for a people ground under a totalitarian boot. Mythical echoes, such as Katniss's similarities to the goddess Artemis, and the huntress Atalanta, connect with her powers as a healer, and as a hunter. Katniss is a fighter, and reflects on the thrill of the fight even as she is repelled by it.<sup>18</sup> A hero who is able to fight should not be completely given over to its thrills – should not kill out of cruelty, but must

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<sup>18</sup> See Kelly Oliver, *Hunting Girls: Sexual Violence from The Hunger Games to Campus Rape*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016.



**Figure 4:** In Anna Gkoutzouri's push-and-pull book, rotating the image of Achilles shows the ups and downs of heroic life. Anna Gkoutzouri, *Trojan Horse*, Amersham: Papadopoulos Publishing, 2020, 2a–2b. Used with the Author's and Publisher's kind permission.

be able to do so out of necessity – Katniss only kills out of self-defence, and does not revel in violence.

Indeed, violence and fighting in children's and young adult literature are fraught issues. Regardless of what ideology lies behind a story, the writer will only encourage justified violence: to do whatever is considered "good". Literature for young people generally aims to socialize them – to fit them to incorporate neatly and productively into society – with an emphasis on healing, development, maturation, and reaching a point of understanding. In this regard its function is largely educative, and heroes' journeys connect with these ideas about individual development.

The actions of Theseus in fighting the Minotaur are a case in point. For the most part, retellings of this powerful myth show how the hero faces a terrifying creature, for the good of his kingdom. Some versions (discussed further in "L is for Labyrinth") question Theseus' behaviour and honour, for after all, he betrays his helper, Ariadne, neglects his father, Aegeus, and fights a beast who did not choose to be a monster. As Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts note, many children's versions of the Theseus story have sympathy for the Minotaur, and find ways either to justify its killing, or to elide depiction of the fateful moment – after all, the deed is done in the darkness of the labyrinth.<sup>19</sup> However, the power of Theseus' essential story resonates strongly – it is another example of facing one's fear, fighting the darkness that lurks beneath the surface, doing so with help, but also doing it alone. And so we see heroes and heroines inspired by the myth, facing different kinds of Minotaur – metaphorical or literal, standing up for what is right, even if it is difficult, fighting the darkness within as well as without.

Matt Ottley's multimedia text, *Requiem for a Beast* (2007; see also "B is for Beasts", "L is for Labyrinth", "Q is for Quality"), is one of the most striking of these retellings: it presents the coming of age of a young Australian boy who faces his own inner demons when he takes up work as a stockman rounding cattle in the Outback of the country's far north. Encountering a bull that has evaded muster, he finds himself fighting the maddened beast, and when it slips and falls, he finds that he must kill it, to put it out of its misery. Enlightened

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<sup>19</sup> For a subtle discussion of Theseus' killing of the Minotaur in children's books from Charles Kingsley onward, see Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 69–77. See also Deborah H. Roberts with Sheila Murnaghan, "Picturing Duality: The Minotaur as Beast and Human in Illustrated Myth Collections for Children", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 75–98.

moments of killing can be part of the hero's journey: here, it is a very clear maturation ritual, in which the boy acts as a modern Theseus, facing the Minotaur in the labyrinth of the Australian Outback (see "L is for Labyrinth"). A mercy killing is the making of this unnamed hero, who is able then to help untangle the labyrinths of his own, his father's, and his country's past actions.<sup>20</sup>

## **Be Kind and Accept Kindness from Others (Like Many a Children's Hero...)**

Kindness is a virtue in short supply in the myths. The gods themselves are frequently less than kind – to one another or to the mortals. But kindness is important in children's literature – indeed, much of the literature emphasizes the value of kindness and empathy (see "E is for Emotions"). Kindness in heroic stories is important: heroic figures are rewarded for moments of kindness; often helping the unfortunate results in a hero being given a boon. Percy Jackson, for instance, proves his worth by his kindness to various gods masquerading as downtrodden humans: a hero's kindness is the mark of his or her virtue. And moments in which heroes are *not* kind challenge children's writers: how best to depict Theseus abandoning Ariadne on Naxos, after she has risked her life to help him through the Labyrinth, or carelessly forgetting to let his father know that he has made it home safely? (Though how could Theseus know this would cause Aegeus to suicide?) They frequently show the chastened hero learning his lesson, ruling wisely and well over a powerful and peaceful kingdom.

### ***High-Five to the Hero – Vita Murrow Recasts Hercules***

Once upon a time there was a prince called Hercules. He was the son of the king and a commoner, so Vita Murrow tells us in *High-Five to the Hero* (ill. Julia Bereciartu; 2019). In Murrow's version of the Hercules myth, the king's wife, Queen Hera, was initially jealous of the boy, but decided to throw herself into the role of supportive stepmother, training young Hercules to follow in her footsteps as a famous warrior. But Hercules was not so sure. Though he was strong and mighty, he was a kind and gentle boy. When snakes had visited him in his cradle, rather than being afraid or shaking them to death, he cuddled them. And as he grew and became known for his prowess as an athlete and strongman, he

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<sup>20</sup> See Elizabeth Hale, "Facing the Minotaur in the Australian Labyrinth: Politics and the Personal in *Requiem for a Beast*", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 157–173.

became increasingly uncomfortable with his role. While Hera proudly set up statues in his honour, Hercules sneaked off to the hospital, to watch how the doctors healed patients.

Hera had other plans, however, and gave him a list of tasks to help “refocus” him on his destiny. This included killing the Nemean Lion and the Hydra. Hercules reluctantly set to work. Though he was easily able to overpower these mighty creatures, he would not put them to death, and released them. The grateful animals gave him tokens – snippets from the Nemean Lion’s mane, and magical healing blood from the Hydra’s throat. Hercules went home and told Hera it was no good: he was going to train to be a nurse. His healing powers were soon called for, when Hera herself was injured in a wrestling match with the three-headed dog, Cerberus: Hercules raced to her aid, and used the Nemean Lion’s mane to pull her to safety. Then, he cleansed her wounds with drops of the Hydra’s magic blood. A grateful Hera realized that Hercules was living the life he was meant for, and the kingdom celebrated, and benefited from, his healing powers:

When Hera recovered, she replaced the statue of Hercules with one showing a snake circling a column; a symbol of the strength, diversity, and stability that upheld not only their family, but their community. Hercules was touched and added the symbol to his nurse’s uniform, so he could always remember that he had the support of his family in his work. He remained the first face of care for so many, from the hospital to the battlefield. From then on, the only time his mighty arms were the talk of the town was when they gently cradled a newborn baby.<sup>21</sup>

*High-Five to the Hero* takes an unusual approach to the idea of heroism: retelling well-known tales from a modern perspective that emphasizes sharing, caring, and non-traditional gender roles. Murrow’s retelling of the legend of Hercules is one example, in which a warrior becomes a nurse, refusing to kill, and focusing on healing. A hero’s strong arms are best for caring...

Murrow focuses firmly on traditional ideas of heroic behaviour: in the Greek myths, for example, the main heroes are often warriors, often killers, often also focused closely on quests and achievements. But there is room in life for other ideals, Murrow suggests, and her stories explore a range of emotions, ideals, and approaches to life. Recasting Hercules as a would-be healer is part of a deliberate move to shift boys’ ideals of bravery and goodness into kinder and gentler realms. The back cover of *High-Five to the Hero* reads like this: “What if heroes were celebrated for the power of their hearts instead of their swords?”

What if, indeed. Murrow strikes at the core dilemma for the children’s writer retelling heroic stories from the ancient world, which are often violent, involving killing, betrayal, cruelty, loss, and tragedy. In refocusing her stories to celebrate caring, sharing, and fortitude, she bypasses the dark sides of the stories: there’s little room for vengeance and melodrama in the world she encourages, and the vision she depicts is appealing in its gentleness and beauty.

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<sup>21</sup> Vita Murrow, *High-Five to the Hero*, ill. Julia Bereciartu, Minneapolis, MN: Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, 2019, 22.

Other adaptations show heroes accepting help from modern children. Stella Tarakson's "Hopeless Heroes" series of short illustrated novels (2017–2020) features a bumbling Herakles who is physically strong and eager to please, but who needs the help from a clever boy named Tim. Tim is a modern child, fatherless and bullied at school, and lonely because his mother has to work hard to make ends meet. When Tim is doing the family housework while his mother is at one of her several jobs, he breaks an heirloom vase which turns out to be a magic device that brings Herakles into his world. He discovers that although Herakles is powerful, he is not particularly intelligent: when Herakles says he will help Tim by cleaning the house, he overdoes things by moving all the furniture into a heap in the back garden (a parody of the original Labours, in which Herakles diverts a stream into the foul-smelling Augean Stables<sup>22</sup>). Later, Tim travels with Herakles to Olympus, where he meets the hero's daughter, Zoe: together, they help solve mysteries in the mythosphere. This pattern appears in stories for different age groups: *Hercules Finds His Courage* by Elena Paige (ill. Josef Hill; 2017), for instance, a primer for learner readers and the first volume in the series "Taki and Toulia Time Travelers", features the titular characters travelling to Ancient Greece by means of a pair of magic slippers, and helping a timid Hercules gain the courage to complete his Labours. These stories encourage children to understand that they too have power and agency, and that even the mightiest hero may need help from time to time.

Other versions satirize the heroes, showing them manipulating others' kindness. Gary Northfield's *Julius Zebra: Grapple with the Greeks!* (2018), presents Heracles as lazy and manipulative, tricking others into doing tasks for him. Here, Julius and his friends are conned by the hero into finding the golden apple from the Garden of the Hesperides (in a replay of the moment when Heracles fools Atlas into doing his work for him<sup>23</sup>). The Minotaur explains this to Julius:

"He NEVER does his own labours, the lazy oaf."

Julius nearly choked. "NEVER?!" he spluttered.

"Nah," said the Minotaur gruffly. "He finds some poor sap to do it for him. HAHHAHA! He sent YOU on one of his missions, didn't he? Hard luck! Like I said, he ALWAYS finds some wallies to do his dirty work," he laughed.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For the fifth labour, see Apollodorus, *Library* 2.5.5.

<sup>23</sup> For tricking Atlas, see Apollodorus, *Library* 2.5.11.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Northfield, *Julius Zebra: Grapple with the Greeks!*, "Julius Zebra" 4, London: Walker Books, 2018, 146–147.

In previous volumes of the “Julius Zebra” series, Julius, a clumsy zebra from an undistinguished part of Africa, is kidnapped by Romans and taken to the Colosseum to be part of Hadrian’s circus. Like the slave Spartacus, he rises from obscurity to greatness, leading a series of revolutions against the mighty Roman Emperor. He does not do it alone: he has the help of several friends, as dreamy and accident-prone as he is, but sharing his gentle nature and sense of camaraderie. Heroes may sometimes have to fight alone, but a little help from one’s friends is always welcome, and this sense of teamwork is an attractive part of many children’s adventure and fantasy narratives – witness, for instance, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter, who finds his way to success with the support of his friends, Ron, Hermione, and Neville; or Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson, whose friendship with fellow “half-bloods” Annabeth and Tyson is a vital part of his confidence and abilities.

The relationship between helping and kindness shows that while heroes have to be able to work alone, it is important to have support, and be supportive as well. Many children’s stories emphasize teamwork, friendship, and connection to a community, and also stress the idea of thinking beyond one’s immediate individual needs: indeed, children’s literature is often strongly didactic on this point, because of its focus on helping the child fit into society.

### **Bide Your Time and Be an Inspiration (Like Medea...?)**

But heroism is also about standing out from the crowd: about the power of the individual to change the world, even if it means some form of self-sacrifice. It is a paradox, like so much in storytelling, and as such, is rich in meaning. Giving up the needs of the self for the benefit of others is a hard lesson – for heroes, protagonists, and readers. When we began thinking about this chapter, we asked some of our *Our Mythical Childhood* colleagues about which kinds of figures they found inspirational or heroic – which kinds of heroic figures predominated in their childhood reading. Their answers were telling: for some, it was heroes who adventured widely and travelled far. For others it was the individual hero, who ventured forth on difficult tasks alone, or with little company and support. There were national heroes – used as symbols for patriotic inculcation. There were dazzling heroes – strong and bold and vibrant. And there were secret heroes: who did good without anyone (but the reader) knowing about it – who endured isolation and misunderstanding in the process, only sometimes receiving acclaim at the end of their story. To this last category we want to add the hero who seemed not to be

heroic – for in the retellings and adaptations of the ancient myths we often find these figures reversed as time and politics change our ideas about what is good or bad, or right or wrong. Stories in this category emphasize the overlooked, the downtrodden, the heroic figures who do not immediately win through, but have to put their own needs aside while others achieve glory or dominance. In this category we might think of the tragic figures – the Cassandra, Didos, Ariadne, even the Medusas and Minotaurs and Medeas of the world, characters who are pushed aside because they get in the way of traditional heroic narratives, but who are valued by later generations, and appear in new tellings that highlight their powers.

### Medea Tells Her Own Tale

*Always a confronting figure, Medea has been given the chance to speak for herself in a number of books for a range of different target audiences. These stories often explore the ramifications of female power.*

- 📖 Helen Mary Hoover's *The Dawn Palace: The Story of Medea* (1988) recounts the famous myth from thirteen-year-old Medea's perspective.
- 📖 In Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams's *Medea the Enchantress* (2017) Medea is sent by her aunt Circe to visit Mount Olympus Academy, but her fated role in Jason's quest cannot be avoided. While the students in hero-ology class control the characters on a game-board, Medea and her frenemy Glauce are sucked into the mythic saga and she is forced to choose whether to help or hinder the hero.
- 📖 Eric Braun's *Medea Tells All: A Mad, Magical Love*, illustrated by Stephen Gilpin (2014), challenges the traditional perception of Medea as a power-hungry witch.
- 📖 In Julia Wills's *Fleeced! An Aries Adventure* (2014), Aries, the wisecracking ram, is furious that Jason made off with his Golden Fleece. In company with Alex, the zookeeper to the Underworld, he travels through time to modern-day London, where Medea is now a glamorous fashion designer.
- 📖 Sarah McCarry's young adult novel *About a Girl* (2015) centres on the importance of female relationships, and the character of Maddy is a modern incarnation of Medea: punk, witchy, beautiful, and dangerous.

The heroes and heroines of the myths, and the heroes of children's stories, appear again and again and again. In the myths, they can have tragic ends. Jason is ostracized for his association with the wicked Medea and wanders the earth alone until he collapses against the side of the Argo. The figurehead falls upon him and kills him, suggesting that he is as much punished as rewarded for his heroism. Atalanta and Hippomenes are transformed into lions<sup>25</sup> by the goddess Aphrodite, angry that they have failed to worship her after she helped

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Apollodorus, *Library* 3.9.2; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.689–704.

solve their love problems – though we might admire lions for their strength, beauty, and fierceness, the ancient world regarded them as trapped in a splendid isolation, unable to love. Death comes to heroes, just as it does to us all, but the fall from the glories of youth and power seems particularly sharp. But perhaps that is the point of hero narratives – life is a perpetual challenge: even those of us who reach the pinnacles of glory must reach some kind of end. And while children’s literature may sanitize, or bowdlerize, many of the heroic legends – softening harsh moments, explaining away cruelty or vicious moments – at its best it enables readers to think about the puzzle of heroism. The heroes of the Greek myths are not idealized fantasies. Instead, they are superhuman figures who face many of the same challenges we do – just in a larger, or more vivid, or grander scale. Like many a naughty child, Hercules has to learn to do what he is told. Like many of us who do not immediately get what we want or need, Penelope has to wait and hold out against changes she does not accept. Atalanta learns to compromise, and gets some of what she wants, in a husband who shares her fierceness, but is also tricky and deceitful. Ariadne gets away from her vicious father – but at the cost of losing her family, and her half-brother.

The heroes of the myths teach us the compromises and challenges that come with life. And while much children’s literature teaches that happy endings are possible, much also teaches that it is important to be able to reflect on the difficulties of life. Much young adult fiction takes young protagonists (or heroes, or readers) through a journey of understanding – of the world and of the self. Heroic achievements, which might include the achievement of wisdom (as opposed to mere cleverness) come at a cost – the sacrifices of family, or love, or the self.

### Further Reading on Heroism in Children’s Literature

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1949.

Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1997.

is for being informed

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**I** is for being informed

The great Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus made the observation in his *Ars Poetica* (19 BCE) that literature should be both *dulce et utile* ('sweet and useful').<sup>1</sup> By this, he meant it should be both enjoyable and instructive. Storytelling is the most ancient form of in-

struction, and many children's texts deliver useful information in pleasant packages. Through teaching, humour, play, and storytelling, children's non-fictional works (and fictional too) aim to provide children with useful and interesting material, as accurately, and as interestingly, as possible.

## Teaching

Most obviously informative are the texts intended to educate: books that teach ancient languages or history. It is not our main purpose to discuss educational material overall, but some examples stand out for us, particularly the *Minimus* and *Legonium* approaches to learning Latin. *Minimus: Starting Out in Latin* (1999) is a pair of Latin books devised by Barbara Bell and illustrated by Helen Forte.<sup>2</sup> Using the adventures of a cheeky mouse from Roman Britain (and the authors and intended audience are British), they teach Latin to primary school students. This narrative approach, combined with humour, has made *Minimus* popular in the classroom, often as an enjoyable alternative to more "serious" works. From *Minimus'* adventures, told throughout the textbook and in activity

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<sup>1</sup> See Horace, *Art of Poetry* 343–344, in Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, "Loeb Classical Library", London and New York, NY: William Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926, 478, via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.02952/page/477/mode/2up> (accessed 7 April 2022): "He has won every vote who has blended profit and pleasure, at once delighting and instructing the reader" ([O]mne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci lectorem delectando pariterque monendo).

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of these works as educational texts, see the entries in the *Our Mythical Childhood Education Database*: Marta Pszczolińska, "Entry on: *Minimus. Starting Out in Latin* by Barbara Bell and Helen Forte", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Ayelet Peer, *Our Mythical Childhood Education*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/education-survey/item/66> (accessed 15 March 2022); Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: *Legonium* by Anthony Gibbins", peer-reviewed by Ayelet Peer and Lisa Maurice, *Our Mythical Childhood Education*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/education-survey/item/14> (accessed 15 March 2022); also the volume edited by Lisa Maurice: *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*.

materials, children learn simple Latin, and some contextual information about Roman Britain, and the classical myths. For instance, in the play “Improbis es, Rufe” (You’re naughty, Rufus), Minimus helps children find out information about daily life in Roman Britain.

This is the story of a naughty little boy whom everybody loves. His name is Rufus. He lives with his family in Vindolanda, near Hadrian’s Wall in the North of England. Britain is ruled by the Romans, and Rufus’ father is the Commander of a cohort in the Roman army. In the first scene, Minimus, a mouse who lives in their house, is finding out about Rufus’ family – his father, his mother, his sister, his brother.

In this simple play, Rufus gets into mild trouble (pulling a peacock’s tail, knocking over an inkpot, pricking his finger on a sword), but when he becomes ill from a fever, it is clear how much everyone loves him. They pray to Jupiter, and to the British gods, and Rufus is healed: “euge! bene tibi, Rufe! optimus es!” Drawing on the idea of the naughty child is an obvious nod to children’s enjoyment of play and mischief – allowing them the pleasant sense of identification with Rufus, or perhaps superiority to him – all while picking up Latin.

### Let’s Learn Latin and Greek

*There is a plethora of resources available for children to learn Latin, including teaching resources as well as translations of children’s Classics into Latin or Greek, including Winnie the Pooh, The Hobbit, Guess How Much I Love You, the Harry Potter series, and The Gruffalo.*

📖 Barbara Bell, *Minimus: Starting Out in Latin*, ill. Helen Forte (1999)

📖 Aaron Larsen and Christopher Perrin, *Latin for Children, Primer A* (2003)

📖 Jonathan Sheikh-Miller, *Usborne Latin Words Sticker Book*, ill. Stephen Cartwright (2006)

📖 Lorna Robinson, *Telling Tales in Latin: A New Latin Course and Storybook for Children*, ill. Soham De (2013)

📖 Therese Sellers, *Alpha Is for Anthropolos: An Ancient Greek Alphabet*, ill. Lucy Bell Jarka-Sellers (2013)

📖 Anthony Gibbins, *Legonium: Season One* (2019)

In *Legonium*, a website and book that teaches conversational Latin through simple adventure stories, Sydney Latin Master Anthony Gibbins conveys the fun of learning by setting his work in a town named Legonium. His stories feature a mysterious woman in black, who has stolen a valuable jewel from the jeweller’s shop:



Iēssica dē corbe  
statim salit, cēterīs  
sequentibus. omnēs  
ad templī gradūs  
currunt.

‘illōs capite!’ Mīranda  
magnā vōce clāmat.  
‘quid faciāmus?’  
Ravēna anxia rogat.



Francus sē ad  
Ravēnam vertit.  
‘curre!’ sociae  
commōtae dīcit. ‘tē  
oportet cum librō  
effugere. ego  
intereā hīc manēbō  
ad illōs  
impediendōs.’

**Figure 5:** Anthony Gibbins’s amusing LEGO dioramas support the teaching of Latin through a fun adventure story. Anthony Gibbins, *Legonium Season One*, Sydney: Legonium Latin Press, 2019, 165. Used with the Author’s kind permission.

Interea in tecto argentariae haec femina per fenestras despicit. Fortasse quaeries quid haec femina fecit.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, on the roof of the jeweller’s, this woman is climbing out the window. Perhaps you are wondering what this woman is doing.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Gibbins, *Legonium Season One*, Sydney: Legonium Latin Press, 2019, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 174.

As the inhabitants of Legonium join forces to stop the thief and recover the missing jewel, Gibbins takes readers on a light-hearted journey through daily life, providing a simple vocabulary that facilitates playful discussion. Gibbins illustrates the stories with photographs of a LEGO town he has built. Conversation focuses on modern daily life as opposed to Ancient Roman daily life, but when the action takes his characters out of Legonium, they visit Pompeii. Here, Gibbins makes use of the LEGO Pompeii set, commissioned by Sydney University's Nicholson Museum of Classics, and popular as an outreach tool. Through this visit to LEGO Pompeii, readers learn more about the ancient world, about archaeology and archaeological tourism, and the inspiration both provide for modern creators. Classics is a subject known for its energetic outreach (museum visits, putting on plays, language competitions), and LEGO outreach has proven popular around the world. The LEGO Classicists project, for instance, run by Sydney archivist Liam Jensen, makes LEGO versions of the scholars who work in the field. (This is a fascinating side-branch of outreach through making and internet culture, namely, the rise of the "public intellectual", whose profile as a researcher is almost as important as the work they do.)<sup>5</sup> Entertaining projects, like *Minimus*, *Legonium*, and LEGO Pompeii, are popular with teachers and students as they bridge the gap between the ancient and modern world. And many informational texts for children make use of humour and playfulness to inspire a connection in their young readers.

### Read All About It

*A neat way to present the events of the classical world, historical as well as mythological, is in the format of newspaper articles that encourage readers to consider the relationship between the present and the past.*

📖 Andrew Langley and Philip De Souza, *The Roman News* (1996)

📖 Anton Powell, *The Greek News*, ill. Philip Steele (1996)

📖 Paul Fleischman, *Dateline: Troy*, ill. Gwen Frankfeldt and Glenn Morrow (1996)

📖 Fergus Fleming and Paul Dowswell, *The Greek Gazette* (1997)

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Hale and Anna Foka have discussed this project and other examples of educational fabrication in more depth in "Myths of Classical Education in Australia: Fostering Classics through Fabrication, Visualization, and Reception", in Lisa Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021, 295–310.

PLACERE



PROTEGERE

τὴν σὴν ῥίνα καὶ τὸ στόμα ἐπικάλυπτε



ἵνα ζῶα τὰ φίλα περισώζειν

**Figure 6:** Protect your friends: Maggie Rudy uses ancient languages to encourage mask-wearing during the Covid pandemic. Latin and Ancient Greek versions of the *Wear a Mask* poster by Maggie Rudy, © 2020, <https://www.maggierudy.com/wear-a-mask-poster> (accessed 22 March 2022). Used with the Author's kind permission.

## Playful Presentation

The playful presentation of information is a key factor in children's books about the ancient world, and authors seek dynamic ways to convey exciting information (see also "K is for Kidding Around"). For instance, Anita Ganeri and David West's "Monster Fight Club" series of educational picture books (2012) uses the concept of a fictional "fight club" to draw together gods and heroes from different traditions and invites readers to speculate who would come out on top in a fight. "Watch in awe as gods and goddesses from myth and legend enter the ring to do battle", says the introduction to one of the series' volumes, *Gods and Goddesses*.<sup>6</sup> The layout emphasizes profile pages "crammed with fascinating and bloodcurdling facts" about the contestants. Full-page spreads provide information about each mythical figure, with short summaries and digital illustrations of key stories before the figures are put into battle against one another. Information boxes with statistics and key attributes indicate fighters' strengths and weaknesses, based on the myths.

In the fight scenes, Odysseus meets Aeneas; King Arthur takes on Perseus; Hua Mulan of China fights Penthesilea, the Queen of the Amazons. Short narratives summarize the outcomes, in what the book promises to be a "chilling account of how each fight progresses".<sup>7</sup> Hades, the god of the Underworld fights Mictlantecuhlti, the Aztec lord of the dead, in a battle where though Hades kills Mictlantecuhlti, the Aztec god, being dead, is not really defeated. By placing together gods and heroes with similar roles and attributes, Ganeri and West encourage comparative responses to myth and legend. Since the fights are purely imaginary (for example, Thor vs Ares), readers are challenged to think about whether they agree with the outcomes. They can propose their own battles, choosing their own figures, and making their own statistics.

Game-playing approaches like "Monster Fight Club" bridge the gap between *dulce* and *utile*. So, too, do comic approaches. Terry Deary's hugely popular "Horrible Histories" series (1993–2013), for instance, provides quite comprehensive coverage of social and political life in different periods of history, using a warts-and-all approach that emphasizes bad smells and gross-out humour. It is not afraid to ask the tough questions either:

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<sup>6</sup> Anita Ganeri and David West, *Gods and Goddesses*, "Monster Fight Club", New York, NY: The Rosen Publishing Company, 2012, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

Everybody knows the story of the wooden horse of Troy. [...] Everyone thinks it's a wonderful story. No one stops to ask, "Would the Trojans really be that stupid?" But, if they *did* ask that question, the answer would have to be "Yes." If brains were gunpowder the Trojans wouldn't have had enough to blow their helmets off.<sup>8</sup>

This irreverent approach to classical warfare highlights the ridiculous side of the Greek myths, and the books are full of cartoons poking fun at different moments from ancient culture. Deary takes an overtly anti-establishment approach, which empowers young readers to have their own points of view, a cat-can-look-at-a-king attitude, in which classical myth and history are allowed to be funny and ridiculous. Other similar series, such as the "You Wouldn't Want to Be" series (for example, *You Wouldn't Want to Be a Roman Gladiator! Gory Things You'd Rather Not Know*), emphasize the unpleasant side of ancient life, highlighting violence, hard work, and bad smells. Again, presentation is important, interweaving a conversational text with comic strips, cartoons, top-ten lists, and how-to boxes (for instance, how to build your own Boetian battle-blaster, how to make your own chiton [using Dad's rather than Mum's best sheets]).

Despite their comic style, books like the "Horrible Histories" and "You Wouldn't Want to Be" have their serious side. They emphasize the experience of ordinary people – latrine users, baths attendants, slaves, women, children – often figures glossed over in canonical accounts of ancient culture. For example, in Deary's *The Groovy Greeks* (1996), a "Greek Good Wife Guide" works through the pros and cons of life for Ancient Greek women:<sup>9</sup>

A Woman Should	A Woman Does Not
 Stay at home	 Vote
 Be brought up with slaves and learn household skills	 Buy or sell anything worth more than a small measure of barley
 Learn to spin, weave, cook and manage slaves	 Own anything other than her clothes, jewellery and slaves
 Have a husband chosen – by her father – when she is 15	 Leave the house except to visit other women or go to religious festivals and funerals
 Worship the Goddess Hestia	

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<sup>8</sup> Terry Deary, *The Groovy Greeks*, ill. Martin Brown, "Horrible Histories", London: Scholastic, 1996, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 83.

Insets like this make a clear point for modern readers about the status of women in the ancient world, and encourage children to ask questions about received ideas about ancient culture. At the same time, “Horrible Histories” and other comic books about history also provide standardized information: highlighting famous moments from history, important aspects of ancient myth, and nationhood. Most such books are aimed at older children and younger adolescents, implying that publishers, teachers, and parents recognize the demand for such easy-access approaches that entertain while they instruct. There is no room for dignity here, in works that answer the kinds of questions children are not afraid to ask.

### The Olympic Games

*Held in honour of the god Zeus, the first Olympic Games are traditionally dated to 776 BCE. Though its origins lie in myth, the four-yearly event reveals a great deal about Ancient Greek life and culture, and provides much inspiration for children’s stories.*

**Retelling – Helen East, *How the Olympics Came to Be*, ill. Mehrdokht Amini (2011)**

As the Olympians watch from on high, Tethys, grandmother of the gods, explains the origins of the Olympic Games. With an emphasis on historical detail and illustrated by ancient artefacts, this book is a publication of the British Museum.

**Revision – Ben M. Baglio, *The First Olympics* (1988)**

A “Choose Your Own Adventure” story in which the reader, visiting the site of ancient Olympia, is suddenly transported back in time and must decide whether to compete in the wrestling or chariot races.

**Adaptation – Shoo Rayner, “Olympia” series (2011)**

In this eight-book series that references both ancient history and mythology, young athlete Olly competes against his rival Spiro in the various Olympic contests.

**Allusion – Steve Cole, *The Moo-Lympic Games* (2010)**

Part of the “Cows in Action” series about time-travelling cows, this chapter book inserts bovine characters and wordplay into the Ancient Greek world.

## Storytelling Techniques

Playful and humorous approaches are part of a storytelling toolkit. Other useful ways to provide access to the ancient world involve devising simple narratives, with protagonists who appeal to young readers. Shoo Rayner’s “Olympia” (2011)

series of short books about ancient athletics focalizes the narrative through a young would-be athlete named Olly. In competition with his mean cousin Spiro, and Spiro's aggressive dog, Kerberos, Olly learns to run races, wrestle, shoot, swim, jump, and throw. Each story provides a simple structure. In *Run Like the Wind* (2011), Olly wants to be a runner. Consulting helpful friends and adult advisors, Olly learns more about how to train, and how the gods look after the athletes. Olly makes a sacrifice to Hermes, and the priest gives him a pair of wings to tie to his ankles. But when Spiro accuses him of cheating, he puts them aside, running under his own steam. Luckily for him, Kerberos, the naughty dog, inspires him to run faster, by growling and nipping at his heels:

Fear gripped Olly and twisted his insides. "Hermes! Save me!" he screamed. Olly felt a surge of power and determination flood through him. As if someone had pulled the levers of a *hysplex* inside him, Olly leaped forward as his legs pumped even faster than before.<sup>10</sup>

It is a gentle joke that Olly wins the race, not only because of his training, but helped by a naughty dog. And Rayner's work is full of jokes which put the reader on the protagonist's side. The cover of his picture book *Euclid: The Man Who Invented Geometry* (2017), for instance, invites readers to discover the "beauty of geometry" "with jokes and lots of illustrations".<sup>11</sup> Here, a cartoon Euclid explains different concepts of geometry, "slowly, one idea at a time", to his joke-telling friends:

"Without Geometry," Euclid said, mysteriously, "life would be pointless!"  
"That's a good one!" Euclid's friends laughed.<sup>12</sup>

*Euclid: The Man Who Invented Geometry* aims to teach, using jokes to break up the delivery of information, and give readers time to absorb and reflect; it also allows a sense that concepts are challenging and reward patience and repetition to understand.

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<sup>10</sup> Shoo Rayner, *Run Like the Wind*, "Olympia" 1, London: Orchard, 2011, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Shoo Rayner, *Euclid: The Man Who Invented Geometry*, England: Shoo Rayner, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 26.

## Gathering Facts

Despite their irreverent and imaginative approaches, comic perspectives on ancient culture are grounded in accuracy and reputable sources. Most books provide glossaries to reinforce key terms and give references to scholarly volumes for those who wish to follow up in more detail. Becoming informed requires the desire to learn more, and these books gently assume that readers want to know more.

Children may enjoy the Greek myths because they are eminently collectible, with facts and stories and connections rewarding retelling and exploration. Teachers report that their students enjoy designing family trees and diagrams of the gods, making statistics lists of their talents, traits, and skills.<sup>13</sup> Publishers are highly aware of children's enjoyment of collecting, producing series of works that can then be resold in box sets, or with toys and trinkets, or adapted into cartoons or films. Alongside the narrative desire that episodic storytelling encourages – to hear just one more story, or find out the next stage of their hero's adventures – comes the opportunity to learn more facts. Authors are kept busy finding new settings, antagonists, love interests, and challenges for their protagonists, mindful of the need to keep one foot in "reality". If readers are to suspend disbelief, to enter willingly into narratives in which the gods make their existence known, getting the details right can only help.

Marcia Williams balances precise details with humour and whimsy in *The Romans: Gods, Emperors and Dormice* (2013), *The Iliad and the Odyssey* (1996), and *Greek Myths* (1991), which provide comic-strip summaries of famous stories and historical moments. Sometimes this is with help from animals: in *The Romans*, a dormouse called Dormeo acts as an interpreter for the events of Ancient Rome:

Hail, Reader!

I am DORMEO, a dormouse gladiator, berry nibbler and your guide to ancient Rome. My ancestors have lived on the Palatine Hill since the time of Romulus and Remus. In fact, one of my relations was actually eaten by the she-wolf who adopted those wild twins! My family has witnessed the rise and fall of Rome. We have also had the terrifying honour of being a favourite food of the Romans – many's the time that the only thing between me and a Roman's digestive juices was my gladiator's helmet, so I won't be taking that off, even for you! However, I will tell you everything

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<sup>13</sup> See Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education*.

you need to know about the ups and downs of life in Rome. Just keep me supplied with berries or I might... yawn... be forced... yawn... to hibernate... large yawn – before you have finished reading.  
Semper vale et salve. Dormeo Augustus.<sup>14</sup>

In a frame narrative that is similar to the cartoon retellings of Roman myths and history, Dormeo provides a running commentary on the action. Cutaway images of Roman houses give a clue to daily life for both Patricians and Plebeians, while aerial views of the Forum and the Roman Baths show political and daily activity. Tables and trees of gods, kings, and emperors give useful summaries, and provide a pause in the storytelling, a technique Williams uses in *The Iliad and the Odyssey* and *Greek Myths*. Williams highlights humorous, moving, and gruesome elements, and does not gloss over occasional moments of violence. For instance, she uses vivid details to show the Cyclops Polyphemus crouching down to grab Odysseus' men. The feet of one man can be seen dangling from his drooling mouth, while three more struggle in his grasp. Skulls and crossbones form a border to the action. Comic elements reinforce the revolting aspects of the Polyphemus story – his hairy toes and nostrils and dirty legs dehumanize him, and, as he devours Odysseus' man, he says "I hope you've washed between your toes. I hate fluff". But Williams also softens grotesque details: watching in the foreground are two zebras – a mother and child. The mother admonishes Polyphemus: "How many times have I told you? Don't speak with your mouth full". "Isn't he naughty, mummy!" says the young zebra.<sup>15</sup>

Williams's books strike a balance between delight and instruction, and between fidelity to the original material and the need to present it carefully for young readers. She presents frightening, funny, and moving material, with warm, hand-drawn images and comic dialogue. Interestingly, these books are not presented as explicitly educational, but rather as attractive and informative, providing what reviewers describe as "elegant, intelligent, funny, dramatic and totally absorbing: the perfect start to an early familiarity with Homer" (*Guardian* reviewer, quoted on cover of *The Iliad and the Odyssey*).<sup>16</sup>

Texts that inform children, then, are educational and inspirational, giving readers entrance into a vibrant cultural and imaginative world (see "A is for Adaptations", and "F is for First Encounters"). And so while some works explicitly

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<sup>14</sup> Marcia Williams, *The Romans: Gods, Emperors and Dormice*, Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2013, front matter.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, cover.

appeal to the *utile* part of Horace's formation, Williams and others focus on the *dulce* aspects to good effect. There is always more to learn, and to enjoy finding out about, and the Greek myths seem ready-made for an ever-expanding universe of adventures and storytelling, backed up by generations of scholarly inquiry and discovery, and the sense for young readers and their parents that by knowing more about mythology one knows more about the important touchstones of our culture. Fans of Rick Riordan's work, for instance, are inspired to study Classics at school, drawn too by the sense that in joining the Classics community they are becoming part of a special club, in which intellectual ability is cherished and encouraged.<sup>17</sup>

### Finding the Source

*Even the most imaginative adaptation may lead readers to want to know more – about myths, about sources, and origins. Many authors provide information in acknowledgements, introductions, bibliographies, or reading lists, which can indicate where to find more, and also where authors found their influences.*

*Some stories are retold and adapted more than others, and some of the most influential myths are listed here.*

<b>Myth</b>	<b>Classical Source(s)</b>
Persephone	<i>Homeric Hymn</i> (2) to <i>Demeter</i>
Orpheus	Virgil, <i>Georgics</i> 4
Jason and the Golden Fleece	Pindar, <i>Pythian Ode</i> 4
	Apollonius Rhodius, <i>Argonautica</i>
Cupid and Psyche	Apuleius, <i>Metamorphoses</i> 4–6
Midas and the Golden Touch	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> 11
Wooden Horse and the Fall of Troy	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> 8
	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i> 2
Theseus and the Minotaur	Apollodorus, <i>Library</i> 3.16 (and <i>Epitome</i> 1.24)
	Plutarch, <i>Life of Theseus</i>
Hercules	Greek art
	Apollodorus, <i>Library</i> 2.5.1–12
Pandora	Hesiod, <i>Works and Days</i> and <i>Theogony</i>
Perseus and Medusa	Apollodorus, <i>Library</i> 2.4.1–5
Daedalus and Icarus	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> 8.183–259

<sup>17</sup> See Katarzyna Marciniak, "Create Your Own Mythology: Youngsters for Youngsters (and Oldsters) in Mythological Fan Fiction", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 428–452.

Birth of Zeus	Hesiod, <i>Theogony</i>
Arachne	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> 6.1–145
Odysseus' wanderings	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> 9–12
Atalanta	Apollodorus, <i>Library</i> 3.9.2
Pegasus (Bellerophon and the Chimaera)	Hesiod, <i>Theogony</i> 278–286
	Apollodorus, <i>Library</i> 2.3.1–2
	Bellerophon mentioned in Homer, <i>Iliad</i> 6

The myths that figure most prominently in modern-day children's retellings feature in a wide range of ancient sources, predominantly literary, but also in art. Sometimes the stories are told in detail, in other cases mentioned only in passing. It's a reminder of how widely known these stories were in antiquity, and already being revised and adapted. And of course, numerous ancient texts are fragmentary or lost, so that modern storytellers have come to rely on Hellenistic and Roman material in many cases. Later interpreters, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Kingsley, and Andrew Lang, have also contributed to the selection and shaping of this corpus of material.

Some stories are misremembered in the popular imagination. It's often assumed that Homer's *Iliad* features the death of Achilles and the Fall of Troy, but the best source for this most famous Greek myth is actually a Latin one – *Aeneid* 2. Children's retellings of ancient stories often strive to present a cohesive version of a myth which is very different from how it appears in an ancient source. The first encounters a young person has with the corpus of classical myth stay with them, and having grown up on Roger Lancelyn Green's *Tales of the Greek Heroes* (1958), it can be something of a shock to get to university and discover the fragmentary, and often unfamiliar, way that the famous myths appear.

It's interesting to reflect on why certain stories have remained popular to tell to children, while other ancient myths have not retained the same currency. Stories of heroes and gods, alongside memorable figures who learn a moral lesson, make up this canon.

## Comprehensiveness

Many collections, retellings, and adaptations are selective – this is often a reflection of necessity. Publishers' margins are tight, illustrations come at a cost, and some of the myths test the limits of what parents want their children to know. But writers find it hard to leave things out. *Brick Greek Myths* (2014), by Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, which uses LEGO photographs to retell the Greek origin myths, is admirably comprehensive, giving young readers a satisfyingly thorough amount of information (such as a clear outline of how Zeus established the world order through a series of marriages, and fathering

several sets of children<sup>18</sup>). If you pull one thread of a myth, a whole tapestry is likely to follow – so interconnected and tangled are the gods’ family trees and stories, and some versions are clearer in laying out the groundwork than others. George O’Connor’s “Olympians” series of graphic novels (2010–2022) retells the different gods’ origin myths, and squarely faces the challenge of how to organize material. Each volume focuses on a member of the Olympians. O’Connor highlights the Olympians’ family tree, and provides notes on each main figure, identifying their powers, attributes, and legacies. “Greek/Geek” notes give extra information, and a bibliography provides further reading for adults and for younger readers too. Readers working their way through this series will see how each mythical figure connects with a wider body of stories. O’Connor’s conversational style highlights that the myths are complicated and contradictory, and encourages readers to think through their own take on a myth, as, for instance, here, in *Hades: Lord of the Dead* (2012):

Page 4–5, panel 7: “The Mortal half of Heracles” – this was a subject of much debate in the ancient world – did Heracles go to Hades when he died, like a mortal, or did he ascend to Olympus, like a god? I previously showed the latter in *Olympians Book 3, Hera: The Goddess and Her Glory*, and, indeed, there were many worshippers of Heracles that claimed he attained godhood upon his mortal demise. However, no less a source than the epic poem *The Odyssey* attests to Heracles being a denizen of Hades – Odysseus encounters Heracles (as well as Medusa) during his own visit to the Underworld. It was ultimately decided that, since Heracles was a demigod, his immortal half ascended to Olympus, while his mortal half descended to Hades. Bad luck to be Heracles’ mortal half!<sup>19</sup>

### Caroline Lawrence, “The Roman Mysteries” Series (2001–2009)

Beginning with *The Thieves of Ostia* (2001), this popular series of historical novels, which includes seventeen books as well as a trio of spin-off “Mini-Mysteries”, quiz books and other compendiums, introduces readers to the customs and culture of life in the Roman Empire. Set in the first century CE during the reign of Titus, the fast-paced detective stories are centred on four children who unite to solve various mysteries in their neighbourhood and wider world. Flavia Gemina is a wealthy Roman girl, the daughter of a sea captain, whose mother died in childbirth. Her neighbour, Jonathan ben Mordecai, is a Jewish boy who

<sup>18</sup> Brack, Sweeney, and Thomas, *Brick Greek Myths*, 22–23.

<sup>19</sup> George O’Connor, *Hades: Lord of the Dead*, “Olympians” 4, New York, NY: First Second, 2012, 71.

is secretly a Christian. Lupus is an orphaned, mute beggar boy, and Nubia is a freed slave girl from Africa. Other characters are based on historical figures, including Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, the Emperor Titus and members of the Imperial family.

The children's different backgrounds allow for exploration of the diversity of the Roman Empire, and function as a didactic device, as Flavia and Jonathan explain Roman customs and history to Lupus and Nubia. The series features extensive facts about life in Ancient Rome, which are not always integrated into the plot. Lawrence is clearly motivated to educate her audience about this historical period while simultaneously entertaining them with an exciting story.

### Ancient Greek Historical Fiction

*While mythology is the predominant focus in children's retellings, a number of books instead look to bring the historical record to life.*

- ▣ Set in ancient Athens in the mid-fourth century BCE, Priscilla Galloway's *The Courtesan's Daughter* (2002) is a coming-of-age story that explores the conflict between true love and the pressures of an arranged marriage.
- ▣ Barry Denenberg's young adult novel *Pandora of Athens, 399 BC* (2004) addresses the restrictions placed on young women within classical Athenian society.
- ▣ Jackie French's *Oracle: An Acrobat Brother and a Sister with the Gift of Truth* (2010) is an adventure story set in Mycenaean times, about the young orphans Nikko and Thetis, who are saved from a life in slavery by their incredible acrobatic skills, and travel across the Greek mainland to Delphi.
- ▣ Catherine Mayo's *Murder at Mykenai* (2013) grounds the prelude to the Trojan War in a historical context, focusing on the friendship between Odysseus and Menelaus.
- ▣ Wendy Orr's *Dragonfly Song* (2016) tells the story of the outcast Aissa, who joins the bull-dancers of Knossos. The young adult novel is followed by *Swallow's Dance* (2018) and *Cuckoo's Flight* (2021), which extend the story of the Minoan civilization and the eruption of nearly Thera.

## Being Informed

Approaches such as O'Connor's emphasize the interest that lies in piecing together the fragments we know about the ancient world, and that there is room for contradiction and complexity in the pictures presented. While many children's versions of myth and history point to received or understood ideas, many also encourage interpretation and enjoy the possibility of debate and contradiction. They enjoy the idea of learning, and of learning by reading and thinking on their own.

In a seeming paradox, most children's books are written by adults, with the intent either to instruct or delight. And even in the most delightful work, the intent to instruct is often visible. So too is the hidden adult, teaching, informing, and imposing.<sup>20</sup> (See "C is for Childhood".) This means that children's books are often ideologically driven, imposing, or replicating whatever ideology, values, or mores are dominant at the time of composition.

As we indicate in the "Introduction" to this volume (and also in "Q is for Quality"), teachers and parents choosing material for young readers have much to think about. Every type of storytelling is an ideological act, or an act informed by an ideology. Writers retelling material from Classical Antiquity are participating in a tradition that has its own baggage. But it is also flexible, able to be modulated, and moderated, according to different contexts. (In "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects", we consider how sexual and violent content in the myths make them both challenging to retell, and useful to help think through difficult moments.) Retellers of classical myth and history have to think about challenging elements, such as how to represent slavery, the position of women, the treatment of animals, and the violence of ancient history. Subtler, but just as important, elements of ideology can come from the reteller's own time – assumptions about the composition of families, for instance: many books on social history assume a family will be nuclear (mother, father, two children of different genders). Many books focalize their information through a narrative construct when they use a young protagonist to filter their stories.

These are challenges that face all children's writers, not just those working with Classical Antiquity. When we choose how to represent the world to young readers, we have to think about what information is useful, what is interesting, and what is appropriate. In her poetic picture book, *Echo Echo: Reverso Poems about Greek Myths* (ill. Josée Masse; 2015), Marilyn Singer puts it like this: "These myths make sense of the world. We – tellers and listeners alike – enter these portals to gods and mortals. They can never again be closed, once our imaginations are opened".<sup>21</sup> The myths, and our response to them, help us make sense of the world: providing information, and eliciting an informed response. Which may be a point to close with: that texts we discuss in this book showcase the power of the myths to inspire creative responses, to open our imaginations, and to help us make sense of the world.

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<sup>20</sup> See Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*.

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Singer, *Echo Echo: Reverso Poems about Greek Myths*, ill. Josée Masse, New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2015, 27.

### Thinking Difference: Autism and Classical Myth

Through her work on autism and classical myth, Susan Deacy (University of Roehampton) has been investigating how children with autism engage with classical mythology, focusing on the Labours of Hercules. She has developed classroom tools and exercises which present the myths and offer ways to engage with them. With Lisa Maurice, she has established the ACCLAIM group (Autism Connecting with CLAssically-Inspired Myth) for researchers interested in exploring the potential of myth for inspiring autistic children. In her blog, *Autism and Classical Myth* (<https://myth-autism.blogspot.com/>), she reflects on the processes of developing this work.



### Our Mythical Education Database

One component of the *Our Mythical Childhood* project concentrates on educational materials for children and young adults that engage with the ancient world. Led by Lisa Maurice and Ayelet Peer from Bar-Ilan University in Israel, the *Our Mythical Education* authors are undertaking a survey of teaching resources, including textbooks, lesson plans, and online materials. The database (<http://www.omic.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/education-survey>) already contains more than 100 entries, with new material being added all the time.



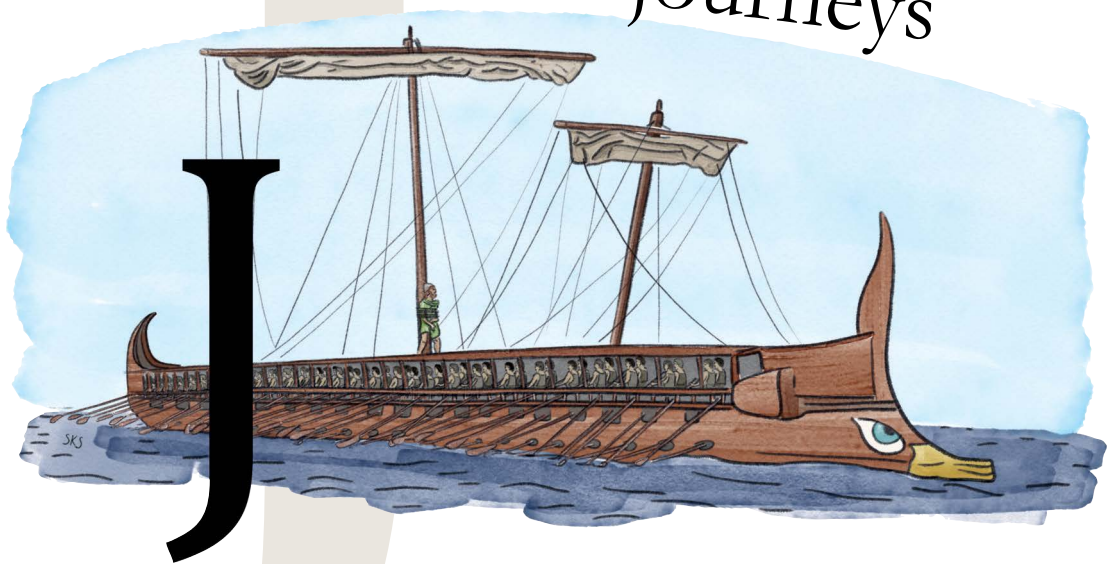
### Further Reading on Classics and Education

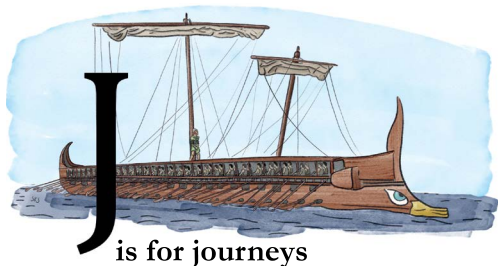
Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities and Society in England, 1830–1960*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Arlene Holmes-Henderson, Steven Hunt, and Mai Musié, eds., *Forward with Classics: Classical Languages in Schools and Communities*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Lisa Maurice, ed., *Our Mythical Education: The Reception of Classical Myth Worldwide in Formal Education, 1900–2020*, “Our Mythical Childhood”, Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021.

is for journeys





Children's songs and stories are full of journeys: away from home, and back to it, out into the wilderness, and home again to safety. In Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), Peter Rabbit braves the perils of Mr McGregor's garden, seeking adventure

or lettuces, overindulging in both. Peter is nearly captured, but escapes home to the comfort of his mother, sisters, and a dose of camomile tea: frightened, and chastened, but soon restored to his boyish high spirits, if his later adventures with his cousin Benjamin Bunny are any indication. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), Bilbo Baggins seeks adventure he did not know he wished for, when he accompanies a group of dwarves to the Lonely Mountain to retrieve their treasure from the dragon Smaug. On their journey they make friends and combat enemies, and Bilbo finds in himself a bravery and cleverness he did not know he possessed.

### Quest Myths

*Classical mythology is full of quest narratives where heroes (usually male, though not always), set out on a mission or in search of a particular goal or treasure.*

- ▣ Jason and the Argonauts journey to Colchis at the end of the Black Sea to obtain the Golden Fleece.
- ▣ Perseus is challenged to bring back the head of Medusa, and sets out on a solo quest to find the terrifying Gorgon.
- ▣ The goddess Venus sets Psyche a series of trials that culminate in descending to the Underworld and bringing back a box containing a dose of Persephone's beauty.
- ▣ A number of Hercules' Labours require him to bring back an object, including the belt of the Amazon Queen Hippolyta, a golden apple from the garden of the Hesperides, and, in the most difficult trial of all, the three-headed dog, Cerberus, from the Underworld.
- ▣ Odysseus' quest is not for an object but for a place; he wanders for ten long years in search of home.

This type of journey, characterized as the "home-away-home" narrative motif by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, is one of the most common in the field: a protagonist, not necessarily a child, leaves home, seeking adventure, facing and overcoming challenges, and returning home, perhaps empowered, stronger, braver, and wiser in some regard – in some instances filled with a new

understanding of the value of home, able in others to improve a broken home.<sup>1</sup> In making a journey, the child protagonist learns about the world, encounters dangers, but is able to return to safety – or so the narrative pattern promises. Stories for adolescents complicate the pattern: their protagonists sometimes find it is at home that danger is present, and the journey-maker seeks a new kind of home – the home that is right for them, the home that they make, perhaps having forged new relationships, and made new families. Sometimes they are changed by their journeys, meaning that home is never quite the same (Bilbo Baggins, for instance, is always afterwards a little sadder and a little wiser than he had been previously).

Ancient myth is also full of journeys, and often involves leaving home and returning. Theseus and Perseus go out into the world, and return once more – sadder, wiser, changed by the trials they have endured, and glad to be back among their friends and families. Some stories complicate the relationship to home: Aeneas makes a new home, taking his son to Italy, and founding a new empire – an endeavour that is not without sacrifice and effort. For other travellers, the journey is as much the point as the return: Odysseus and Jason spring to mind – their adventures take them around the Mediterranean, and their landing places can be seen to this day. Journey narratives can be episodic good fun, involving pleasant side-diversions, such as Odysseus' time on the island of the nymph Calypso. They can include alarming episodes – such as when Jason has to navigate his ship between the terrifying moving cliffs of the Symplegades. Or they can be entertaining challenges, such as Odysseus' confrontation with the Cyclops Polyphemus.

Journeys can be physical, and they can also be mental and emotional, and stories for young readers often intertwine the two – a literal journey through a landscape is accompanied by an inward journey, in which the protagonist reflects and grows. The role of the journey in classical and children's culture is remarkably similar: involving exploration, survival, challenge, and personal growth. Maria Nikolajeva, writing about the journey motif in children's stories, notes that "journeys, both real and imaginary, discoveries, the search for identity, and survival on one's own with adults' assistance, are all important components in a young person's psychological development",<sup>2</sup> a point that holds true for the heroes, who also develop and grow during their adventures. Hercules'

<sup>1</sup> Perry Nodelman, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Mavis Reimer, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature: An Introduction*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005, 83.

Labours take him around the Mediterranean, but they also take him on a journey of repentance and endurance that confirms his greatness, and while he does not need to “come of age” in quite the same way as a child or an adolescent, his willingness to endure and do penance, show him taking a heroic inner journey. Theseus is forced to grow up when his carelessness costs his father his life – he becomes a wise and generous ruler.

When we read journey narratives, indeed, when we read any story, we also travel, going on imaginative journeys – into other places, and times, and experiences, leaving ourselves behind to some degree, but also learning about things that affect us. In *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*, Maria Tatar describes the process, in the context of children’s bedtime reading, as an “adventure” in which children begin to

contemplate perils and possibilities, and to ponder what could be, might be, or should be. They want stories that will transport them, enabling them to discover new arenas of action and places to play, despite the darkness. And this is why we need Oz, Narnia, Wonderland, Neverland, and early on, sites like Maurice Sendak’s *Night Kitchen* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. It is there that children can go at night time to exercise their imaginations. And it is there that they discover how words can take them out of familiar comfort zones, enabling breakthroughs into worlds that encode fears and desires in the safe form of symbolic language.<sup>3</sup>

In “S is for Speculation” we discuss the idea of the fantasy realm – literature as a space for exploration and imagination, stories that explore “what-ifs” and “what-might-be”. Literary journeys are part of that exploration, both in terms of the child’s entry into an imaginative realm, and in terms of the protagonist’s story.

## Jason’s Journey through Life

The balance between being lost and finding one’s way, between going out and coming home again, seeking danger and overcoming it – this balance is part of structures that are as old, or older, than the classical myths we discuss here. When writers and illustrators retell or adapt those myths, they are working

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Tatar, *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2009, 111–112.

with these ideas, using their own, and the child's imagination, to travel along familiar and strange paths. Robert Byrd's colourful picture book *Jason and the Argonauts: The First Great Quest in Greek Mythology* (2016) shows the famous hero's journey in vivid detail.

This is the story of a hero, Jason, who lived many years ago in ancient Greece. He built a ship, filled it with other heroes willing to join him, and set out on an epic quest. His is a tale of gods and mortals, of adventure and danger, and, of course, glory.<sup>4</sup>

Byrd divides Jason's journey through life into sections, each one on a double-page spread: beginning with Jason's childhood education in the cave of Chiron, his acceptance of the quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece, his encounters with the gods in disguise, or speaking through oracles. He constructs a ship, the mighty Argo, issues a call to the heroes who come to join him and sets sail. Each section shows a different stage of his travels – and shows him to be on a journey that is not merely about travelling through space, but is about encountering the different beings that live there. He helps the soothsayer King Phineas cope with the horrible Harpies;<sup>5</sup> the Argonauts sail nimbly through the Symplegades, or Clashing Rocks<sup>6</sup> with Athena's help, they frighten off the man-eating Stymphalian Birds,<sup>7</sup> and arrive in Colchis in good style, where Jason falls in love with King Aeetes' daughter, Medea.<sup>8</sup> More adventures follow. Medea helps Jason complete tasks to please the king, and also to steal the Fleece.<sup>9</sup>

Jason has reached the "there" of his "there and back again quest", as Byrd's imagery emphasizes in a page that forces one to slow down and look closely at what Jason has found. The Fleece (or rather the ram with the Golden Fleece) is magnificently depicted in a full-page night-time scene: its golden wool gleaming against a starry night sky, offset by the glittering scales of a golden and yellow serpent, with three flickering red tongues. Part of a journey narrative involves moments of rest and reflection, in which the hero takes stock of where

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Byrd, *Jason and the Argonauts: The First Great Quest in Greek Mythology*, New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2016, 1.

<sup>5</sup> For Phineus and Harpies, see Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.21–22.

<sup>6</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.22; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 2.549–606.

<sup>7</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 2.1033–1089.

<sup>8</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 3.275–301.

<sup>9</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.99–182.

he has come to, before heading off on the next stage, and the visual imagery of illustrated works can contribute to that idea: the Golden Fleece is not merely a treasure, but a wondrous creature.

For Jason, finding his way back again may seem simpler, as he knows the way home, but in fact he has a more difficult task, for, as J.R.R. Tolkien knew and expressed in *The Hobbit* (1937) and his later trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), you can never really go home again: at least, not without finding that something has changed – either at home, or within yourself. Jason's troubles intensify: with Medea's help, he has killed her brother Apsyrtus;<sup>10</sup> they have angered Zeus, who proclaims "his fury and disgust at Jason and Medea's betrayal of her own flesh and blood".<sup>11</sup> Rough seas beset them as they seek the island of the sorceress Circe,<sup>12</sup> who can speak for Zeus and pardon the duo if Medea will "relinquish her powers of evil magic".<sup>13</sup> Together with the Argonauts, they face further challenges – the rocks and whirlpool of Scylla and Charybdis,<sup>14</sup> a period in the desert of Libya, and a fight against the bronze giant Talos.<sup>15</sup> Each stage takes them through another part of the Mediterranean (and gives a mythical explanation of the Mediterranean's different geographical features). They return home to Iolcus, where Jason and Medea use the promise of a magical potion that can restore youth, to trick Pelias into jumping into a cauldron of boiling water, helped by his daughters.<sup>16</sup>

Jason seems to be revenged, but the gods are disgusted at Medea's actions – she has tricked Pelias' innocent daughters into murdering their father. The people of Iolcus refuse to accept her as their queen, and so they are forced to leave. Fleeing to Corinth, they are welcomed by King Creon, but Jason now fears his powerful wife, and forgetting all she has done for him, tells her he wants to marry Glauce, Creon's daughter.<sup>17</sup> In a rage, Medea murders the children she shared with Jason.<sup>18</sup> Her grandfather, the sun god Helios, sends her a chariot pulled by two dragons, and she escapes – the picture shows her flying into the air as Jason fruitlessly waves his sword.

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<sup>10</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.454–481.

<sup>11</sup> Byrd, *Jason and the Argonauts*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.557–561.

<sup>13</sup> Byrd, *Jason and the Argonauts*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.922–964.

<sup>15</sup> See Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.1638–1688.

<sup>16</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.27.

<sup>17</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

Whatever we may think of Jason, he is devastated by this loss.

He had fallen out of favour with the gods, especially Hera, for breaking his promise to Medea. He wandered through Greece, homeless, forgotten by his friends, reliving his past glory and grieving for the tragedies that ruined him.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to Iolcus many years later, he finds the Argo beached on the shore. Sitting down under the prow of the ship, he rests in its shade. The figure-head, rotten with age, breaks off and falls, killing him instantly. His journeys are at an end. Byrd's retelling ends with an indictment of the gods, whose callous meddling causes so many tragedies for mere humans:

Jason's story is a classic tale of bravery and valor, but also deceit, trickery, and vengeance. It shows how the whims of the gods played with the lives of mere mortals for their own pleasure and gain.<sup>20</sup>

## Jason and the Argonauts

*The hero Jason sails on a quest for the Golden Fleece, accompanied by the Argonauts and aided by Hera and Athena. After many adventures he arrives in Colchis where the princess Medea defies her father and helps him obtain the prize. Full of monsters and magic, the story has captivated children for generations.*

### **Retelling – Dan Whitehead, *Jason and the Argonauts*, ill. Sankha Banerjee (2011)**

A graphic novel retelling Jason's famous journey to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece that celebrates his heroic qualities as well as his fatal flaws.

### **Revision – Helen Mary Hoover, *The Dawn Palace: The Story of Medea* (1988)**

Told from the perspective of thirteen-year-old Medea, this young adult novel actively challenges her role as the villain of the saga.

### **Adaptation – Kevin Kneupper, *Argonauts* (2016)**

This novel transports the story of Jason and Medea into the realm of science fiction. Medea becomes a scientist programming the human genetic code, while wealthy, handsome Jason is a shareholder in the Argo Corporation and must accompany her on a dangerous mission.

### **Allusion – Matthew Reilly, *Hover Car Racer* (2004)**

There are coded references to Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece in this futuristic story about the competitive sport of Hover Car Racing.

<sup>19</sup> Byrd, *Jason and the Argonauts*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

## Visual Journeys

Narrations of major journey cycles, like Jason's or Odysseus', may use visual storytelling to depict the scenes and characters of the story – the places visited, the curious, charming, or menacing beings that live there. Journey narratives can be episodic, meaning that they are filled with events and adventures, but they may not always find the time for reflection and character building. This is especially the case with picture book retellings, which pack a lot of story into a short space. Having said that, the visual splendours that picture books can present allow full play to the idea of the physical journey. And as picture book scholar Jane Doonan notes, the density and reflectiveness of images can invite a slow and thoughtful reading, one that draws the reader or viewer into the world – to do the mental work of travelling with the hero through the magnificent landscape.<sup>21</sup> Byrd's Jason makes his way through a world that is meticulously filled in, with sweeping illustrations that present the ancient world in shades of blue and green and gold and pink: full of magic and mystery, but also lively and energetic: despite the dark underpinnings of the later part of Jason's story, he conveys a sense that the Argonauts' journey overall is one of fun, joy, and comradeship.

Other illustrators take different approaches: Errol Le Cain's lavish illustration of Walter Pater's *Cupid and Psyche* (1977) retells Apuleius' story of the princess who fell in love with Cupid, the son of Aphrodite, and who was sent on perilous journeys by her future mother-in-law, even penetrating the depths of the Underworld to retrieve the recipe for Persephone's face cream. Le Cain draws inspiration from the style of the late nineteenth-century Decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley, to depict a world in black and white, full of images of elongated and menacing people, but also full of beauty. Images such as that of Psyche climbing into Charon's ferry reveal the fearsome nature of the Underworld. Even more so than in Byrd's reimaginings, Le Cain's artwork draws the reader into a mysterious and threatening realm, highlighting Psyche's braveness and vulnerability. It is a journey full of peril, but also full of beauty, not only Psyche's but also of the mythical world her story is part of (see also "E is for Emotions" and "V is for Visual Storytelling").

Both Jason and Psyche go on quests – journeys with a purpose – in both cases to retrieve a special object, and in order to restore troubled relationships. Jason is trying to return to his home of Iolcus, where his role as king has been

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Doonan, *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books*, Woodchester: Thimble Press, 1993.

usurped by Pelias. Psyche is trying to prove her worthiness to Eros' jealous mother, Aphrodite. Journeys are more than simply pleasurable outings; in the world of myth they require courage and fortitude. It is not a coincidence that many hero narratives involve significant journeys. (See "H is for How to Be Heroic".) The mythological journeys show the heroes travelling through space to achieve different ends. Odysseus' odyssey is intended to be a homeward journey. Aeneas makes his way to a new land and a new home. Perseus, Theseus, and Hercules travel to fulfil tasks, and make their mark on the land. Many characters journey to the Underworld, to face the ultimate terror – death (see "U is for Underworld Adventures").

### Up, Down, All Around

*The shape of a journey varies, taking stories up to Olympus, and down to Hades, and all around the ancient worlds in between.*

**Odysseus** travels there and back again, from Ithaca to Troy and home once more.

**Aeneas** travels away from his home in Troy to found a new civilization in Italy. His journey is a kind of home-away-home story, which considers what it feels like to be forced out of one home, and to have to find, and establish, a new home.

**Orpheus** travels into the Underworld to find his lost love, Eurydice. But on his way home, he disobeys instructions, looking back at her before they reach the world, meaning that his journey was fruitless. He is one of many characters to perform a kind of **katabasis**, that is, a journey downward, to confront the ultimate peril of death.

**Theseus** travels around the Aegean and Mediterranean, from Athens to Crete. When he reaches Crete, he travels again, this time into the Labyrinth (a kind of round-and-round, confusing journey that he needs Ariadne's help to solve).

**Jason** and the Argonauts, his band of heroic companions (including Hercules and Atalanta), travel around the ancient world by sea. Their journey is both a quest and an adventurous outing, similar to the *Odyssey* in its episodic nature and the travellers' stops at interesting islands along the way.

**Hercules'** famous Labours take him around the ancient world too. His journey is presented as a series of tests and trials, which occur in many places, some of which can be seen today.

**The goddess Demeter** travels all around the world looking for her abducted child, Persephone – she travels over the land, and up to Olympus, before learning that Persephone is in the Underworld.

Demeter's daughter, **Persephone**, undergoes a different kind of katabasis: she is taken to the Underworld by Hades, then restored to the upperworld following Demeter's intervention. Persephone's movement, between above ground and the Underworld, creates the seasons.

**Psyche** travels throughout the world seeking her lost love, Eros. Carrying out tasks for his mother, Aphrodite, as a test of her love, she travels to the Underworld to bring back Persephone's face cream for the beautiful goddess.

**The messenger god Hermes**, with his winged sandals, is known to travel widely throughout the world, even guiding souls to the Underworld in his role as psychopomp.

**The goddess Iris**, symbolic of rainbows, also travels widely, acting as a messenger.

## Inner Journeys (Growing Up, Finding Oneself)

Literature for young people, especially older children and young adults, is also interested in what happens to the mind and the character of the protagonist. So many of these narratives are about psychological journeys, and are framed as journeys of maturation. It is probably no coincidence, either, that the traditional Hero's Journey, as mapped by the mythographer Joseph Campbell, building on the work of Carl Jung, has much in common with the coming-of-age narrative, whereby a young protagonist reaches a point of maturation, by overcoming obstacles and learning about his or her place in the world.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, the great heroic legends of the ancient world present heroes whose subjectivity is already formed – even though they may make mistakes and learn from them, they do not need to “grow up” in the way that children's narratives present. (This may be one reason why adaptations of myths often find new heroes to work with – authors may unconsciously feel that the Greek heroes are already formed in a way that makes them challenging to present as young adults – see “B is for Beasts” and “M is for Mythical and Magical Beings”.)

We can see how the external journey can connect with the inner psyche if we look at contemporary young adult novels, such as Louis Sachar's adventure comedy, *Holes* (1998), in which an unconfident boy named Stanley becomes a hero by enduring the hardships of the land, as well as a situation out of his control (when he is falsely accused of theft, and sent to a detention facility in the desert). As the story begins, Stanley is sad and hopeless, overweight and unfit. But as time progresses, he grows stronger (digging holes in the desert in search of a missing treasure), makes friends with a similarly troubled boy named Zero and teaches him to read and write. When the boys run away together, they help each other cross the desert, and climb a mysterious mountain (named God's

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<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Thumb), where they discover the missing treasure. With each step in their adventure, Stanley grows stronger – physically and mentally; his journey takes him into a new sense of himself, and through his success, he is able to restore his family's lost fortunes and sense of pride.

Barbara Dee's *Halfway Normal* (2017), set in an American junior high school (for students aged between eleven and fourteen), takes its protagonist, Nora, on a different kind of journey. Nora has been very ill, having suffered from leukaemia. She desperately wants to return to normal when she goes back to school, but finds that her friends have moved on, and developed beyond her, and that some of them are afraid of her illness and what it might mean. As she navigates the new social patterns, picking up with old friends, making new ones, and finding her way towards romance with a boy named Griffin, Nora undergoes a journey towards a new sense of normal, one in which she is able to accept her own illness as part of her life. A significant part of that acceptance comes from her class project on the story of Persephone, in which she realizes that Persephone's choice to remain in the Underworld for part of the year is similar to her own need to accept the fact that she has been ill, and that life has changed for her.

Physical and social journeys are important parts of children's literature, because they help dramatize the way that we travel through life, cope with change, embrace opportunity, or overcome threats. A great many stories for young people, especially those for young adults, dramatize aspects of the life journey, with the intention to help readers think about the challenges they may face. Overcoming, and accepting, the difficulties of life are a major part of the literary journey (see "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects").

Fantasy novels, such as Margaret Mahy's romantic young adult novel *The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance* (1984), intertwine literal and metaphorical journeys. In this novel, fifteen-year-old Laura Chant undergoes a magic ritual in order to become a witch, and uses her new powers to defeat a creepy man named Carmody Braque who is a *lemur*, a kind of Ancient Roman vampire that feeds on the life force of the very young. In the ritual she undergoes, Laura accepts the help of three witches who live in her neighbourhood in a mansion named *Janua Caeli* ('the doors of the sky'): a crone (Winter), a woman (Winter's daughter, Miryam), and a young man (Miryam's son, Sorenson). The ritual takes Laura on a journey inside her own psyche and heritage: it is a journey into the Underworld of the self, where she travels through a mythical forest of magical beings and of memories.

She was in a forest that was all forests, the forest at the heart of fairy tales, the looking-glass forest where names disappeared, the forests of the night where Carmody Braque devoured tiger cubs, the wood around *Janua Caeli* inhabited by yet another tiger which might have a human face behind its mask, and Laura's own forest, the forest without trees, the subdivision, the city.

Between the straight trunks of the birches, the earth-moving machines lumbered like shadowy, disinterested beasts, a distant supermarket parking lot showed like a little desert of cars. [Her neighbour] Mrs Fangboner, hair newly set, came out from between the ferns and called, "Laura – don't get into dangerous spots. Don't let yourself go." But Laura was already going.<sup>23</sup>

Laura's journey into the forests of her mind takes her into confrontation with her past – her divorced parents with their conflicting heritages (English and Māori), her life in an uninspiring suburb, babysitting her brother while her mother is at work. Mahy mixes up the magical with the mundane, blending the magic forest with the suburban carpark, and Laura pushes grimly onward with her journey, emerging suddenly into reality, changed over into a witch. Having re-emerged from her interior journey, Laura now has the power to defeat the *lemur* and rescue her brother. Journeys of this kind – which take the traveller into the innermost recesses of their soul, connect with the adolescent novel of maturation, in which a protagonist grows up, literally maturing, or reaches a point of understanding about the world and their place in it. Laura comes into her witchy powers, but also comes into her own as a person, learning about her own sexuality (the novel is subtitled "A Supernatural Romance"), and about her relationships with her mother and her young brother: growing in agency and in responsibility.

## Travel Broadens the Mind

Travel broadens the mind, they say: and this certainly applies to travel in mythological and magical stories and ways of thinking. Be they internal or external travels, they take protagonists on journeys in which they face challenges, overcome trials, fulfil responsibilities, and find themselves. And as they do so, they

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Mahy, *The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance*, London: J.M. Dent, 1984, 144.

take readers on journeys, too – into new worlds, and new ways of thinking, being, as well as into the minds and perceptions of others.

### **Further Reading on Journeys**

Nina Goga and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, eds., *Maps and Mapping in Children's Literature: Landscapes, Seascapes and Cityscapes*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017.

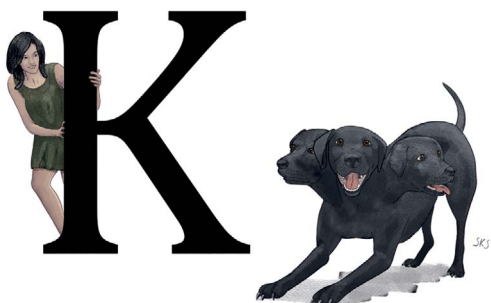
Claudia Nelson and Anne Morey, *Topologies of the Classical World in Children's Fiction: Palimpsests, Maps, and Fractals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Helen Lovatt, *In Search of the Argonauts: The Remarkable History of Jason and the Golden Fleece*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.



K is for kidding around





is for kidding around

"I came, I saw, I threw up". Surely not the kind of admission Julius Caesar might make! But in the slapstick world of Gary Northfield's *Julius Zebra: Rumble with the Romans!*, this is mild joking. Reading a funny book is a special kind of experience. Sharing one's fa-

vourite funny books is a special kind of joy. The Ancient Greeks and Romans also enjoyed a joke. The parodic poem *Batrachomyomachia* offers a travesty of the *Iliad*, recasting it with frogs, mice, and crabs. The plays of the great comedy writers Aristophanes and Plautus offer a mixture of ridiculous situations, satirical comedy, slapstick, and puns. The satirists Juvenal and Horace use fierce language and sly wit to point out the follies and vice of Rome. The fourth-century joke book, known as *Philogelos*, or the *Love of Laughter*, collects jokes on subjects ranging from foolish philosophers to wise fools. Here are two examples from *Philogelos*, quoted in *Julius Zebra: Joke Book Jamboree* (2019):

A young student hears that a crow lives for more than 200 years. So he decided to rear one to find out if it's true!

A young student asks her mother to lend her a cloak to go down to the country. "I have a cloak to go down to the ankle", she replies. "But I don't have one that reaches as far as the country."<sup>1</sup>

Ancient jokes do not seem so funny to us now, because contexts change and it is sometimes hard to understand another culture's sense of humour. It is challenging to tell a joke in a new language. But one thing is clear: humour and play are very important parts of the human experience.

## Highs and Lows of Humour

By finding playful ways to approach Classical Antiquity, writers and illustrators of works for children find ways to cross over between cultures. Readers may not have the knowledge to understand the nuances of Horace or Juvenal. But they recognize silly behaviour, enjoy fun and games, and playing with names and words. The prolific Usborne informational books highlight this approach

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Northfield, *Julius Zebra: Joke Book Jamboree*, "Julius Zebra" 5, London: Walker Books, 2019, 9–10.

through guides to Ancient Rome, using funny characters, situations, and stories, such as in Lesley Sims's *A Visitors' Guide to Ancient Rome* (1999). Even more popular and prolific are Terry Deary's "Horrible Histories" (1993–2013), which emphasize slapstick, gross-out humour, and silly names, to draw in young readers. Concealed within that approach is a serious message: history is about ordinary people and experiences as much as about kings and conquerors. Here, for instance, Deary describes what happened when gladiators died in combat:

It was no use faking a fight. If you were meant to die in the arena the Romans made sure you did. How? Two men came into the arena after your fight. One was dressed in a tight tunic, wore soft leather boots and mask that gave him the nose of a hawk. He carried a big hammer. [He said]: "I am Dis, god of the dead, come to claim this man."

In front of Dis was another man with wings on his helmet and carrying a red-hot poker. [He said]: "I am Mercury, messenger of the gods."

Mercury stuck his red-hot poker into you to make sure you weren't just pretending to be dead, then Dis made absolutely sure by smashing you very hard on the forehead. Then slaves came and carried you off on a stretcher. It was a bit like a football match today... at least that very small bit with the stretcher is.<sup>2</sup>

Using wit, cartoon images, and modern parallels, Deary vividly captures the violence and ruthlessness of Roman life, and its incorporation of mythology as part of the culture's belief – the extraordinary mixed with the ordinary.

This is the democracy of humour: cats can look at kings; children can see that emperors are wearing no clothes. So humorous approaches to Classical Antiquity have an air of bringing something often considered highbrow and elite down to an approachable level. René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo did this regularly in their satirical series of comics, *Asterix* (*Astérix* in French; continued from 2013 by Jean-Yves Ferri and Didier Conrad). The series pits a group of Gauls from a small village in the north of France against the might of the Roman Empire, headed by Julius Caesar. The Gauls have a secret weapon – a potion that gives them superhuman strength – this, and their irreverent sense of humour, makes them effective against the regimented military power of the Romans. In *Asterix and the Laurel Wreath* (published in French in 1971 as *Les Lauriers de César*; translated into English in 1974), Chief Vitalstatistix (Abraracourcix

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Deary, *Ruthless Romans*, ill. Martin Brown, "Horrible Histories", London: Scholastic Children's Books, 2003, 46.

in French) boasts to his annoying brother-in-law that he can get something money cannot buy – a stew seasoned with leaves from Caesar’s laurel wreath. A chaotic and very funny plot is set in motion, in which Asterix and his friend Obelix volunteer to retrieve the wreath and infiltrate Caesar’s palace by putting themselves up as slaves. In dealing with the mayhem when they are sold to the wrong owner, they are mistaken for assassins, thrown in jail, tried, found guilty and thrown to the lions in the Circus Maximus. There, they plan to use their day of fighting the lions to snatch Caesar’s wreath, but on finding that he will not be there, refuse to participate. And so on. Eventually, they manage to persuade Goldendelicius (Garedefréjus), a slave with access, to switch the laurel wreath for one made of parsley, just before Caesar leaves the palace for a triumphal procession through the streets of Rome. The great emperor, looking out over everything he rules, is nevertheless puzzled to feel a bit like a fish (parsley being a traditional French garnish for fish). Something is definitely fishy.<sup>3</sup>

Comedies like *Asterix and the Laurel Wreath* play the balance between high and low for laughs: the story gives a magnificent send-up of Caesar, normally a formidable figure, famous to this day, studied for generations by historians and students of Roman culture. Despite his power and status, he is outwitted, and made a fool of, by humble villagers in the one corner of France the Roman Empire has not been able to conquer. Such comedies show young readers that ordinary people can have power, and that even in serious situations fun is possible. The *Asterix* series plays continually with the contest between the fearsome Romans and the naughty Gauls, showing the power of individuality, and the power of good fun, through situation comedy, and a host of silly puns.

Punning is common in children’s comedies set in the ancient world. They are made easier in English by the fact that the English language has inherited many words from Latin and Greek, and that many Latin names in particular sound like English words that are almost, but not quite the same. Credit must be given to Anthea Bell, the masterful translator (into English) of *Asterix*, who contributes names that play on homophones and jargon: the head of a group of thieves in *Asterix and the Laurel Wreath* is called Habeascorpus; Asterix and Obelix find themselves bought at a slave auction by a man named Osseus Humerus, and his family – Fibula, Tibia, and Metatarsus.<sup>4</sup> Young readers may

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<sup>3</sup> In the original French it is fennel (*fenouil*) rather than parsley that makes up Caesar’s wreath.

<sup>4</sup> Bell is also picking up on the punning that runs through the French original, where Osseus Humerus is called Claudius Quiquifus. His wife is called Alpaga Quiquifus; their daughters remain Fibula and Tibia; the son is Gracchus Quiquifus.

not immediately recognize the puns on anatomical nomenclature, but they will recognize that jokes are being made, and may be inspired to learn more about Latin and Ancient Rome.

**René Goscinny, “The Adventures of Asterix” Series, ill. Albert Uderzo (Continued from 2013 by Jean-Yves Ferri and Didier Conrad)**

For six decades, these comic books have been adored by generations of young readers, and are responsible for inspiring many fans to pursue the study of Latin and Roman history. Originally published in French, the books have been translated into countless languages and adapted for the screen, and as video and board games. There is even a theme park in Plailly, France.

Set in 50 BCE, the books recount the adventures of a village of indomitable Gauls, who resist Roman invasion with the aid of a magic potion that endows them with super strength. The stories feature a host of memorable characters, whose names are often puns on their roles or personalities. The main protagonists are shrewd, compact Asterix (endowed with an enormous moustache) and his oversized best friend, Obelix, whose obsession with wild boar is overshadowed only by his love for his little white dog, Dogmatix (in the English version; in the French he is known as Idéfix). The wordplay of the written text is balanced by the slapstick violence depicted in the illustrations, with plenty of king-hits and concussions. Readers derive enormous satisfaction from seeing the all-powerful Romans consistently brought undone by the underdog Gauls.

## Words and Situations

Working in the *Asterix* tradition is Gary Northfield’s series “Julius Zebra” (2015–present; the name is of course a pun on Julius Caesar), a set of illustrated books that make similar puns and plays with what we know, or what we think we know about Ancient Roman culture. In *Julius Zebra: Rumble with the Romans!* (2015), the first of the series, Julius is a dreamy zebra who comes to Rome against his will when he and a group of animals from Africa are captured and taken to the circus. Initially Julius thinks he is going to see a circus and is excited, but when he discovers he will be *part* of the circus, he is not so keen. Julius and his friends are thrust into the centre of the Colosseum, and a gang of fierce gladiators attack them. When one of them calls Julius a “stripy horse”, however, Julius is enraged, and fights back, winning a reprieve when the Emperor Hadrian decides he is popular enough to live to fight another day:

"WHAT??!" screamed Julius. "That's not a path to fame and glory – that's a path to me getting my head lopped off. I DON'T STAND A CHANCE!!" Julius started sobbing into his hooves.<sup>5</sup>

Julius and his friends undergo training and are eventually victorious. In this, and in the other volumes, Northfield shows different aspects of life in Rome, especially from the perspective of slaves, gladiators, and animals. He does not shy away from gross-out humour: in the opening of the second volume, *Julius Zebra: Bundle with the Britons!* (2016), Julius is asked by a fan to sign a parchment with a print from his hoof. He gladly obliges, dipping his hoof in what he thinks is mud, before he realizes his mistake: "I don't think that actually was mud", says Julius to his friend Cornelius the warthog, who takes a sniff, and exclaims disgustedly "Peeyoo! And that girl kissed it too!"<sup>6</sup> Such comic moments keep the "Julius Zebra" books rollicking along, helped by simple, clear text in which written and drawn elements offer punchlines, slapstick, and occasional pathos. Serious elements occur too: such as the satirical representation of the power-hungry Emperor Hadrian (in *Bundle with the Britons* he is obsessed with the building of his big wall); or the depiction of how Julius and his friends' sympathy for the slaves of Britannia leads them to start a revolution.

Also with a kernel of seriousness at its heart, is Geoffrey McSkimming's series of archaeological adventure stories, "The Cairo Jim Chronicles" (1993–2011), featuring an archaeologist and poet (Cairo Jim) and his group of friends, Doris the Macaw and Brenda the Wonder Camel. The series is set in the modern day, and the ancient world features in the archaeological sites around the world that the team visits, as part of a society that aims to "protect the past". Their chief adversary, Neptune Flannelbottom Bone, seeks to rule the world by searching out ancient treasures with mystical properties that will enable him to conquer all. As they travel, they connect with different aspects of the classical world. McSkimming skilfully blends information about daily life with ideas about mythology, belief, and the powers beyond. In *Cairo Jim amidst the Petticoats of Artemis* (2000), for example, Jim and the team follow Neptune Bone to Turkey, to the underground cities of Cappadocia, and the small city of Aphrodisias in Anatolia, where a statue of Artemis offers the clues to ultimate power. There, Bone seeks to reunite the petticoats of the statue with a missing belt, known

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Northfield, *Julius Zebra: Rumble with the Romans!*, "Julius Zebra" 1, Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2015, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Northfield, *Julius Zebra: Bundle with the Britons!*, "Julius Zebra" 2, London: Walker Books, 2016, 17.

as the "Belt of Bountaeity". Using a combination of derring-do and good scholarship, Jim and his companions race against Bone to prevent magical objects of the past falling into the wrong hands.

The "Cairo Jim" books are popular for their combination of interesting settings, exciting action, wordplay, and situational humour. Funny names, comic characters, and strange situations are a feature. For instance, here is a scene in which Brenda the Wonder Camel quietly conducts some archaeological research in the Turkish city of Aphrodisias, using her sensitive nose to decipher an inscription:

She didn't know what that letter would be... maybe a D or a V or a C. Maybe not even one of those. But she knew that once she found a single letter of the type used in the ancient Roman script, then she would probably find other letters. Maybe they would be right next to the first letter she would find, or maybe, if the slab containing the first letter had smashed, the other letters would be on nearby fragments of marble in the grass. If that was the case, then Jim and Doris and she would have an ancient jigsaw puzzle to piece together.

As her sensitive nostrils moved across the marble, she concentrated – as hard as she had concentrated on anything before – and in her mind she began to see the curves and straight lines that made up the letters of the Latin alphabet.

Carefully, with her unique Wonder Camel precision of mind, muscle and minutiae, she transferred the images in her head to the muscles of her nostrils.<sup>7</sup>

In *Cairo Jim at the Crossroads of Orpheus* (2006) we learn that as a calf Brenda swallowed the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Her knowledge and wisdom, coupled with her psychic powers (whereby she transmits her thoughts to her companions) make her a gentle straight-man (or straight-camel), providing exposition and explanation, and often doing the work while the mayhem continues around her. This scene, in which Brenda snuffles among the ruins of Aphrodisias, displaying the power of good scholarship in archaeological work, is an example of the way that McSkimming incorporates humour and learning.

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey McSkimming, *Cairo Jim amidst the Petticoats of Artemis: A Turkish Tale of Treachery*, "The Cairo Jim Chronicles" 7, Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2000, 130–131.

The playfulness and wit that pervade these books shows how humour and seriousness work alongside one another. They retain an educational seriousness: for the most part ancient and modern elements are clearly marked, and even if young readers might be disappointed to find out that Julius Zebra is not a real gladiator, or if there was not really a “Belt of Bountaeity” in the cult of Artemis, they may be drawn to find out more about the Ancient Romans, and discover equally entertaining and thought-provoking historical facts (see also “S is for Speculation”).<sup>8</sup>

Readers may also learn about myth and the myriad ways that it can be played with, by reading books such as Paul Shipton’s *The Pig Scrolls* (2004) and *The Pig Who Saved the World* (2006), which feature Gryllus, one of Odysseus’ crew, turned into a pig by the sorceress Circe.<sup>9</sup> When the others are turned back to men and leave, Gryllus, who has hidden in the bushes, remains a pig. He is found by a teenage poet named Homer and a brave prophetess called Sibyl, and goes on adventures with them, saving the world both on purpose and accidentally. These stories find the amusing side of the world of Greek mythology, and Gryllus and his friends encounter all sorts of strange and funny beings on their quest to save the world.

Shipton works with the source material of the ancient myths, and highlights how funny parts of them are. Indeed, the original *Odyssey* is full of wit and trickery, including puns, games, and jokes. When Odysseus famously introduces himself to the Cyclops Polyphemus as “Nobody”, he not only conceals his true identity, but also plays a clever trick on the dim-witted giant. As he is being blinded, Polyphemus cries out to his fellow Cyclopes, “Nobody is hurting me!”,<sup>10</sup> thus ensuring that no one comes to his aid. It is a simple joke, one that children and adults alike can find amusing. Odysseus’ wooden horse, with which he fools the Trojans into letting the Greeks behind enemy lines, is similarly amusing. But the comic potential of a wooden horse containing soldiers ready to jump out of it and cry “Surprise!” offers considerable fodder for artists and writers alike.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 202.

<sup>9</sup> For turning Odysseus’ crew into swines, see Homer, *Odyssey* 10.233–243.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 9.408, in Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray, vol. 1, “Loeb Classical Library”, London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1946, 331, via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/in.gov.ignca.913/page/n349/mode/2up> (accessed 7 April 2022): “My friends, it is Noman that is slaying me by guile and not by force” (ὦ φίλοι, Οὐτίς με κτείνει δόλῳ οὐδὲ βίῃφιν).

## Midas and the Golden Touch

*When Dionysus grants Midas a wish, the avaricious king wishes that everything he touches turns to gold. But the gift quickly becomes a curse when he discovers he cannot eat or drink and even transforms his beloved daughter into a golden statue. With its strong fantasy elements and moralistic message, this myth is enormously popular in stories for children of all ages.*

**Retelling** – Jan Mark, *The Midas Touch*, ill. Juan Wijngaard (1999)

A lavishly illustrated picture book version of the famous myth, which highlights the sensory delights and horrors of being granted the power to transform things to gold.

**Revision** – Lynne Reid Banks, *The Adventures of King Midas*, ill. George Him (1976)

This chapter book begins with the traditional tale, but introduces witches, magicians, and other fantasy creatures into King Midas' search for a way to transform his daughter, Delia, back.

**Adaptation** – Annie Sullivan, *A Touch of Gold* (2018)

This young adult novel expands the character of Midas' daughter, recounting her swash-buckling adventures with pirates as she seeks to retrieve her father's special golden objects, which have been stolen from him.

**Allusion** – Ryan North, *The Midas Flesh*, ill. Braden Lamb and Shelli Paroline (2014)

A graphic novel space-adventure in which the notion of the golden touch is transformed into a weapon that everyone wants to have power over.

Many of the Greek myths are not funny at all, of course. It is hard to laugh at tragic figures, such as Philomela or Daphne, robbed of their futures by vicious men or gods. And children's writers know when to leave well alone, avoiding tragic and brutal stories, and working instead on funny elements in narratives that may seem more sympathetic to young readers. Sometimes this means the Minotaur is transformed from a brutish beast into a cuddly unfortunate. See, for instance, Alexander Matthews and Wilbur Dawbarn's very funny graphic novel, *Useleus: A Greek Oddity* (2017), in which the bumbling hero of the title is mentored by the Minotaur, now "retired from Labyrinth duty". Sometimes this means that Icarus, instead of tumbling into the sea is caught by his inventive father (see Lisl Weil's *King Midas' Secret and Other Follies* [1969], discussed in "E is for Emotions"). Some myths attract funny retellings, such as the tales of King Midas, known for his "golden touch", and for gaining donkey ears when he praises the wrong god in a talent display.<sup>11</sup> (Weil shows the humour of a blushing Midas trying out inventive haircuts and headdresses to hide his ears.) The story of the golden touch

<sup>11</sup> For Midas' ears, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.172–193.

has its tragic side, and comes with a moral realization about the nature of value (see, for instance, Nathaniel Hawthorne's influential retelling, in which Midas' daughter, Marygold, is turned to lifeless gold at a crucial moment). But the comic potential of the story is such that many illustrators and writers enjoy showing the different effects of the Midas touch. Rosemary Wells's *Max and Ruby's Midas: Another Greek Myth* (1995) shows a bunny-rabbit Midas figure turning everything he touches into jelly (see "B is for Beasts"); Patrick Skene Catling's *The Chocolate Touch*, illustrated by Mildred Coughlin McNutt (1952), revises the story into a fable about a boy who likes chocolate a bit too much. That they contain clear morals does not hurt these retellings' chances of publications – parents love funny books with messages (and indeed so do children).

Other stories about greed and chaos invoke, allusively, the spectre of Eryichthon, the King of Thessaly, who was inflicted with a hunger so all-consuming that he ended up eating his limbs and body, consuming himself. Don Gillmor and Pierre Pratt present the story as *The Boy Who Ate the World and the Girl Who Saved It* (2008), a picture book in which a boy named Herman is so hungry that he eats the entire world. As he does so, he grows larger and larger, and also more and more lonely. The only thing he has not eaten is a girl named Sarah. When he tells her that he is "stuffed", she jumps into his mouth. He bursts, and the world is restored. Reunited with her dog, Sarah "watched the moon come out, which looked like Herman's face. It was smiling".<sup>12</sup> The message of greed and restraint is clear; however, stories like these appeal to young readers, who are learning about boundaries and self-control, but enjoy the idea of doing what they want, and being out of control.

### Play and Performance

*Comedy and drama were essential elements of life in the ancient world, and a number of storytellers have adapted the classical myths into play scripts, often intended for classroom work.*

- ▣ Audrey Haggard, *Little Plays from the Greek Myths* (1929)
- ▣ Suzanne Barchers, *From Atalanta to Zeus: Readers Theatre from Greek Mythology* (2001)
- ▣ Geraldine McCaughrean, *The Greeks on Stage: 25 Plays from Greek Mythology*, ill. Richard Brassey (2002)
- ▣ Alison Hawes, *Go Greek!* (2010; activity book with recipes, pottery, costumes)
- ▣ Ursula Dubosarsky, *The Boy Who Could Fly and Other Magical Plays for Children* (2019; eleven plays based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*)

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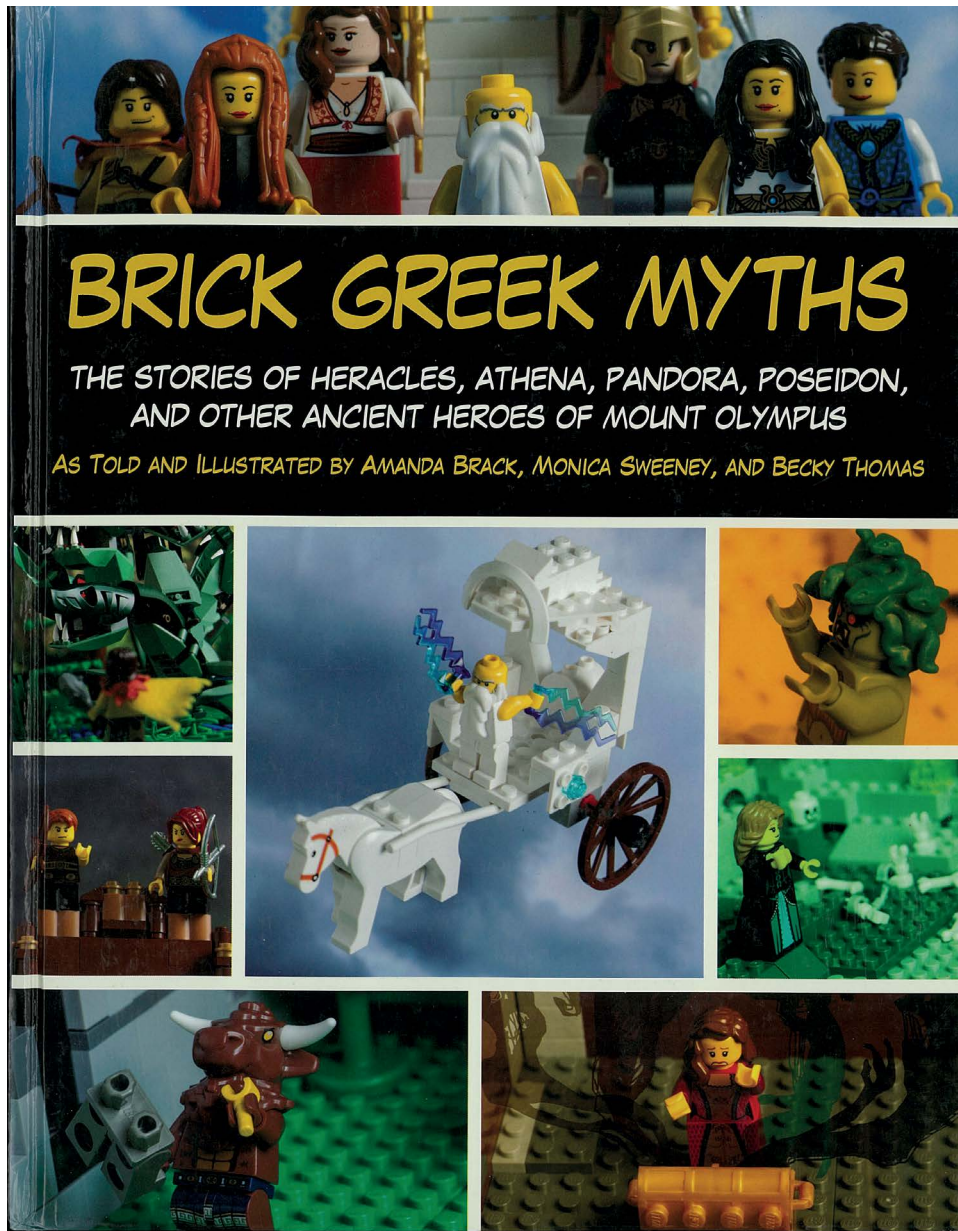
<sup>12</sup> Don Gillmor, *The Boy Who Ate the World and the Girl Who Saved It*, ill. Pierre Pratt, Toronto: North Winds Press, 2008, 28.

### Gross-Out, Madcap Myth Books

*Often written for juvenile boys, these books use slapstick and gross-out humour and funny elements from the ancient world to capture their interest.*

- 📖 Terry Denton, “Storymaze” series (1999–2003)
- 📖 Felice Arena, *Farticus Maximus and Other Stories That Stink!* (2008)
- 📖 Charles R. Smith, *The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth*, ill. P. Craig Russell (2009)
- 📖 Michael Townsend, *Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders* (2010)
- 📖 Steve Cole, *The Moo-Lympic Games* (2010)
- 📖 Gary Northfield, “Julius Zebra” series (2015–present)
- 📖 Mark Maciejewski, *I Am Fartacus* (2017)
- 📖 Øyvind Torseter, *Mulysses* (2017)
- 📖 Blake Hoena, “Gross Gods” series, ill. Ivica Stevanovic (2019)

Stella Tarakson’s “Hopeless Heroes” (2017–2020) series and John Dougherty’s *Zeus* (2004–2011) series of illustrated chapter books offer a different side of mythical comedy and ideas about chaos. This time, the gods are out of control, and serious and careful children are given the task to keep them out of trouble. In “Hopeless Heroes”, Tim, a boy whose father has died, finds that the great hero Hercules is trapped in an antique vase in his mother’s living room, put there by a plotting Hera, whose dislike for the hero will stop at nothing. Mayhem ensues. Tim, with the help of Hercules’ daughter, Zoe, turns out to be good at outwitting the gods, and his newfound confidence helps him deal with problems in his real life, such as bullies and his mother’s romance with his teacher. In Dougherty’s *Zeus* series, a mild-mannered boy named Alex is startled when a cardboard temple he has made for a school project turns into a portal for the king of the gods, Zeus. True to form, Zeus is hard to handle, being mischievous, bad-mannered, and unruly. As Alex and his friend Charlie solve the problems Zeus sets in motion, they re-enact in the schoolyard different elements of Greek myth, such as the Trojan War, where Charlie smuggles Alex into the school inside a vaulting horse from the gym; or the Labours of Hercules, in which a bully named Eric Lees (a pun on Heracles) is forced by Zeus to carry out a number of tasks. Here, the gods are comic foils to serious children who feel worries and responsibilities. And this leads us to a final point: comedy helps us look at things differently, to see things from different perspectives, to solve problems, by laughter. The great gods and heroes may be great, but just as cats can look at kings, so children can help the gods get home to Olympus, their dignity more or less intact.



**Figure 7:** The *Brick Greek Myths* use witty LEGO depictions to present a comprehensive and entertaining version of the Greek myths. Cover of Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, *Brick Greek Myths: The Stories of Heracles, Athena, Pandora, Poseidon, and Other Ancient Heroes of Mount Olympus*, New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

Kidding around offers a way for the smallest of us to bring great things down to size – be they gods, or heroes, or seemingly unsurmountable problems. Punning and parody, slapstick and gross-out humour all have their place in children’s literature, allowing laughter to break in. Notably, stories like “Hopeless Heroes” and *Zeus on the Loose* give children a sense of power and agency – not only using humour to help them handle their own difficulties, but also to engage with the classical world.

### **Further Reading on Kidding Around**

Kerry Mallan, *Laugh Lines: Exploring Humour in Children’s Literature*, Newtown: Primary English Teachers Association, 1993.

Julie Cross, *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.





is for labyrinth



is for labyrinth

## First, We Must Approach the Maze

What does a Labyrinth look like? It depends on who is doing the looking – and who is illustrating the famous maze. For some it is rectangular: Gary Northfield's

*Julius Zebra: Grapple with the Greeks!* (2018) presents it on a tattered map, with one corner "chewed off due to stress!": a loosely sketched maze scattered with skeletons ("skellybobs") and eyeballs, "sad" mice, "nice" spiders, an "ordinary" bull, and a Minotaur lurking in the middle, waving his sword.<sup>1</sup> For others it is circular: Sara Fanelli's Labyrinth in *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece* (2002), "designed by Daedalus",<sup>2</sup> showing a doe-eyed Minotaur wrapped, as it were, by layers of walls in a huge circle – suggesting that he is as much trapped as his victims. In Frank Sikalas's *Theseus and the Minotaur: Birth of a Hero* (2017), illustrated by Anna Manolatos, the Labyrinth is figured in blacks and greys, with skulls in various dead-ends, and a blue-and-black Minotaur crouching in its midst. Manolatos's images are accompanied by Sikalas's words, emphasizing the ominous and threatening aspects of the maze and the beast at its centre: as Theseus walks, with the Athenian sacrifices cowering next to him, "the DIRTIER, DARKER, and SMELLIER it got. There was a growling and snoring sound close by".<sup>3</sup>

But not all Labyrinths are quite so fearsome. In *Greek Myths* (1991), Marcia Williams frames her Labyrinth with golden columns, showing a cartoonish Theseus progressing through a series of "cold, dark passages",<sup>4</sup> seen from above like a map, and from within, with cute bats, ghosts, and lizards observing his progress. Each page of Juliet Rix's *A-Maze-Ing Minotaur* (2014), illustrated by Juliet Snape, features maze puzzles and invites readers to play an active role in the adventure: the back cover exhorts readers to "Follow Theseus on his quest, through the Labyrinth, and see if YOU can spot where the Minotaur is lurking, and see if you can follow the thread and help Theseus escape?" Snape is known for her books of mazes, which are set around the world, and the genre is quite popular for young readers: including wipe-clean books that can be traced again and again by small fingers, or with washable markers.

<sup>1</sup> Northfield, *Julius Zebra: Grapple with the Greeks!*, 122–123.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Fanelli, *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece*, London: Walker Books, 2002, 18–19.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Sikalas, *Theseus and the Minotaur: Birth of a Hero*, ill. Anna Manolatos, Underwood: Frank Sikalas and In House Publishing, 2017, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Marcia Williams, *Greek Myths*, Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 1991, 28.

Books of labyrinths allow for the fun of getting lost, and finding oneself multiple times, in all sorts of locations. Jan Bajtlik's splendid large-format collection of complicated labyrinths, *NiĆ Ariadny. Mity i labirynty* (2018; translated into English as *Greek Myths and Mazes* [2019]) presents the stories of the Greek myths as stages in different labyrinths, suggesting that the myths themselves form a kind of labyrinth of meaning. Its blurb urges readers:

Find your way through the Labyrinth of Greek mythology! Pick a path through the twists and turns of winding tracks, among gods, heroes, fantastic creatures and extraordinary events... Lose yourself in this book to find yourself in the Greece of thousands of years ago.<sup>5</sup>

Tracing the epic journeys of Jason and Odysseus, Prometheus and Heracles in this manner, roaming through bestiaries, boats, palaces and amphitheatres, Bajtlik suggests that we all travel through labyrinths, and that far from being places to get lost in, they are a means to travel, to seek and find.

What one finds in the Labyrinth, of course, is the question. In Nick Butterworth's picture book *Percy the Park Keeper: The Secret Path* (1994), a gardener called Percy gets lost in a botanical maze when his small animal friends loosen the string he tied to the entrance. A playful story like this, aimed at very young readers, is less about facing the inner darkness, and more about the delight of a good joke, and readers are encouraged to help Percy find his way out, by tracing his path on a large fold-out map of the labyrinth. Instead of a fearsome beast lurking at the centre of the maze is a pleasant garden, while a cuddly Minotaur statue guards the maze's entrance.

### Maze and Puzzle Books

*The puzzles of mythology (mazes, mythical beasts, games, and contests) inspire writers and readers to play with the stories, ideas, and creatures of the ancient world.*

📖 Nick Butterworth, *Percy the Park Keeper: The Secret Path* (1994)

📖 Sara Maitland, *Pandora's Box: A 3-Dimensional Celebration of Greek Mythology*, ill. Christos Kondeatis (1995), with masks, board games, mazes, and pop-ups included

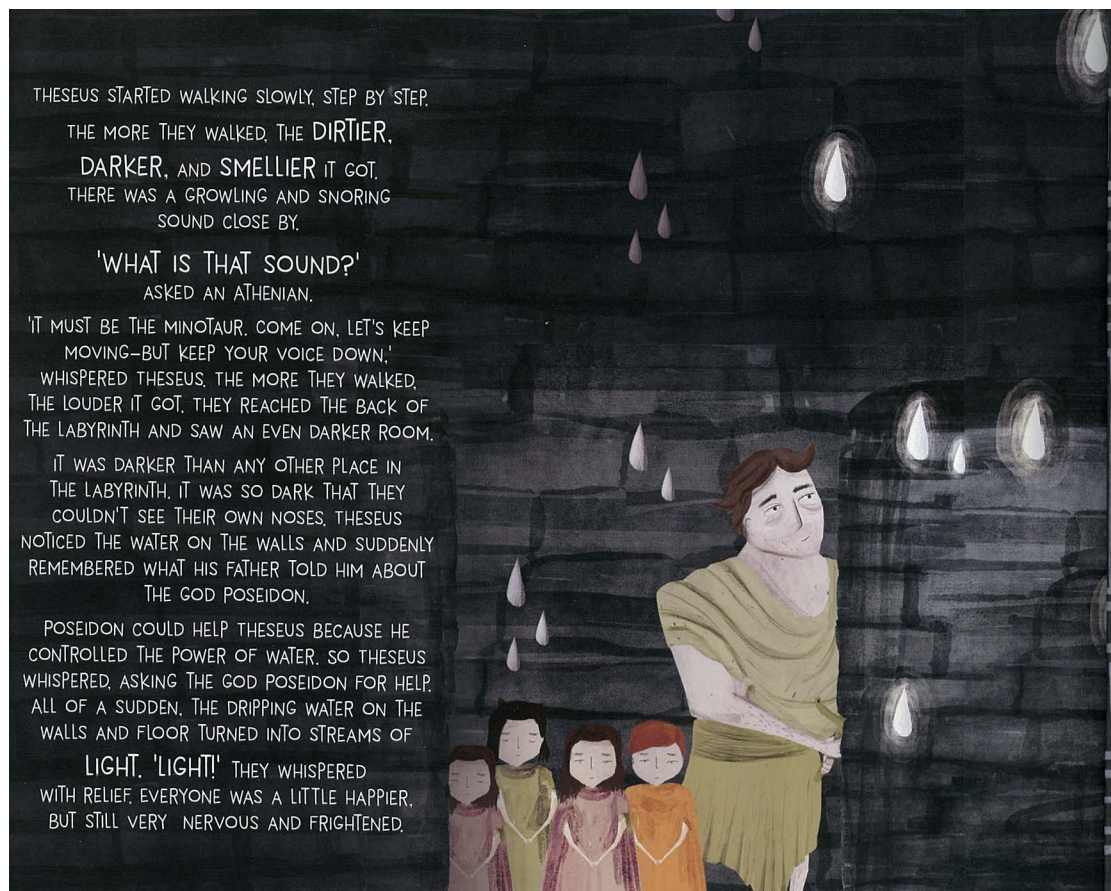
📖 Heather Amery, *Usborne Greek Myths Jigsaw Book*, ill. Linda Edwards (2006)

📖 Juliet Rix, *A-Maze-Ing Minotaur*, ill. Juliet Snape (2014)

📖 Good Wives and Warriors [Becky Bolton and Louise Chappell], *Myth Match: A Fantastical Flipbook of Extraordinary Beasts* (2018)

📖 Jan Bajtlik, *Greek Myths and Mazes* (2019)

<sup>5</sup> Jan Bajtlik, *Greek Myths and Mazes*, trans. Zosia Krasodomska-Jones, Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2019 (ed. pr. in Polish 2018).



THESEUS STARTED WALKING SLOWLY, STEP BY STEP.

THE MORE THEY WALKED, THE DIRTIER,

DARKER, AND SMELLIER IT GOT.

THERE WAS A GROWLING AND SNORING  
SOUND CLOSE BY.

'WHAT IS THAT SOUND?'

ASKED AN ATHENIAN.

'IT MUST BE THE MINOTAUR. COME ON, LET'S KEEP  
MOVING—BUT KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN.'

WHISPERED THESEUS. THE MORE THEY WALKED,  
THE LOUDER IT GOT. THEY REACHED THE BACK OF  
THE LABYRINTH AND SAW AN EVEN DARKER ROOM.

IT WAS DARKER THAN ANY OTHER PLACE IN  
THE LABYRINTH. IT WAS SO DARK THAT THEY  
COULDN'T SEE THEIR OWN NOSES. THESEUS  
NOTICED THE WATER ON THE WALLS AND SUDDENLY  
REMEMBERED WHAT HIS FATHER TOLD HIM ABOUT  
THE GOD POSEIDON.

POSEIDON COULD HELP THESEUS BECAUSE HE  
CONTROLLED THE POWER OF WATER. SO THESEUS  
WHISPERED, ASKING THE GOD POSEIDON FOR HELP.  
ALL OF A SUDDEN, THE DRIPPING WATER ON THE  
WALLS AND FLOOR TURNED INTO STREAMS OF

LIGHT. 'LIGHT!' THEY WHISPERED  
WITH RELIEF EVERYONE WAS A LITTLE HAPPIER,  
BUT STILL VERY NERVOUS AND FRIGHTENED.

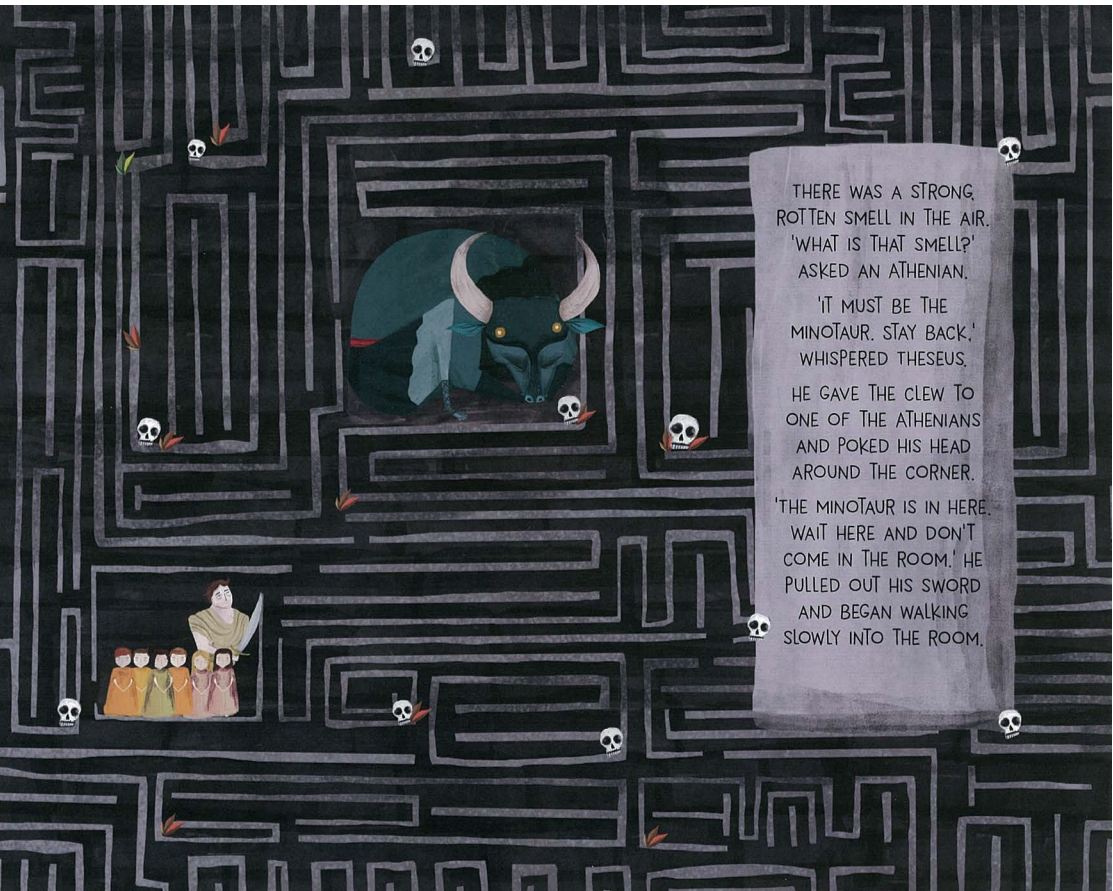
## Meeting the Minotaur

Most Minotaurs, however, are not cuddly: they are symbols of fierceness and monstrosity. Theseus is brave and strong to take on this terrifying beast, as many retellings emphasize.

*Brick Greek Myths* (2014), by Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, shows Asterion, the child of Queen Pasiphae and Poseidon's bull, becoming "wilder and wilder, like his father. He began devouring people, and the people of Crete were afraid for their lives".<sup>6</sup> This comprehensive book that uses images of LEGO reconstructions of well-known Greek myths is often surprisingly frank (see also "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects", "I is for Being

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<sup>6</sup> Brack, Sweeney, and Thomas, *Brick Greek Myths*, 114.



**Figure 8:** Frank Sikalas and Anna Manolatos show the fearsome qualities of the Labyrinth. Frank Sikalas, *Theseus and the Minotaur: Birth of a Hero*, ill. Anna Manolatos, Underwood: Frank Sikalas and In House Publishing, 2017, 23–24. Used with the Authors' kind permission.

Informed", "O is for the Olympians"). It takes the Minotaur at face-value, viewing it as a fierce beast, and showing LEGO Theseus braving the Labyrinth, tearing off the sleeping Minotaur's horn, and using it to stab the beast through the heart,<sup>7</sup> before the narrative moves briskly on to the next part of the story.

Works like these, which emphasize adventure over introspection, are of course less likely to explore the Minotaur's inner workings. Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (2005–2009) series of young adult adventure-fantasy novels recasts many of the Greek myths in a loose retelling

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 118.

of the *Perseiad*. The books feature a Brooklyn teenager named Percy Jackson, who discovers he is a son of the god Poseidon, and joins in a battle against the forces of darkness. In the early stages of *The Lightning Thief* (2005; the first novel in the series) Percy encounters the Minotaur in Brooklyn. It attacks Percy's mother, dissolving her in a shower of gold. Enraged, Percy fights what he refers to as the "bull-man", tearing off one of the Minotaur's horns:

Rage filled me like high-octane fuel. I got both hands around one horn and I pulled backwards with all my might. The monster tensed, gave a surprised grunt, then – *snap!*

The bull-man screamed and flung me through the air. I landed flat on my back in the grass. My head smacked against a rock. When I sat up, my vision was blurry, but I had a horn in my hands, a ragged bone weapon the size of a knife.<sup>8</sup>

This Minotaur "only had one gear: forward",<sup>9</sup> and when he charges and Percy stabs him with his horn, he roars in agony, and disintegrates "like crumbling sand, blown away in chunks by the wind".<sup>10</sup> Percy, of course, is a reincarnation of Perseus, not Theseus, but, in discovering he is part of the world of the Olympians, he finds himself facing monsters from various myth cycles. He later learns that the Minotaur is not dead: "Monsters don't die, Percy. They can be killed. But they don't die", explains his friend Annabeth (herself a child of Athena).<sup>11</sup>

In Riordan's work, mythical beings' primal power can be seen in the way they can re-form and be faced again and again. Despite his terrifying qualities, this Minotaur is not the worst monster Percy can face: as part of a series structure that pits the "good" forces of the Olympians against the "bad" forces of the Titans, this Minotaur is merely a servant of the dark, not a force of darkness himself. Another such Minotaur appears in Myke Bartlett's young adult novel *Fire in the Sea* (2012) set in Perth, Western Australia. This Minotaur is brought there by a wicked priestess of Atlantis, who is searching for an ancient talisman that will bring her eternal life, and sets him on a rampage through the city:

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<sup>8</sup> Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" 1, New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2005, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 86.

He might have made an imposing statue with his thick legs cast from bronze. Every muscle was clearly sculpted, from the broad biceps to his calves. Sparse hair embellished his weight-lifter's chest. A heavy, rusted lock hung from a chain around his neck. His feet were bare and blackened, the skin thick and crusted, and long, dark nails curled from his gnarled hands. Still, nobody was looking at his hands. All eyes were on the matted fur of his head, the exposed and bloodied teeth, and the horns. The head of a bull, the body of a man, the teeth of a lion.<sup>12</sup>

Despite his ferocity, this Minotaur is an unwilling henchman: a slave in fact, whom the novel's heroine, Sadie, liberates during the novel's denouement. Looking deep into the beast's eyes, Sadie sees the suffering soul inside, and she loosens his chains and allows him to slip away.

For Bartlett, the Minotaur's monstrosity masks something deeper: interior feelings and consciousness making the beast a tragic, as well as a fearsome and grotesque, being, hinting at reflection about the viciousness of slavery, and encouraging a sense of empathy for this creature who is the monstrous result of others' actions. In general, the novel emphasizes emotions and personal growth: Sadie's ability to feel empathy for the Minotaur is an important part of her development. This approach is generally important in young adult novels, and can be seen in their treatment of the Minotaur myth. David Elliott's verse novel *Bull* (2017) delivers the story of the Cretan tragedy through a series of dramatic monologues, spoken by the key players (Poseidon, King Minos, Queen Pasiphae, Theseus, Ariadne, Daedalus, and Asterion, that is, the Minotaur). Many of these players find themselves trapped in impossible situations: Pasiphae goes mad; Ariadne betrays her brother by giving Theseus the thread to the Labyrinth; Daedalus is filled with revulsion at King Minos' demands. Asterion in particular is the greatest victim of the Labyrinth: trapped within the design executed by Daedalus to the King's instructions, seeking deliverance, he is killed by a jeering Theseus. Asterion faces his fate bravely: his final words a reproach to the story that has trapped him:

HELL...  
... is not  
the pushing of a boulder  
up a mountainside  
to watch it roll

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<sup>12</sup> Myke Bartlett, *Fire in the Sea*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2012, 107.

back with broken back  
and broken shoulder.  
HELL is the numbing of the soul.  
HELL is not an unfulfilled desire.  
It's colder.  
Nor the thirst  
that takes its victims whole.  
HELL is the freezing  
scorn for who you are  
that transforms a faultless boy  
to Minotaur [...].<sup>13</sup>

Scattered over the pages, these words highlight an essential unfairness to the story that has haunted retellings of the myth, especially for children. Who chooses to be monstrous? What does it mean to be a monster, and what does it mean to be locked away, to function as a figure of fear and torment, and in turn to be tormented? Furthermore, who decides what is monstrous? The parallels with the casual cruelties of life and society are myriad, and invoke all sorts of reflections on winning and losing, and on good and bad deeds. For Elliott, Asterion/Minotaur is entirely a victim. A similar approach can be seen in Jennifer Cook's young adult romance, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004) set in "the time scholars of Classical Studies refer to as Ancient Greece. Actually it was way before that, in a time that the scholars are still struggling to give a name to, apart from the terribly vague but romantic-sounding 'Mythical Greece'".<sup>14</sup> Here, the Minotaur is not half man, half bull, but a deformed child, the product of Pasiphae's affair with Pistrades, a priest of Dionysus. King Minos is enraged and ashamed. He traps the boy (known as "Taurus") in a fearsome Labyrinth, designed with mechanisms that kill all other entrants. It is the Labyrinth, not the bull, that is monstrous, but a disoriented Theseus loses Ariadne's thread and confused by the Labyrinth kills the innocent child instead of helping him. (In this version, Ariadne is only too happy to be left on Naxos by Theseus, as she is able to reunite with her true love interest, a young acolyte of Dionysus named Pleides, who has tried to help protect Taurus, and live a quiet life in a fishing village.) Even more than in *Bull*, Taurus is an innocent victim of adult drama: his mother's infidelity; his father's jealousy and pride; Theseus' brash overconfidence; even Ariadne's attempts to help. Perhaps this resonates with

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<sup>13</sup> David Elliott, *Bull: A Novel*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, 167–169.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Cook, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur*, Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2004, 7.

the idea, common in children's literature, that children often suffer because of adult mistakes (to varying degrees).

This idea has much resonance, of course, and connects interestingly to non-classical situations. For example, writer-artist-composer Matt Ottley explores this idea further in *Requiem for a Beast* (2007), a multimedia exploration of the Australian treatment of the Aborigines by European settlers. Here, the Minotaur is an innocent animal: a magnificent Brahman bull, one that has evaded muster for many years. It is rounded up and killed by the novel's protagonist, an unnamed boy in his late teens who has run away from his problems in the city and is now working as a cowboy in the Australian Outback. As the boy confronts the bull, he also confronts his memories of his childhood and teenage years, memories that connect with his own father's shame (at complicity in the death of a young Aboriginal boy), and the Australian national shame at its treatment of the Aborigines. The Minotaur figures in the boy's mind as a symbol of his own depression – caused partly by his father's shame, and by his own spiralling into drug-use and cheating. In full-page illustrations, the Minotaur towers in cloud formations, and looms in the boy's dreams, until he faces the "beast" in real time, in the form of the bull, whom he chases into a labyrinth-like ravine, where it falls and injures itself. The boy then has to perform a mercy killing of the unfortunate beast, a killing that enables him to grow up, and to shed some of the intergenerational bad faith that has haunted him.

The Labyrinth of *Requiem for a Beast* is the Australian landscape, and its history, which Ottley depicts in mythological terms: connecting men on horseback (cowboys or soldiers from the settler era) with the idea of the centaur, a vicious creature neither human nor animal. He further connects the hybridity of such beasts with the hybridity of adolescence – lost in the labyrinth of emotions, the boy feels as if he himself is transforming into a horrifying monster. It is only when he faces the bull, and also when he faces the sins of the past, and acknowledges them on behalf of his culture, that he is able to begin healing, helped by an Aboriginal Ariadne – an old woman (and the ghost of her past childhood), who unlocks his memories with the thread of her words.

*Requiem for a Beast* is an unusually rich application of the Labyrinth myth, and its socio-political emphasis, combined with its vivid images, hymn cycle (connecting the *Dies irae* with songs from the Bundjalung People of Northern New South Wales), and multiple modes of storytelling (monologue, memoir, graphic novel), demands a concentrated and deep engagement. Indeed, it is a kind of crossover text, one that appeals to audiences of varying ages – perhaps evoking a Labyrinth of meanings.

## Many Kinds of Minotaurs

*Minotaurs appear in comedies, tragedies, novels, cartoons, and picture books, each time slightly differently. Sometimes they are fierce, sometimes they are cuddly, sometimes they are simply misunderstood.*

📖 Jennifer Cook, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004). Here, it is the Labyrinth, rather than the Minotaur, who is monstrous – he is merely a small disabled boy, the child of Queen Pasiphae and a priest of Dionysus, and symbolic of Minos' shame and repression.

📖 Matt Ottley, *Requiem for a Beast* (2007). The Minotaur is a symbol of pain and bad faith accumulated over generations of maltreatment of Australia's Indigenous people. Killing the Minotaur means facing the shame of the past, in order to move forward.

📖 Shoo Rayner, *Minotaur Maze* (2010). In this chapter book for early readers, the Minotaur has become a vegetarian topiarist who helps design a maze in a field of corn for kids to play in.

📖 Myke Bartlett, *Fire in the Sea* (2012). The Minotaur is muscle-bound and monstrously terrifying, but is also a slave worth of compassion and liberation.

📖 David Elliott, *Bull* (2017). This verse novel features monologues by the key players in the myth, including Asterion, the Minotaur, a sensitive creature who faces a cruel Theseus.



## Theseus and Ariadne

*Theseus travels to Crete as part of the annual tribute to the Minotaur. Aided by the princess Ariadne, he navigates the Labyrinth to defeat the bull-headed monster. Sailing home to Athens, he forgets to signal his victory, prompting his father to commit suicide. This powerful story is one of the most retold of the Greek myths, raising questions about courage, fear, betrayal, and what it means to be a hero or a monster.*

**Retelling – Robert Byrd, *The Hero and the Minotaur: The Fantastic Adventures of Theseus* (2005)**

A detailed, lavishly illustrated retelling of Theseus' exploits, which incorporates his backstory and other heroic deeds.

**Revision – Jennifer Cook, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004)**

This first-person narrative for young adults encourages readers to question the traditional heroes and villains of the famous myth, highlighting a strong emotional connection between Ariadne and her half-brother, Taurus.

**Adaptation – David Elliott, *Bull* (2017)**

Written for a young adult audience, and recounted in the ambitious form of a verse novel, *Bull* presents the perspectives of the multiple players in this famous mythic saga.

**Allusion – Margaret Mahy, *The Tricksters* (1986)**

A young adult novel about ghostly visitors to a New Zealand summer house, who reveal the metaphorical minotaurs at the heart of the family that holiday there.

## Finding Our Way Out Again

Even when the hero gets out of the Labyrinth, those meanings remain complicated and require navigation. In some ways, Theseus is a simple hero: he has one job; he does it effectively, and he returns in a kind of triumph. In other ways, he is more complicated. He needs help to do that job – receiving it from Ariadne, the daughter of his enemy, King Minos. He rewards her by helping her flee her father's kingdom, but promptly abandons her on the island of Naxos. He returns home in triumph, but forgets to change the sails on his boat to let his father know that he has survived, and this error causes his father to kill himself in despair. Perhaps chastened by the knowledge of his carelessness, Theseus becomes a wise and temperate king.

This tension between the simple and the complex, which marks the Labyrinth and the Minotaur, thus carries over to Theseus, and many retellings and adaptations reveal their writers' mixed feelings about this hero whose flaws reveal at the least a lack of sensitivity. Some writers, such as Robert Byrd in *The Hero and the Minotaur: The Fantastic Adventures of Theseus* (2005), attempt to explain Theseus' actions. In his version, Dionysus follows Ariadne to Naxos, and Theseus feels he has no choice but to leave her with the god. So exhausted and troubled is he by this and his recent encounter with the Minotaur, that he forgets to change the sails, and is devastated by his father's death. Marcia Williams in *Greek Myths* (1991) explains Theseus' actions as pragmatic: "Theseus, unwilling to marry his enemy's daughter, left her sleeping on the sand".<sup>15</sup> For other writers, such as Geraldine McCaughrean, Theseus is more than a little vapid and "ungrateful".

Just then, Ariadne came and sat at his feet, gazing up at him. "How wonderful!" she sighed. "To be free of my wicked father and to be married to a brave prince!"

"Married?" said Theseus, turning rather pale. He suddenly realised that just because Ariadne had saved his life, she expected to marry him! He studied her face. That nose was very big. And those eyebrows were very thick. "Mmmm", he said. "How wonderful".<sup>16</sup>

Theseus hastily drops Ariadne off at an island to get supplies, and sets sail while she is buying bread and wine. "He was in such a hurry to get away that he

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Greek Myths*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> McCaughrean, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, 65.

quite forgot to change the black sail for a white one".<sup>17</sup> And McCaughrean is not alone in finding Theseus to be vain and selfish. In David Elliott's *Bull*, Theseus is a muscular braggart, who delights in tormenting Asterion before killing him. Ann Turnbull shows an initially grieving Ariadne, who cries out "I saved you from the Minotaur and yet you discard me as if I were some peasant girl...",<sup>18</sup> but soon the god Dionysus approaches, saying: "Don't weep for that faithless Athenian; he is not worthy of you. You, princess, should be the bride of a god":<sup>19</sup>

Ariadne listened in wonder to this speech. The tears dried on her cheeks as she basked in the radiance of the immortal who offered her his love. Theseus, whom she'd loved and risked all for, was gone. He cared nothing for her. But Dionysus had recognized her worth. She did not notice the arrow that Eros shot into her heart, but when Dionysus held out his hand to her, she stepped forward and took it.<sup>20</sup>

Margaret Mahy's *The Tricksters* (1986), a young adult novel that draws on ancient myths to comment on modern family situations, shows a contemporary Ariadne, a teenage girl named Harry (Ariadne) Hamilton, who confronts the metaphorical Minotaur in her family: the secrets and lies surrounding her father's infidelity, and the child resulting from it. This strange work of magical realism draws on the Minotaur myth to explore the way that trouble and shame can hide and fester. As Harry, who wants to be a writer, explores the labyrinth of emotions lurking in her family, finally forcing a confrontation that reveals all, she grows up, transitioning from Harry to Ariadne, the girl whose perceptions act as a clew to the maze. Theseus does not appear in this novel, but the writer Ovid does, in the form of a sinister ghost who is haunting the Hamiltons (along with his brothers, Felix and Hadfield), and Harry finds herself in competition with Ovid to uncover the secrets (or write them?) safely. If the baby from her father's affair is a kind of Minotaur, it is a harmless one: what is harmful is the desire to hide the truth and to bury emotions, which metamorphose and become destructive. *The Tricksters* suggests that in offering the clew, or clue, or key to the labyrinth, Ariadne is heroic and powerful – and in this version of the story she is not abandoned, making love with Felix before he disappears with his brothers, and reuniting her relieved family. The clew to the symbolic

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Turnbull, *Greek Myths*, ill. Sarah Young, London: Walker Books, 2010, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 67–68.

labyrinth – in this case, the labyrinth of a family with secrets – can only be wielded by someone with the right measure of sensitivity and determination: in this case, a modern Ariadne.

### Archaeological Adventures in Knossos

*Archaeological sites provide inspiration for all kinds of adventures. The Cretan palace of Knossos is one example of a site that appears in a number of children's books.*

📖 In 1933, Erick Berry published *The Winged Girl of Knossos*, an illustrated children's historical novel set in Minoan Crete.

📖 Juliet Rix and Juliet Snape are inspired by the restored basement rooms of Knossos for their maze book, *A-Maze-Ing Minotaur* (2014).

📖 More recently, Wendy Orr has used the palace of Knossos as a setting for her Bronze Age trilogy of young adult novels: *Dragonfly Song* (2016), *Swallow's Dance* (2018), and *Cuckoo's Flight* (2021).

## Getting Lost, and Getting Found

It sometimes seems as if the Labyrinth is at the heart of all the myths and stories we are thinking about in this project. It is a journey, a puzzle, a katabasis. It is a battle, a love story gone wrong. It is a symbol of family shame and family pride. It is the result of catastrophic mix-ups in royal houses; a symbol of entanglement and interconnectedness (like the myths that surround it). It goes round and round, and down, down, down into the dark, where dangers lurk. When you go into a Labyrinth you are in danger of getting lost forever, of losing your life, of losing your identity, but also of becoming something new – a hero or a villain or a terrible monster. No one comes out of a Labyrinth entirely the way they went in.

This all sounds rather fanciful. But consider the Labyrinth's role: in the story of the great creator Daedalus, and his son, Icarus, its connection to the wicked but wounded King Minos, his wife Pasiphae and her tragic son, the half-man, half-bull Asterion, to say nothing of Poseidon, the god who instigated some of the tragedies of the Cretan story, and Theseus the Athenian prince whose actions resolved much of the tangle but set off other disasters. It starts to seem as if much of Greek myth is a huge, interconnected Labyrinth, and as if the Labyrinth is almost as alive as the people and monsters who walk between its walls.

To put it another way: the Labyrinth lurks at the centre of a whirl of stories, whose connections all lead to this: a lone hero, braving the darkness to conquer a beast that lurks within. And its solution is also absurdly simple – a thread

to trace his path and find the way out again. Even though the hero faces the Labyrinth alone, he gladly receives help at crucial moments.

The power of the Labyrinth reaches beyond the myths, having resonance as a psychological symbol. Dreams, emotions and past experiences can be labyrinthine, causing the individual to become lost in a multitude of confused and confusing feelings and memories. But treading the path of the Labyrinth can also be akin to the soul's journey towards self-understanding and authenticity. Meditative labyrinths provide winding paths for solace and reflection as we tread their lines. We can also enter the Labyrinth to escape the self – seeking thrills and confusion at amusement parks and public gardens.

We can find labyrinths everywhere we go – in shopping malls or busy streets, in forests or even in libraries, which offer seemingly ordered but confusing winding paths. We can get lost in those libraries, seeking meaning and clarity, but finding only intrigue and distraction – even more so if we open the books – all texts are labyrinthine too, interlaced with meaning and allusion, each leading to another, taking us in directions we had not intended, leading us perhaps to the Minotaur of self-doubt, or shame, fear, or loss, or confusion. The Minotaur eats humans, but perhaps they are already chewed up by their time in the Labyrinth.

The meanings and metaphors of the Labyrinth story are many and various, and as we have said, approaching it feels like an invitation to being lost. In children's books, the act of being lost is a necessary precursor to finding oneself again: doing what the story tells us to, or finding one's way out once more. In "J is for Journeys", we discussed the idea of the home-away-home journey, in which a protagonist ventures out from familiar territory in search of adventure before returning. The Labyrinth story is a version of that pattern, though one in which the journey is darkly interior. But the essential elements of the story (hero, beast, maze, helper) can be found in many stories, in many different ways, showing a profound influence over literature – for children and for adults.

### Further Reading on the Labyrinth

Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.

Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020.

M

is for mythical  
and magical beings



SKS

# M is for mythical and magical beings



Sarah Fanelli's lively picture book *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece* (2002) promises a dramatic experience for the reader who is brave enough to enter its pages: "Watch out for their huge teeth. / Beware their many heads. / Count their eyes. / Imagine their

powers... if you DARE!"<sup>1</sup> Fanelli depicts fourteen monsters: Argus, Medusa, Pegasus, Sirens, Harpies, Scylla, Cyclops, Minotaur, Cerberus, Centaurs, Satyrs, Hydra, Sphinx, and Echidna – possibly the best-known of the Ancient Greek mythological bestiary, certainly some of the most exciting. Fanelli's presentation is likewise exciting, using collage, sketching, painting, doodles, and snippets of text in quirky fonts to give short, fragmentary summaries of each beast's story, and to highlight its signature characteristics. Looming over a tiny lyre-playing Hermes is a brick-red Argus, with 100 collaged eyes on his massive head (human eyes, photographed and pasted onto his head, and helpfully numbered so that readers can enjoy counting them).<sup>2</sup> Littering the ground are several pairs of spectacles, suggesting that Argus the watchman needs some help with his vision. Scylla, "The SEA-Monster with the UGLY temper who GOBBLED up all the SAILORS who dared to sail past her",<sup>3</sup> has curiously elegant shoes on some of her twelve feet, and a list is provided that numbers her many appendages: "12 feet, 6 heads, 6 necks, 6 mouths (each with 3 rows of teeth)".<sup>4</sup> They are creepy and slightly worrying monsters, even Pegasus, normally an endearing figure, is a hybrid of beast and machine, with a propeller for a tale, and wings made out of sheet music.

How attractive these monsters may be to children is unclear: in some ways this picture book seems more likely to appeal to older readers, who already know something about mythology, and might appreciate the way Fanelli plays around with ideas about the figures.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Fanelli strikingly deconstructs the idea of monstrosity, using an array of styles and *trompe l'oeil* trickery to reveal

<sup>1</sup> Fanelli, *Mythological Monsters*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 14.

<sup>5</sup> See Barbara Weinrich's analysis of Fanelli in "The Metanarrative of Picture Books: 'Reading' Greek Myth for (and to) Children", in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature: Heroes and Eagles*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 6, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015, 85–104.

that the mythological beings of Ancient Greece are fascinating because of their strange components: their many legs and oddly placed eyes, their teeth, their heads, their roaring and devouring mouths, their eating habits, their extreme strangeness. These are not cute and cuddly monsters, but in the way that each is taken out of its story, and considered as part of a group, they are collectible and countable. Fanelli ends with a summary of each figure, and with questions that could reinforce a child's learning: "Who needs 12 socks?" "Who needs 9 scarves?" "Who likes honey cakes?" "Who sings sweetly to sailors?"<sup>6</sup> All of the questions are written on a page resembling a school notebook, suggesting a play on the traditional "educational" qualities of how children are encouraged to approach myth and the ancient world.

### Mythological Monsters

*The strange and scary creatures of classical mythology appear in many collections, which highlight their fearsome aspects but also their magical qualities and their beauty. Often, they are lavishly illustrated, allowing illustrators free play in imagining what these creatures may look like.*

- 📖 Helen Jacobson, *The First Book of Mythical Beasts* (1961)
- 📖 Margaret Mayo, *Mythical Birds and Beasts from Many Lands*, ill. Jane Ray (1996)
- 📖 Stewart Ross, *Beasts* (1997)
- 📖 Newt Scamander [J.K. Rowling], *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001)
- 📖 John Harris, *Greece! Rome! Monsters!*, ill. Calef Brown (2002; also published as *Mythical Beasts of Greece and Rome*)
- 📖 Sara Fanelli, *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece* (2002)
- 📖 Lynn Curlee, *Mythological Creatures: A Classical Bestiary. Tales of Strange Beings, Fabulous Creatures, Fearsome Beasts, and Hideous Monsters from Ancient Greek Mythology* (2008)
- 📖 Sam Bowring, *The Zoo of Magical and Mythological Creatures* (2009)
- 📖 Stella A. Caldwell, *Beastworld: Terrifying Monsters and Mythical Beasts* (2016)
- 📖 Good Wives and Warriors [Becky Bolton and Louise Chappell], *Myth Match: A Fantastical Flipbook of Extraordinary Beasts* (2018)

John Harris and Mark Todd take a similar approach in *My Monster Notebook* (2011): a similar postmodern pastiche that presents itself as a teenager's notebook about mythology, with drawings and notes, collage and found objects, emphasizing the strange and humorous aspects of the monsters. "Hello, my name is HORROR" is the name tag accompanying the faceless images of the Graeae, who shared between them only one eye and one tooth.<sup>7</sup> A sign saying

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<sup>6</sup> Fanelli, *Mythological Monsters*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> John Harris, *My Monster Notebook*, ill. Mark Todd, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2011, 30.

"Do not remove, thanks" points to the plug in the giant automaton Talos' ankle (which releases the ichor that animates it).<sup>8</sup> The fictional student who owns this notebook seems to find the creatures' strangeness amusing, and through the book's sardonic humour, Harris and Todd may be encouraging the "reluctant" reader: the child who is forced to read about topics that adults have decided are good for them, and who may (will) enjoy subverting and challenging their tasks (this is an approach that has worked well for Terry Deary, whose "Horrible Histories" (1993–2013) are written with the aim of subversion – see "I is for Being Informed" and "K is for Kidding Around").

### Monstrous Ladies – Harpies

*Harpies are savage and mischievous bird-women, known to torment and tease their victims. Sometimes these victims deserve it, as for example King Phineus of Thrace, who blinded his own sons. Zeus punished him with visitations of Harpies who stole his food, or rendered it uneatable. During their voyage to acquire the Golden Fleece, Jason and his team of Argonauts rid Phineus of the Harpies, when the sons of the wind god Boreas best them in a flying competition.*

▣ Eva Ibbotson, *The Secret of Platform 13* (2001). The inhabitants of a magical kingdom travel to London via a portal that comes out on Platform 13 at King's Cross Railway station. When their prince is kidnapped by a beastly Londoner, an ogre, a hag, a wizard, and a fey set out to rescue him, before the kingdom's Harpies, led by the wicked Mrs Smith, snatch the prince and claim the prize over the kingdom.

▣ Anne Ursu, *The Shadow Thieves* (2006). Someone from the Underworld is causing trouble up above. Cousins Charlotte and Zee go to the Underworld to find out what is going on, and become caught in a battle between Hades and rebel Shades. Humorous versions of Underworld characters feature in this fantasy adventure, including a sardonic Charon, and Harpies who screech rude versions of modern nursery rhymes.

▣ Daniela Ohms, *Harpjenblut* [The Blood of the Harpy; 2011]. Lucie, the daughter of a Harpy and a human, finds it hard to fit in at school, and has problems hiding her Harpy qualities (ravenous appetite, emitting a foul odour). She also has to work hard, helping the souls of the dead find new life. When she meets a male Harpy, Jean, she discovers that bad Harpies (the Harpies of Death) are trying to destroy the souls, and she joins the fight against them.

▣ Justina Ireland, *Promise of Shadows* (2014). An ugly-duckling tale in which Zephyr, a dreamy Harpy, is banished to Tartarus for accidentally killing a god. But when she turns out to be the embodiment of Nyx, the goddess of the night, she discovers her life's purpose is to bring the universe into balance. In this young adult novel, Harpies are mostly vicious assassins, but Zephyr's story suggests other options are possible.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 33.

Despite their signature features (the wings of Pegasus, the snakes of Medusa's hair, the horns of the Minotaur), no one really knows what the monsters of the ancient world look like, and so they offer a delightful challenge to illustrators interested in depicting them, who take a huge range of approaches to their work. They can be lushly beautiful: in *Mythological Creatures: A Classical Bestiary. Tales of Strange Beings, Fabulous Creatures, Fearsome Beasts, and Hideous Monsters from Ancient Greek Mythology* (2008) Lynn Curlee presents each figure as a carefully framed emblem, seen at twilight or sunset, with lush, bright-colour palettes and polished representations. A simple retelling accompanies each image, and the tone of the whole book (visually and verbally) encourages readers to take a reflective, lingering approach. Rather than relishing the strange and funny details of the myths, here the ancient world, with its monstrous or magical figures, is beautiful, but also violent and sometimes tragic. The presentation, for example, of the Cyclops Polyphemus shows him holding two of Odysseus' soldiers in his hands, blood streaming down his wrists, his mouth open in what could be a snarl, but could also be a howl of sadness. Such lapidarian depictions of the myths, which freeze key players in stylized positions, emphasize the monumentality, influence, and repeated resonance of the stories, which offer succinct introductions to the tales.

Mythical beings can be cute: in their board book *Little Master Homer: The Odyssey. A Monsters Primer!* (2017), Jennifer Adams and Alison Oliver introduce the monsters to extremely young readers. They reduce the story to only a few of the beings Odysseus encountered: a dreaming Calypso, clothed in purple – "I keep Odysseus here with me, since I saved him from the wine dark sea", she says.<sup>9</sup> A pale-pink Ino, the sea nymph, offers Odysseus a kelp-green veil to protect himself.<sup>10</sup> Pink, blue, and green Lotus Eaters are cuddly monsters munching on flowers – "Nom nom" says one as it stuffs the flowers into its mouth.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most endearing-looking of the group is a languid coral-coloured Cyclops, leaning on an elbow while he reads *The Joy of Cooking Humans*, and two cuddly sheep rest on his outstretched legs.<sup>12</sup> Again, though this book is attractive, its strongest impact in terms of classical knowledge is likely upon the grown-ups who know the myths and delight in passing on their knowledge to their babies. But as Sonya Nevin notes, its multicoloured and inclusive

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Adams, *Little Master Homer: The Odyssey. A Monsters Primer!*, ill. Alison Oliver, "BabyLit Primers", Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2017, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 7–8.

approach, featuring characters of different ethnicities and backgrounds (a Gypsy soothsayer, Telemus, for instance, closes the book by gazing into his crystal ball and saying “I told you all these things would come to pass”<sup>13</sup>), encourages a sense that the stories are open to many cultures, and it offers babies a familiarity with magical beings from the very cradle.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 9:** A friendly Cyclops – or is he? From Jennifer Adams and Alison Oliver’s board book for babies. Jennifer Adams, *Little Master Homer: The Odyssey. A Monsters Primer!*, ill. Alison Oliver, Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2017, 7–8. Used with the Publisher’s kind permission.

Mythical monsters can also be grotesque: as in the works of Fanelli and Harris and Todd. They can be fearsome: see, for instance, Selene Nicolaides’s hyper-real monsters in *Gods, Heroes and Monsters: Discover the Wonders of the Ancient Greek Myths* (2016), massive creatures that dominate the heroes who fight them, and loom very large on the page. Emphasizing their size and splendour is key, here: and illustrators enjoy taking the opportunity to depict figures in lavish detail – see, for example, Christina Balit’s imposing illustrations for the *National Geographic’s Treasury of Greek Mythology* (written by Donna Jo Napoli; 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Sonya Nevin, “Entry on: *Little Master Homer. The Odyssey* by Jennifer Adams”, peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/323> (accessed 17 November 2021).

## Collecting and Caring

How well collections of myths introduce these beings to young readers is open to debate: perhaps the point is that many of the mythical monsters and magical beings that populate ancient stories are so generally known that introduction is not always necessary. Instead, writers and illustrators work with a familiar set of icons and signature features, enabling them to experiment and play. This is especially the case in texts where magical beings feature “en masse”, as it were: as part of collections and series. As with the Olympians, mythical creatures are highly “collectible”, and appeal to young readers for that very purpose – like superheroes, they have powers, strengths, abilities, and key attributes which can be listed and counted, or even looked after and cherished.

### **J.K. Rowling’s Mythical Beasts in the *Harry Potter* Series and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them***

In creating the world of the *Harry Potter* novels, J.K. Rowling draws on many mythical and folkloric traditions. Creatures from Greek myth live alongside English elves and Scottish boggarts. *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* provides a guide to the mythical creatures of her world. Some come from recognized tradition, and some have been created by Rowling. The volume purports to be written by a great scholar of “fantastic beasts”, Godric Grindelwald, friend of Harry’s headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. Spin-off volumes like this are common in fantasy literature, especially that which creates alternative worlds or belief systems. They are presented as if they are accurate documents providing guidance to the fictional worlds, and are popular with fans eager for more information about the worlds of their favourite stories.

In the *Harry Potter* series, mythical creatures are part of the framework of the “wizarding” world that Harry finds himself a part of. They range from the beautiful to the deadly. Harry and his friends learn to fly a hippogriff, an attractive flying horse with the head of a griffin. They fight the deadly basilisk, a giant snake that lives beneath the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And they take counsel from mysterious mythical creatures, such as the centaurs, whom Harry meets in the forest near the school. The centaurs, who are both wise and fierce, offer a mythical perspective on the contest between light and dark that Harry is a part of: as ancient beings, they have seen it all before, and can read the signs of the upcoming battle. Rowling draws her mythical creatures from classical sources, and also from post-classical tradition (hippogriffs, for instance, are a Renaissance invention, attributed to Ludovico Ariosto, combining the attractions of the flying horse with the fierce qualities of the griffin).

## Fantastic Flying, Fishy, and Furry Friends

*Some mythical beings seem tailor-made for friendship.*

**Pegasus** – The singular flying horse, born from the blood of Medusa, becomes a cuddly best friend, with a taste for mischief and – sometimes – a sweet tooth.

📖 Kate O’Hearn, “Pegasus” series (2013–2017): a New York teenager named Emily is plunged into mythical adventures when a wounded Pegasus crash-lands on her roof. “Pegs”, as she calls him, is a radiant-white stallion, and loves ice cream.

📖 Sally Sutton, “Miniwings” series (2017–2018): Clara and Sophia have their work cut out for them when their miniature flying pony toys come to life and cause mayhem.

📖 Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, “Roly-Poly Flying Pony” series (2018): a roly-poly flying pony with a taste for custard creams becomes best friends with a boy named Max in the English town of Bumbleford, where all sorts of mythical and mysterious things happen.

**Sirens/Mermaids** – Part of a long heritage of Siren myths that go back to the classical world, mermaids can be frightening, but they can also be alluring. Mermaid stories often involve exploring and curiosity – about the world and about the self.

📖 K.G. Campbell, *The Mermaid and the Shoe* (2014): Minnow, the youngest daughter of King Neptune, is curious about the world. When she discovers a red shoe, she sets out to find its origin. She learns that humans live on land, and wear shoes on their feet (or “leg hands”).

📖 David Wiesner and Donna Jo Napoli, *Fish Girl* (2017): Mira is a mermaid who has been snatched from the sea by a fisherman and placed in a seaside attraction. But Mira is curious about the world, and escapes, becoming friends with a girl named Livia.

📖 Jessica Love, *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018): Julián is a little boy who wants to be a mermaid. When he dresses up in his grandmother’s curtains, she takes him to a mermaid parade where he can be part of a community of like-minded souls.

**Centaurs** – Centaurs can be violent and fierce, but they can also be wise guardians and guides.

📖 J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997): In the forest near Hogwarts, Harry receives advice and wisdom from the centaurs, who can see the long pattern of the battle between good and evil.

📖 Eoin Colfer, *Artemis Fowl* (2001): Foaly is a cantankerous inventor who designs most of the technology in the fairy world of these adventure novels, featuring the genius criminal, Artemis Fowl.

📖 Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* (2005): Percy Jackson’s admired teacher Mr Brunner turns out to be Chiron, the famous teacher of Jason and Perseus.

Fantasy novels, such as Lucy Coats's "Beasts of Olympus" series (2015–2018), appeal to the collecting and nurturing instinct among children, offering stories that can themselves be collected. In *Beast Keeper* (2015), the first of the series, Coats's hero, Demon, a son of Pan, looks after the "Stables of the Gods", and finds that looking after the mythical creatures is more work than expected. Coats is sympathetic to otherwise fearsome monsters, who need to be cured and cared for after heroes such as Heracles have done with them, using a magical box of cures provided by Hephaestus, helping the Nemean Lion to regrow its skin, dropping medicine into the Stymphalian Birds' beaks, to help them regrow their feathers, restarting the Cretan Bull's internal fire, and becoming increasingly infuriated with Heracles:

"If that Heracles comes anywhere near my beasts again, I *will* stab him," he said. "Even if he does have muscles like tree roots."

"You're all right for a half-god human, really, Pan's scrawny kid," the griffin said to him. "At least you do seem to hate that horrible Heracles as much as we do."<sup>15</sup>

Stories like *Beast Keeper* promote a message of looking after, rather than killing, the otherwise fierce mythical beasts that heroes normally fight. And this message of caring pervades much children's literature: perhaps because a major rule of the field is that heroes should only fight beings that deserve their enmity. Especially in works for younger children, an association with animals (see "B is for Beasts") carries over in treatments of magical beings.

## **Pals with Pegasus**

Some magical creatures seem ready-made to be friends with kids. The pure-white winged horse, Pegasus, is a prime example: offering a singularly beautiful dream of animal companionship. And while there is only *one* Pegasus in Greek mythology,<sup>16</sup> in children's adaptations there are many variations, from the ridiculous to the sublime. In *The Legend of Kevin: A Roly-Poly Flying Pony Adventure* by Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre (2018), the titular flying pony Kevin is blown out of his nest into the town of Bumbleford, and helps his new friend

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<sup>15</sup> Lucy Coats, *Beast Keeper*, "Beasts of Olympus" 1, ill. David Roberts, London: Piccadilly Press, 2015, 62.

<sup>16</sup> For Pegasus' birth, see Hesiod, *Theogony* 280–283.

Max (who looks after him and feeds him biscuits) to save the town from a terrible flood. Sally Sutton's "Miniwings" (2017–2018) chapter books about a group of winged-horse toys that come to life when grown-ups are not around, feature mischievous creatures with names like Moonlight and Oceana, who take their owners Clara and Sophia on a series of "heartwarming and hilarious glitter-twinkly adventures", as the books' blurbs announce.

There is a long tradition, in children's literature, of stories about girls and their horses, and Pegasus stories fit neatly into the pattern of the "pony book", featuring themes of friendship, caring, loyalty, and adventure. Kallie George's "Wings of Olympus" series (2019–2020) are aimed at readers aged eight and up, and feature the adventures of a foundling named Pippa, who is the only mortal chosen to ride in a magical winged-horse race on the slopes of Mount Olympus. With her steed, an undersized Pegasus named Zephyr, Pippa has to learn how to race, and to work for success in an academy full of petty rivalries and feuds, the two proving together that "love is greater than might".

For slightly older readers is Kate O'Hearn's fantasy series "Pegasus" (2013–2017). In the first of the series, *The Flame of Olympus* (2013, ed. pr. 2011), thirteen-year-old Emily discovers that the real Pegasus has crash-landed on the roof of her Manhattan apartment, and becomes involved in a cosmic battle between the Roman gods and a race of four-armed stone warriors called the Nirads. Pegasus (or "Pegs", as Emily calls him) is a glowing-white winged stallion, who has come to Manhattan to find her. Emily, who is grieving the recent death of her mother, takes care of the wounded creature, applying ointment and feeding him ice cream as the closest substitute for ambrosia she can find. She shares an instant bond with Pegasus:

"It's really you, isn't it?" she whispered softly as she fearlessly stroked the soft muzzle. "You're Pegasus, aren't you? I mean the really real Pegasus." The stallion seemed to pause for a moment. Then he nudged her hand, inviting another stroke. In that one rain-drenched instant, Emily felt her world changing.  
Forever.<sup>17</sup>

Emily, it turns out, is the "heart of living flame" of the cult of Vesta: her flame has been dimmed by grief over the recent death of her mother, meaning that Olympus is vulnerable to invasion by the forces of darkness. With help from her friend Joel, who knows a lot about ancient myth, she keeps Pegasus safe

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<sup>17</sup> Kate O'Hearn, *The Flame of Olympus*, "Pegasus" 1, New York, NY: Aladdin, 2013, 30.

from the Nirads and from a sinister government agency that is looking to exploit Pegs's magical powers. A sub-theme of this action-packed story is the treatment of animals: in one scene, Emily and Joel (joined by the goddess Diana, who has come to find Pegasus), release a group of abused carriage horses, and the novel includes reflections on the tragedy of cruelty to animals. (Later volumes of this series further develop the theme of slavery – the Nirads turn out to be a benevolent race, unfortunately under the control of the Gorgons Euryale and Stheno.) As in many versions of the myth, O'Hearn's Pegs is a wise, brave, and noble creature, driven by good instincts, and drawn to Emily by an understanding that she is not only the chosen one, but also has a good heart. Magical beings like Pegs, then, have all sorts of interesting abilities, such as intuition and strength – and of course his ability to fly is key among them. And what is most striking about Pegasus, especially the noble versions that are closest to the mythical origins, is his combination of goodness and beauty.

## **Monstrous Feminine: Medusa the Mean Girl and More**

At the other extreme is Pegasus' mother: the Gorgon Medusa. Curiously, the mythical Pegasus is born from a bloody act: he springs from the severed head of the Gorgon Medusa, when the hero Perseus finds a way to kill her. Perhaps the message is one of hope: that beauty can spring even from the most horrific of places and stories. As Stephen Fry comments in *Heroes: Mortals and Monsters, Quests and Adventures* (2018), "something so transcendently beautiful [was] born of something so appallingly foul".<sup>18</sup> But Medusa, routinely described as horrifying, vicious, or foul, was initially a beautiful young woman, until the events that led to her transformation to a Gorgon. According to Ovid, she was seduced by Poseidon in Athena's temple: the goddess, angered that her sacred site was defiled,<sup>19</sup> turned her into a monster.

Medusa is known for her horrifying appearance: her hair made of snakes; her basilisk stare that turns those who meet it into stone. She seems to symbolize fear itself (in contrast with her children: Pegasus, who symbolizes joy and beauty, and Chrysaor, who wields a golden sword and becomes the king of Iberia). Mythical beings, then, can function at different ends of the symbolic spectrum.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Fry, *Heroes: Mortals and Monsters, Quests and Adventures*, London: Michael Joseph, 2018, 34.

<sup>19</sup> For this version of the myth, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.794–801.

Though she may be horrifying, Medusa is one of the most vividly popular of the mythical beings. Instantly recognizable, fun to draw and write about, with terrifying and pitiable characteristics and a backstory that encourages more sympathetic rewritings, Medusa's story fits into a variety of scripts, especially about women's roles: from mean girl, to monster, to victim. In school stories, such as Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams's "Goddess Girls" (2010–present) series of mythological school stories for young readers, she is the "mean girl": snarky, petty, aggressive, and competitive, who makes the kids around her uncomfortable. Ross Collins's coming-of-age story *Medusa Jones* (2008) takes further the idea of bullying at school, showing a teenage Medusa suffering from bullying by the nasty "Champions" at her school, until she and her friends (known collectively as the "Freaks") prove their worth by saving the Champions during a storm. In contrast, Neal Shusterman's romantic horror novel *Dread Locks* (2005) presents Medusa as a powerful figure – an ancient being who relishes her power, and who seduces the novel's protagonist, Parker, into becoming a Gorgon like her.

Some find Medusa beautiful, such as the Poseidon depicted in Donna Jo Napoli's *Treasury of Greek Mythology* (ill. Christina Balit; 2011). Her Poseidon is weary of the chaos of war between the Olympians and the Titans, and glad when his brother Zeus gives him dominion over the seas. Enjoying roaming the seas, aiming to help the vulnerable as an "antidote" to the war, he is drawn to Medusa:

Poseidon found her mortality that much more alluring. She was vulnerable. How amazing to know someone vulnerable. He put his arms out and let the serpents of her hair swarm around them. Good! Those serpents could bite and poison – good protection. He gingerly touched the wings that jutted from her shoulder blades. Good good! Those wings could carry her far from an attacker. He stroked her scales. Ah, very good indeed! They were harder than armor. And most assuring of all, she had a special power: Anything mortal that looked directly at her face would turn instantly to stone. That should do it. And so Poseidon felt almost safe in loving Medusa.<sup>20</sup>

No word on whether Medusa felt safe loving Poseidon! This early romance does not prevent Medusa losing her head by the sword of Perseus, who does not find her at all attractive:

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<sup>20</sup> Napoli, *Treasury of Greek Mythology*, 44.

Never had he imagined such ugliness. Their serpent hair curled around them, making their whole bodies seem scaly. Long sharp porcine tusks protruded from their lower jaws. Gold wings sprouted from their backs, and their hands were bronze. The god Poseidon called Medusa his jewel, yet how he could bear being near her was beyond Perseus.<sup>21</sup>

This Perseus seems less to be staring into the face of fear, than to be eliminating an unpleasant pest, using the shield of Athena to protect him from Medusa's petrifying gaze.

Napoli captures the dualism of Medusa – expressed through beauty and danger, through emotional need and revulsion, but she remains here essentially mysterious – viewed through others' eyes. Those writers who attempt to explore the interiority of this monstrous being, find other ways to engage.

Marilyn Singer's book of "reverso" poems, *Echo Echo: Reverso Poems about Greek Myths* (ill. Josée Masse; 2015), in which the same lines can be read differently backwards and forwards, captures Medusa's dual quality:<sup>22</sup>

Perseus and Medusa	
There is no man who wouldn't be scared stiff. Petrified indeed, I must have your head, stone-hearted monster! I am the chosen one to rid the world of you nasty creatures. It is my curse to be the hero. Look away. You cannot shield yourself from me.	Shield yourself from me? You cannot look away, hero. It is my curse to be the one to rid the world of you nasty creatures. I am the chosen stone-hearted monster. I must have your head, petrified indeed – scared stiff. There is no man who wouldn't be.

Making the point that there are "two sides to every story" (cover note, *Echo Echo*), Singer points to an essential dualism running through the myths: and indeed, the myths revel in the paradoxical qualities of the gods, heroes, and monsters. Perhaps with the exception of "good" figures like Pegasus, very few of the mythical and magical beings are entirely consistent – embodying contradiction.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Singer, *Echo Echo*, 20.

This means that myths like that of Medusa invite many different interpretations – and some writers go back for more, as in Holub and Williams, whose extensive “Goddess Girls” series (currently at twenty-seven volumes) explore the pantheon. In *Medusa the Mean* (2012), readers are given insight into Medusa, who in previous stories has functioned as the archetypal “mean girl”. Holub and Williams show her to be a lonely outsider figure, whose meanness comes from defensiveness, and who feels isolated and unworthy at Mount Olympus Academy. Amusing touches, such as the naughty snakes in her hair, which make faces at Medusa’s antagonists, and shoplift when she goes shopping, symbolize her rebelliousness, and also the difficulty of subjugating one’s personality to fit in.

Overall, the sheer variety and number of mythical and magical beings mean that they offer fertile ground for writers playing with the concepts they offer. Taken as a whole, they provide a wide range of ideas to think about – ideas of collecting, of variety, of monstrosity, and of beauty. Taken singly, these ideas are focused through concepts close to the heart of young readers – adventure, coming of age, and finding oneself. The Medusa myth in particular offers us a mirror for thinking about what frightens us, but also offers us ways to think about what frightens us about ourselves. If we looked at ourselves in Athena’s shield, what might we find that could be frightening? And would that shield help us look at our fearsome qualities close up? Mythical beings can be marvellous or monstrous. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests, they stand at the crossroads of desire and revulsion.<sup>23</sup> If we want to know a culture, we may know it by its ideas about beauty and about danger. And children’s texts are part of a culture. There may be more to it still: in teaching children about monstrosity and beauty, children’s texts teach them what to admire and aspire to, and what to avoid – both as external objects, and as internal objects. Monsters can be warded off, but also welcomed in.

### **Further Reading on Mythical and Magical Beings**

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Debra Mitts-Smith, *Picturing the Wolf in Children’s Literature*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2010.

Liz Gloyd, *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 4.

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is for nature



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In *Fish Girl* (2017), a graphic novel by illustrator David Wiesner and writer Donna Jo Napoli, a pre-teen mermaid is held captive in an old building on the shorefront of a seaside town. Her captor is a fisherman who found her in his net when she was a baby; sensing a financial opportunity, he has put her on display in a large tank, where she lives with fish, and a friendly octopus. Posing

as Neptune for the tourists who come to see the show, he introduces her as the greatest of a collection of marvels:

Here you'll find specimens from the farthest corners of the earth. Strange beasts from the deepest darkest depths, where no human has ventured – but where I, Neptune, travel with ease! Creatures that are fearsome!... beautiful!... grotesque! Creatures to amaze and delight child and adult alike! [...] Nowhere else will you see such extraordinary sights. Only here at Ocean Wonders! And yet, as incredible as these denizens of the deep are, one transcends them all... the Fish Girl!<sup>1</sup>

The mermaid's job is to flit around the tank, just enough out of sight that visitors cannot be sure if she is really a mermaid, or only a side-show of the kind common in holiday towns. It is a lonely life. Fish Girl, who does not speak until the end of the story, is alone in her tank with the fish, and her best friend, an orange octopus. She dreams of being friends with the children who come to see her. And when she accidentally reveals herself to Livia, a girl her own age, who names her Mira, and becomes friends with her, the desire to break free grows stronger. She discovers how to get out of the tank, finds that when she is in the air her tail transforms into legs, and she is able to leave the building at night to visit the nearby carnival. Eventually, the sea destroys the tank-building in a mighty storm and takes back all its creatures, all except Mira the mermaid, who stays on the land and becomes part of Livia's family. In order to have a human family, however, Mira has to leave behind her Fish Girl self, and turn her back on the sea. Does this suggest that to be human, one has to leave behind one's natural self? Are humanity and nature compatible, or at odds?

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<sup>1</sup> David Wiesner and Donna Jo Napoli, *Fish Girl*, New York, NY: Clarion Books, 2017, 4–6.

We might think so, especially where Poseidon is concerned. The fierce god of the oceans, protector of sea creatures, was the very embodiment of wild nature for the Ancient Greeks. Poseidon's ancient battle with the goddess Athena suggests an ongoing tussle between human civilization and the forces of nature, both of which have to be appeased, and to co-exist. This uneasy balance makes itself felt in a great deal of children's books. It is likely not a coincidence that Mira, the mermaid of *Fish Girl*, appears to be on the cusp of puberty; her transition from natural child to mature member of society is a common focus in children's books.

## Children as Part of Nature

Thinking about nature in children's books reveals the power and fragility of the world we inhabit. It also reveals our connections with, and disruptions from, nature. Indeed, children remind us that we are part of nature; as they (we) grow, however, they become more allied with society. Famous picture books, such as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), show this dichotomy through a fantasy in which a naughty boy, sent to bed without supper, dreams himself (or finds a way to go) into a place where the "wild things are". Becoming king of the wild things on their island, he gives play to his natural (wild) impulses, until he smells "from all around" the smell of his mother's cooking. He wants to go home to where "someone loved him best of all", back to the safe (but confining) comfort of his bedroom, where his supper is waiting for him "and it was still hot".<sup>2</sup> Classical mythology does not much feature in *Where the Wild Things Are*, though one wild thing looks a little like a Minotaur. But the story's elemental force is important, for it shows how children (in books and in life) feel both like part of nature, and separate from it. Max, the little boy of the story, is wild, but he also needs to grow up to be part of human society, represented by the walls of his bedroom, and by his mother's cooking. This is a dichotomy explored again and again by children's writers: J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1906, 1911, 1928), for instance, lives in his own kind of place where the "wild things" are – the forested island of Neverland, a place of eternal childhood, set apart from the society that forces most children to grow up, and to take their places in appointed roles.

The joyful qualities of *Where the Wild Things Are* come from the fun of seeing a child fully at play, finding his way to a (fantasy) natural space, before

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963, 37.

willingly returning to civilization. Such ideas are as ancient as the myths. Peter Pan is a child version of the nature god, Pan, protector of small animals and shepherds, who rules over a natural fantasy-space called Arcadia, a place not unlike idealized visions of childhood, away from urban society, and away from the pressures of linear time. The concept of Arcadia, which draws on the poetry of the Arcadian region of Greece, dominates pastoral literature (fiction, poetry, drama) – in which the action is set in a pleasant natural space, where humans and animals live in harmony. Many famous children's fantasy stories exploit this idea, most notably Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), a story about animals who are more or less civilized, living in a pastoral space (see also "C is for Childhood"). Presiding over them, not always noticed, is Pan, who symbolizes the power of Nature, and the call of the wild. The animal protagonists, being adults, do not always heed the call, but occasionally venture into Pan's spaces, as for instance when Portly Otter, the youngest of Otter's brood, goes missing, and Ratty and Mole spend the night rowing on the river looking for him. At dawn, they hear the call of Nature, and find the baby otter curled up, asleep, at the foot of the great god, Pan. Here, we see Mole witnessing Pan's power:

Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fulness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humorously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.<sup>3</sup>

This quasi-ecstatic response to the power of nature is typical of literature written around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which offsets Arcadian and pastoral concepts of nature against concerns about industrialization

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<sup>3</sup> Grahame, *The Annotated Wind in the Willows*, 174–177.

and the rat race. As *Where the Wild Things Are* shows, these approaches continue into contemporary children's literature – and continue thinking about how to balance the idea of the child as part of nature, and the child as part of civilization.

## Pan

*Son of Hermes, the nature god Pan has the hindquarters and horns of a goat. The god of the shepherds and flocks, he is credited with the invention of the panpipes and associated with wild, rustic music and moments of panic. He often appears in literature that reflects on the nature of childhood, and children's association with nature.*

### **Retelling – Mordicai Gerstein, *I Am Pan!* (2016)**

A colourful, entertaining introduction to the chaotic figure of Pan, bringing together his various appearances in mythology.

### **Revision – Donna Jo Napoli, *The Great God Pan* (2003)**

Pan is cast as the hero of this young adult novel, which attempts to fill some of the gaps in the mythic record and brings together the goat-legged god with Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon.

### **Adaptation – M. Landers, *Pan & Puck* (2017)**

A fantasy novel in which two sisters head off on an adventure into wilderness, guided by the Greek god Pan and the Shakespearean hobgoblin Puck.

### **Allusion – Ellen Booraem, *The Unnameables* (2008)**

A dystopian young adult novel, set in an isolated utilitarian community, and featuring a horned-headed Goatman who wreaks havoc for the artistic protagonist, Medford Runyuin.

Pan appears in children's stories in different guises – perhaps most notably as a Pied Piper figure, whose appeal to children is seen as a threat to adults. Sophie Masson has shown how this figure appears in Australian children's books – Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), Ursula Duboarsky's *The Golden Day* (2011), Christopher Koch's *The Doubleman* (1985): in these works, she argues, Pan is responsible for drawing children away from home and into the wild.<sup>4</sup> While children may understand his allure, adults find it frightening, just as nature is both beautiful and deadly. Like all the gods, Pan has a duality – his kindness can turn to menace, his fun-loving qualities can go over the top, as Mordicai Gerstein shows in his lively picture book

<sup>4</sup> Sophie Masson, "Fairy Tale Transformation: The Pied Piper Theme in Australian Fiction", *M/C Journal* 19.4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1116>.

*I Am Pan!* (2016). Depicted in bright colours, and shimmering lines, Gerstein's Pan explains his story, gives a tour of Arcadia, and leaps about so much that it is clear he is a figure who is hard to pin down. Some versions of the King Midas myth show Pan, or his alter ego Dionysus, visiting the greedy king and giving him the dubious power of turning all he touches to gold – an act so unnatural that it is of course a punishment rather than a boon. It is better to keep on Pan's good side, just as it is better to keep on Nature's good side. As we discuss in "B is for Beasts", keeping on Pan's good side involves looking after his animals – for instance, Lucy Coats's "Beasts of Olympus" series (2015–2018) shows Pan's son, Demon, taking a job caring for the magical animals damaged by the heroes of mythology, in a series that suggests writers are increasingly concerned with animal welfare, and also dubious about the powers and wisdom of the gods.

Also dubious about the gods' powers are Noelle Stevenson, Grace Ellis, Shannon Watters, and Brooklyn Allen, who produce "Lumberjanes" (2015–2020), a series of graphic novels for pre-teen readers, set in a summer camp in the middle of a forest, where mythical and magical things happen (see also "G is for Girls and Boys", "K is for Kidding Around", "X Marks the Spot"). This series of adventures is strongly feminist, encouraging "friendship to the max", and promoting the value of ecology, of teamwork, and diversity. During their time at "Miss Qiunzella Thiskwin Penniquiquil Thistle Crumpet's Camp for Hardcore Lady Types", the five heroines of the series find that all in the woods is not what it seems. They enter into a quest where they discover that Artemis and Apollo are treating them as their playthings. Encountering weird and dangerous creatures, and making their way through dark forests, over wild rapids, and into caves, solving problems, finding and using magic bows and arrows, the Lumberjanes prove their bravery, ingenuity, and problem-solving skills, outwitting and overcoming the gods.

The "Lumberjanes" approach to nature combines local myths (sasquatch, yeti) with classical influences (Apollo, Artemis), and emphasizes the beauty and power of nature. A "Field Manual" accompanies each set of adventures, with chapters named for different badges the Lumberjanes can earn: the first volume, *Beware the Kitten Holy* (2015), for instance, extols the pleasures of staying up at night in the forest:

While nature is a great experience in the light of the sun, when the majority of living creatures are out and about, a true Lumberjane knows that there is even more to the experience when the sun goes down. Curiosity and

courage are especially important to a Lumberjane, she has an urge to get out and match her wits and fervor with the elements, to feel the cool crisp night air or possibly the rain on her face. To witness the hyper-natural power of lightning with the true darkness that a night with no moon can provide.<sup>5</sup>

The Lumberjanes' adventures do not take place in the Arcadian setting of *Peter Pan*, but rather in a wild wood, one where transformation and mutation takes place. At the end of the first volume, when the Lumberjanes have outwitted Artemis and Apollo, Zeus appears from the sky, in the form of a bull, to retrieve his naughty children – a cheeky reminder of his abduction of Europa, and also of the gods' ability to meddle with nature (and through nature, humans).

### Stories in the Stars

*The concept of constellations and their stories is a useful one for informational books.*

- 📖 Jacqueline Mitton and Will Tirion, *Zoo in the Sky: A Book of Animal Constellations*, ill. Christina Balit (1998)
- 📖 Tom Kindley, *Heroes of the Night Sky: The Greek Myths behind the Constellations* (2016)
- 📖 Don Nardo, *Natural Phenomena and Greek Mythology* (2017)
- 📖 Kelsey Oseid, *What We See in the Stars: An Illustrated Tour of the Night Sky* (2017)

### Literary Stars

*Stories in the stars, and stories about stars who are forced to come to earth, appear in a number of young adult novels.*

- 📖 Diana Wynne Jones, *Dogsbody* (1975): The star Sirius is convicted of a crime he did not commit and banished to earth in the form of a puppy.
- 📖 Diana Wynne Jones, *The Game* (2007): Haley, the daughter of Merope and Sisyphus, re-enacts a planetary game with the Pleiades in a run-down house in Ireland.
- 📖 Maz Evans, *Who Let the Gods Out?* (2017): Virgo, a young shooting star, crashes on earth, and helps Elliott, a boy with troubles, in company with members of the Olympians.
- 📖 Sabrina Malcolm, *Zeustian Logic* (2017): Coming to terms with his father's death, Tuttle becomes inspired by the stories of the stars.

<sup>5</sup> Noelle Stevenson, Grace Ellis, Shannon Watters, and Brooklyn Allen, *Lumberjanes: Beware the Kitten Holy*, "Lumberjanes" 1, St. Louis, MO: Turtleback Books, 2015, 8.

## Forces of Nature

Thinking about nature in children's books reveals the power and fragility of the world we inhabit. While many children's books engage with nature realistically, in the material we focus on here, the involvement of mythology opens up the idea of nature as a mystical space, symbolized by the gods' involvement in the natural world. Because the Greek myths are anchored in nature, as well as representing aspects of human behaviour and emotions, the gods represent elements of nature. Each Olympian, for instance, is associated with plants or animals, as Françoise Rachmühl and Charlotte Gastaut show in *Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology* (2018). (See also "O is for the Olympians".) Many figures from mythology are transformed into natural, non-human beings. The nymph, Daphne, for instance, is turned into a sweet-smelling tree to escape the attentions of the god Apollo; the fast runner Atalanta is transformed into a lion for neglecting to worship the goddess Aphrodite. The devoted mother Niobe, whose many children were killed by Artemis and Apollo,<sup>6</sup> turned into a rocky spring, so eternal were her tears.<sup>7</sup> When Hades took the spring-deity Persephone to his Underworld, the earth turned to winter until her mother negotiated her return for part of the year – in a myth that explains the cycle of the seasons (at least for those regions of the world that have seasons).

So resonant are these myths, which help explain aspects of nature – why rocks are hard, why lightning strikes, the effects of storms at sea or on land, the healing power of plants, the dangerousness of nature and also its beauty – that they have endured, and their instructional elements contribute to their application in children's stories. They account partly for humans' sense that nature is beyond their control, but also for the need to care for nature. And all of these elements combine in the myths, and also in children's versions of the myths, as Donna Jo Napoli explains in an interview:

We know a great deal of facts about the world now, many more than the ancients did. But we still lack understanding of many things. For example, we don't even really know how it is that trees manage to pump water up from the ground to their crowns. We've rejected osmosis as the answer – but there is no presently agreed upon answer. And that is a rather mundane thing – something happening around us all the time, but we haven't a clue about what's going on. We are much more in the dark about the arcane

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<sup>6</sup> See Homer, *Iliad* 24.602–609.

<sup>7</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 3.5.6.

things. And the more we learn about both life on earth and space way out there, the more we recognize how little we truly understand.

The ancients tried to give reasons for everything... for earthquakes and tsunamis and lightning. They sought to see a comprehensive picture. And within that picture, they tried to adjust to the vagaries of human behaviour. I think young people today would like a comprehensive picture within which they could make some kind of sense of the natural world and human behaviour within it. It is comforting to see characters in the ancient tales struggle with the same human foibles we struggle with. And it is comforting to see that they too were stupefied by natural events around them... different natural events from the ones that stupefy us today, perhaps... but no less enigmatic.<sup>8</sup>

Children's stories that explain the natural world will not always draw on myths to do so, of course. But those that do use mythical material are part of a long tradition which associates the natural world with an aura of mystery and magic. In the natural world, humans may reach the limits of their knowledge: mythical material is one way to express the sense of what lies beyond our ken. Scientists are continually discovering new aspects of how the world works – for example, ideas about how plants communicate, or the triggering of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. And frequently they discover what the myths knew already about the cycle of the seasons, or the need for humans to be caretakers rather than exploiters of the natural world.

### Young Adult Cli-Fi (Climate Fiction)

*In recent years a number of young adult books have used classical themes to address contemporary environmental issues, bringing elements of the past into the present and future.*

- 📖 Terry Deary, *The Fire Thief* (2005). A time-slip novel featuring Prometheus, who is horrified to see the environmental damage that his gift of fire has wrought on the world.
- 📖 Julia Golding, "Companions Quartet" (2006–2007). A book series that sounds a warning about humanity's tendency to push for industrial development, at the expense of natural well-being.
- 📖 Julie Hearn, *Wreckers* (2011). A novel set in a dystopian future in which the figure of Pandora/Hope nevertheless connects with optimism about saving the planet from environmental collapse.
- 📖 Francesca Lia Block, *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013). A retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* set in a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Hale, "Thinking about Nature with Donna Jo Napoli's *Fish Girl*...", *Antipodean Odyssey: Explorations in Children's Culture and Classical Antiquity*, 8 May 2019, <https://antipodeanodyssey.wordpress.com/2019/05/08/thinking-about-nature-with-donna-jo-napolis-fish-girl/> (accessed 17 November 2021).

## Fighting for Nature

This comforting sense of comprehensiveness and also openness to not knowing everything is particularly interesting in relation to nature, when we think about the continual tussle between human civilization and the natural world. Contemporary writers, increasingly concerned about the natural environment, use mythology to represent human obligation to care for nature. Victoria Turnbull's picture book *Pandora* (2016), for example, tells the story of a fox named Pandora, a lonely figure in a world of broken things. She mends them as best she can, but the task seems more than she can handle, until one day a bird falls from the sky, and she begins the work of bringing it back to health. As the bird gains strength, it begins to fly, bringing back seeds and plants. One day it does not come back, and Pandora is alone again. Missing the bird, she becomes depressed. But when the nest the bird made transforms into a bush, she goes out, and sees that the world has transformed – with flowers and trees – regenerated by the bird she has healed. The story ends with Pandora and the bird reunited in a world of living things. Here, Pandora's box of pollution and exploitation of nature contains the hope of revival – possible only if we work together to care for the natural world.

Other figures of hope have similar battles to fight on behalf of the natural world, and the natural order. Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games" (2008–2010) trilogy of young adult novels integrates history, politics, and myth into a dystopian story about a world run by tyrants. In them, a teenager named Katniss Everdeen becomes a reluctant heroine, who overcomes a corrupt totalitarian government during the course of the Hunger Games: a kind of reality-television gladiatorial combat where teenagers fight to the death in order to win resources for their districts. Each warrior has a different skill in the fight; Katniss is an expert archer, able to kill animals quickly and painlessly with her superb marksmanship. She is also able to cure, to use herbs and natural remedies to help ease the pain of those who suffer. Like the goddess Artemis, Katniss is a skilled archer, at home in the forest, a hunter but also a carer, fierce to her enemies, caring to her friends. As she fights her enemies, her viewing public comes to love her for her combination of strength and gentleness, seeing her as an emblem of the power of nature.

At the core of "The Hunger Games" is a sense that humans have exploited the earth to its limits, and that it is important for us to return to a close relationship with nature, where humans live within their means, embrace natural remedies, and care for the earth. Katniss's association with Artemis reinforces that understanding, in which ordinary people rise up against entrenched political interests, to live in harmony with nature. At the end of the trilogy, Katniss

returns to the woods, to live a simple life with her chosen partner, reinforcing the values of a simple ecological life... one as far away from human society as possible.

### Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games" Trilogy (2008–2010)

This dystopian trilogy of young adult novels, narrated by sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, contains numerous references to classical myth and ancient history. The story draws upon the myth of Theseus in the Labyrinth, with Collins describing Katniss as a futuristic version of the hero. The tradition in which youths from each of the twelve districts are selected as tributes to participate in the Hunger Games is an echo of the myth, and the arena an outdoor Labyrinth that Katniss must navigate. Her journey has been compared to that of other mythological figures, including Persephone and Artemis.

The novels also reference the gladiatorial contests of Ancient Rome, and the brutality, decadence, and corruption of the Roman Empire more generally. A number of characters have names drawn from the annals of Roman history, and the story adapts other ancient rituals and traditions in its exploration of the themes of triumph, self-sacrifice, and the devastating impacts of war and totalitarian rule.

At the same time, Collins scrutinizes the contemporary phenomenon of reality television, highlighting its true nature as a carefully constructed spectacle shaped by artifice and intervention to entertain a voyeuristic audience.

Indeed, this message, of getting away from it all seems to pervade many books for young readers. Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder's moving picture book *The Great Bear* (2011) is another narrative of natural transformation and escape from captivity. Here, it is the story of a bear in medieval Europe, in the power of a group of performers who travel from village to village (see "B is for Beasts"). Like Mira the Fish Girl, the bear does not speak, but Gleeson and Greder show the story from her perspective, as she watches the humans push her to dance, jeering and poking at her (acting cruelly out of mingled enjoyment of power and displaced fear of a wild animal?). Eventually the cruelty becomes too much for the bear, who breaks from her chains, roars, and leaps up into the sky, where she is transformed into Ursa Major, the Great Bear (as we discuss in "B is for Beasts"). Classical myth of course considers this constellation to be that of Callisto, another tragic figure, a follower of Artemis seduced by Zeus, expelled from her group, and then transformed into a bear by a jealous Hera.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For the story of Callisto, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.409–488. Compare the version in which it is Zeus who turns Callisto into a bear and Hera who persuades Artemis to shoot her: Apollodorus, *Library* 3.8.2.

It is hard to know which story is sadder. So many classical myths with aetiological functions like this have tragic qualities – which comment as much on the cruelty of the gods, or of humans, as they do on the elements of nature they are attempting to explain.

Ecocritical approaches to children's literature are part of a movement sometimes known as post-humanism, which encourages thought about life from outside the human perspective. It is hard for humans to get outside of our own heads – hard for us to remember that the world is not here just for us, just to help us out. As Donna Haraway points out, animals are not "surrogates for theory. They are not here just to think with. They are here to live with".<sup>10</sup> The myths of ancient cultures bump up against this conundrum – that as humans we use ourselves to think about the world, but that the world can carry on without us quite fine. And yet, as with children's books, they are human products, products of a noble attempt to understand nature, and to understand the world.

### Further Reading on Nature

Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd, eds., *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004.

Liam Heneghan, *Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children's Literature*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

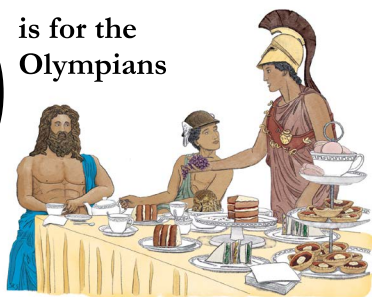
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<sup>10</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003, 298.

O  
is for the Olympians



# O is for the Olympians



In *Athena the Brain* (2010), the first of the “Goddess Girls” series of chapter books for middle-grade readers, twelve-year-old Athena is plucked from life as an ordinary girl in Ancient Greece, and transported to Mount Olympus Academy, a school for the

gods. Athena is clever and inventive, but it takes her time to settle in at school, and to find her feet amongst the other goddess girls and god boys, making friends with Artemis and Aphrodite, competing with rival Poseidon, and contending with mean-girl Medusa. Along the way, she learns how to handle heroes, in her class project featuring Odysseus, and, in a later volume, helping demigod Heracles carry out his famous Labours. Her stories take place in the world of Mount Olympus Academy – a fictional universe that recasts the stories of the Olympians and selected other mythological figures. Athena is not the only pupil whose adventures feature in the “Goddess Girls” series – there are the stories of her best friends, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Persephone, mean-girl Medusa, and many more, each one involving adventures drawn from their mythological background, and also incorporating common features of coming-of-age stories, in which children learn about themselves, the world, and their place in it.

The “Goddess Girls” series (2010–present) currently stands at twenty-seven titles, indicating the scope and range both of the novels and also of the mythological figures that inspire the stories. They are prime examples of the appeal of series fiction, in which the continuing adventures of a group of characters take young readers again and again into an appealing or exciting fictional world. “Goddess Girls” are a mythological modification of series such as Bonnie Bryant’s “The Saddle Club” series (1988–2001) about a group of girls interested in riding, Ann M. Martin’s “The Baby-Sitters Club” (1986–2000) about a group of girls who have adventures while minding children, or K.A. Applegate’s “Animorphs” series (1996–2001), about a group of friends who can transform into any animal they touch, and use their powers to fight an alien race known as the “Yeerks”. Such series are educational in a broad sense, exploring friendship, growing up, teamwork, and individual character traits, and providing information about different kinds of activities and skills. “Goddess Girls” offers a clever variation on the format, connecting different character traits and life lessons with the original myths, as can be seen in titles such as *Athena the Brain* (2010), *Aphrodite the Beauty* (2010), *Artemis the Brave* (2010), *Athena the Wise* (2011), *Aphrodite the Diva* (2011), *Athena the Proud* (2014), *Aphrodite the Fair* (2014), or *Hestia the Invisible* (2015).

## Mythological Series Fiction

*Just as the Olympian gods and goddesses are arranged into a group of twelve (with some flexibility about who is included), some of the best-known and most commercially successful children's adaptations of classical mythology are structured as a series.*

- 📖 Kate McMullan, "Myth-O-Mania" (2002–2014)
- 📖 Rick Riordan, "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (2005–2009)
- 📖 Carolyn Hennesy, "Mythic Misadventures" (2007–2013)
- 📖 George O'Connor, "Olympians" (2010–2022)
- 📖 Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, "Goddess Girls" (2010–present) and "Heroes in Training" (2012–2021)
- 📖 Lucy Coats, "Beasts of Olympus" (2015–2018)



## School Stories

*Likely influenced by the success of the "Percy Jackson" and "Goddess Girls" franchises, many recent books for young adults feature the characters and tropes of classical mythology within a high school setting.*

- 📖 Tera Lynn Childs, *Oh, My. Gods* (2008)
- 📖 Shana Norris, *Troy High* (2009)
- 📖 Kieran Scott, *Only Everything* (2014)
- 📖 Tonya Alexandra, *Nymph* (2014)
- 📖 Eliza Raine, "Olympus Academy" series (2019–2020)

Other mythological works by the series' authors, Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, explore further elements of the pantheon: the "Heroes in Training" series (2012–2021), for instance, shows young Olympians Zeus, Poseidon and more, facing off against the tyrannical Titans, while "Little Goddess Girls" (2019–2020), aimed at readers aged between eight and ten, takes the goddesses on adventures inspired by other fantasy stories: *Athena and the Magic Land* (2019), for instance, is inspired by the *Wizard of Oz*. Holub and Williams find scope for seemingly endless recombinations and explorations of the Olympians' characters, working with individual myths in each book, as Holub explains for the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*:

Each book in the ***Goddess Girls*** series (ages 8–12, Simon and Schuster) and ***Heroes in Training*** series (ages 7–10, Simon and Schuster) is a retelling of one or two Greek myths, with a twist. We stay as true as possible to the core bones of an original myth in order to give young readers a good understanding, but we include kid situations and humor to entertain. As

an example, in ***Goddess Girls #1: Athena the Brain***, Athena is summoned to attend Mount Olympus Academy, where Zeus is the principal. MOA teachers include Mr. Cyclops, who teaches Hero-ology, a class where students are graded on their abilities to maneuver small hero figures such as Odysseus, around a gameboard to enact the Trojan War, etc. Meanwhile, Athena, who is the goddess of invention among other things, inadvertently turns mean-girl Medusa's hair to snakes and gives her the power to turn mortals to stone by means of a shampoo-like invention called Snakeypoo at the MOA invention fair.<sup>1</sup>

The fun and whimsy of these books is undeniable, and they offer a gentle introduction to the world of Greek myths, making them accessible for young readers through humour and relatable issues. Olympus is an idyllic place: with its majestic architecture (a lot of columns and marble), Mount Olympus Academy is elegant and comfortable, just as one would expect from a school for the gods.

Because the "Goddess Girls" books are a series, each one focusing on the adventures of a single protagonist (identified in the title), the representation of the Olympians is alternately individualized, and collective. And they perform a similar double-act in presenting each mythological figure: in the novels bearing her name, Athena uses her intelligence (*Athena the Brain*), gains wisdom (*Athena the Wise*), and works out how to fit in with others (*Athena the Proud*). The lessons of being a goddess girl are not dissimilar to the lessons of being a girl in the modern world.

In series fiction, anthologies, and individual stories, children's literature representations of the Olympians perform a balancing act that encapsulates the dilemmas of the children's writer working with classical mythology: how to set fun, beauty, and playfulness along with issues of power, responsibility, and morality, in ways that are true to the original myths, and also to the needs of young audiences. As a group, the Olympians are so dynamic that presenting them together is an attractive option – allowing writers to talk about the collective idea of the gods of Olympus, but also to explore their individual characters – at least as much as the format of writing allows them. Many books present their myths in anthology format, or as a series of interconnected stories – and perhaps unintentionally presenting them as a more coherent set of myths and identities

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Holub, interview prepared by Alison Rosenblum and Ayelet Peer as part of: Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: *Do Not Open! The Story of Pandora's Box* by Joan Holub", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Elżbieta Olechowska, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018, <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/289> (accessed 17 November 2021).

than the ancient world knew them as. In very simple texts, of course, there is little time to develop deep insights into individual characters, as we can see in Anna Gkoutzouri's bright pop-up books for the Faros Books' "My First Greek Myths" series (2020), aimed at very young readers, from eighteen months up. But books like these highlight the visual iconography of the gods and introduce them as a group of figures who will soon become familiar. These sturdy board books, with tabs and wheels, and very few pages, encourage readers to "push, pull, slide" the books around, revealing new figures or surprising moments in the mythical stories. Simple text is accompanied by bright and simple illustrations: for example, the opening pages of *The Twelve Gods of Olympus* (2020) read: "The twelve gods of Olympus had Zeus for their lord. Hera was his wife and fearless Ares was the war god".<sup>2</sup> A jolly-looking Zeus sits in a summery landscape surrounded by flowers and birds. Hera, accompanied by her signature peacock, is waving at him from her chariot; pulling on the tab reveals a smiling Ares, clad in golden armour, running after Hera. No sense of squabbling among the gods, or meddling in humans' affairs in this book, which keeps things idyllically pleasant, for very young readers, and their adults.

### Goddess Girl Power

*Numerous collections have a feminist focus on the stories of the glamorous, gorgeous immortal women of mythology.*

- 📖 Kris Waldherr, *The Barefoot Book of Goddesses* (1995)
- 📖 Doris Orgel, *We Goddesses: Athena, Aphrodite, Hera*, ill. Marilee Heyer (1999)
- 📖 Ann Shen, *Legendary Ladies: 50 Goddesses to Empower and Inspire You* (2018)
- 📖 Imogen Greenberg, *Athena: The Story of a Goddess*, ill. Isabel Greenberg (2018)
- 📖 Jennifer Adams, *I Am a Warrior Goddess*, ill. Carme Lemniscates (2018)
- 📖 Yung In Chae, *Goddess Power: 10 Empowering Tales of Legendary Women*, ill. Alida Massari (2020)

Books for slightly older children, such as Marcia Williams's large-format *Greek Myths* (1991), have a similarly cartoonish quality. Williams is blunt about the damage the gods do to one another and to mortals. Zeus' punishment of Prometheus, for instance, is presented in characteristically straightforward terms, with a bit of humour thrown in: "Boy, he's moody", sighs Prometheus, after Zeus chains him to the famous rock; as a vulture tears out his liver – displayed in vivid detail, Prometheus comments "I would cook it for you, but we're

<sup>2</sup> Anna Gkoutzouri, *The Twelve Gods of Olympus*, Amersham: Faros Books, 2020, 1–2.

a little short on fire”.<sup>3</sup> Williams does not shy away from showing the savagery of Zeus’ actions, but uses humour to make the stories palatable.

Children’s authors frequently have this choice to make: do they soften, or revel in, the harsh energy of the myths? *Mount Olympus Basketball* (2003), Kevin O’Malley’s unusual picture book about a basketball court battle between the mortals and Olympians, finds a cunning way out of this dilemma – life is a no-holds-barred game of basketball, in which gods and mortals continually outwit and cheat one another – the only rules seem to be that the rules will be broken, and that the gods will win in the end (final score: Gods: 2,678,352; Mortals: 6). O’Malley cleverly uses the narrative device of two sports commentators explaining the game, the line-up, and the context of the ancient world, to provide educational elements, though the presentation of the myths does seem to assume some pre-existing knowledge of mythology.

Other books introducing the Olympians prefer to emphasize the soulful elements of the myths – as, for instance, *Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology* (2018) written by Françoise Rachmühl and illustrated by Charlotte Gastaut, which presents the Olympians as stylized, large-eyed beings, posing gracefully in idyllic meadows, while representing the myths with a candour that signifies its older target audience. This book is visually very pretty, and the languid prose sets out the different stories as a fluid set of intertwined myths:

When Poseidon wanted to marry, he began to court Amphitrite, a Nereid. But she hated Poseidon’s violence, and so she ran away, taking refuge beside the Titan, Atlas. So, Poseidon sent her a dolphin to plead his case. The dolphin succeeded in convincing Amphitrite, and so she became his wife and queen of the seas.

But, like his brother, Zeus, Poseidon was not a faithful husband. One day he met the Gorgons, three beautiful sisters, and fell deeply in love with one of them, Medusa.

“Come, follow me. Night is coming. Let us go to the shore to make love,” he whispered in her ear. “I see a temple there; nobody will bother us there.” The temple belonged to none other than Athena herself. When she saw that the two lovers had the audacity to pass the night in her temple, she grew angry. Not daring to confront Poseidon directly, she transformed Medusa into a terrifying beast – golden wings, metal claws, and serpent hair.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Greek Myths*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Rachmühl, *Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology*, 19–20.

When Hera is mad . . . look out!  
The ref has awarded the Gods two points,  
but it's too late.  
Hera has turned him into a cow.



**Figure 10:** An Olympian game of basketball pits the gods against the heroes in Kevin O'Malley's *Mount Olympus Basketball*, New York, NY: Walker Books, 2003, 8. Used with the Author's kind permission.

The story flows on – Perseus kills Medusa; from her blood springs Pegasus, who joins the Olympians, is tamed by Athena, and then helps the heroes defeat monsters. He makes his father Poseidon proud, the authors say, before moving on to the story of Demeter.

Retellings like this seem to slide over the unpleasant details – the gods' carelessness, the violence of the stories. Perhaps an alert child may notice behavioural inconsistencies and be moved to explore further. Other versions highlight, or at least comment on, the way that gods (and other mythical figures) behave. In *Mythologica: An Encyclopedia of Gods, Monsters and Mortals from Ancient Greece* (2019) Steve Kershaw and Victoria Topping present the gods as powerful and magnificent – but also dangerous. Here is Apollo, for instance:

Apollo was the son of Zeus and a Titan called Leto. He was born under a palm tree on the island of Delos along with his twin sister, Artemis. Apollo helped mortals and protected them from evil. He was the god of many things: prophecy and oracles; light and enlightenment; healing, plague and disease; purification; music, song and poetry; archery; and the Sun. He was also known as Phoebus ("Shining" or "Brilliant"), and sometimes appeared with a halo – although he would also wear a crown or a wreath and sometimes carry a laurel branch.

It was dangerous to compete with him. The Satyr Marsyas was an incredible flute player and challenged Apollo to a contest. The winner could do whatever he liked to the loser.

Their first performances were equally impressive, but then Apollo turned his lyre upside down and challenged Marsyas to do the same. This was impossible, so Apollo was declared the winner and killed Marsyas.<sup>5</sup>

Victoria Topping's bold illustrations accompany Kershaw's text – here, strumming his lyre, is Apollo: a beautiful punk-like figure with spiky dark hair giving way to flame-like curls, his golden eyes under brooding dark brows, staring menacingly into the distance. Beauty and danger – two sides of Apollo's personality – are captured here, and *Mythologica* represents them both non-judgementally, or without seeming to wish to explain either away.

Representing the Olympians, as with many of the other myths, raises issues that we discuss in "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects", especially in relation to works for young audiences, and it is worth keeping an eye on how

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Kershaw, *Mythologica: An Encyclopedia of Gods, Monsters and Mortals from Ancient Greece*, ill. Victoria Topping, London: Wide Eyed Editions, 2019, 12.

authors engage with them, whether through humour, elision, explanation, or simple representation. For instance, Rachel Smythe's web comic *Lore Olympus* (2018–present) shows Apollo as charming but vicious – he's guilty of forcing Persephone into having sex with him (and the comic provides a readers-warning for this episode). And yet, the gods' inconsistencies and contradictions make them powerfully real – figures who, just like humans, do good things and bad things, who get on well with on another in one story, and squabble or fight in another. Amanda Brack, Monica Sweeney, and Becky Thomas, in *Brick Greek Myths* (2014), show the gods interacting in many ways – being promiscuous or vengeful or violent. Perhaps the harshness is softened by the amusing LEGO reconstructions of their stories (though the loving representation of death and gore, even in brightly coloured plastic bricks, suggests that they are well aware of the ways that their work can be confronting). George O'Connor's "Olympians" (2010–2022) series of graphic novels uses a visual style closer to traditional superhero comics, each one telling the story of a different god or goddess, and taking a deeper dive into each Olympian's story, showing how the gods connect to different legends and heroic stories, as well as representing their roles as gods of different areas of life. Poseidon, for instance, reflects on how, like the sea, he flows into multiple myth cycles – what does this mean for the god, O'Connor wonders, and his stories explore their inner subjectivity in way that collections are less likely to.

### George O'Connor, "Olympians" Series (2010–2022)

- 📖 *Zeus: King of the Gods* (2010)
- 📖 *Athena: Grey-Eyed Goddess* (2010)
- 📖 *Hera: The Goddess and Her Glory* (2011)
- 📖 *Hades: Lord of the Dead* (2012)
- 📖 *Poseidon: Earth Shaker* (2013)
- 📖 *Aphrodite: Goddess of Love* (2013)
- 📖 *Ares: Bringer of War* (2015)
- 📖 *Apollo: The Brilliant One* (2016)
- 📖 *Artemis: Wild Goddess of the Hunt* (2017)
- 📖 *Hermes: Tales of the Trickster* (2018)
- 📖 *Hephaistos: God of Fire* (2019)
- 📖 *Dionysos: The New God* (2022)

This popular American series of graphic novels draws upon the tradition of Marvel and DC Comics, with the gods and goddesses styled as comic-book superheroes with athletic

physiques and extraordinary powers. Each of the twelve volumes is devoted to a particular god or goddess, tracing the story of their origins and rise to power, and drawing together the varied myths in which they feature. The books recognize the individual attributes and vulnerabilities of each god, with each narrative framed as a coming-of-age story in which they find their power and place on Olympus. Through the course of the series, the gods make appearances within each other's stories, highlighting their various alliances, entanglements, and animosities. A range of different narrators, some omniscient, others directly involved, oversee the storytelling. The linking of different myths and traditions is complex and clever.

O'Connor has an extensive familiarity with ancient source material, both well-known and more obscure, and his retellings reveal a high degree of fidelity as well as an awareness of the evolution of myth and its continued adaptation. Each volume contains an "Author's Note" in which O'Connor reflects on his rendering of the myth and its varied traditions, as well as supplementary resources including a family tree, etymological guide, and reading lists for both children and adult readers, in recognition of the series' multiple audiences. The graphic style, representation of violence, and exploration of complex ideas around fate, morality, and necessary evil require readers to be relatively mature, but the "Olympians" remains accessible and fun even for younger readers.

When working with the myths of the Olympians, as with various magical beings and heroic figures, creators have a set of ready-made identifiers to hand. Each god is associated with a particular symbol, accoutrement, animal, or plant. Some figures are more complicated than others – for example, Apollo, with his multiple drives (beauty, anger, lust), or Hermes (trickster, patron of thieves and robbers, commerce, trade, herdsman, herds, boundaries, transgression, and a guide who travels the world, even into death). Athena, the goddess of wisdom and just war, is also known for vengeance and petty actions, suggesting the paradoxes of her nature, and also the breadth of her cult: indeed, the many paradoxes within the gods' characters relate to the complexities of their real worship in the ancient world. In many children's books, the myths are presented as a tidy and complete set of stories – far from the fragmented and contradictory aspects visible in ancient texts. This tidiness can be applied to individual figures, and also to the group of gods who make up the Olympians. Twelve in number, but with friends, family, and lovers to think about as well – they make an appealing group to collect: in anthologies, in summary works, in series fiction, in games, toys, and artwork.

## Greek Gods and Goddesses

*The Olympian gods are infamous for their petty disputes as well as their tremendous powers. From their home high on Mount Olympus, they observe – and interfere in – the affairs of mortals. They feature in a huge array of children's books – as protagonists, bit players, helpers, and hinderers.*

### **Retelling – Sylvie Baussier, *Greek Gods and Heroes: 40 Inspiring Icons* (2018)**

This is an appealing compendium of key divine and mortal figures in the mythic corpus, using infographics to provide a guide to the gods and heroes.

### **Revision – Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, “Heroes in Training” series (2012–2021)**

Now in its seventeenth instalment, these novellas follow the adventures of ten-year-old Zeus and his friends and siblings as they learn about themselves, their unique powers, and the dangerous world they inhabit.

### **Adaptation – Maz Evans, *Who Let the Gods Out?* (2017)**

This novel tells the story of Elliot, who becomes embroiled in a fight with Thanatos, the god of death, with the support of a motley crew of Olympians.

### **Allusion – Diana Wynne Jones, *The Game* (2007)**

This young adult novel draws upon the legend of the Pleiades, intertwining it with elements from Russian folklore and a host of other mythic traditions, in a story about a family with unique secrets and special abilities.

## Collectible Sets

Publishers of books and games are always looking for useful sets to develop, encouraging children and their adults to acquire complete sets, or explore further adventures in series fiction – and we suspect that this is one reason that the Olympians are currently very popular: a tidy, but also endlessly modifiable, set of figures to collect, learn about, and play with – something that is very attractive to the child (or adult) who enjoys collecting, arranging, writing up facts, and acquiring knowledge. For the type of reader who always wants just one more story, or wants to remain in a particular literary “universe”, series fiction gives that experience. Thus, the “Goddess Girls” and “Heroes in Training” series we mentioned above are attractive to readers who want to make complete collections, and to follow the adventures of multiple characters – in this case, one at a time, but also with the added interest of seeing different characters from different angles.

## Looking around the World with the Olympians

The gods of Olympus are not orderly or easily controlled, however, and so while the attraction of collection and categorization is clear, perhaps this becomes charged with an awareness that these figures are powerful and unruly too. Retellings emphasize their battles – in particular against the Titans, as outlined in Hesiod’s *Theogony*.<sup>6</sup> These stories have the narrative advantage of showing the Olympians in action in their youths (for the only one among them who remains a child is of course Eros), and working as a team to stand up for the side of light. Holub and Williams’s “Heroes in Training” series (2012–2021), for instance, emphasizes the Olympians’ battles as formative moments in their maturation – stories that show how gods came to be the great figures we know of. Similarly, Mordicai Gerstein’s *I Am Hermes! Mischief-Making Messenger of the Gods* (2019) uses bright illustrations and comics-style dialogue to show the mischievous messenger god playing tricks on everyone he meets – as we see here in his exchange with the hundred-eyed Argus:<sup>7</sup>

Hermes:

Hey, Argus, have you heard the latest gossip?

Argus:

No, tell me!

Hermes:

Well, I was told by Apollo, who was told by Aphrodite, who was told by Ares, who got it from Athena, who heard from Poseidon, who overheard Hercules telling Artemis. He learned from Pan, who was informed by BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...

Argus:

Yes, yes?

Hermes:

BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...


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<sup>6</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 390–396, 617–735, 881–885.

<sup>7</sup> Mordicai Gerstein, *I Am Hermes! Mischief-Making Messenger of the Gods*, New York, NY: Holiday House, 2019, 50–51.



Artemis:

Can I have 50 nymphs 2 keep me company?   
U know, on long treks.

Zeus:

K

Versions like these emphasize the idea of the gods as a large, squabbling family of larger-than-life personalities, who ultimately get along, but perhaps also leave a trail of destruction in their wake.

But other writers see things differently. Marilyn Singer's book of reverse poems, *Echo Echo* (ill. Josée Masse; 2015), points out that the gods "bring about chaos and order", and also "bring about summer's harvest, deep winter's hardship".<sup>9</sup> Their roles, as figures of power and order – of war and peace, of justice and crime, of life and death – and also as figures of nature – of storms and floods, of winds, and sunshine, volcanoes and earthquakes – are part of the story too. For Singer, the gods are "gone but not forgotten",<sup>10</sup> emphasizing their continuing influence.

And yet the gods live on in the children's books we discuss. They appear continually in children's fantasy, popping into our world to cause problems or solve them. Sometimes they help out, as in Diana Wynne Jones's fantasy novel *The Game* (2007), in which the gods still live on earth – disguised as a rambling family whose game-playing keeps the world in order: here, the heroine, Hayley, discovers that her parents are Merope and Sisiphus, trapped in the Underworld by her uncle Jolyon, who is Jupiter in disguise. Having spent her childhood with her grandfather, who it turns out is the giant Atlas, studying the cosmos to keep the world in order, Hayley joins her cousins in a mysterious game that takes them into supernatural realms. Maz Evans's *Who Let the Gods Out?* (2017), written for readers aged ten to twelve, shows the Olympians banding together to help Alex, a British boy who is a "chosen one" in the battle between light and dark, when he accidentally releases Thanatos, who has been chained in a cavern beneath Stonehenge. With godly zeal, they transform his world – Demeter, for instance, turning his mother's derelict farm into an oasis of bountiful fertility – even taking him to visit the Queen, and turning her crown into a secret teapot.

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<sup>9</sup> Singer, *Echo Echo*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

In literature for young readers, gods have a habit of turning up in odd places, sometimes literally and sometimes in the minds and story structure of novels. This is especially the case in magic realism for young adults: for instance, in Margaret Mahy's *Memory* (1987), Jonny Dart, a boy dancer, becomes a Dionysian figure when he dances drunkenly around Christchurch on the eve of the Māori Land Walk, a landmark protest event that began shifting colonial-Indigenous relationships in New Zealand. Finding friendship with Sophie, an elderly woman who is suffering from dementia, he rebuilds his sense of himself and his country in her company, learning about the power of mystery, oracles, and time. Jonny, the Dionysian figure of the dance and the body; Sophie, the elderly figure of wisdom (Sophia) and the mysteries of the mind.

In Joanne Horniman's *Loving Athena* (1997), set in Lismore in Northern New South Wales (Australia), it is Athena who appears, in the form of Etta, a grief-stricken teen who is mourning the death of her best friend, Artemis, from cancer. Smitten with Etta, the protagonist, Keats, worships her as a new Athena – a figure of knowledge and wisdom – but of course he learns along the way that wisdom is hard-won. All over the world, the Greek gods appear to child protagonists, helping them, or challenging them, in their stories. In *The Dragonfly Pool* (2009) Eva Ibbotson makes the case that it is Demeter, rather than Persephone, who is the heroine of her story – a figure of mother-love that will stop at nothing to rescue a child in trouble. The American "Lumberjanes" (2015–2020) find themselves having to outwit and outplay the meddling of Apollo and Artemis, when they are caught up in a battle between the duelling gods. Sabrina Malcolm's novel *Zeustian Logic* (2017) presents Tuttle, a New Zealand boy whose father, Theodorus, has died in a mountain-climbing accident, coping with his grief by reflecting on ancient myth and astronomy – the stories of *katasterismos*. While Tuttle's mother runs the house with Zeus-like efficiency, Tuttle finds an alternative way of thinking about the world. Indeed, in magical-realist literature for young adults in particular, associations with different Olympians offer different ways of approaching life – with Zeus-like gusto, cool Athenian reflectiveness, Dionysian pleasure, Artemisian or Apollonian forcefulness. In short, the Olympians connect with protagonists' needs, temperaments, and emotions, offering ways to think through how to be in the world.

And one way to be in the world is to accept the sweep and play of emotions, as part of the whole of the human experience. Perhaps this is where the image of the Olympians feasting may help us. The great Italian writer Laura Orvieto, who was the first in her country to recast the myths of the Ancient Greeks for young readers, in *Storie di bambini molto antichi* (ill. Rita Petruccioli; 1937)

presents the Olympians as a harmonious group, gathered around a table, feasting on ambrosia and sweet violets:

[V]iolette e foglie di rosa, di fiori d'arancio, di crema alla vaniglia, di mandorle pestate con lo zucchero, di panna montata con i cialdoni e di liquirizia alla menta.<sup>11</sup>

Violets and rose leaves, orange blossoms, vanilla cream, almonds grated with sugar, whipped cream with *cialdoni* and liquorice flavoured with mint.<sup>12</sup>

As the gods feast in celebration of the wedding between Aphrodite and Hephaestus, they celebrate a union between opposites (beauty and ugliness, love and industry). The illustrations in Mondadori's 2014 re-issue of the stories emphasize the gods' individuality – their expressions show pleasure and irritation, laughter and raillery. Similarly, Anna Gkoutzouri's push-pull-slide book *Heracles* (2020) of the "My First Greek Myths" series, which concludes with the great hero being invited to join the gods as their guest on Olympus, shows the gods feasting at a round table covered in food (readers can turn a wheel to show ever more items wheeling around the table): Athena tucks into a hamburger, while Hermes is munching on a chocolate-chip cookie. Artemis and Aphrodite eat fruit (pomegranates and apples, respectively), while Zeus holds a krater of wine in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other. (Like a good guest, Heracles brings a bunch of flowers to the party.) In this version, everyone is smiling – as the book is aimed at very, very young readers – presenting the Olympians as a joyful, happy group of immortals, feasting and enjoying one another's company: an idyllic family party, with all the time in the world to have fun.

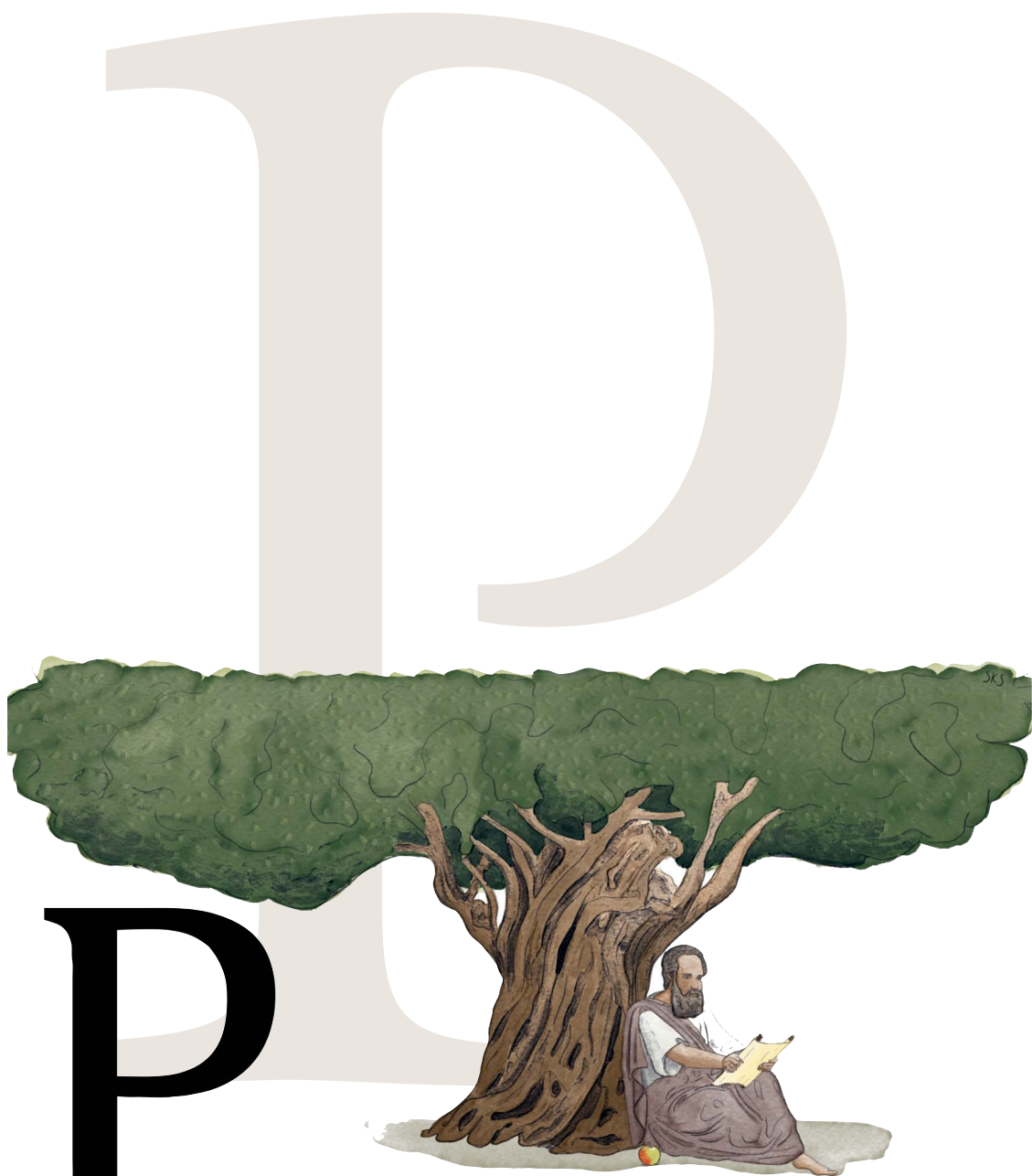
### Further Reading on the Olympians

Nancy Hathaway, *The Friendly Guide to Mythology: A Mortal's Companion to the Fantastical Realm of Gods, Goddesses, Monsters, and Heroes*, New York, NY: Viking, 2004 (ed. pr. 1994).  
Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*, ill. Joseph Michael Linsner, Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel Weiser, 2007.

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<sup>11</sup> Laura Orvieto, *Storie di bambini molto antichi*, ill. Rita Petruccioli, Milano: Mondadori, 2014 (ed. pr. 1937), 45.

<sup>12</sup> Trans. by Dorota Rejter.



P is for philosophical  
approaches



If the myths of Ancient Greece and Rome offer “field guides to human behaviour”,<sup>1</sup> as comments Maggie Rudy (author and illustrator of exquisite diorama-based retellings of myth and fairy tale), when children’s authors retell them for young readers, they often

highlight ways to understand other people and the world in which we live. This is a theme of *Classical Mythology and Children’s Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey*, in which we underscore the nurturing and clarifying intent of children’s literature, one that works in parallel with the knowledge put forward in mythology. Being philosophical can mean being like a philosopher: thinking about the nature of knowledge and existence. It can also mean keeping calm when faced with difficulties. Both ways of being philosophical are important in children’s books, especially as they help children think about the world and about themselves as well.

Children’s literature uses classical myth and thought to help children gain a sense of confidence and personal power in the world. Power is an important concept in children’s books, or perhaps a better word is agency: child characters frequently gain agency through their narratives. They gain strength by facing challenges and passing through trials. And a large part of facing a challenge involves thinking about it and finding a way to be philosophical (that is, calm, knowledgeable, thoughtful) about what they want, or are able to achieve. Different kinds of books provide different ways of considering what it is to be thoughtful, and showing how the different elements of mythical or classical engagements connect with that philosophical approach, and provide personal power.

### Little Philosophers

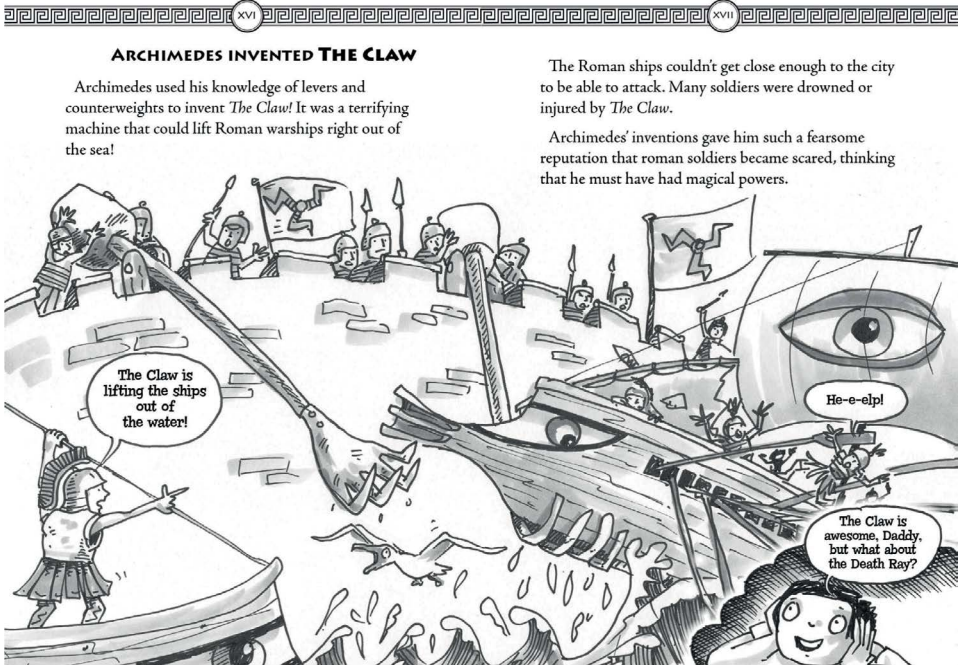
*Not nearly as prolific as mythological retellings, yet a number of authors have sought to introduce young readers to the ideas of the world’s great thinkers. Significantly, a number of these books have been published in languages other than English to reach an international audience.*

📖 Pamela Allen, *Mr Archimedes’ Bath* (1979)

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Rudy, author’s questionnaire, in Elizabeth Hale, “Entry on: *City Mouse, Country Mouse* by Maggie Rudy”, peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Susan Deacy, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018, <http://www.omic.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/711> (accessed 17 November 2021).

- ▣ Alex Dorros and Arthur Dorros, *Número uno*, ill. Susan Guevara (2007; the book uses the story of Socrates to teach Spanish language)
- ▣ “Les petits Platons” series (French), which includes *The Death of Socrates*, by Jean Paul Mongin, with illustrations by Yann Le Bras (2015)
- ▣ Sarah Tomley and Marcus Weeks, *Children’s Book of Philosophy: An Introduction to the World’s Great Thinkers and Their Big Ideas* (2015)
- ▣ Shoo Rayner, *Euclid: The Man Who Invented Geometry* (2017) and *Archimedes: The Man Who Invented the Death Ray* (2017)
- ▣ School of Life, *Big Ideas for Curious Minds: An Introduction to Philosophy* (2018)
- ▣ Jamila Wilson, *Big Ideas for Young Thinkers*, ill. Andrea Pippins (2020)



**Figure 11:** Shoo Rayner’s graphic novel shows the scope of Archimedes’ inventiveness. Shoo Rayner, *Archimedes: The Man Who Invented the Death Ray*, England: Shoo Rayner, 2017, 16–17. Used with the Author’s kind permission.

Lise Lunge-Larsen’s picture book *Gifts from the Gods: Ancient Words and Wisdom from Greek and Roman Mythology* (ill. Gareth Hinds; 2011), shows how classical words maintain power in modern English. As she explains:

Humans have always loved telling stories, and to tell them we use words. Sometimes, however, the words themselves have stories to tell. The ancient words in this book come from the gods, goddesses, heroes, and humans in Greek and Roman mythology. The stories of their adventures so captured people's imagination that they have been told and retold for thousands of years, and their names have survived as words we use every day. Not only do these tales illuminate and explain words, but they also help us understand our own world more deeply.<sup>2</sup>

Lunge-Larsen explains the origin behind common phrases, such as Achilles' heel, Echo and Narcissus, Fate, Fortune, Fury, Genius, Grace, Nemesis, and more. She retells the myths, and summarizes their meanings, drawing attention to the underpinning meanings of how they are used today. For example, the section on Fate provides an overview of sisters Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, explaining how they spun, ordered, and cut the thread of life, or *stamen*. The stamen is the foundational warp thread in weaving, and a strong stamen makes for a strong life. Lunge-Larsen explains how the women of Athens would make offerings to the three sisters, hoping for favourable fates for their children:

People who have tremendous physical power and endurance seem to have a strong thread of life. That's why we say these people have great *stamina*. The thread of life also gave its name to the pollen-producing reproductive part of a flower, called the *stamen*. The Romans named Atropos, the goddess who cut the thread of life, Morta. Her name means "death" and lives on in *mortal* and *mortality*, words we use about things that one day will die. The gods, who will never die, are *immortal*.<sup>3</sup>

Lunge-Larsen highlights the ways that words and knowledge weave through myths, legends, and connect to life (see also "W is for Weaving"). A life woven with myth must be a strong one, and this might account for the ways that authors use myths to help think about what it means to pass through trials, and grow in strength and knowledge. All the texts we discuss in *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey* contain this kernel of truth within them, though they may be more or less explicit in making the connection clear. But some are clearly enlightenment fables, in which a character achieves

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<sup>2</sup> Lise Lunge-Larsen, *Gifts from the Gods: Ancient Words and Wisdom from Greek and Roman Mythology*, ill. Gareth Hinds, Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 2011, 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 22.

a new understanding of the way the world works. This is the case in Melina Marchetta's humorous chapter book for tweens, *The Gorgon in the Gully* (2010; see also "H is for How to Be Heroic"), in which eleven-year-old Danny has to learn how to face his fears. Danny is small and timid, and vulnerable to bullies. Just before an important football match, he accidentally kicks the school's lucky ball into a nearby gully where school legend has it a Gorgon lives. Though he is afraid, Danny realizes he must confront the Gorgon. He considers his options. He goes home and looks up Gorgon in the dictionary. It does not reassure him. More helpful is talking things over with his mother, who advises him:

"Look at whatever you're scared of from a different angle. Look at it up really close. Find a friend at school who's not afraid to look at things up close with you."<sup>4</sup>

Danny does this. He makes friends with the bullyish Simmo, who has called Danny a "gutless wonder". Next, he is brave enough to go into the gully to confront the Gorgon and retrieve the lucky ball. He finds that there is no Gorgon, merely a nice elderly man in a suburban garden, who gladly gives Danny the ball. Danny and his friends do not win their important match, but Danny has learned something about how to handle fear. When children from other schools ask him to eradicate their own particular monsters, Danny is able to help:

All they needed to do was look up close at what it was they were afraid of and they'd probably realise that it wasn't so frightening after all.<sup>5</sup>

*The Gorgon in the Gully* focuses on how to handle bullying, and advocates inclusiveness, tolerance, and teamwork in a way common to much children's literature for this age group. To do this, it gently appropriates the philosophical message behind the Medusa myth. In the original myth, it is the goddess Athena who offers help to Perseus, providing him with winged sandals and a reflective shield to ward off the Gorgon's glare. Athena may well symbolize the power of reflective thought, the use of rational intelligence to fight off rage and fear (represented by Medusa). Instead of Athena, Danny has the help of a dictionary and his mother, and instead of a reflective shield, Danny looks at his problem from different angles, and looks at it close up. Danny controls his fear, and as a result feels more integrated into society, gaining popularity as a result of his

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<sup>4</sup> Marchetta, *The Gorgon in the Gully*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 118.

action. Like a good philosopher (or a true hero), though, Danny is able to share what he learns, for the benefit of others.

The mythological Gorgon symbolizes Danny's lack of confidence, and overcoming it shows a child gaining self-belief and agency. The philosophical approach he takes shows him thinking through a problem, confronting it, and gaining power as a result. It is a philosophical coming of age, in which rationality defeats the irrationality of fear. And though the didactic and topical elements show through quite clearly, what stands out is the thoughtful way that Marchetta shows Danny solving problems, becoming someone who is able to look danger in the eye without becoming petrified.

*The Gorgon in the Gully* handles philosophy lightly, subsuming it into a general exploration of how to face the world rationally. This is often the case in children's stories which advocate particular moralities, behaviours, or ideology in subtle ways. Some writers, however, foreground the role of the science of philosophy in a growing body of informational works aimed at young readers. Jean Paul Mongin, for instance, has published a series of illustrated books about the lives of famous philosophers. In *The Death of Socrates* (2015), using simple storytelling techniques, and accompanied by the vivid illustrations of Yann Le Bras, he presents the account of how Socrates stood up against the state, and met his imprisonment and ultimate death sentence with calmness and fortitude.

This book, like many short biographies, gives highlights from Socrates' life, establishing his cleverness, and showing him to be sympathetic in his advocacy of a simple life, avoiding vanity and greed:

When the persons to whom he talks take themselves to be very wise, Socrates plays around with them by asking so many questions that they end up admitting their ignorance. When he runs into ignorant people, Socrates sets them on the way to wisdom. Socrates himself claims to know only one single thing – that he knows nothing at all!<sup>6</sup>

Despite some light moments, *The Death of Socrates* takes its subject seriously, and does not avoid unpleasant details. Socrates' trial, his imprisonment, and death, are recounted in clear and simple prose. Two elements, however, may soften the story for young readers: first, Le Bras's bright images show Socrates, the people of Athens, and the world as Socrates framed it in his philosophy. Second, there is the mythical realm: the existence of demons and souls, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Paul Mongin, *The Death of Socrates*, trans. Anna Street, ill. Yann Le Bras, "Plato & Co", Chicago, IL: Diaphanes, 2015, 3–4.

possibility of spiritual improvement through time in the afterlife. When Socrates drinks his hemlock and dies, then, the final image of the piece shows the great philosopher flying up to the sun with his soul supporting him.

### Socrates

*Often regarded as the founding figure of Western philosophy, Socrates questioned everyone and everything. Though he himself did not write a word, his revolutionary ideas, and his state-sanctioned death have been immortalized in the works of other writers.*

**Retelling – Duane Armitage and Maureen McQuerry, *Truth with Socrates*, ill. Robin Rosenthal (2020)**

A lovely board book that introduces very young children to some of Socrates' key philosophies, including the importance of questioning everything around us.

**Revision – Laurie Gray, *Just Myrto* (2014)**

A work of historical fiction for young adults, this book is about the young woman who, at eighteen years of age, is married to Socrates.

**Adaptation – Margo Sorenson, *Death of Lies: Socrates*, ill. Michael A. Aspengren (1998)**

Written for older children, this is a fictionalized imagining of the trial of Socrates, as experienced by a young Athenian girl named Aleesa.

**Allusion – Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy* (1994; ed. pr. in Norwegian 1991)**

A comprehensive and wide-ranging study of Western philosophy is embedded within the story of a fourteen-year-old Norwegian girl who receives strange and mysterious messages that invite her to question the world around her, and her own identity.

Presenting harsh messages palatably is an important skill for children's writers (as we have discussed in "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects"). The dominant message of *The Death of Socrates* is that the great philosopher faced the challenges of his life with rational equanimity, and that his way of thinking through problems allowed him to do so. As he explains to the singer Simmias:

"I wouldn't be so content to be taking this trip to the Underworld if I weren't convinced that I will find other gods there that are absolutely good, and perhaps men even better than those from here."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 37.

Socrates courageously uses rationality and wisdom to help face fear, and the inevitable, showing that a philosophical approach can provide a balance for strong emotion, be that the power of love, or the power of fear.

This tussle between reason and passion can be very inspiring: Margaret Mahy, whose magic-realist romances for young adults in the 1980s and 1990s we have discussed elsewhere ("A is for Adaptation", "H is for How to Be Heroic", "J is for Journeys", "L is for Labyrinth", "O is for the Olympians", "U is for Underworld Adventures", "Y is for Young Adulthood"), drew inspiration from myths and philosophy in her work. One of them, *The Catalogue of the Universe* (1985), dramatizes the conflict between passion and reason in finding one's place in the world. It recasts aspects of the *Aeneid* in the story of Angela Chase, a wild and beautiful girl whose single mother, Dido, has told her a romantic story about how she came to be born. Seeking her absent father, and believing she can reunite them, Angela discovers him to be a very disappointing Aeneas – a shallow and tawdry flirt who had no intention of getting to know his lost daughter. In contrast with the beautiful and eccentric Angela and Dido is the other protagonist of the novel, Tycho, whose suburban family is almost excessively normal. Named after the great Danish astronomer, Tycho is drawn to the Greek philosophers. While his brother dismisses philosophy as "something some old Greek said a million years ago", Tycho is struck by philosophy as "something to think about". He also finds solace in its continuity of meaning and thought through the aeons. "I mean Democritus said that in 430 BC... 430 BC", Tycho repeated as if he expected [his brother] to be somehow moved by this fact".<sup>8</sup> Tycho thinks about facts and matter and the stability and instability of the universe: "[N]othing exists save atoms and the void", says Democritus, and for Tycho that is reassuring.<sup>9</sup>

Where Angela enjoys chaos (what she calls the "wobble in the symmetry" of the universe) and Tycho prefers order, it is a book about the nature of the universe that literally brings them together, when short Tycho stands on it to kiss tall Angela. Mahy uses the format of a romantic novel to show young protagonists thinking about the nature of the world, and how they can live in it, separately or together. Like many of her works, *The Catalogue of the Universe* focuses on the protagonists' coming of age, in this case, coming to an understanding that they can work with, and that will help them live fulfilled lives, finding stability by balancing passion (Angela) with philosophy (Tycho).

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret Mahy, *The Catalogue of the Universe*, London: J.M. Dent, 1985, 45.

<sup>9</sup> See Elizabeth Hale, "Imaginative Displacement: Classical Reception in the Young Adult Fiction of Margaret Mahy", in Marguerite Johnson, ed., *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 143–154.

Astronomy, as much as philosophy, interests Tycho. In the novel, he thinks about the philosopher-scientist Anaximander (610–546 BCE), who explored the origins of the universe and the movements of the celestial bodies. Anaximander features in another young adult novel from New Zealand, *Genesis* (2006), by Bernard Beckett. In this work of dystopian science fiction, a female teenager named Anaximander undergoes an examination for entrance into an elite Academy. The novel is set far in the future, following a global apocalypse that has reshaped the world order. As *Genesis* unfolds, it is revealed that the human race has died out, replaced by Artificially Intelligent (AI) creatures (made in the form of orangutans), which it had developed as assistants, but which took over. Nevertheless, the spirit of humanity carries on in the form of an infection, transmitted to the robots by a rebel hero. In the last pages of the novel, Anaximander discovers that that infection involves feelings of love and individualism, and that she herself is infected. The examination was to identify AI beings who are drawn to humanism and to eliminate them rather than to admit them to the Academy. The novel ends with her disconnection.

This tense novel is told in the form of a Socratic dialogue, in which Anaximander debates with her examiners. Her task is to present a historical project, and her choice of subject, Adam Forde, the man who it emerges infected the AI beings with humanism, marks her out as someone to be eliminated. During the post-apocalyptic period in which society was remade by philosophers, Adam had rebelled. He is captured and made to debate a machine named Art, an early prototype of the AI creatures developed to work for humans (and which later took over the world). These debates are part of Art's development program, and form an important core of the book, which discusses human versus robotic intelligence. Here is Adam explaining what it means to be human:

"You mock me for the shortness of my life span, but it is this very fear of dying which breathes life into me. I am the thinker who thinks of thought. I am curiosity, I am reason, I am love and I am hatred. I am indifference. I am the son of a father, who in turn was a father's son. I am the reason my mother laughed and the reason my mother cried. I am wonder and I am wondrous. Yes, the world may push your buttons as it passes through your circuitry. But the world does not pass through me. It lingers. I am in it and it is in me. I am the means by which the universe has come to know itself. I am the thing no machine can ever make. I am meaning." Adam was silent, shaking. It was impossible to tell whether it was breath or words he had run out of.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Beckett, *Genesis*, Dunedin: Longacre Press, 2006, 95–96.

Whether this statement convinces Art of the power of human thought is unclear. A complicated end-game sees Art trick Adam by going along with an escape plan, then killing him when the duo is surrounded by guards. As his robot fingers close around Adam's neck, Adam looks deep into Art's eyes, and transmits the power of human feeling, an infection that pervades the AI society for generations to come. He has transmitted what the examiners call the power of the Idea, but also the power of love, of creativity, of feeling.

*Genesis* reinforces the idea that humans have something special about them – the power of thought infused with feeling – the mixture of reason and passion that makes it good to be alive. As young humans themselves, readers interested in debate, philosophy, and thinking about the nature of the world find this book gripping, and enjoy the twists and turns. Peppered throughout *Genesis*, too, are references to classical philosophers, especially through characters who have classical names (Anaximander, her teacher Pericles, Plato who is the last leader of human society following the Apocalypse, another student named Socrates). Anaximander's name highlights that she is an AI: as a robot, she only reflects the shining light of humanity – indeed, Beckett is ultimately a humanist. But the philosophical workout she has been through makes us sympathize with her, for her skill, and her imagination.<sup>11</sup>

Philosophy does not have to be cold, and the coldness of the examiners, and their clinical disconnection of Anaximander's cerebral cortex, contrasts with the investigation of life and love that her testimony presents. For readers (young or old) who do not see the final twist coming, it is a shocking ending. Anaximander does not, like Mongin's Socrates, ascend to the afterlife with her soul, for she does not have one. Death comes as a blunt end to her experience, and to the novel. But she has demonstrated to the readers the kind of rational self-determination that a philosophical approach can allow. Even if she was deluded, and even if she was lied to, she has proven her agency through her careful scholarship and philosophical approach to the world. Hers, like Socrates', is a noble and rational death.

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<sup>11</sup> See Babette Pütz, "Classical Influences in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*, *August*, and *Lullaby*", in Marguerite Johnson, ed., *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 155–166; Babette Puetz, "When Is a Robot a Human? Hope, Myth, and Humanity in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Hope: The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Our Mythical Childhood", Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2021, 471–490; Elizabeth Hale, "Examining Humanity in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*: Anaximander, Plato, Classical Philosophy and Gothic in Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults", *Clotho* 2.2 (2020), 103–125.

Most literature for young readers does not end with the protagonist's death. It is striking that this happens in two of the examples we have chosen. But the pearls of wisdom offered by these writers are such as to suggest a philosophical approach offers a way to strengthen the thread of life, to meet trouble when it approaches, to look at it closely and find ways to deal with it, to overcome challenges, or accept limitations.

### **Further Reading on Philosophy**

Peter R. Costello, ed., *Philosophy in Children's Literature*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011.



# Q

is for quality



SKS

# Q

is for quality



The image for this chapter shows the goddess Athena, who is known for her attributes of intelligence, creativity, learning, judgement, and justice. She is assessing two works of art – statues of herself, one in a realistic, and one in a modernistic style. If she wants

to rank one above the other, she has quite a task on her hands, especially if she wants to say that one is of higher “quality” than the other. How will she judge this? By workmanship? Each is equally carefully constructed. By style? Each is considerably different from the other. One is obviously Athena; the other is highly symbolic. By purpose? We do not know where she might want her statue to be placed, or for what purpose. By artistic intent? How does she know what each artist intended, once the work is removed from its context? By taste? If Athena is choosing the work for herself, then obviously her own taste is paramount: there is no point having a sculpture sitting around that she doesn’t like. But if she is choosing on behalf of her public (let us say), then she may have to think about what might please the crowd rather than meeting her individual taste. Being a goddess, she probably does not need to think in terms of financial cost: but for lesser beings, price can be a factor, so Athena may consider this aspect of quality as well. If she is choosing a template from which other sculptures might be formed, she may need to consider aspects of reproducibility – in different sizes and for different needs. Indeed, it seems that our Athena has decided not to choose between the statues: that she has accepted both – appreciating that their different qualities make them each unique and interesting.

The purpose of these statues is ambiguous. If Athena is choosing a statue for a child audience, which one would she identify? A “realistic” or a “symbolic” image? Realism can often be seen as the place to start from: a strong, clear visual which gives a sense of what the goddess may look like – the sense that the Olympic gods look like humans, just larger, and bearing readily identifiable symbols (Athena’s helmet and aegis, for example, which symbolize her profile as a warrior goddess and a protector of Athens). Symbolism, on the other hand, reduces the image to its simplest parts – in this case, shapes which underly the structure of a realist work – suggesting the foundation of art, and its applicability in multiple contexts; suggesting too the idea of a child’s stack of building blocks, using basic strong shapes from which to develop later. Would either of these

images tell children something about Athena? Where might they stand, and what other material might be needed to provide guidance? A plinth with a name tag is one option; a gallery exhibit with explanatory notes. Our Athena statues might stand at the entrance to a school or a library, offering a sense of tradition in learning and thinking.

Another god might choose differently. It's fun to think about how the gods' different interests and realms could affect their ideas of quality, taste, and production. Apollo, also a god of creativity and artistic endeavour, might prefer less stately work, in line with his whimsical, sometimes brutal qualities. For Apollo, the line of artistic inquiry might be more important than the sense of judgement and protective educational qualities. Hestia, the goddess of the hearth and the home, might be concerned that statues have no sharp corners that could harm the child rushing by. Would Hermes, the messenger god with winged heels, even have time to look at statues as he swept off on another errand? Artemis, another very busy god, might prefer an image that embodied her interests in nature and the hunt. Though their interests might be different in terms of subject matter, Pan, Demeter, and Poseidon, with their guardianship over the earth and its creatures, might be concerned that the art be sustainably produced.

Questions of quality take us into considerations of a huge range of specifics, to do with a text's contents, construction, form, style, production methods; its audiences, reception, intended purpose, its alignment with tastes, trends, and mores. Popular acclaim versus critical admiration; ephemerality versus lasting admiration are part of the equation as well. These multiple factors reflect that there is no precise formula for assessing quality.

That is before we even consider issues related to children's literature, which include elements of appropriateness for different age groups, balancing out the needs to entertain, inform, and empower, and remembering the impact that texts can have on children at impressionable stages of life (see "F is for First Encounters"). Parents, teachers, librarians, publishers, authors, reviewers, and booksellers are mostly adults, and are impacted by the brief to disseminate "quality" material to young readers. Which is where literature influenced by Classical Antiquity may come in: for it is an area that is traditionally (at least in the Western world) considered useful, beautiful, and valuable for a well-rounded education.

## Novels with Big Ideas: C.S. Lewis, Philip Pullman, and Epic – “The Chronicles of Narnia” and “His Dark Materials” Series

In “The Chronicles of Narnia” (1950–1956), C.S. Lewis creates a fantasy world called Narnia, where mythical beasts live alongside figures from folk tales and fairy stories. Like many fantasy novels, the series began with a single story: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), in which Lucy, the youngest of a family of four children, finds a magical world at the back of a wardrobe, and meets a faun, Mr Tumnus, who invites her to tea. This is the beginning of increasingly grand adventures, which intertwine elements from many mythologies, including the classical, Christian, and Eastern myths. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), Arthurian legend and the *Odyssey* blend, in the story of Prince Caspian’s quest to rescue a group of knights, lost on a journey many years before. In *The Silver Chair* (1953), the story of *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight* weaves together katabatic myths, such as that of Orpheus and Eurydice, in the story of a prince, kidnapped by a serpentine enchantress, and rescued by the protagonists, Polly and Eustace. Prequel stories, such as *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955), offer creation myths for the world of Narnia, and include magical creatures, such as Strawberry, a London cab-horse transformed into a Pegasus named Fledge, on his arrival in a Narnia that is still in creation mode. Throughout the novels runs a strong sense of the need for good to fight against evil: the stories become increasingly driven by this concept, and informed by a Christian sense of the battle for the soul of the world.

In the “His Dark Materials” trilogy (1995–2000; *The Northern Lights* [in the United States known as *The Golden Compass*], *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*), Philip Pullman consciously employs the idea of epic in a story about the nature of life, the soul, and the universe. His novels combine adventure through a number of marvellous worlds, and involve existential reflection on what it means to be alive. Protagonists Lyra and Will discover that their worlds have been corrupted by religious orders who exploit the relation between the soul and the body to gain power. In the final volume, they journey to the realm of the dead, where they rescue the Authority (the figure of God) from a prison, where he has been trapped by the Metatron (the most powerful angel). The Authority dies, and Will and Lyra realize they must remake the world themselves, but at great cost. These novels are unusual in children’s literature, being consciously atheistic: Pullman writes against the Christian vision displayed in Lewis’s “Chronicles of Narnia”, suggesting it is humans, rather than any godlike figure, who shape the world.

In some ways the “Chronicles of Narnia” and “His Dark Materials” cycle have become canonical in children’s literature (especially British children’s literature). Lewis, one of the Inklings circle in Oxford, is profoundly influential in British fantasy literature, along with J.R.R. Tolkien and others, and Pullman’s consciously grand sweep is part of this process, making a claim for children’s literature to work out big ideas (another of his intertexts is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). While many other children’s novels also engage with big ideas, Pullman foregrounds this aspect of his work, and many of his characters are academics, scientists, and thinkers.

The French theorist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term “cultural capital”, referring to the notion that knowledge of certain ideas, texts, aesthetic objects, and experiences, gives the possessor status and power, and entry into privileged circles.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of Greek and Latin, for a long time, has been a marker of that kind of cultural capital – it functions as a kind of code, meaning that one has had the “right” kind of education, and can participate in civilized society. This is a hangover from an age in which access to education, particularly classical, was limited, and the preserve of elites. Nineteenth-century British gentlemen, for instance, were expected to learn a bit of Latin, and would quote snippets as a sign of their learning. Children at prestigious schools would learn Latin whether they wanted to or not, in order to be part of ruling society (to get into the right kinds of university, and to have the right kinds of jobs).<sup>2</sup>

This somewhat cynical attitude towards “quality” is social in nature, and focuses on knowledge as useful to gain access to power. This view shows people being driven less by intrinsic interest in the beauty, truth, or depth of the classical material being taught than by a sense that knowing the “best” allows one to be “the best”. It is an attitude that persists to this day: for, even though education is more available than ever, the increasing breadth of subjects taught, and changing interests, mean that the “dead” languages and their cultures are far less likely to dominate than they did in previous systems. In formal terms, classical learning has an unusual position of being both “elite” and “obscure” and also “under threat”, and a great deal of debate about its role in the academy (at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels) takes place.<sup>3</sup>

Related to the idea of cultural capital is that of the “canon”. The term “canon” means ‘list’, and was originally used to refer to those books in the Bible that were considered most authoritative. In literature, the term “canon” means the texts (fiction, drama, poetry) that are generally considered “excellent” and valuable works: familiarity with the canon means one has an apprehension of what is best in literature. Though the idea may seem static, the canon is not a static list, being continually revised and reformed. Texts once considered essential reading slip off the list, to be replaced by new or rediscovered items, shaped by changing ideas about writing and reading. Changing ideas about what

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> See Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities and Society in England, 1830–1960*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Arlene Holmes-Henderson, Steven Hunt, and Mai Musié, eds., *Forward with Classics: Classical Languages in Schools and Communities*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

is important in the world also influence the canon, just as they shape ideas about education, and classically inspired works find their way into it, just as they may be displaced in their turn.

The influence of classical material, in literature and culture, means that knowing something about it gives one access to understanding, and from that, one can have access to beauty, and insight, and reflection. But knowledge is not the preserve only of the academy. This is where, we believe, children's books come in, offering a way for young minds to encounter ancient wisdom and ideas, and from there, access to the web of meaning seen in literature, film, architecture, and more, offering them a kind of knowledge that spreads cultural capital more widely through a kind of democracy of publishing and reading. Cats can look at kings, and children can read about the gods in picture books or comics, chapter books and novels.

With that in mind, we return to Athena's questions of quality. How do we know which text provides a quality experience for young readers? How do we choose which to share, and which not to share? And under what conditions? How do we balance questions of enjoyment, education, durability, availability, and affordability? (These are questions that have been at the forefront of our own minds as we have written this book: whenever we mention a text, it can be assumed we are recommending it in some way.) The sheer volume of children's literature produced (in the United Kingdom alone, over 8,000 titles are published annually) means that it is impossible for anyone to read it all. Many excellent works will have only brief print runs and will remain obscure. Even those that are distributed widely through mainstream publishers may be supplanted quickly by new items. In our image, Athena is only choosing between two statues, while modern readers have many thousands of works at their fingertips.

### **J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter Series* (1997–2007)**

The classical tradition has an important place in these famous bestselling books, and has been widely remarked upon by fans and analysed by academics. Rowling studied Classics along with French at the University of Exeter in the 1980s, and her familiarity with the mythology and languages of the ancient world informs her storytelling. From centaurs to Cerberus, the phoenix and the basilisk, mythic monsters figure throughout the series.

In addition, many characters bear classical names. Minerva McGonagall pays homage to the Roman version of Athena, while Harry's friend Hermione recalls the daughter of Helen and Menelaus. Other names contain elements of Latin and Greek that reveal key aspects of their personalities. As both fans and scholarly critics have observed, almost every character's name is significant.

Latin is also the language of wizardry, and most of the spells Harry and his friends learn derive from the ancient language. The books have been called a “primer by stealth”, inculcating readers into the knowledge of Latin without them even realizing it. The publication of translations of the series into both Latin and Greek brings the process full circle.

Drawing on the genre of school stories, Hogwarts is the ultimate British boarding school, with ornate architecture, long-standing academic and sporting traditions, and house rivalries. The fact that the study of classical culture and languages is a cornerstone of the curriculum at such institutions in the Muggle world contributes to the significance of classical elements within the series.



## Pygmalion

*The talented sculptor Pygmalion carves a statue of the perfect woman. He makes a wish for a wife that is just like the statue. Aphrodite answers his prayer and brings the statue to life as the maiden Galatea. A story about art, life, and about getting what you wish for...*

### **Retelling – Diane Stanley, *The Trouble with Wishes* (2007)**

In this picture book version, the sculptor Pyg carves a statue of a goddess so beautiful that he falls in love with her and wishes that she was real. But real life is different from the imagination.

### **Revision – Madeline Miller, *Galatea* (2013)**

A crossover short story for a more mature readership that gives a voice and a subjective perspective to the living statue whom Pygmalion adores.

### **Adaptation – Marilyn Singer, “Pygmalion and Galatea” in *Echo Echo: Verso Poems about Greek Myths*, ill. Josée Masse (2015)**

Included in a collection of poems that can be read both forwards and backwards, this version of the Pygmalion story uses the myth to highlight the concept of artistic creation and the subtleties of alternative points of view.

### **Allusion – Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio* (1883)**

The similarities between the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea and the story of Pinocchio have been recognized by a number of literary critics.

## Some Rules for Considering Quality

How then do we establish that a book has “quality” – in other words, that it is worth reading? We have come up with a few rules of thumb that may assist, focusing of course on works inspired by Classical Antiquity.

1. Purpose/content. Is the book "on topic"? Does it connect with the world of Classical Antiquity? If it does, how thoroughly? Do you want to read a work that engages fully with the subject, or are you satisfied with a slight, or allusive, encounter instead?
2. Sources/research/accuracy. Is the text carefully researched, and is it accurate? This is particularly important when we consider informational texts, which should generally be providing accurate or authoritative material. One way to test this is to see if there is a bibliography or reference list, or suggestions for further readings. Consider the context (see "A is for Adaptation"): are you looking for a faithful rendition or historical accuracy, or are you looking for material that plays with classical material for new purposes?
3. Publishing house. While publishing houses vary from the very large to the very small, you can gain a sense of the quality of their work by checking publishing lists and reviews. The size of a publisher is not always an indication of quality – some large publishers are over-extended and under pressure to push out commercially successful works, which may mean that depth can be sacrificed. Small publishers produce excellent products, but may have shorter print runs, so works can be hard to find. When you read a book that you think is good, keep an eye on the publisher, to see what else they are bringing out.
4. Presentation. Is it well written? Is it nicely illustrated? Has it been through a rigorous review process, been edited carefully, and is well put-together?
5. Audience/age group. Consider the audience: factors such as target age and gender can influence how the classical world is depicted. A board book for babies will present a very different view of the Olympians than will a graphic novel for teens.
6. Appropriateness. For young readers, issues of appropriateness can be quite challenging, and given that many myths contain frightening, violent, or challenging elements (see "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects"), it may be worth checking books' target ages. Other elements of appropriateness can include the complexity of language, and of ideas – too easy and a child will be bored; too hard, and a reader can be frustrated and turned off. Consider whether the author or illustrator understands the market and the needs and interests of young readers, and whether they have connected ideas about the ancient world to an understanding of the modern world (and vice versa).
7. Reading intentions. Are you looking to be informed or entertained? Do you want a book with depth, or one that can be read quickly? Are you happy to read challenging material, in terms of emotions or ideas? Or do you want a "relaxing" read? Learn to understand the signs – publishers usually



**Figure 12:** Manuela Adreani's dreamy illustrations of *The Odyssey* convey the story's emotional power. Giorgio Ferrero, *The Odyssey*, ill. Manuela Adreani, New York, NY: White Star Kids, 2016, 46–47. Used with the Author's kind permission.

- indicate in blurbs what kind of book they are presenting. Consider why you have the intention you have – for yourself, or for other readers. When is it important to be challenged? When is it important to be entertained?
8. Reviews, awards, and recommendations. Consult reviews, take note of whether texts have received awards, and listen to recommendations from other readers whose advice you value. There are different ways to find reviews: in newspapers and magazines, in industry fora, or simply in on-line communities of enthusiasts. Consider their contexts and balance their tastes with your own.
  9. Aesthetics and enjoyment. Consider what you find beautiful in literature, and what you find enjoyable (these are not necessarily the same thing).
  10. Challenge yourself and be open to new ideas. Try out something completely different from your usual taste – you may discover a whole new world of literature. Try reading works from a different culture or written by different generations from your own. See the ancient world from new perspectives.

As we indicated in our “Introduction” to this book, the reader who sets out to explore children’s literature inspired by Classical Antiquity will swiftly find an ocean of texts to choose from. We used the concept of the “alphabetical

odyssey” to reflect that our literary journey could not realistically be comprehensive, but instead to offer a series of principles and ideas as a guide through that ocean. Odysseys can seem random, but they have a purpose – a sense of movement and exploration, and an appreciation of what comes one’s way.

### **Our Mythical Childhood Survey**

The *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* (<http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey>) presents 1,500+ texts for children that are inspired by Classical Antiquity. Each *Survey* entry provides information about a text: summarizing and analysing how it engages with classical matters. Information is given about genre, context, authorial intentions (where known), and entries are tagged according to their classical topics, and also their connections with issues important in children’s literature. This *Survey* is helpful if you want to find out more about how particular classical figures or concepts are treated in children’s and young adults’ culture. It is helpful, too, if you want to search for particular genres (for instance, if you want to find out how young adult romance novels engage with classical motifs, or are curious about how adventure stories connect with the ancient world). It is also useful if you are interested in seeing how issues of particular interest to children connect with classically inspired storytelling. We encourage you to have a look around, and to write with recommendations for further entries.



### **Living Myth: Myths from Cameroon**

An exciting aspect of the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* is the inclusion of myths from Cameroon and neighbouring countries. Conducted by Prof. Daniel A. Nkemele, Prof. Divine Che Neba, and Prof. Eleanor A. Dasi (University of Yaoundé 1), Cameroonian researchers record myths and folklore from local storytellers and summarize them in the *Survey*. Connections between Cameroonian myth and the myths of the classical world can be seen in overlapping themes, repeated tropes and concepts, which are noted in the *Survey*. This work reflects the life of myths: their continued relevance in understanding aspects of the world and human behaviour.



### **Further Reading**

Anne Lundin, *Constructing the Canon of Children’s Literature: Beyond Library Walls and Ivory Towers*, New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2004.  
Benjamin Lefebvre, ed., *Textual Transformations in Children’s Literature: Adaptations, Translations, Reconsiderations*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2019.

is for relationships

R





## is for relationships

If we are fortunate, it usually works like this when we enter the world. First, we meet our family. Gradually our frame of reference expands. We leave the house, meet people from other families, we make friends, we fall in love. We go to kindergarten and school, join

teams, go to community and religious groups, we learn new skills, maybe we get a job, and our world expands further. Eventually we leave home, seeking new experiences and adventures, we make our own homes and lives and families. Even if things turn out differently than we might expect, the cycle continues, and the journey carries on.

Children's literature reflects that journey through a life full of different kinds of relationships. Given its focus on the lives of the young, however, it is mainly preoccupied with the role of friends and family. The decisions that parents (or guardians or tutors) make, the relations we have with our siblings, our desires to do things our own way, and to leave the nest, are some parts of children's books. Children see the world in relation to their immediate family, and learn who they are from understanding their role in a family. Ideally, a family is supportive, and dedicated to helping children grow in understanding while they grow in physical stature. Many children's books reinforce that ideal, showing child protagonists spending time with parents or siblings or grandparents, and learning about the world from their immediate and extended family. They also reinforce the child's identity, as they move from baby to toddler, from pre-schooler to school-age child, from tween to adolescent. As children grow, so do their protagonists: babies like stories about babies, tweens about tweens, and so on; stories aimed at different age groups reflect their abilities, the likely nature of their families and groups of friends, and more.<sup>1</sup>

Not so different from the Greek myths, really, or the legends of great heroes. Many of the Greek gods have origin stories, and we know some things about their childhoods, their families, and their friendship networks. Similarly, we learn snippets about the childhoods of the great heroes (Hercules, whose strength is apparent from the cradle; Jason, who is instructed by Chiron until he comes of age). They have protective mothers, dubious or absent fathers, and

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<sup>1</sup> And children are interested in what lies ahead: librarians and teachers know that children tend also to read "up", to read books for and about older children.

for many of them, finding connection with their fathers in their early adulthood is an important stage of development.

They also make friends, from outside their immediate family circle. Jason gathers a band of merry warriors to travel with him on the Argo in their quest for the Golden Fleece. The Centaur Chiron educates both Jason and (more rarely) Perseus, and is a friend and mentor. Perhaps if Icarus had had some friends or a tutor, his tragic fall from the sky might have been averted. And Greek and Roman myth celebrate any number of important friendships and family relationships (the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus; devoted friends and lovers Nisus and Euryalus; sisters Anna and Dido). The nature of mythology is not such as to spend great amounts of time on heroic friendships, but heroes need friends as much as they need family. The gods and heroes, in short, are a microcosm of society – of family, of friends, and of society more generally. In “O is for the Olympians”, we discussed how the Olympians function as a large family – affectionate, squabbling, sometimes riven, sometimes close – whose relationships usefully inspire children’s fiction about family and the individual.

Children’s books inspired by classical myth often emphasize friends and family. The gods may have singular qualities and traits, but they are social beings, and in picture books about Icarus, such as Jane Yolen’s *Wings* (ill. Dennis Nolan; 1990) and Gerald McDermott’s *Sun Flight* (1980), the relationship between Daedalus and Icarus is a key part of the myth’s impact. Daedalus, whose complicity in the Minotaur myth makes him a complex figure, continues his conflicted path, in which his ingenuity gets him into and out of difficult situations. This time, his son, Icarus, pays the price for his father’s complicity. (At least that is one way of looking at it. Another is that Icarus, an excitable and headstrong boy, does not listen properly to his knowledgeable father, and pays the price for his foolishness.) Daedalus of course pays another price: the devastating loss of his only son.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in *Greek Myths* (1991), Marcia Williams makes the point that Daedalus is a serial offender, causing the death of his nephew, Talos:<sup>3</sup> Icarus’ death is a punishment from the gods:

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<sup>2</sup> McDermott’s illustrations depict the gods as cloud-people watching over the action below, presented in family tableaux, raising the question as to whether the gods are complicit, or helpless, in this tragedy. For a discussion, see John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children’s Literature*, New York, NY: Garland, 1998, 71–72.

<sup>3</sup> See Apollodorus, *Library* 3.15.8; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4.76.4–7.

Meanwhile, Daedalus had lost sight of his son. He saw nothing but a few feathers floating on the waves. He hovered over the sea until Icarus' body floated to the surface. Weeping, Daedalus carried his dead son to an island, where he gently laid the body in a grave. As Daedalus smoothed the earth, a partridge landed by him. Daedalus believed it to be the spirit of his nephew, Talos, and he knew that the gods had at last punished him, by allowing Icarus to fall to his death – just as Talos had done.<sup>4</sup>

Either way, poor Icarus is an innocent victim of a tragic story cycle. Some versions try to give him a modicum of happiness – such as Robert Byrd's retelling of the Theseus myth (*The Hero and the Minotaur: The Fantastic Adventures of Theseus*, 2005), in which Ariadne and her friend Icarus help Theseus trace his path through the Labyrinth. Lisl Weil's retelling in *King Midas' Secret and Other Follies* (1969) shows a cunning Daedalus catching Icarus in a trumpet-like contraption, having foreseen his son's foolishness, and being ready to rescue him. Michael Garland's version, *Icarus Swinebuckle* (2000), transforms the story to an eighteenth-century tale of a pig named Icarus Swinebuckle (who bears some resemblance to the inventor and polymath Benjamin Franklin) proving himself to his young son, by inventing wings with which he can soar above a marvelling crowd. Joan Holub and Leslie Patricelli's board book for babies *Be Careful, Icarus!* (2015) shows Icarus losing his kite, rather than his life. In all of these retellings, the bond between father and son is powerful and moving – and even in versions in which Daedalus is to blame, or punished, his love for his child is never in doubt.

Family harmony is never guaranteed in the Greek myths: the story of Atalanta shows a girl who is at first abandoned by her parents, then taken care of by animals and other humans, then restored to her family, who insist she marry. She pushes back, refusing to marry any man who cannot beat her in a race. Some versions show Atalanta using the unsuccessful men for target practice, others do not, and indeed picture books are often more open about retelling challenging aspects of myths than we might suspect. The Atalanta myth has attractive elements: the golden apples, the excitement of racing, and Atalanta may seem an appealing female figure for girls to identify with. But, as Vashti Farrer notes in her picture book *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World* (ill. Naomi Lewis; 2004), Hippomenes does not win the race fairly, and had "used

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Greek Myths*, 20.

a cunning trick”<sup>5</sup> to win Atalanta, who nevertheless keeps her word. Perhaps the story’s viciousness relates to the pair’s later transformation into a lioness and lion when they neglect to worship Aphrodite (who views herself as their helper). Perhaps, too, the story is about not wanting to have a romantic relationship – Atalanta identifies with the cult of Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt, who guards her in her childhood, and is also a singular figure in the way of a number of myths – this time as an athletic girl or woman, who eschews romance. She is popular in modern retellings for her athleticism and independence, enabling readers to think about what it means to be forced into (or also to avoid) social conventions.

Depending on the genre of story, writers are more or less explicit about young protagonists’ relationships with family and friends. Fiction for adolescents often treads a path between encouraging young readers’ sense of empowerment and individual agency on the one hand, and on the other hand advising them on ways to become productive members of society. For example, Rick Riordan’s “Percy Jackson” books show teenagers identifying with the ambiguities and struggles of heroes and demigods, rather than with the all-powerful gods.

For Percy Jackson, who is a modern Perseus figure and the hero of Riordan’s “Percy Jackson and the Olympians” (2005–2009) series, it is the absence of his father (Poseidon) that means he struggles with a brutish stepfather, and desires to protect his gentle mother. That battle transforms into one with epic import, when Percy joins “Camp Half-Blood”, where he builds a team of demigod friends, “half-bloods” like him whose parents are gods and mortals, in order to take on the vicious Titans who are rising up to challenge the Olympians. In Riordan’s literary universe, the Titans are ascendant, being figures who prevail at times in history when the forces of darkness are rising in power. The Olympians need help to fight back, and Percy joins forces with other children of different gods and mortals, to set the world on the right path: Annabeth, a daughter of Athena; Luke, son of Hermes; Thalia, daughter of Zeus; as well as their friends, Grover (a satyr) and Tyson (a young Cyclops).

As figures of familial authority, and as gods at the same time, the Olympians cause both admiration and frustration for Percy and his friends. Each descendant carries on their traits and abilities. In Camp Half-Blood, the place where Percy, Annabeth, and their other demigod friends are trained, the cavalier behaviour of powerful but capricious gods is thrown into sharp relief – not

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<sup>5</sup> Vashti Farrer, *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World*, ill. Naomi Lewis, South Melbourne: Pearson Education, 2004, 22.

merely an embarrassing family, but a troublesome one, especially where the lives of mortals and demigods are concerned.

In “O is for the Olympians”, we have discussed how the gods operate as a big messy family, a challenging group for anyone who encounters them – especially romantically. We see the disastrous side of the gods’ unruly behaviour in romantic fiction, such as the love story of Rachel Smythe’s web comic, *Lore Olympus* (2018–present), in which the love story between Hades and Persephone is interrupted by the meddling of Apollo, Hermes, Demeter, Hera – in fact, of nearly all the Olympians in one form or another. In stories like these, the gods function as obstacles to the path of true love – the protagonists have to overcome them to get together – and also to prove to the reader that they are willing to make the effort to be together (or belong together).

Romance, love, relationships – all are vitally important in young adult fiction, which gives voice to all sorts of ideas about what is involved with falling in love, dating, sex, sexuality and long-term partnerships. Because the classical myths themselves are preoccupied with these subjects, they offer considerable inspiration.

### Love Is All Around

*Classical myth features countless great love stories, and writers of young adult novels (traditional or graphic novels) have imagined new lives for these old lovers, in which identity becomes more complex, and gender roles and sexual orientation more fluid.*

- ▣ Kei Murayama, *A Centaur’s Life* (2011; LGBTQI coming-of-age graphic novel featuring mythical creatures from many traditions)
- ▣ Sarah Diemer, *The Dark Wife* (2011; lesbian retelling of the Persephone myth)
- ▣ Francesca Lia Block, *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013; gender-fluid retelling of the *Odyssey*)
- ▣ David Almond, *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014; gender-fluid retelling of the Orpheus myth)
- ▣ Noelle Stevenson, Grace Ellis, Shannon Watters, and Brooklyn Allen, “Lumberjanes” (2015–2020; gender-fluid graphic novels involving Apollo and Diana)
- ▣ Elizabeth Tammi, *Outrun the Wind* (2018; lesbian retelling of the Atalanta myth)
- ▣ Will Kostakis, *Monuments* and *Rebel Gods* (2019 and 2020; queer heroes discover they are gods)
- ▣ Brynne Rebele-Henry, *Orpheus Girl* (2019; lesbian retelling of the Orpheus myth)

Famous pairs of mythological lovers demonstrate the challenges facing true love: Psyche overcomes the trials set her by her future mother-in-law, Aphrodite, to win eternal life with her true love, Eros. Orpheus persuades Persephone and

Hades to let him bring Eurydice back to the world, but is ultimately overcome by his own doubts and fears. Stories like these connect powerfully to the anxieties and desires of young readers, especially young adult readers – in novels such as Laura Ruby’s *Bone Gap* (2015), in which Sean, a young Midwestern doctor, finds a way to rescue his true love, Roza, from abduction by Hades, and on the way helps heal the broken romance between his brother Finn (suffering from face-blindness) and his unusual-looking girlfriend, Petey. Or David Almond’s *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014), set in the North of England, in which Orpheus falls in love with, then tries to rescue, Ella, a suicidal teen. It is narrated by Ella’s friend and former lover, Claire, who feels as if she has lost Ella twice over – once in losing her friend to an all-encompassing love with Orpheus, and again when Ella dies. Claire watches Ella fall for this mysterious poet who can sing the world, listening as Ella describes her love for Orpheus:

It’s like I’m this daisy and it’s like the thing that’s in the daisy is the same as the thing that’s in me. The thing that pushes it up from the earth and pushes the petals out and makes the pollen glow. It’s like the thing that pushes the song out from those birds and make them spread their wings and makes the salmon swim... Oh, Claire, how the hell do I know?<sup>6</sup>

In this version of the myth, which “turns Northumberland to Greece”, everyone’s heart breaks, especially Claire’s.

More doomed lovers can be seen in Jane Abbott’s novel *Elegy* (2016), which features the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, eternally cursed to play out their doomed love story through the ages – in this version, in an Australian country town. Common to all these stories, and more, is the sense of the protagonists’ passionate love for one another – a love that outlasts time, shines more brightly than all others’, and that challenges even death. The intensity, especially of doomed love stories, suits a particular kind of melodramatic approach – not uncommon in young adult fiction, which offers a space for intense reflection on emotions, and also on the nature of the self and the self’s relations to the world: in a time of life that is peculiarly focused on the idea of growing up, coming of age, and figuring out one’s place in the world, such stories – even if they have unhappy endings – are suited to the problematics of being young, and of feeling misunderstood and adrift.

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<sup>6</sup> David Almond, *A Song for Ella Grey*, London: Hodder Children’s Books, 2014, 120.

Thankfully, not all romances are tragedies. There are all sorts of variations on the theme. In Barbara Dee's *Halfway Normal* (2017), protagonist Nora, acutely conscious that she has missed several years of school from illness, finds relief in her immediate connection with Griffin, a musical boy who asks her to draw mythology-inspired cartoons with him, and who supports her as she finds her way back into the whirl of school society. This story uses the Persephone myth to reflect on what it feels like to nearly die: Nora reflects on how life is always tinged by the experience of visiting the Underworld, and shows how Persephone's transition from life with Demeter to life with Hades connects with girls who are working out their relationships with their own mothers and their romantic interests. Will Kostakis's duology *Monuments* (2019) and *Rebel Gods* (2020) features the coming of age of his hero, Connor, who discovers beneath his school the monuments, gods who have created the world and then buried themselves away to keep humanity safe. The love story between Connor and his new friend Locky goes alongside a lively adventure story which, Kostakis states, avoids the label of "issue" fiction so often attached to LGBTQI+ literature in favour of good fun. On his website, Kostakis asks:

Why is there always a "Greek tragedy waiting to happen"? Why must the gay kid in fiction struggle to come to terms with himself? Why can't the gay Greek kid just save the world?<sup>7</sup>

But issues are not so easily avoided, especially when we're thinking about relationships. Another queer novel, Francesca Lia Block's surreal *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013), recasts the events of the *Odyssey* in a California that has been shattered by apocalyptic disaster. Its protagonist, Pen (short for Penelope), travels through a post-apocalyptic California searching for her lost brother, Venice, and her dog, Argos, haunted by her memories of her friends from school, and her beloved mother. At the Lotus Hotel, she falls in love with a transgender boy named Hex and travels on with him, meeting a pair of musical lovers, Ez and Ash, boys who can summon tunes and art from the air. Together they form a new family, and when Pen meets her real father, and learns of his role in causing the apocalypse (he was a genetic scientist for an out-of-control corporation), she understands that family means different things at different time. This gender- and genre-busting novel shows how love can work as a constant even when the world, and ideas about conventional identity, have been turned upside down.

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<sup>7</sup> Will Kostakis, "Making *Monuments*", *Will Kostakis*, 22 September 2019, <https://willkostakis.com/2019/09/22/monuments/> (accessed 17 November 2021).

Not every young adult novel breaks with convention, however: more traditional romances, such as the paranormal teen romances that present the Persephone–Hades romance as a kind of forbidden-love melodrama, in which Hades’ attractions come from his great wealth, and inaccessibility, run the risk of recasting him as a version of the Byronic lover – handsome, brooding, nursing a hurt that only the right girl can cure. Similar in style are recastings of the Eros and Psyche myth. These stories, however melodramatic, tap into the idea of intense, forbidden love – they are novels of maturation, which dramatize boundary-crossing for young readers, who may be wondering about their own romantic inclinations. Not all novels are, or need to be, reflective, but some do overtly discuss ideas about love and mythology: for younger readers, Bruce Coville’s *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love* (2003) offers an interesting take on the Eros and Psyche myth (as discussed in “E is for Emotions”), showing how different concepts of love can be expressed by different classical myths.

### Demeter and Persephone

*Demeter’s beloved daughter Persephone is abducted by Hades to be his bride in the Underworld. Demeter searches in vain for her daughter and the earth ceases to grow as a result of her grief. Spring returns when mother and daughter are reunited.*

**Retelling** – Sally Pomme Clayton, *Persephone: A Journey from Winter to Spring*, ill. Virginia Lee (2009)

An illustrated retelling of the myth that focuses on the emotions of the players and the aetiological resolution.

**Revision** – Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *Persephone and the Giant Flowers*, ill. Yuyi Chen (2019)

In the second volume in the “Goddess Girls” spin-off for early readers, “Little Goddess Girls”, that links Greek mythology with the story of the Wizard of Oz, Persephone accompanies her friend Athena on her journey to Sparkle City to ask Zeus to send her home. Hades and his dog, Cerberus, appear as characters in the story, but in gentler incarnations to the traditional version of the myth.

**Adaptation** – Patricia Miles, *The Gods in Winter* (1978)

When a family with a young baby appoint Mrs Korngold to be their housekeeper, they find themselves caught up in a replay of the myth of Demeter and her lost daughter Persephone.

**Allusion** – Bob Graham, *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten* (1992)

A charming picture book about a family who move to a new neighbourhood and brighten the life of the lonely old man living next door.

## Paranormal Romance – The Allure of Hades

There are many, many works published for young adults that draw upon the sometimes titillating, often tortured romance between Persephone and Hades, the handsome, enigmatic lord of the Underworld. The books listed here are often described as “paranormal romance”.

- 📖 Jennifer Cook, *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess* (2005)
- 📖 Aimée Carter, *The Goddess Test* (2011)
- 📖 Meg Cabot, *Abandon* (2011)
- 📖 Brodi Ashton, *Everneath* (2012)
- 📖 Kaitlin Bevis, *Persephone* (2012)
- 📖 Molly Ringle, *Persephone’s Orchard* (2013)
- 📖 Bree Despain, *The Eternity Key* (2015)
- 📖 Tellulah Darling, *My Ex from Hell* (2015)
- 📖 Rachel Smythe, *Lore Olympus* (2018–present)
- 📖 Eliza Raine and Rose Wilson, *The Power of Hades* (2020)

## When Relationships Go Wrong

Some relationships go horribly wrong – or are not really relationships at all. Courtney Carbone’s *Greek Gods #squadgoals* (2017) shows how the relationship between Echo and Narcissus does not work at all – at least for Echo. This book presents the myths through social media status updates, revealing the self-interest at the heart of every myth:<sup>8</sup>

👤 Narcissus:

Narcissus has added “Myself” to his interests.

👤 Echo:

Echo has added “Narcissus” to her interests. (Narcissus likes this.)

👤 Narcissus:

Just saw the most beautiful 🧑 on 🌐. In a pool of water. 💧  
I’m in love. 💖 I can’t eat. ❌ 🍝 I can’t drink. ❌ 🌙 I can’t sleep.  
❌ 😭 All I can do is 👁️ into this magical reflective surface  
just inches from my face. This person (who actually looks a lot like  
me, except more watery) is perfect in every way. I would rather  
die than look away. 😊

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<sup>8</sup> Carbone, *Greek Gods #squadgoals*, 76–77.

👤 Echo:

👤 Narcissus:

Just saw the most beautiful 🧑 on 🌍. In a pool of water. 💧  
 I'm in love. ❤️ I can't eat. ❌🍌 I can't drink. ❌🔥 I can't sleep.  
 ❌😭 All I can do is 🧐 into this magical reflective surface  
 just inches from my face. This person (who actually looks a lot like  
 me, except more watery) is perfect in every way. I would rather  
 die than look away. 😞

Hermes:

Famous last words, Echo. Guess it's time for me to bring you and  
 Narcissus to the Underworld. 🧟🧟

In "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects", we discussed the tragic story of Daphne, who transformed into a tree when Apollo tried to ravish her. Her story is recast in several ways in stories for young readers – Laurie Halse Anderson's exploration of rape and trauma, *Speak* (1999), draws on the myth in her story of Melinda, a teenage girl who loses her ability to speak after she is raped at a party by a popular boy. As Melinda recovers from her trauma, she gives expression to her grief through art, creating a powerful image of a tree that helps her speak up, and speak out. Similarly, Joseph Coelho's *The Girl Who Became a Tree: A Story Told in Poems* (2020), illustrated by Kate Milner, shows a girl suffering from the loss of her father finding refuge in the story of Apollo and Daphne, and viewing Daphne's transformation as akin to her own journey towards freedom. These stories, which show what happens when relationships go badly wrong (through assault, or death), also show the healing power of myth to help think about the self, and its journey.

As we shall see in "Y is for Young Adulthood", the journey of the self – from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to knowledge, from trauma to healing, and more – is vitally important in young adult fiction – indeed, the most precious relationship of all may be with the self. Stories about relationships can externalize that journey – the protagonist figures out who they are in the world, and how getting on with family, or friends, or lovers, or even enemies, can be part of their engagement with the world, but also part of their self-knowledge. This is not to say that young adult fiction is narcissistic – readers are not merely looking into mirrors to admire their own reflections; indeed, it engages with identity, with understanding about the world – in its external and its internal forms. Fiction that draws on the classical myths does so as part of that reflective

process, because they offer useful ways to track self-development, and also to track common elements and patterns in relationships.

### **Further Reading on Relationships**

Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2011.

Holly Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, "Children's Literature and Culture" 80, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

S

is for speculation





Speculative fiction is the umbrella term for science fiction and fantasy fiction – the fiction, in other words, that is not specifically set in our real world, but takes us into made-up or mythical places. Science fiction generally looks at the scientific or technical aspects of specula-

tion, such as time travel, space travel, and parallel universes. Fantasy fiction generally explores myth, folklore, and magic, and alternate worlds. Though one emphasizes science, and the other emphasizes magic, both genres draw on elements of mythology and the ancient world. They share an openness to the mystical, the mythical, the fantastic, the supernatural, and the unexplained – offering scope to explore and make things up – in short to speculate. While much fiction drawing on classical material is keen to be as accurate as possible (grounded in a knowledge of the ancient world), speculative fiction builds on the ancient world's difference from our everyday reality, to propose that our own worlds could also be mythical.

## The Trojan War

*When Paris steals Helen, the Greeks declare war on Troy, led by Agamemnon. After ten long years of siege warfare, heroic combat, and tragic loss of life, Odysseus tricks the Trojans into letting the Greeks inside their city (through the famous Wooden Horse), and the city of Troy falls. Full of powerful and fascinating characters, stories from the Trojan War (and, of course, Homer's Iliad) appear in many forms.*

**Retelling – Roger Lancelyn Green, *The Tale of Troy*, ill. Betty Middleton-Sandford (1958)**

An influential retelling that draws closely on ancient sources to present a comprehensive narrative version from the war's origins to its aftermath.

**Revision – Kate Hovey, *Voices of the Trojan War* (2004)**

Recounted in free verse, this novella draws upon the format of the *Iliad* but allows the characters of the famous saga to tell their own stories, with a particular focus on female agency and subjectivity.

**Adaptation – Caroline Cooney, *On the Seas to Troy* (2002)**

This young adult novel writes into the gaps in the Trojan War story, casting Helen as the villain, and inventing a new character, the young girl Anaxandra, who plays a crucial part in the saga.

**Allusion – Shana Norris, *Troy High* (2009)**

The story of the *Iliad* is played out in an American high school, with the warring sides transformed into rival football teams.

## Fantasy Worlds

In its various forms, fantasy fiction takes readers into contact with the myths' imaginary and magical elements. There are motifs and structures common in fantasy: for instance, portal fantasy, in which characters go through mysterious doorways into alternative worlds. An influential example is C.S. Lewis's "The Chronicles of Narnia" (1950–1956), in which protagonists travel through magical wardrobes and paintings to the world of Narnia, a place where centaurs, fauns, and nymphs live alongside dwarves, witches, and talking animals. So too is J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007), in which the world of magic (including many classical magical beasts, such as phoenixes, griffins, and three-headed dogs) exists alongside our ordinary "Muggle" world, reachable through portals such as magical walls and train stations. In such fantasy worlds magic is possible, and "myth is a lived and continuous reality"<sup>1</sup> as Karen R. Brooks puts it. In her "Cassandra Klein" fantasy novel series (2001–2004), the titular character travels to a world of myth called Morphea, where all the myths come together, and the heroine has to fight the wickedness of Hecate, who has enslaved the citizens of this magical world.

Other kinds of fantasy include intrusion fantasy, which occurs when magical beings find their way into our own world, causing challenges for ordinary children. This style of fantasy is popular for young readers and includes stories such as John Dougherty's *Zeus on the Loose* (ill. Georgien Overwater; 2004), in which the king of the gods causes challenges at school for an ordinary British boy who accidentally calls him into his own reality (see also "A is for Adaptation", "F is for First Encounters", "Z is for Zest"). Fantasy can take place in settings or worlds that are similar to our own, but have significant differences. Animal fantasy, for instance, involves animals as protagonists: in *Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures* (written by Kate DiCamillo, illustrated by K.G. Campbell; 2013), an illustrated novel for readers aged ten to twelve. Here, we see the heroic adventures of a squirrel named Ulysses, who is transformed into a poet and adventurer when he is swallowed up by a vacuum cleaner along with a book of poetry. Ten-year-old Flora rescues Ulysses, giving him the kiss of life. They become fast friends. At first it is only Flora who accepts Ulysses' marvellous powers, but as the novel progresses they gather about them a band of supporters, and bring together Flora's once fractured family. Animal fantasy can be quite epic in scope, as in Robin Price's "Spartapuss Tales" series (2006–2010),

<sup>1</sup> Karen R. Brooks, *It's Time, Cassandra Klein*, Port Melbourne: Lothian, 2001, blurb.

which recasts famous stories from the ancient world in a world dominated by cats, with punning titles such as *Catligula* (2006), *Die Clawdius* (2006), and *Boudicat* (2008). Or Gary Northfield's comic epics, the "Julius Zebra" series (2015–present), in which a kind-hearted zebra named Julius takes on the might of the Roman Empire with help from a group of animal friends. This last offers interesting insights into colonialism – with the Romans portrayed as humans, and their subjects as different kinds of animals – showing the satirical possibilities of fantasy to comment on politics (see also "K is for Kidding Around"). Lucy Coats's "Beasts of Olympus" series (2015–2018; in which Demon, a son of Pan, is taken to Mount Olympus to help heal the famous beasts of classical mythology after the heroes have done with them) offers another revisionist take on the hierarchies of the ancient world – criticizing heroes' thuggish behaviour, and sympathizing with the beasts whose only crime is to be exceptional.

## Science Fiction

Fantasy takes us into the realm of myth and magic. Science fiction, on the other hand, takes us into worlds where technology is pushed to new limits – in futuristic realms, or alternative universes. There is always a rational, rather than a mythical, explanation in science fiction, but the ancient world can play a part – in terms of history and in terms of myth. It is a world full of adventure, as in Geoffrey McSkimming's archaeological adventures in "The Cairo Jim Chronicles" series (1993–2011). These humorous stories (see also "K is for Kidding Around"), featuring an archaeologist-poet named Cairo Jim, and his psychic camel, Brenda, posit a world where ancient treasures have hidden powers, and can alter the course of history should they fall into the wrong hands. Using their skills to navigate famous sites from antiquity (such as the ruins of Pompeii or the catacombs of Ancient Rome), Jim and Brenda recover the treasures for guardianship by the Old Relics Society, evading the clutches of the villainous Neptune Flannelbottom Bone and his wicked crow, Desdemona. This is an example of "dieselpunk", a form of science fiction set in the diesel-powered era between World War I and the 1950s, focusing on the aesthetics of mid-century travel – and thus an example of science fiction that looks backward, but is inspired by certain kinds of technology. It is also inspired by the *Indiana Jones* adventure films, and adventure novels of the late British Empire, such as H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) or *She: A History of Adventure* (1887), which focus on explorations of Africa and the ancient world.

Much science fiction seems to be interested in relics and empires. A series of comics called “The Rise and Fall of the Trigan Empire” (1965–1982), for example, explores the mythology of an alien race called the Vorgs. A spaceship crashes on earth; it contains humanoids twelve-foot tall, and texts written in an alien language. Eventually the texts are translated, and the mythic history of the race is recounted: it bears considerable similarities to the stories of the founding of Rome. The Vorgs merge with the Trigans, a more developed people who are fleeing invasion by the Lokans, and their civilization grows, retaining the trappings of Rome – togas, sandals, lances, but also including high-tech weapons, such as ray guns, and transport, such as spaceships. Romans with ray guns is an attractive idea, and the vivid illustrations of this series made it highly appealing to young readers of the magazines in which it appeared, playing up the speculative elements of myth, history, and futurism. While all fiction is imaginative to some degree, speculative fiction foregrounds the “what if” of storytelling, taking readers into new worlds, but also retaining some elements of the familiar. What if there were civilizations on other planets? What if there were Romans in space? Stories like these test the boundaries of what is possible or probable.

### Greek Myth in Outer Space

*Greek myths have resonance far beyond our world in these adventure stories, which take epic action into the world of outer space and interplanetary adventure.*

📖 Sam Lundwall, *Alice's World* (1971)

📖 Terry Denton, “Storymaze” series (1999–2003)

📖 Brian Greene, *Icarus at the Edge of Time* (2008)

📖 William Geradts and Christian Gossett, *Attica*, ill. Alan Robinson, Richard P. Clark, and Diego Toro (2012)

📖 Ryan North, *The Midas Flesh Volume One* and *Volume Two*, ill. Braden Lamb and Shelli Paroline (2014)

📖 George Saoulidis, *Myth Gods Tech* (2016)

## Speculation and Boundary-Testing

This boundary-testing occurs frequently in speculative adventures for young readers. What if the lost city of Atlantis floated through the seas to Australia, under the control of a wicked priestess seeking a talisman that might give her

immortality (as in Myke Bartlett's novel *Fire in the Sea*, 2012)? What if a teenager from New York discovered that his father was the god Poseidon, and that he is called to fight on behalf of the Olympians (as in Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians", 2005–2009)? What if, as in Mike Maihack's "Cleopatra in Space" series of graphic novels (2014–present), Queen Cleopatra had been transported through space and time as a teenager, joining with an organization named "Pharaoh Yasiro's Research Academy and Military Initiative of Defense" (PYRAMID), to battle the forces of evil? What if the laws of geography and history suddenly shift, bringing hordes of Goths and Scythians to rural Minnesota, as in Alan DeNiro's novel *Total Oblivion, More or Less* (2009)? What if, indeed? Speculative fiction can take us far away from the ordinary, through time and space, through magic and the mythical.

In stories for children, a key rule seems to be that adults are less able to see, or participate in, speculative elements, especially where myth or magic are concerned. Children, with their open minds and flexible imaginations, accept mythical opportunities and participate in them. Sally Sutton's "Miniwings" series (2017–2018), for instance, and John Dougherty's *Zeus on the Loose* (ill. Georgien Overwater; 2004), use the fear of adults finding out what is going on, as a framing device to heighten tension when mythical beings (tiny flying ponies, or the god Zeus himself) make their way into the real world and cause mayhem. It is up to clever, brave, or simply dutiful child protagonists to tidy things up, usually before the adults find out. (Are children protecting adults from the knowledge of the mythical world, or protecting the mythical world from the interference of adults?)

A common explanation of the appeal of children's fantasy is that it permits young protagonists to behave in ways that real life does not allow them – to become braver, stronger, more magical – sometimes as a wish-fulfilment to help them deal with real difficulties, and sometimes as a fantasy for young readers. Harry Potter's adventures with the magic and mythical beasts of the wizarding world, for instance, allow young readers to fly along with him on his Nimbus 2000 broomstick – imagining what it would be like to be a wizard, to be a chosen one, to make good and loyal friends, to defeat enemies, to find one's way into bravery and heroism, and to fight the forces of evil. *The Midas Flesh* (2014), Ryan North, Shelli Paroline, and Braden Lamb's duology of graphic novels set in space, offers a fantasy of friendship and adventure in space, in which a trio of explorers (two humans and one nerdy dinosaur) discover the planet Earth, turned to gold by a chain reaction from King Midas' touch. They remove his finger, intending to use it to make themselves wealthy. But of course, in the way

of adventure stories, other characters want the Midas Flesh for themselves, and the chase is on. Happily mixing science fiction, myth, and legend, and figures from all sorts of different eras, is part of the story's fun, and part of a culture of "mash-up", that has predominated in youth storytelling for some time.

Part of the fun is the "willing suspension of disbelief", which the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge identified as essential for fiction (and fantasy) to be successful.<sup>2</sup> While readers may not wholeheartedly believe that speculative worlds are possible, reading such fiction requires an ability to let go of preconceptions about what is and is not actually possible, and such uproarious mixtures offer the ultimate escapist fantasy – into fantasy itself. The enjoyment of world-building is another attraction – and fans of speculative fiction can find themselves entranced by the logic, or illogic, of particular fantasy worlds. Classical material in such stories is often part of the fabric of fantasy and speculation – offering a sense that we are in an alternative universe, but also allowing writers to present alternative worlds that have elements of familiarity.

## **Speculating about Ourselves**

These elements differ slightly between science fiction and fantasy. In science fiction, we often see the classical appearing as a way of symbolizing power structures, solidity, eternity, but also decayed ideas in need of change. This is strongly visible in Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games" (2008–2010) series, which has echoes of the Roman Empire, in names (Emperor Snow), institutions (the country of Panem), and activities (gladiatorial combat, circuses for the populus's entertainment). These echoes underscore the story's dystopian qualities, where representatives from an enslaved population are selected to fight for their districts in a specialized combat zone like an elaborate arena, their actions televised to the world to entertain and distract the people. At the same time, there is a hero narrative within the story, in which Katniss Everdeen, an adept huntress from a poor community, steps in to represent her district in the games in order to protect her family. A talented archer and athlete, with knowledge of nature and healing and an uncertainty about romance, Katniss bears a strong similarity to the goddess Artemis, and also to the athlete Atalanta (see discussion in "N is for Nature"). Further mythological elements can be seen in the

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, London: J.M. Dent, 1965 (ed. pr. 1817), 169.

novel's connection to the myth of Theseus, in which unwilling participants are selected for sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> Katniss penetrates the labyrinth of Panem's capitol, with its palace intrigues and political manipulation, to emerge victorious and begin the process of liberating the nation.

Another dystopian fiction is Bernard Beckett's creepy examination-room horror story, *Genesis* (2006), which draws on ideas from the world of philosophy to explore what it means to be human in a future dominated by robots (see discussion in "P is for Philosophical Approaches"). Its characters are named after well-known Greek thinkers (Plato, Socrates, Pericles), and the protagonist, a teenage robot named Anaximander (after the Greek scientist who explored the origins of life), undergoes an examination to see whether she has been infected by the spirit, or virus, of the humans that created robots many years before. In her examination, she outlines her world's history, in which a humanity wracked by plague and war is gradually replaced by the robots designed to take its more onerous tasks, and designed on the principles of peaceful rationality. But that rational society is tainted, whether by the echoes of human violence, or by the bad-faith destruction of the robots' creators. As Babette Pütz and Geoffrey Miles note, *Genesis* scrutinizes scientific humanism, expressed in the novel's format of Socratic dialogue and Platonic reflection.<sup>4</sup> It encourages young readers to be confident in the powers of their own minds, but also to be wary of social power structures that aim to control them. The novel is a strong example of speculative fiction for teens that has a clear engagement with the problems of the real world.

Writers of historical fiction, too, use speculation in their works – necessarily so, using different devices to imagine what life might have been like in the ancient world. Focalizing their stories through the eyes of child protagonists is one tried and tested method. In Caroline Lawrence's popular series of detective-adventure stories, "The Roman Mysteries" (2001–2009), children from different parts of Roman society team up to solve mysteries, which take them (and readers) around the Empire. In *Dragonfly Song* (2016), Wendy Orr imagines what it might be like to be a female bull-dancer in Minoan Crete, through the story of Aissa, an ostracized girl who is unable to speak, but whose intuitive communication with animals and ability to survive in the wild are signs of her

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<sup>3</sup> Claudia Nelson and Anne Morey, *Topologies of the Classical World in Children's Fiction: Palimpsests, Maps, and Fractals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Pütz, "Classical Influences in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*, *August*, and *Lullaby*"; Geoffrey Miles, "Utopia", in Anna Jackson, Geoffrey Miles, Harry Ricketts, Tatjana Schaefer, and Kathryn Walls, *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011, 87–111.

connection to her destiny. Through the eyes of their protagonists, Lawrence and Orr show vividly imagined and meticulously researched ancient societies, allowing insights into how it might feel to live there. Similar research goes into representing the age of myths in retellings and adaptations – in her recasting of the Theseus legend, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004), Jennifer Cook explores what it might be like to live in the palace of King Minos; while Kallie George shows how people lived in Ancient Greece – both among mortals and the gods of Olympus, in her fantasy novel series about riders of winged horses, “Wings of Olympus” (2019–2020).

However far away speculative fiction may take us – into the past, the future, the mythical or magical, or out into space – we find at its core a connection with ourselves – individually, and more broadly in society. It seems to us that drawing on ancient cultures is a way to make the fictional world familiar but also mysterious – what do we really *know* about the Ancient Greeks and Romans, beyond the fragments and ruins left for us to piece together? Speculation, in fantasy and science fiction, and simply in the sense of making things up, of wondering how things might be, enables writers to bring readers to the ancient world, through different means (portals, magic, time travel, and simple imagination).

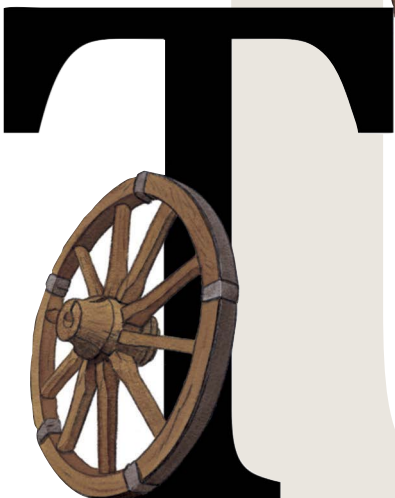
### Further Reading on Speculation

Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds., *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

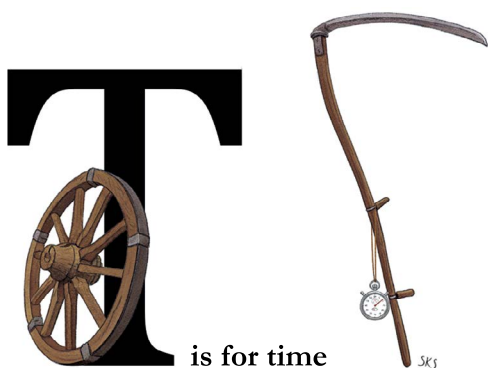
Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds., *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.



is for time



SKS



is for time

Have you ever lost all sense of time while reading? Found your eyes adjusting to the dimming light as the sun goes down, until you can hardly make out the words on the page? Suddenly come to with a start, as someone says your name repeatedly to recall you

to the “real” world? Do you feel as if you’ve lived many lives while spending time in a fictional world, before returning to remember that you are... *you*, embodied in our world? What happens to our minds while we are far away in the world of story? Do we leave our own perceptions of linear time, of moving from minute to minute, day to day, year to year, beginning as children, ending as the elderly? Do you sometimes feel older, or younger, than your years? Do you sometimes feel as if time has run ahead of you, and you are catching up – or vice versa? Has your sense of time changed as you’ve grown up? How did time pass when you were a child, in comparison with now? Does time move more quickly or more slowly if we mark it and think about it? How did time move in the ancient world as opposed to now? How does it move in the myths, and how does it move in children’s stories? How do children’s stories, and young adult fiction, view time? What changes? What remains the same? Do the events of a story happen in an orderly, linear fashion, or do they repeat, and circle back, fragment and fracture? What does this mean for story, for readers, and for ideas about literature for children?

Time is an ever-present but often unacknowledged feature in narrative, helping make sense of the events that occur in a story, and their relationship to one another. If we think about how the classical myths are told again and again, we can see how the idea of timeless repetition is key to the corpus. The myths are retold tales, repeated over and over, by different storytellers, in different texts: when we go into the world of myth, then, we enter a world out of time, one that endures and applies to multiple contexts. It is not unlike the repetition of a favourite bedtime story, one that lulls the reader into the world of dreams, an escape from the daily march of time, into a place that is reassuringly familiar.

Children’s literature is associated with another kind of repetition; the reiteration of the same text on multiple occasions. Both these forms of repetition have been integral in the development of the mythic tradition within children’s stories, suggesting a world of dreams and make-believe that can be visited again and again, by readers, and by creators seeking inspiration. Myths function as a kind of touchstone, in this version.

Myths also reach forwards and backwards through time. Their aetiological function is well known – explaining how things that we live with now came to be: plants, animals, geographical features, the seasons. The passage from life to death is also part of how time works, as myths about death’s inevitability show us. Myths are full of mortals who want to escape the ravages of time, but only a few are lucky enough to do so. The Sibyl<sup>1</sup> and Tithonus, who became immortal but continued to age,<sup>2</sup> are two examples – tragic figures who only occasionally appear in children’s stories, though some writers do confront the fear of ageing; see, for instance, Gary Crew’s horror story *Old Ridley* (ill. Marc McBride; 2002), in which a boy is transformed into an old man, trapped in a spooky house dominated by a stained-glass window depicting the story of Eos and Tithonus. In *The Pig Who Saved the World* (2006) Paul Shipton recuperates the Sibyl, giving her an active heroic role in a battle against the god of death, Thanatos. Instead of trapping her in immortality, Shipton allows his Sibyl to die and be reborn – a softer ending for the great prophetess, as befits her presence in a humorous novel. (The idea of eternally ageing, and never being able to die, is seriously frightening.)

### Eos and Tithonus

*Goddess of the Dawn, Eos, falls in love with a mortal man, Tithonus. She begs Zeus to make him immortal, but forgets to also ask that he remain eternally young. Tithonus grows ever more ancient until he becomes a grasshopper. The story provides a warning about time, ageing, but also in its curious way celebrates the power of love.*

#### **Retelling – Ingri and Edgar Parin D’Aulaire, *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths* (1962)**

A traditional retelling of the legend of Eos and Tithonus appears in this well-known compendium of Greek mythology.

#### **Revision – Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *Eos the Lighthearted* (2018)**

In this twenty-fourth instalment in the “Goddess Girls” series, the tragic love story of Eos and Tithonus is reinvented as a classroom melodrama that explores the themes of jealousy, forgiveness, and the choice between immortality and living a short life to the fullest.

<sup>1</sup> For the Sibyl, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.130–153. Compare: Petronius, *Satyricon* 48.8, in *Petronius; Seneca, Apocolocyntosis*, trans. Michael Heseltine and W.H.D. Rouse, London and New York, NY: William Heinemann and G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1925, 84–87, via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/petronius00petruoft/page/86/mode/2up> (accessed 7 April 2022): “Yes, and I myself with my own eyes saw the Sibyl hanging in a cage; and when the boys cried at her: ‘Sibyl, Sibyl, what do you want?’ ‘I would that I were dead,’ she used to answer” (Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: σίβυλλα, τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω).

<sup>2</sup> For the myth of Eos and Tithonus, see *Homeric Hymn (5) to Aphrodite* 218–238.

**Adaptation – Paul Shipton, *The Pig Who Saved the World* (2006)**

The grasshopper Tithonus makes an appearance in this comic novel, whose main character is one of Odysseus' former crew, who was turned into a pig by the witch Circe.

**Allusion – Gary Crew, *Old Ridley*, ill. Marc McBride (2002)**

A surreal, unsettling Australian picture book about a young boy, Joachim, who becomes captivated by his strange and elderly next-door neighbour, who was on a quest for immortality.

An alternative to this concept is the idea of eternal youth: the most famous example of this being J.M. Barrie's influential play *Peter Pan, or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904) about a boy who refuses to grow up, remaining instead in a magical dream-space known as Never-Neverland: an eternal boy, out of the reach of time, knowable only by children. Critics have discussed different reasons for this attitude – is it that Barrie and other writers with similar attitudes look nostalgically on their own childhoods, having failed to grow up into conventional attitudes? Or is it that they have captured something about the nature of childhood, which sits outside the busy hurry-scurry of adult time? Many a pastoral idyll, such as E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), regrets that children must grow up, leaving behind their innocent appreciation of the world's magic – living outside adulthood is akin to living close to the world of myth and make-believe, and also to the power of nature in contrast with adult society. Natalie Babbitt's novel *Tuck Everlasting* (1975), in which a mortal girl named Winnie makes friends with a family that has become immortal by drinking from a magical spring, offers another version of this dilemma: though she is offered the chance to drink from the spring herself and live eternally with them as a seventeen-year-old, Winnie chooses normal life, to grow old and pass away. Curiously, novels like these, which reflect on the nature of time and its passing, are often called "timeless" by critics, meaning that their message is seen as continually relevant.

## Long, Long Ago

That eternal relevance can be seen in the myths, especially in their retelling and adaptation (as we have discussed in "A is for Adaptation"), in their continual modification and repetition showing their adaptability to modern times and showing how they have endured into the present. Such texts play around with time, its limits and possibilities, and consistently seek to reveal how ancient stories remains relevant, bridging that gap between the distant past of the ancient

myths, and the “now” of the modern story. And yet that gap is an important part of the storytelling: phrases like “long ago”, and “once upon a time”, underscore myths’ remoteness, and emphasize their mystique and foreignness – the “strange alterities” of the mythic setting that are nevertheless alluring to young readers, as John Stephens and Robyn McCallum note.<sup>3</sup>

These paradoxes are visible in collections such as Juliet Sharman Burke’s *Stories from the Stars: Greek Myths of the Zodiac* (ill. Jackie Morris; 1996), which uses a variety of phrases to emphasize the distance of the mythic setting from the present day. Her retelling of the Theseus story begins conventionally enough with “Many years ago”,<sup>4</sup> giving the story a chronological framework. Other stories are set in mythic realms “before time began”, when “life was very different from what it is today”,<sup>5</sup> or “in the very beginning of time”. What is time, how it changes from story to story, highlights that with myth we are working outside of modern conceptions of linear, or historical, time. Sharman Burke concentrates on myths that have influenced the Zodiac calendar, emphasizing that the ancient world has influenced the modern, and casting the myths as the source of aetiologies – whether astronomical, environmental, or cultural. Another phrase, “to this day”, is almost as common as “long ago”, promoting the idea that the world of myth continues to resonate and impact on us now. This is both time-aware, and timeless, emphasizing, as Kay E. Vandergrift points out, the power of story’s “potential to reach out over time and distance to make connections that tie human beings together in a recognition of their common humanity”.<sup>6</sup> While some texts strive to emphasize the remoteness of the time of myth in an effort to highlight its exotic appeal, it is also common to stress the common territory between the mythic past and the present.

## Travelling into Myth

Another way to bridge the gap is to show the modern slipping into the past. To some degree all mythic retellings reflect upon the connection between the past and the present, but time-slip stories, in which characters from the modern

<sup>3</sup> Stephens and McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Juliet Sharman Burke, *Stories from the Stars: Greek Myths of the Zodiac*, ill. Jackie Morris, New York, NY: Abbeville Kids, 1996, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Kay E. Vandergrift, *Child and Story: The Literary Connection*, New York, NY: Neal-Schuman, 1980, 278.

age travel into the world of classical mythology, seem particularly preoccupied with the dynamics of the relationship. Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980), a well-known Australian time-slip novel in which a modern girl travels into Sydney's past by means of a magical piece of lacework, is reflective on the concept of time:

The theory she had had... four years before – that time was a great black vortex down which everything disappeared – no longer made sense to her. She saw now that it was a great river, always moving, always changing, but with the same water flowing between its banks from source to sea.<sup>7</sup>

Here, time moves and stands still, with repetitions from past, present, and future eddying through it. In time-slip novels like *Playing Beatie Bow*, modern children travel back in time to find that the past is a very different place, but ultimately that many aspects of the human experience remain a constant, a theme that is popular in the genre, which explores the allure of history and its connection with the present. And time-slip stories can overlap with stories that take protagonists into mythic pasts as well.

Critics express different opinions on the appeal of time-slip stories. For Paul J. Nahin, they hold a particular fascination for young children, responding to a collective "longing for the past [...] [and] the sweet pleasure most people get from experiencing almost any recreation of times gone by".<sup>8</sup> The desire to see what the landscapes and characters of the world of myth look like, and to play an active part in the stories themselves, is clearly an aspect of what motivates the production of these narratives. In depicting young characters encountering the world of myth first-hand, these stories allow readers to satisfy their own longings vicariously. Some critics are sceptical of this point: Maria Nikolajeva argues that nostalgia for the past is in fact largely a phenomenon experienced by adults. She finds it "doubtful that young readers will be seized by the same longing for the times gone by, since they have not experienced them, either personally or through literature".<sup>9</sup> Nikolajeva's point serves as a reminder of the dangers of conflating adult perspectives with those of children, yet the recurrence of time-travel narratives does seem to indicate that these stories resonate with readers of all ages.

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Park, *Playing Beatie Bow*, West Melbourne: Nelson, 1980, 195.

<sup>8</sup> Paul J. Nahin, *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics and Science Fiction*, New York, NY: American Institute of Physics, 1993, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear*, 22.

## Time-Slip Stories

*In these books, children travel from the modern world into the world of ancient mythology, meeting famous heroes and following in their footsteps, before returning to their own time.*

- 📖 Mary Pope Osborne, *Vacation under the Volcano*, ill. Sal Murdocca (1998)
- 📖 Francesca Simon, *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They've Never Been Told Before!*, ill. Ross Asquith (1999)
- 📖 N.M. Browne, *Warriors of Alavna* (2000)
- 📖 Jon Scieszka, *It's All Greek to Me*, ill. Lane Smith (1999), and *See You Later, Gladiator*, ill. Adam McCauley (2004)
- 📖 Julia Jarman, *The Time-Travelling Cat and the Roman Eagle* (2001)
- 📖 Tracy Barrett, *On Etruscan Time* (2005)
- 📖 Ken Smith, *Camp Century: The Bucephalus Incident* (2012)
- 📖 Chris Blake, *Greek Warriors* (2013)
- 📖 Stella Tarakson, "Hopeless Heroes" series (2017–2020)
- 📖 Jonathan W. Stokes, *The Thrifty Guide to Ancient Greece: A Handbook for Time Travellers* (2018)

Travelling into myth is not quite the same as travelling through time, as we see in Jon Scieszka's *It's All Greek to Me* (ill. Lane Smith; 1999), part of his "Time Warp Trio" series (1991–2017), in which three American schoolboys travel through time by means of a magical book. One of them, Joe, makes the distinction when he addresses sceptical readers of the "Time Warp Trio" series: "I can just hear one of you smart guys out there saying, 'How can you travel into Greek mythology? I thought *The Book* could only travel through time'".<sup>10</sup> Joe and his friends find that the world of Greek myth is a place "farther and stranger than we'd ever gone before".<sup>11</sup> The world in which myth takes place is not the Ancient Greece of a particular historical epoch. Storytellers borrow freely from all parts of Ancient Greek history, from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine era, in creating its topography.

The boys are about to perform their school play about Greek mythology, entitled *The Myth of Power*, when they are transported into the world of myth. Joe realizes that "*The Book* has somehow sent us into our own play and the Greek myths all mixed together",<sup>12</sup> replacing the "all-powerful Zeus you read

<sup>10</sup> Jon Scieszka, *It's All Greek to Me*, ill. Lane Smith, "Time Warp Trio" 8, New York, NY: Puffin Books, 2001, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 13.

about" with "the goofy, thunderbolt-losing Zeus from our play".<sup>13</sup> Drawing upon the traditional narrative elements of the time-travel genre, Scieszka engages with the problems that can arise from interference with the past, how myth can be changed, and how such changes impact upon the world. Sam worries that if "the monsters take over Mount Olympus, all the stories of the Greek myths will be changed and I think we will be in a whole lot of permanent trouble".<sup>14</sup>

In another example, Francesca Simon's *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They've Never Been Told Before!* (ill. Ross Asquith; 1999), a girl named Susan travels to the mythical age by means of an ancient coin with the words TI ETHELEIS – Ancient Greek for "What do you wish?" – transcribed upon its face. But after testing its capabilities, Susan comes to realize that "it wasn't a wishing coin, but a Greek time-travel coin",<sup>15</sup> and it only has the power to transport its owner to the time from which it comes. Each time Susan travels, she helps a different hero – Hercules, Bellerophon, Andromeda, Orpheus, Perseus, solving their different challenges (clearing the Augean Stables, taming Pegasus, soothing Cerberus to sleep). But though she has considerable agency, having more skill and common sense than the foolish heroes (see our discussion in "H is for How to Be Heroic"), once Susan returns to her own time she discovers that she does not receive acknowledgement for her cleverness – the heroes take "all the credit",<sup>16</sup> and she agrees to keep secret that they have been bested by a little girl. The time traveller must not expect to be a famous historical figure.

The time traveller must also return home, especially in stories for children. In the final chapter of *Helping Hercules*, the heroes gather to help Susan, who has left her magic coin behind at home. They call through time to her siblings, who come to them, somewhat disoriented, bearing the coin so that all can return. The call of the heroes is silent to Susan, but echoes through the ages – in an arresting image of the way that the myths themselves reverberate through time into the modern world. Mythology's presence can often seem subtle and indirect, but is nevertheless powerful. Safely returned to her own time, Susan gazes up at the night sky, and identifies the constellations above her. "There was Orion, with his belt of three stars. There was Perseus, Andromeda, and Pegasus.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, 56. A common theme in time-travel stories – see Ray Bradbury's influential story "A Sound of Thunder" (1952), in which a time traveller standing on a single prehistoric butterfly changes the course of human history.

<sup>15</sup> Francesca Simon, *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They've Never Been Told Before!*, ill. Ross Asquith, London: Orion Books, 1999, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, 22.

There was Orpheus. And there was Hercules...".<sup>17</sup> The stars function as a tangible reminder of the presence of elements of ancient myth within modern life. In a lasting reminder of the ongoing link between the mythic and modern worlds, Susan hears voices "everywhere, calling to her from the stars".<sup>18</sup>

## Survival and Endurance

The myths endure through time, and one final group of stories show how they survive into the modern age. For some, this survival is a mixed blessing. Kate Hovey's *Arachne Speaks* (ill. Blair Dawson; 2000) shows a triumphant Arachne outlasting Athena's relevance through her spider descendants:

Blown on ceaseless winds,  
my thread uncurled  
round a changing world.  
Now, hosts of artisans  
spin on in Arachne's name.  
Athena, on her throne,  
languishes alone,  
still envying my fame.  
What good is her immortality?  
No incense burns  
in the Parthenon's urns!  
She faces cold reality  
while my descendants thrive,  
weaving our story again and again,  
to the planet's end –  
even then, we will survive.<sup>19</sup>

Immortality means living forever, even when one is no longer worshipped or remembered – Hovey gives the gods a fate similar to that of Tithonus – though they do not age perpetually, they are doomed to have outlived their relevance. But other invocations of the gods show them keeping up their powers, and influencing the modern world behind the scenes. In Rick Riordan's "Percy

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 121.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> Kate Hovey, *Arachne Speaks*, ill. Blair Dawson, New York, NY, and Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 2000, 36.

Jackson and the Olympians" novels (2005–2009), the gods have continued to have offspring with mortal partners, and Olympus has relocated to the new locus of Western civilization, the United States of America. Percy's adventures replicate and perform again the stories of the original myth cycle, such as when he faces a modern Medusa, this time called "Aunty Em", the owner of a garden-statuary shop. In this version of mythic time, the legends are eternal, and able to be replayed or re-enacted by modern children – a new way of collapsing the boundaries between the past and the present, the mythic and the imaginary.

Time is not linear in these versions – like *Playing Beatie Bow's* river, the current flows, but the water eddies back and around. Patricia Miles's *The Gods in Winter* (1978) explores this idea further in a recasting of the Persephone myth – building on its aetiological explanation of the seasons and showing that the sacred elements of myth can exist throughout time in the domestic everyday. Classical mythology lives in the edges, and below the surfaces, of everyday modern life, and Miles proposes that the ancient myths are destined to play themselves out repeatedly – a version of the critic Gerard Genette's concept of iterative time, in which an event plays out continually, being both past, present, and future.

In *The Gods in Winter*, Miles draws extensively on the *Homeric Hymn* (2) to *Demeter*, particularly the episode in which Demeter, searching throughout the world for her daughter Persephone, disguises herself as nursemaid to the child of the royal family of Eleusis.<sup>20</sup> In this adaptation of the myth, set in 1970s England, Demeter takes work as a housekeeper for a British family, the Brambles, an ordinary, middle-class family with a scientist father, teacher mother, and three children, Adam, Lottie, and Zach, with another, the baby Beth, born during the course of the narrative. Although her domestic skills are unreliable and her moods frequently unpredictable, through the course of the long, harsh winter Mrs Korngold becomes an important part of the family unit. Gradually they learn that she has lost contact with her daughter, Cora, and that she has extraordinary powers; saving Lottie's life after she falls off a pony, and transforming the children's annoying cousin Crispin into a lizard. As the family begins to suspect her true identity, events come to a head with a confrontation between Mrs Korngold and her sinister brother, Mr Underwood, who has abducted Cora in the early stages of the novel. Reunited, at least temporarily, with her daughter, the story concludes with Mrs Korngold departing the Bramble household having bestowed important gifts on each family member.

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<sup>20</sup> *Homeric Hymn* (2) to *Demeter* 212–300.

In *The Gods in Winter*, the Bramble family comes to recognize that they have had a close encounter with the world of myth. Instead of stories from a remote past, myth exists on the borders of everyday life, around its edges and below the surface. The story is set in Derbyshire in the British Midlands, a region shaped by the effects of coal mining, prone to subsidence, full of old tunnels, a subterranean world – “one of those places where you can enter the Underworld”,<sup>21</sup> and thus close to the events of Hades’ abduction of Persephone (aka Cora). Here, Demeter’s story is ancient and remote, yet at the same time a recurring event with immediate and far-reaching effects. It is as if Demeter, Hades, Persephone, and the other gods are compelled to perpetually repeat their roles in the saga. They are under the influence of a story that is much greater than they are. The children suspect that Mrs Korngold “goes and stays with someone every year”.<sup>22</sup> The myth’s focus on seasonal change, alluded to in the book’s title, provides another dimension to this endless repetition; the seasons are at once permanently established and eternally re-determined.

This is myth as iterative (a sense of time in which things are present, but also continual – akin to this somewhat awkward phrase – “to have always been doing”).<sup>23</sup> It is invested with a timeless quality, characterizing events that happen not merely recurrently, but outside of the framework of a standard, linear chronology. As a consequence, the iterative is a hallmark of mythic time. Maria Nikolajeva identifies common ground between mythic stories and children’s literature, writing that “[w]hat strikes a scholar familiar with both archaic narratives and children’s fiction is that the iterative has widely been used in both”.<sup>24</sup> Like stories with this cyclical, “timeless” quality (such as *Charlotte’s Web*, or *Tuck Everlasting*), *The Gods in Winter* promotes not only the survival of ancient mythology in the modern age, but also a more complex understanding of the connection between the worlds of myth and everyday life. Just as the seasons revolve, Hades is always snatching Persephone away, Demeter is always searching to recover her.

The dynamics of past and present are constantly shifting within children’s retellings of classical myth. The mythic world is at once remote and distant, a foreign land lost in the clouds of prehistory, and yet also intensely vivid, in close proximity to our modern existence. Time and myth, time and story, are constantly interacting, as Rosemary Johnston notes, using the idea of the

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Miles, *The Gods in Winter*, New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1978, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

literary palimpsest, a manuscript page that has been scraped clean and written over, so that layers of script can be glimpsed:

These time-spaces are in a state of constant contextual and intertextual interaction. They are like a palimpsest: other, older, layers of script are glimpsed beneath the top layer of a document which is continuously being written, erased, and re-written.<sup>25</sup>

This idea of time, especially historical time, as a palimpsest is of course very attractive to readers and writers: the book of time is ever able to be written in, with multiple overlapping layers that can obscure, but never completely replace, what has come before (or may come after).<sup>26</sup>

## **Finding a Way through Time – Fancy or Faithfulness to Facts?**

Literature, then, is an excellent means to find one's way through time – from the present to the past. Writers reconstruct the past, or at least construct their versions of the past, for readers who may wish to visit it. A potential clash, between imagination, interpretation, and information, is part of this kind of work. Similar to the different strands identified in "A is for Adaptation", writing, and reading, through time, require the ability to differentiate between carefully researched fidelity to the past, and the flights of imagination inspired by aspects of the past.

Here, we wish to stress that there is not one "right" way: that the different approaches simply reveal different responses and attitudes. It is a matter for readers (and their advisers) to decide which approach they like (or find useful, or inspiring). Certain principles hold true, however: for instance, a sense of accuracy or fidelity to facts that are generally agreed upon. If a text advertises itself as being informative (see "I is for Being Informed"), readers might reasonably expect that it is grounded in facts, has been researched carefully, and presents aspects of the past in a way that are as accurate as possible. It would be irresponsible, in an informative text, to represent Julius Caesar as, for instance, being a woman, or having wings, or coming from another planet.

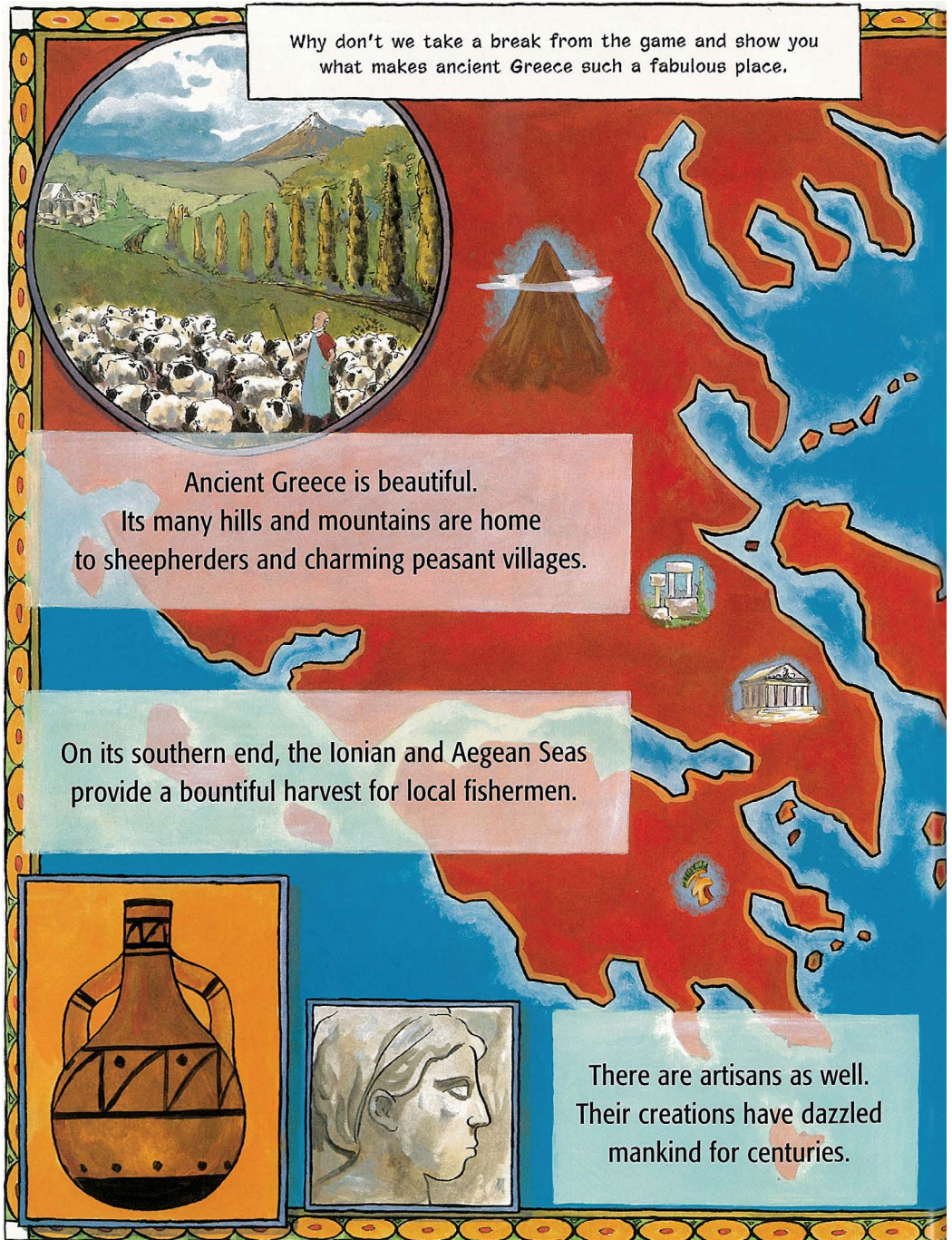
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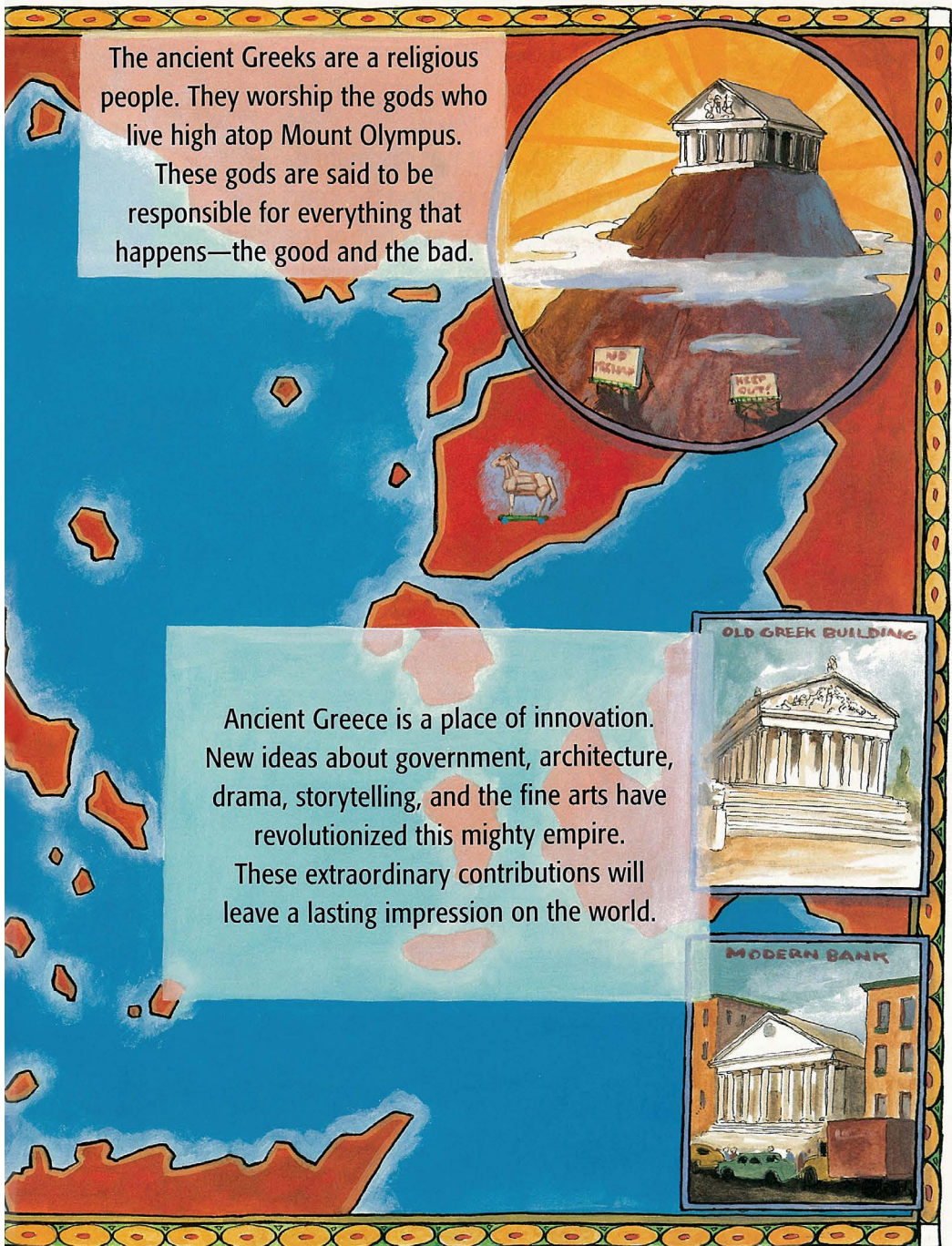
<sup>25</sup> Rosemary Johnston, "Time-Space: History as Palimpsest and Mise-en-abyme in Children's Literature (How the Past of History Streams into the Present of Story)", *Orana* 34.3 (1998), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson and Morey, *Topologies of the Classical World*.

A.J. Wood and Hemesh Alles's picture book *Errata* (1992) draws attention to the role of accuracy in establishing different time-spaces. It contains twelve large illustrations of moments in time, each with ten errors (or errata) for readers to find: for example, "Farming on the banks of the Nile in ancient Egypt", or "Aboriginal kangaroo hunt in Australia's Northern Territory". Brief explanations give some context, and a key is located at the end of the book, with explanations. In the cover scene, "Farming on the banks of the Nile in ancient Egypt", errors include a farmer using a hose to water some crops, while a man on a tractor ploughs the land. Keeping accuracy in mind, errata are pointed out, and their ancient alternatives (an irrigation channel, a man ploughing with a team of oxen). Another example, "Ships arriving in a Minoan Port", contrasts storage amphorae with modern cardboard boxes; a woman weaving fabric in the traditional manner, next to another using a modern sewing machine to make clothes. This intriguing approach serves a dual purpose: to establish a sense of historical understanding, and to show that though tools may change, fundamental aspects of human life remain the same.

Fictional works do not have such a dedicated educational goal. They rely on historical accuracy to provide convincing pictures of the ancient world: this could mean making sure that aspects of daily life are true to the period of the story – from food, to furniture, to clothing and transport, and to understanding the fundamentals of social structures and roles. If a detail does not ring true, it can spoil the reader's ability to transport into that world and participate in the adventures. So novels like Rosemary Sutcliff's stories of Roman Britain draw on a careful understanding of what life was like, what is known about what happened, and what might reasonably be true. Time-slip or time-travel literature highlights the sense of tourism in another world, as Claudia Nelson and Anne Morey note in *Topologies of the Classical World in Children's Fiction: Palimpsests, Maps, and Fractals*. Children's fiction provides maps and guides to the worlds depicted, in order to show modern readers around. And as with the texts discussed in "S is for Speculation", a mixture of imagination and information makes for an exciting and convincing story, that takes us through time, to and from the ancient world.





**Figure 13:** Maps of the ancient world help provide context for retellings and adaptations, as in *Mount Olympus Basketball*. Kevin O'Malley, *Mount Olympus Basketball*, New York, NY: Walker Books, 2003, 17–18. Used with the Author's kind permission.

### **Momo (1984) by Michael Ende**

This novel of friendship and community by German author Michael Ende (also the author of the cult novel *The Never-Ending Story* [1979]) asks readers to think about the nature of time and how to spend it. It tells of a small town invaded by a group of “grey gentlemen”, time-stealing alien beings, who steal the time of the inhabitants by persuading them to deposit time in the Timesavings Bank. This robs the people of their ability to spend time caring for their friends and families or following creative pursuits, and forces them to focus only on making money. Only the children, and in particular Momo, an orphaned girl who lives in the local amphitheatre where the children gather to play, can see what is happening. When the children are trapped by the grey gentlemen, Momo is rescued by Kassiopeia, a mystical tortoise who can see half an hour into the future, and communicates by means of short messages that appear on her shell, and taken to the Nowhere-House of Meister Hora, who cares for the passage of time represented by the flowers in his garden, hour-lilies which bloom and die in one hour. Meister Hora goes to sleep, and makes the world stand still. He has given Momo one hour-lily, so that she can move for the next hour. She follows the grey gentlemen and, using her flower, separates them from the source of their power (the time they have stolen from the people), whereupon they dissolve. Momo opens the door to the time-bank, and restores time to her world, and a celebration is held.

This curious book offers a meditation on the value of time: how much we have of it, and how we spend it. It critiques corporate greed and untrammelled capitalism, and promotes the values of community, friendship, and the natural world. Momo, who lives in the amphitheatre, and has little in the way of possessions, is somehow outside of ordinary human concerns, and associated with the value of history and a sense of the grandeur of time as a concept: this connection is further underscored when she teams up with Meister Hora and Kassiopeia, the mystical guardians of time. The novel draws on a number of concepts familiar in children’s literature: as an idealized child-hero, aligned with nature, living according to different rules of time to adults, and responsive to the world of the imagination and of mythology, Momo focalizes ideas about how to live a good life.



### **Further Reading on Time**

Maria Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children’s Literature*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1991.

Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children’s Literature*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015.

U



is for underworld adventures  
is for underworld adventures



is for underworld adventures

In Bob Graham's picture book *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten* (1992), a little girl named Rose Summers accidentally kicks her soccer ball into her neighbour's garden. Mr Wintergarten is a pale and gloomy old man, who seldom leaves his decaying mansion. Her friends in the

neighbourhood whisper that he "rides on his crocodile at night",<sup>1</sup> and eats children, and his garden is full of spiky grey plants, surrounded by a high fence, and guarded by a wolf-like dog. But with the help of some fairy cakes baked by her mother, Rose makes her way to his house to ask for her ball back. She feeds a cake to the dog and gives the remainder to Mr Wintergarten. After she goes, Mr Wintergarten eats a cake. He opens his windows. He goes out into his garden and finds himself full of an unfamiliar feeling of fun and joy. He finds Rose's ball, and kicks it back over the fence, along with his slipper, which comes off his foot in the process. The story ends with Mr Wintergarten pulling down his fence and opening his garden, and by implication his heart, to the neighbourhood.

One does not have to have a classical education to appreciate the message of *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, which like Graham's other books promotes tolerance, acceptance, and sharing. Nowhere in this story is the Underworld explicitly mentioned. But for those of us familiar with the myth of Persephone, the allusions are clear. Rose and Mr Wintergarten make for an appealing suburban Persephone and Hades; Mrs Summers is a motherly Demeter. The Underworld becomes an image of loneliness and old age; Rose's visit to Mr Wintergarten brings back more than her ball, it re-integrates an isolated old man into the neighbourhood, and removes fear from the community.

The classical Underworld appears in different guises in children's literature, featuring in retellings of significant myths and legends. In Rachel Smythe's romantic web comic *Lore Olympus* (2018–present), which depicts the Hades–Persephone story as a lush romance, it is a glamorous but occasionally creepy underground city, reached by a mysterious subway, and run as a powerful corporation by its glamorous and brooding CEO, Hades. In Laura Ruby's young adult novel *Bone Gap* (2015), a magical-realist romance in which a Hades-figure abducts a beautiful young woman named Roza and takes her to his kingdom, the Underworld appears like a feudal castle with surrounding fields. In Margaret Mahy's middle-grade fantasy novel about death and suicide, *Dangerous Spaces*

<sup>1</sup> Bob Graham, *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, Ringwood: Viking, 1992, 6.

(1991), the Underworld is called Viridian and looks like a cliff-top amphitheatre, decorated with veiled and weeping statues. Lynnette Lounsbury's young adult gamer-fantasy *Afterworld* (2014) presents the Underworld as a mixture of labyrinth and vast necropolis, or city of the dead, a waiting room in which all the afterlife imaginings of all religions have a place, and where the protagonist, Dom, must play to win to save the life of his sister, Kaide. These Underworlds are places for the dead, but also places where the living are spirited away, and held captive, have to find their way back from, or enter to rescue loved ones.

### Orpheus and Eurydice

*Orpheus adores his wife, Eurydice, and descends to Hades to bring her back from the dead. He charms the guardians of the Underworld with his beautiful music and persuades Hades and Persephone to return his beloved. But he looks back at her and Eurydice is lost forever. Is this a story of true love, or of unconscious betrayal? Retellings offer different perspectives.*

#### **Retelling – Paule du Bouchet, *Prince Orpheus*, ill. Fabian Negrin (2003)**

Recounted in simple language and accompanied with evocative paintings, this retelling includes Orpheus' adventures with the Argonauts as well as his foray into the Underworld.

#### **Revision – Tracy Barrett, *The Song of Orpheus: The Greatest Greek Myths You Never Heard* (2016)**

Narrated by Orpheus, this collection seeks to surprise and challenge readers with alternative versions of well- and lesser-known tales of myth and legend from the ancient world.

#### **Adaptation – Brynne Rebele-Henry, *Orpheus Girl* (2019)**

Set in Texas, this young adult novel tells the story of sixteen-year-old Raya, who is sent to "Friendly Saviours", a re-education camp in an attempt to help her overcome her feelings for her best friend, Sarah. As she resists the conversion therapy, Raya identifies with Orpheus in her attempt to return to the world of life and true love.

#### **Allusion – Laura Ruby, *Bone Gap* (2015)**

This compelling young adult novel, set in the American Midwest, references several Underworld myths, including the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, as the narrative progresses.

## Death and Fantasy

Children's writers who talk about death have a delicate task to perform: how to show its realities in a way that offers space for the sensitivities of young audiences (and their families). Writing in a fantasy genre offers one way to approach the subject, as Kate McInally notes:

Both traditionally and in contemporary times, harsh realities including violence, death and war have been mediated through fantasy as a means through which to discuss not only human conflicts, but cultural ideologies pertaining to growing up, maturation, and a sense of self.<sup>2</sup>

Most texts that engage with classical forms of the Underworld sit firmly within the fantasy genre. The Underworld offers an ultimate form of other-world, one in which young protagonists have their mettle tested, undergo trials, come face to face with death, meet their lost loved ones, and come to terms with the fearsome inevitability and inexorability of death. In so doing, they change, they grow, they gain wisdom, and for the most part return to life better-equipped to face its challenges.

Most children's stories about the Underworld are interesting, entertaining, and have positive outcomes. Child protagonists return from the dead stronger, braver, and more able to appreciate the value of life. This may not be a coincidence. Children's writers tend to accentuate the positive: even the most desperate of dystopian novels for young readers will end with a sense of optimism or hope.<sup>3</sup> We may view this as emanating from writers' sense of obligation to young readers' happiness, or as Roberta Seelinger Trites does, as coming from an industry-wide emphasis on training young readers to accept dominant social norms – to socialize children into accepting specific ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, children's books about the Underworld underscore one sense of Peter Pan's famous phrase: "To die will be an awfully big adventure".

Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, and essentially an immortal living in a world of eternal childhood, likely does not know what he means by that statement. He does not really have to face death. (His comment, however, may send a chill down the spines of adult readers, who know how precious, and temporary, childhood is [and so is life].) But Peter knows death exists, and his plucky expression "awfully big adventure" sums up the paradoxes of a visit to the classical Underworld. Like most resonant concepts, the Underworld contains complexities (caverns within caverns). A place greatly to be feared,

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<sup>2</sup> Kate McInally, "Fantasy as Philosophy in Children's Literature: The Multicultural Landscape of *The Clockwork Forest*", *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 48.1 (2010), 42.

<sup>3</sup> See Kay Sambell, "Presenting the Case for Social Change: The Creative Dilemma of Dystopian Writing for Children", in Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2003, 163–178.

<sup>4</sup> See Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 33.

it is reached easily by the dead, and it is only by making the most challenging journey that the living are able to enter.

Though the Greeks were so fearful of its ruler, Hades, that they sometimes called him “he who must not be named”, they also called him Pluton, referring to the great riches held in the earth.<sup>5</sup> Hades’ multiple realms and areas, its location bounded by great and terrifying rivers, its metaphorically appropriate torments for the wicked, make it a fascinating fantasy realm, as well as one in which heroic resolve is tested. It is the stuff of great stories, of legends, suggesting both that the ancients enjoyed thinking about what would await one after death, and also that mapping out its territories in an effort to understand the “awfully big adventure” beyond, might help them fear it less.

## Retellings: Love

Myths about the Underworld are often myths about the power of love, especially the power of the love of the living for the dead. Aeneas and Odysseus both try to embrace their dead lovers, only to find their arms passing through their incorporeal images. Demeter ranges around the world to seek her daughter; when she discovers Persephone is in Hades, she braves the depths of the Underworld to bring her back. So too does the musician Orpheus, when his beloved wife, Eurydice, is bitten by a snake and dies. Psyche goes to the Underworld to fetch Persephone’s face cream for Aphrodite, in the hope of pleasing Eros’ mother. Only true love could take one into the Underworld like this, and retellings for young readers often feature stories in which the power of love has a fairy-tale quality that makes for a vivid picture book.

The Persephone myth is especially popular, as the story of the spring goddess’s abduction by the god of the Underworld has multiple resonances. It is a story of the seasons, a story of abduction and recovery, a love story, and a story of female empowerment. For instance, Sally Pomme Clayton and Virginia Lee’s picture book *Persephone: A Journey from Winter to Spring* (2009) tells the story in simple words set against full-spread images of the natural world – on earth, in the heavens, and in the Underworld, an approach that is not uncommon in retellings. As Hades whisks Persephone through underground caverns scattered with sparkling amethysts, he tells her: “Now that you are Queen, all this belongs to you”. A sad Persephone does not care. “A shadow fell across and

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<sup>5</sup> Hathaway, *The Friendly Guide to Mythology*, 7.

stayed there”.<sup>6</sup> Demeter searches the world and heavens for her daughter, and the illustrations show the scale of her travels. When she declares, “Curse you, cruel Earth! You don’t deserve to bear fruit if you keep my daughter underground”, and pulls her cloak around her shoulders, the grey folds of her cloak turn into clouds, which cover the earth.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is Demeter who is the real heroine of the Persephone story, for she demonstrates the power of a mother’s love (something reassuring for young readers).

Pomme Clayton and Lee emphasize the natural elements of the story and provide the explanation of the seasons at the end of their book. Such an approach is quite common and works well in picture books, giving illustrators the option to develop lavish and interesting images of the characters, the natural world, the Underworld, and the seasons. Chiara Lossani and Octavia Monaco’s picture book retelling *La nascita delle stagioni. Il mito di Demetra e Persefone* (2006) also emphasizes the cycle of the seasons, as does Glen Huser, Philippe Béha, and Giannis Georgantelis’s *Time for Flowers, Time for Snow* (2013; a picture book accompanied by a CD of a children’s choral rendition of the lyrics).

In these and other retellings, Persephone’s time in the Underworld is temporary, negotiated between her mother and Hades. Indeed, for many Persephones in retellings and adaptations, the Underworld has its attractions. As we shall come to, in stories for older readers, however, Persephone is given the choice to remain in Hades – rather than being tricked by Hades, she chooses to eat the pomegranates, preferring to have time with him rather than remain close to her mother (indeed, many young adult versions of the myth depict Demeter as controlling or overwhelming).

## Adaptations: Coming of Age Underground

While none of us might wish to visit the Underworld ourselves, and certainly not prematurely, it has many narrative attractions. It allows writers to let their imaginations roam free, and acts as a kind of fantasy space within a recognizable framework. It also provides a useful framework for heroic narratives, and narratives of coming of age. Classical or modern heroes who undergo a katabasis

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<sup>6</sup> Sally Pomme Clayton, *Persephone: A Journey from Winter to Spring*, ill. Virginia Lee, London: Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, 2009, 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 13–14.

(a journey to the deep, literally a journey “down”), find on their journeys that they gain power and self-respect from going on this ultimate adventure. Writers use Underworld journeys as symbols of the young protagonist’s coming of age.

### Essential Elements of the Underworld

*While the topography of Hades is represented differently in every story, there are common elements of the Underworld realm.*

- ☞ Charon – see Vicki Grove’s *Everything Breaks* (2013)
- ☞ Cerberus – see Lucy Coats’s *Hound of Hades*, ill. David Roberts (2016)
- ☞ Sisyphus – see Paul Shipton’s *The Pig Who Saved the World* (2006)
- ☞ Tantalus – see Carolyn Hennesy’s *Pandora Gets Frightened* (2013)
- ☞ River Styx – see Tobias Druitt’s *Corydon and the Island of Monsters* (2005)

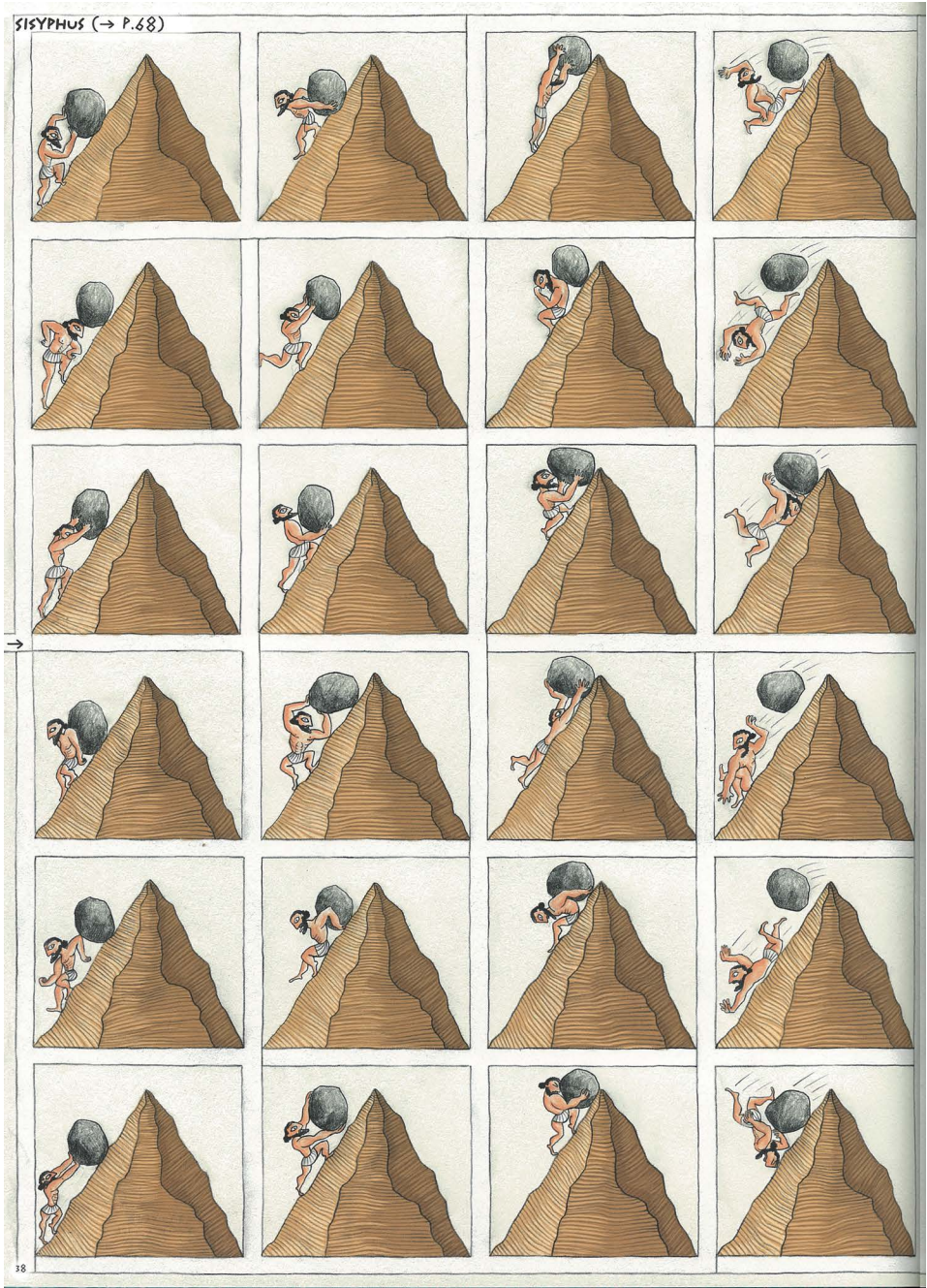


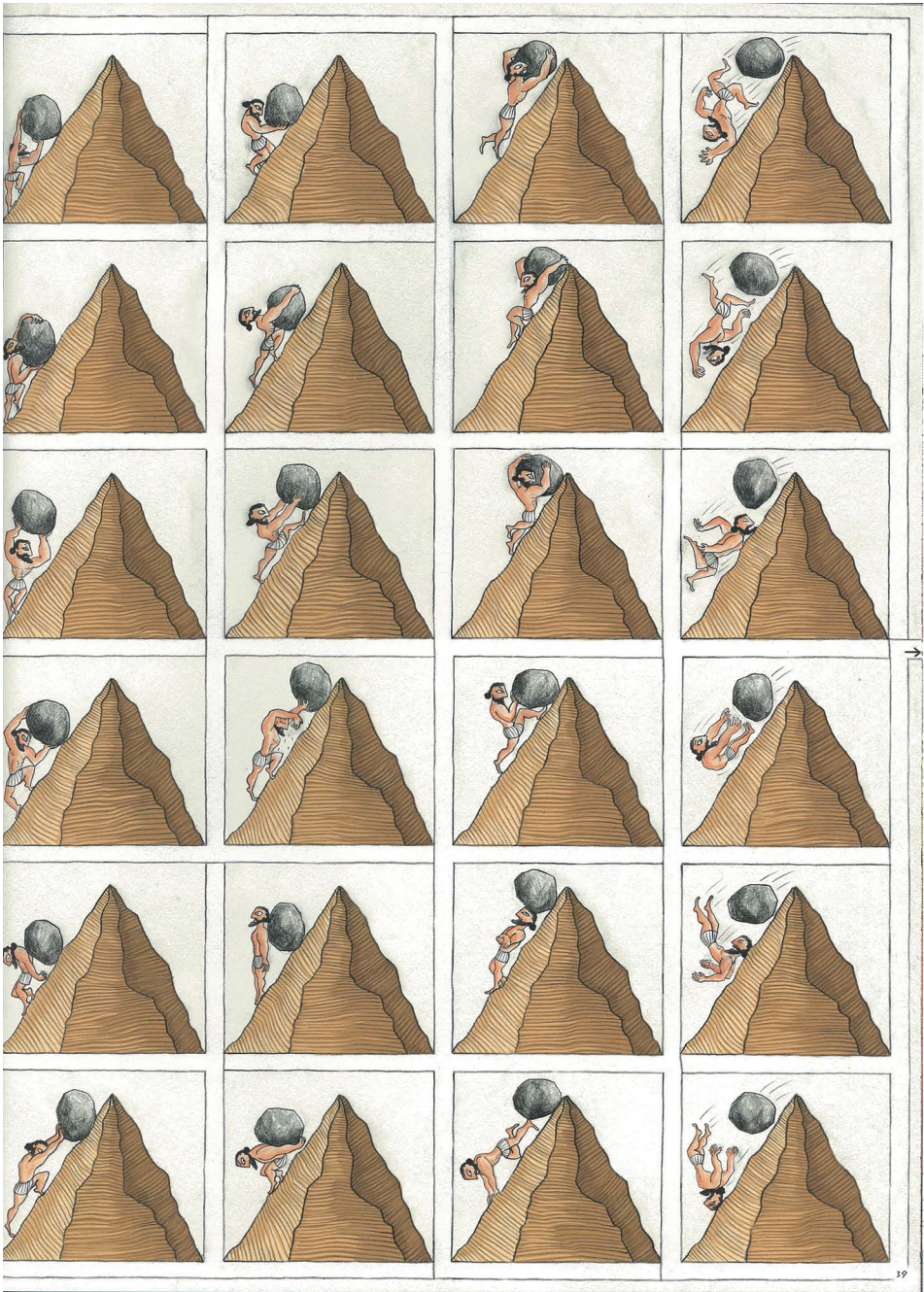
### Katabasis Journeys I

*A descent into the Underworld is an essential element of the heroic journey. Not all of the Greek heroes undertake a literal katabasis, but all of them face the darkness and combat death in some form.*

- ☞ In *Odyssey* 11, Odysseus and his crew travel far to the west to visit the Underworld and consult Tiresias about how to get home to Ithaca.
- ☞ Hercules’ final Labour is to descend to the Underworld to bring back Cerberus, Hades’ three-headed hound.
- ☞ Orpheus goes to Hades to persuade the god of the dead to return his lost love, Eurydice.
- ☞ Theseus’ foray into the Labyrinth to combat the Minotaur can be understood as a symbolic katabasis.
- ☞ While Jason does not undertake a literal katabasis, his journey to Colchis, the barbaric kingdom on the edge of the Black Sea, has elements of an encounter with death.

Anne Ursu’s “The Cronus Chronicles” (2006–2010), a trilogy of tragi-comic adventure stories for tween readers, shows young cousins Zee and Charlotte coming of age as they brave the Underworld to help restore the balance of power there. Hades, distracted by his love for Persephone, has lost control of the shades, who are ever more numerous and annoyed by over-population. If the cousins do not help fight them off, they will not only take over the Underworld, but will also control the world above. Ursu’s Underworld is a mixture of comedy and menace. It is crowded, and full of cynics. Charon, for instance, has developed a side business, providing information to all who can pay.





**Figure 14:** For Sisyphus, the Underworld is a time of eternal work, as Jan Bajtklik depicts. Jan Bajtklik, *Nie Ariadny. Mity i labirynty* [Ariadne's Thread: Myths and Mazes], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dwie Siostry, 2018, 68–69. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

If you asked Charon – not that anyone ever does – he'd tell you he gets a bad rap. The Ferryman for the Dead is widely considered, in both legend and life, to be rather, well, greedy. But really, if you look at all the facts, you can't blame him. He has a family to feed.<sup>8</sup>

Harpies the size of winged bears swoop at Charlotte and Zee, cackling rude nursery rhymes. Persephone goes undercover, doing what she can to restore the status quo. As Charlotte and Zee go to the Underworld, they are mentored by their high school teacher, Mr Metos, a Titan who is sworn to look after members of the human race. And accompanying them is a cat who turns out to be the shade of Zee's recently deceased grandmother. Tokens of protection are important in Underworld journeys, and so too is the comforting thought that loved ones are watching over us from the other side.

Love, death, and self-respect are important themes in *The Shadow Thieves*, which shows two young protagonists coming of age, shaking off their fears and self-consciousness, and acting independently and for the good of other people. All of these are important themes in children's literature, which aims to promote resilience and thoughtfulness as core values. For Ursu, death functions as an other-space to think about these issues, coupled with reflection on the nature of grief and loss, also important in young people's fiction. Ursu uses an adventure format for her "Cronus Chronicles", where Charlotte and Zee's coming of age occurs in the contact of a full-scale cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. In this style of work, protagonists' inner dramas are resolved while they take part in epic action. Other Underworld adventures are smaller in scale, and foreground individuals' emotional stories: for instance, in the novels of Margaret Mahy, a writer known for her magical-realist approach to thinking about adolescent coming of age. In the books in question, *The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance* (1984) and *Dangerous Spaces* (1991), Mahy reflects on death and rebirth through Underworld journeys.

In *The Changeover*, fifteen-year-old Laura comes of age by "changing over" from an ordinary girl to a witch. She does so in order to rescue her little brother, whose life force has been depleted by a *lemur*, a kind of Roman vampire. The changeover ceremony requires her to perform a kind of katabasis, whereby she visits her own personal Underworld, a kind of storybook afterlife where she sees her own past and future mingled with the symbols of the Underworld.

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Ursu, *The Shadow Thieves*, "The Cronus Chronicles" 1, New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006, 228.

Returning as a witch, she is able to defeat the *lemur* and save her brother. Laura acts as a modern Hercules or a more successful Orpheus (see our discussion in “H is for How to Be Heroic”), visiting the realms below in order to save someone she loves, sacrificing her ordinary life to become heroic and magical. This is a kind of death and rebirth, the death of Laura’s innocent, non-magical childhood, and the birth of her new womanly powers. This changeover is connected with romance and sexuality, and is fraught with dangers – for a girl coming into her womanly powers is something to be reckoned with, and has also to do much of the reckoning herself. Mahy’s Underworld is mixed up with symbols from the occult – the tarot, triform Hecate (at one point Laura and the two older women, Miriam and Winter, form a trio – maiden, woman, crone). The risks of the journey, however, are more than worth the risk of not saving Jacko and enable Laura to gain wisdom and understanding, to face the world as a soon-to-be marvellous adult.

Mahy is known for her magical-realist approach to writing for children and young adults. In her literary world, the magic mixes with the mundane; magic is full of power and promise, but also danger, and so is the supernatural. In *Dangerous Spaces*, a middle-grade novel, cousins Flora and Anthea visit the Underworld through a magical portal, a crack in reality that appears in an old photograph they find. The Underworld is called Viridian, after the shade of green, and the place the cousins enter is an old cliff-top Roman amphitheatre, dotted about with veiled and weeping statues. Anthea is suicidal, having been recently orphaned, and she yearns to join her lost parents. In the Underworld, she meets a boy named Griff, who is related to the cousins, being a great-uncle who died young. Griff is also a kind of Hades figure, and he tries to lure Anthea to remain in the Underworld. He promises that if she comes with him to an island they can see from the amphitheatre, her parents will be waiting for her. Flora has initially resented the intrusion of her grieving cousin into her cosy family. She is jealous of Anthea’s beauty, and of the attention she is getting. But she overcomes these ignoble feelings, becoming the heroine she has always wanted to be, when she saves Anthea, calling her back to life. She functions as Demeter to Anthea’s Persephone, reinforcing Anthea’s growing sense that there are things to live for, and integrating her into her family.

In *Dangerous Spaces*, Mahy addresses issues that face young readers – family rivalries, the desire for attention, feelings of dissatisfaction at one’s appearance. She also addresses teen suicide, using the idea of the Underworld to help present that discussion. If Anthea were to commit suicide, it would be in a fantasy/mythic context, crossing over the sea to Griff’s island, rather than

performing a violent act. The idea of the Underworld, then, offers a means for a writer to intertwine magical realism and fantasy with real issues, and to put them in a mythic context. Mahy's work is largely recuperative and oriented positively; though her characters recognize and flirt with danger, they return to the fold, accepting that by overcoming trials they are on the verge of adulthood, and able therefore to cope with society. As with *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, it is possible to read Mahy's novels without picking up on the classicism within. Hers is a deeply embedded adaptation of classical myth, one that combines elements and draws on their core to reflect on young adult experience. Indeed, in doing so she suggests, through her magical-realist approach, that adolescence itself is a kind of mythical experience, that is both highly personal and also universal, and one that invites association with Underworld adventures and rites of passage.

In contrast to Mahy's mythic interiority, other adaptations of the Persephone myth show the Underworld offering externalized experiences to help young protagonists come of age. Loïc Locatelli-Kournwsky's graphic novel *Perséphone* (2017), for instance, exploits a large visual canvas of warring worlds: Eleusis and Hades, in which a teenage Persephone, overawed by her powerful mother, Demeter, comes of age when she is abducted from Eleusis. Their world is divided into two zones: Eleusis (the world above) and Hades (the world below), which had been at war. When Eleusis won the war, Hades was cut off, and the people below face starvation. When Persephone is taken to Hades, she finds a way to heal the rift between the zones. Locatelli-Kournwsky highlights the tension between Persephone and Demeter. Demeter is a powerful warrior, and also a mage. Persephone is afraid she will not live up to her mother's legacy, and will not do justice to the mage powers she is destined to inherit. Her coming of age involves recognizing that her own talents (botany, healing) are as powerful in their own way as her mother's skills.

The characters in *Perséphone* are not gods, but humans in a world where magic exists. Locatelli-Kournwsky explains the different realms, lays out their back story, and sets Persephone's coming-of-age narrative in this context of divided spheres. It seems that in the Underworld, Persephone comes into her own, in a way not possible above ground.

## Katabasis Journeys II

The concept of the katabasis appears in many children's and fantasy adventures. Alice undergoes a katabasis when she falls down the rabbit hole into Wonderland in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb have to penetrate the underworld in C.S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair* (1953), to rescue Prince Rillian from a wicked enchantress. Other katabases involve journeys into the recesses of the mind – for example, Margaret Mahy's *The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance* (1984) – or into emotions – for instance, Barbara Dee's *Halfway Normal* (2017). What lies underground? Often treasures, sometimes the truth. In *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen: A Tale of Alderley* by Alan Garner (1960), the protagonists have to undergo an arduous journey through flooded mineshafts and underground caverns, in order to save the magical “weirdstone” from falling into the wrong hands. Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* (1979) suggests that volcanic structures in Auckland hide colonizing aliens who will harness the earth's power to destroy humanity: the book's protagonists, Rachel and Theo, have to travel into these aliens' secret underground lair to understand what is at stake. Travelling underground is a confrontation with death, but also with fear, and the katabasis and return are important stages in a hero's development, enabling them to be born anew, and to face the world with increased confidence and power.

## Loving Hades

Indeed, treatments of Persephone in the Underworld often serve to highlight the contrast between the worlds. Of all the gods and goddesses, she seems to be the one most often figured as innocent, kind, open to negotiation, and willing to heal. In *Lore Olympus* (2018–present) another graphic novelist, Rachel Smythe, exploits the contrast between the dark implacability of the Underworld, and Persephone's lush, fertile creativity. Here, Hades is the sexy CEO of an Underworld corporation, a brooding loner, a version of the Byronic hero who finds a soulmate in Persephone despite her mother's irritation. *Lore Olympus* is published as a web-toon series, with multiple episodes, and the action and two sweethearts alternate between realms.<sup>9</sup>

*Lore Olympus* largely focuses on the romance between Hades and Persephone, with plot twists and interventions from the other gods along the way. Settings are lightly sketched in, meaning that Hades' Underworld is only faintly

<sup>9</sup> The comic has also been published as a book: Rachel Smythe, *Lore Olympus*, vol. 1, New York, NY: Del Rey, 2021.

visible as an enormous night-time city, dominated by his corporation. In his corporate headquarters, demons torture sinners in secure zones, only reachable by authorized persons. What concerns Persephone most of all is her love for Hades, and her sense that he is as isolated and unhappy as she is.

Sympathy for Hades is a common feature in retellings about the Underworld. Authors like to depict him as shy, brooding, a loner, an introvert, in contrast with his extroverted brothers, Zeus and Poseidon. They like that even if he was tricked into taking charge of the Underworld, he is the king of his own realm, and note that he is less fickle than his brothers, less prone to abducting and traumatizing nymphs and young goddesses (Persephone being the exception). They find in the Persephone story a true romance that is appealing, especially to writers of paranormal romance novels, a genre that is very popular with teenage girls.

In fractured or revisionist retellings, writers recuperate Hades, and find him a sympathetic figure. Kate McMullan's "Myth-O-Mania" series (2002–2014) of chapter books for tween readers, for instance, retells different classical myths from different angles (see discussion also in "A is for Adaptation", "H is for How to Be Heroic"). Hades acts as narrator, framing the story as a correction to the propaganda put about by his controlling brothers. Hades' Underworld is cosy and homelike, restful in comparison with the noise and bustle of above ground. In contrast with his selfish brothers, Hades is a caring god, worrying about the heroes' progress, helping them out, and finding ways to look after his beloved guard-dog, Cerberus. Here he is at the end of *Get Lost, Odysseus!*, talking with Persephone:

Just then there was a commotion in the asphodel, and Cerberus ran out of the bushes. He bounded over to me, his three tongues hanging out of his mouths. I was giving him the old triple head rub when a ghost dog raced out of the asphodel, and Cerbie sped off after him.

"Two crazy dogs," said Persephone as the pair ran in circles, yipping with happiness before they darted off to the far side of the Pool of Memory and disappeared.

"You were the one who got me thinking about bringing the first ghost dog down to the Underworld, P-phone," I said.

"I was?" she said. "You never told me that."

I nodded. "You said Cerbie was lonely when I was away. So I found him a friend, the most loyal mortal dog ever," I said. "And later, when Odysseus showed up down here to begin his afterlife in Elysium, he was overjoyed to be reunited with his old hound, Argos."

"Put that in the book, too, Hades," said Persephone. "That makes it a happy ending."

Have I mentioned that she's always right?<sup>10</sup>

Writers seem to have a perverse fondness for Hades, noting that he's among the least meddling of the gods, that he's the most faithful, least violent. Picturing him as an introverted sensitive shy-guy (*Lore Olympus*), or an uxorious dreamer ("The Cronus Chronicles"), or as a dog-mad family man ("Myth-O-Mania") are responses that are not entirely incompatible with some of the Greek myths. What they do, of course, is present a version of the Underworld, and of death, that has softened the terror of death.

It may seem that the stories we have discussed here are less interested in the Underworld as a place to think deeply about death, and more as a symbolic space that allows the living to confront their fears, and to overcome their own weaknesses. But that might be the point, especially given that children's literature is essentially optimistic, and that so too are the myths these stories draw upon. Yes, there are frightening parts of Hades: the places where torture is dealt on the wicked, or the terrifying nullity of existence (or lack of existence) after drinking from the water of Lethe. But in the children's literature that focuses on it, the spaces of the Underworld are one thing – familiar markers of an iconic realm – more important is the idea that visiting the Underworld may be inevitable, may be challenging, may be painful, but is always helpful.

Although the classical Underworld has its points of reassuring sameness, what it represents to writers, characters, and readers, is as individual as they are. It might be that going into the Underworld means confronting loneliness (*Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*), or lack of confidence in one's abilities (*Perséphone*), or facing the fear of losing one's family, or of losing one's will to live (*The Changeover, Dangerous Spaces*). It may be the attraction to the dark side, the unpopular side (*Lore Olympus*, "Myth-O-Mania"). It may be the knowledge that although only the most heroic figures return from the Underworld, and that they never return completely unscathed, they also never return without having thought about the people and the world that they love.

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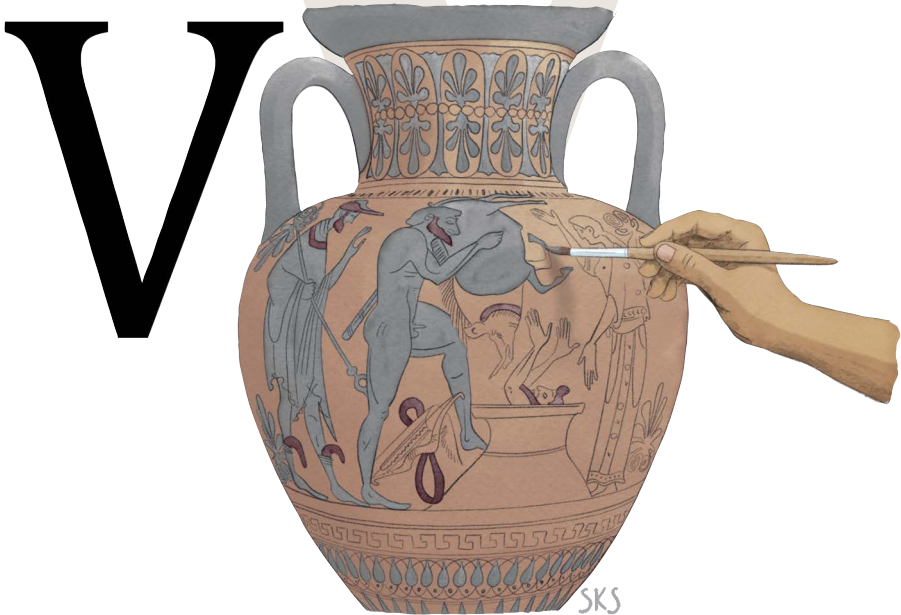
<sup>10</sup> McMullan, *Get Lost, Odysseus!*, 224.

### **Further Reading on Underworld Adventures**

Kiera Vaclavik, *Uncharted Depths: Descent Narratives in English and French Children's Literature*, London: Legenda, 2010.

Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, London: Penguin Books, 2020.

*is for visual storytelling*



# V

is for visual  
storytelling



Picture books are among the first books given to young readers, but that does not mean they are only aimed at the very young. Indeed, a picture book can cross over to adult audiences, and appeal to a wide range of ages. While simple words accompanied by evoca-

tive images are its hallmark, the seeming simplicity of a picture book can bely a sophisticated and complex array of ideas and meanings. Just as the word “novel” can apply to all sorts of genres of storytelling, so a picture book can be sombre or silly, humorous or sweet, conservative or radical. The basic contents involve words and images, or sometimes a story told without words, and only with pictures. Many of the best picture books that respond to classical myth contain multiple resonances and meanings. And given that the classical myths themselves are open to multiple interpretations and adaptations – simple, funny, soulful, tragic – it is hardly surprising that the writers and illustrators of picture books do some of their best work adapting this material. As Jane Doonan explains, in *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books*:

When we hold a picture book, we have in our hands a pictured world full of ideas. We play with those ideas and play our own ideas around the pictured world. The more skilful we are, and the more ideas the picture book contains, the more ideas go on bouncing. And in the process we create something of our very own.<sup>1</sup>

The results are as varied as can be imagined, and take the reader into retellings, adaptations, and lightly allusive modern stories, some with educational intent, others simply aiming to entertain and amuse. And pinning picture books down is challenging – sometimes the words are barely supported by hastily composed pictures, sometimes the illustrations elevate a slight story into another realm entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> Doonan, *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books*, 20.

## Ancient Art

*Myths are not only told in words, but also in images...*

### **Retelling – Penelope Proddow, *Art Tells a Story: Greek and Roman Myths* (1979)**

Written for nine-to-twelve-year-olds, this educational resource uses a diverse range of works of ancient art as a springboard to discuss twelve classical myths.

### **Revision – Elaine Raphael, *Drawing History: Ancient Greece*, ill. Don Bolognese (1989)**

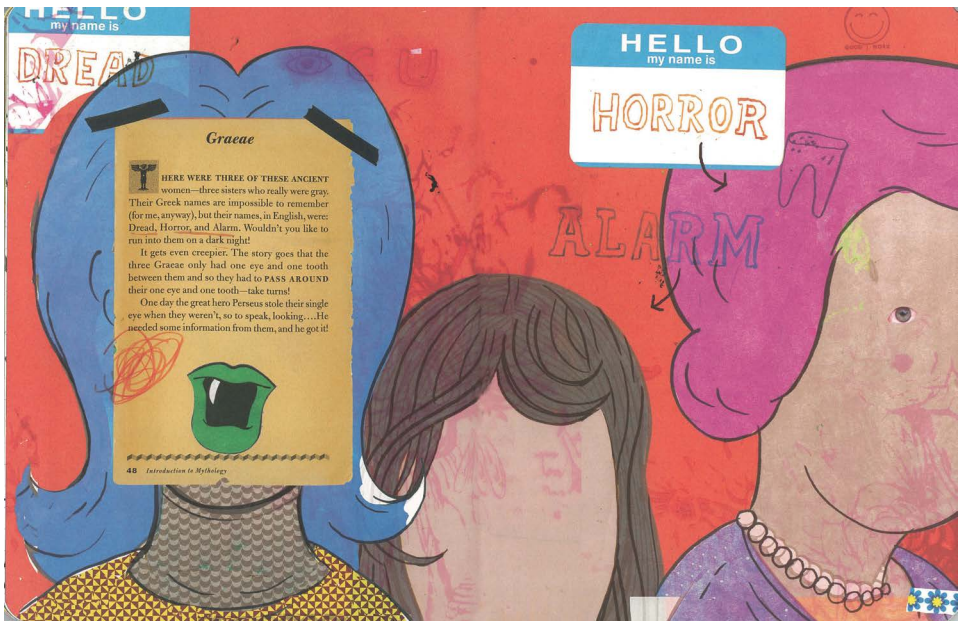
This book includes practical tips for emulating the style of ancient artworks, while also presenting detailed information about Ancient Greek history and myth.

### **Adaptation – Antonia Barber, *Apollo and Daphne: Masterpieces of Greek Mythology* (1998)**

This picture book features famous artworks from Botticelli, Titian, Rembrandt, and others, accompanied by retellings of the classical myths that they reference.

### **Allusion – Sandra Jobson, *Once Upon a Vase* (1970)**

An Australian publication which includes retellings of the myths referenced on the famous François Vase.



**Figure 15:** Mark Todd and John Harris use postmodern pastiche to convey the wild weirdness of Greek mythology in *My Monster Notebook*. John Harris, *My Monster Notebook*, ill. Mark Todd, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2011, 31–32. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with kind permission.

### Panoply Vase Animation Project

The vase in the image of “V” for this chapter depicts Hercules chasing the Erymanthian Boar, and presenting it to Eurystheus. The vase is held at the National Museum of Warsaw, and has been animated by Steve K. Simons, who has illustrated our book as part of the Panoply Vase Animation Project (<https://www.panoply.org.uk/>), with Dr Sonya Nevin (Roehampton and Cambridge Universities). Together, the Panoply team researches the images on Ancient Greek vases, and transforms them into animations which convey the stories, themes, and moods of these beautiful objects from long ago. Visitors to museums who are lucky enough to see them find that the animations almost literally “bring to life” the images depicted on the vases. As part of the *Our Mythical Childhood* project, they have animated five vases held at the National Museum in Warsaw, including Sappho singing the story of Hector and Andromache’s wedding, the rainbow goddess Iris flitting around the pot that bears her image. All of them are accompanied by music, carefully researched, and performed on authentic instruments.



**Figure 16:** A fragment of a black-figure amphora depicting Hercules showing the Erymanthian Boar to Eurystheus hiding in a storage jar, inv. no. 198042 MNW, National Museum in Warsaw, photograph by Steve K. Simons. Used with kind permission.

Some scholars argue a true “picture book” is one in which the story is incomplete without the images (in contrast to an *illustrated* text, in which pictures reinforce or add to the text, rather than contributing to the core of a story).<sup>2</sup> An illustrated book could function as a story without the illustrations, but remove a picture from the picture book, and the story is incomplete. The interplay between the words and the images is part of its magic. For our purposes in “V is for Visual Storytelling”, we take a broad approach, thinking about books that contain words and images, and in which the images are important to the presentation and interpretation of the story.

Classical myths work well in picture books, because of their strong and vivid core stories, and the flexibility they allow authors and illustrators to let their imaginations roam free. What *does* a many-headed Hydra look like, after all? Or a Harpy or Gorgon, a Pegasus, a Labyrinth, a Minotaur? How does an Ancient Greek hero dress or comb his hair? Pictorial approaches to Greek and Roman myth often reveal careful research into ancient visual cultures, with care taken to represent them as generated from a mythical age. As William Moebius comments, “picture books do not arise *ex nihilo* out of a picture-book generator; they draw on thousands of years of human visual representation, filtered through the creative facilities of the adult imagination of a picture-book maker, or makers”.<sup>3</sup>

Sandra Jobson’s *Once Upon a Vase* (1970), which retells several well-known myths (Theseus, Perseus, Peleus and Thetis, the Trojan War, the Revenge of Hephaistos, and the Battle of the Pygmies and the Cranes), draws on Ancient Greek vase art to depict the myths. Inspired by the François Vase, an Attic krater held at the National Archaeological Museum in Florence, Italy, Jobson explains the stories on the vase, and explains elements of Greek vase art. This book is part retelling, part interpretation, part history, and part adaptation, likely a crossover book aimed at adults and children. Other illustrators also draw on historical details for their visual storytelling. Juliet Rix and Juliet Snape make use of Minoan imagery for their *A-Maze-Ing Minotaur* (2014), drawing on the archaeological discoveries about the palace of Minos for their portrayal of the Labyrinth – a tangle of rooms and corridors, columns, and stairs. Snape is known for her production of maze books, designing labyrinths in fairy-tale, fantasy, and historical realms: here, she returns to the original Labyrinth in meticulous detail,

<sup>2</sup> See William Moebius, “Picture Book”, in Lissa Paul and Philip Nel, eds., *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011, 169–173.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 172.

presenting it in bright Minoan colours. Imogen and Isabel Greenberg's *Athena: The Story of a Goddess* (2018) seems to be inspired by the colours of Greek vases, using dark oranges and blacks, with some relief colours, to underscore the royal and godly status of their subject.

### Graphic Novels

*The often violent world of classical mythology seems to lend itself to the style and format of the traditional graphic novel. Yet in recent years the genre has expanded in new directions, including love stories, young adult coming-of-age narratives, satires, and retellings.*

📖 Eric Shanower, "Age of Bronze" series (1998–2019)

📖 Gareth Hinds, *The Odyssey: A Graphic Novel* (2010)

📖 Sally Kindberg and Tracey Turner, *The Comic Strip: Greatest Greek Myths* (2010)

📖 Isabel Greenberg, *The Encyclopedia of Early Earth: A Graphic Novel* (2013)

📖 Anne Simon, *The Song of Aglaia* (2018)

Classical elements are often present in visual representations of the ancient world – especially in dress and architecture, but they are often stylized, in accordance with artistic fashions of the time. Illustrators offer stylized imagery, designed to be lavish and beautiful, like a presentation book – sometimes costly – fitting the subject's canonical status, and drawing on its history as a foundational cultural influence. For instance, writer-illustrator duo Françoise Rachmühl and Charlotte Gastaut offer a lushly stylized introduction to the *Mortals and Immortals of Greek Mythology* (2018), in which the gods and goddesses have elongated necks, and large, soulful eyes, piles of hair, and delicate drapery, set against a luxuriant background of flower-strewn meadows and mountains. Errol Le Cain's *Cupid and Psyche* (1977) illustrates the nineteenth-century writer Walter Pater's retelling of the myth in his novel about Ancient Rome, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Le Cain draws on the Decadent style popular in the late nineteenth century – presenting the story in elegant black-and-white illustrations that pay homage to the beauty of its protagonists. In *Mythological Creatures: A Classical Bestiary. Tales of Strange Beings, Fabulous Creatures, Fearsome Beasts, and Hideous Monsters from Ancient Greek Mythology* (2008), American illustrator Lynn Curlee gives polished emblematic images of mythical beasts, with short texts explaining how each creature came to be. His architectural style (Curlee's other books are often about architectural achievements or marvels) lends a monumental aspect to the presentation of each creature.

Stylized retellings or presentations of classical myths can affect how the story is delivered. While beautiful, the lavish images of Curlee's and Rachmühl

and Gastaut's work slow the pace of reading, encouraging a solemn absorption in the myth and its background. And many picture books have that effect, as Jane Doonan notes, encouraging an "active contemplation" that is essential for children's aesthetic development.<sup>4</sup>

Sara Fanelli's picture book *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece* (2002) uses postmodern techniques to depict monsters such as Medusa and the Minotaur. The book is presented as if it is a student's exercise book, with fonts approximating handwritten notes, and images of monsters using mixed media, such as gouache and collage. Argus roars on the cover, his hundred eyes are cut-outs, collaged from photographs; below him on the ground are scattered several pairs of glasses. This approach plays with the essential elements of the different monsters, and the accompanying commentary explains the rudiments of each myth, with informational notes listed in print form at the end of the book. John Harris teams up with illustrators to present well-known myths in a set of books for the Getty Museum, which take a similar approach – distilling the stories to their essences, and presenting them in postmodern or cartoonish styles. In *Strong Stuff: Herakles and His Labours* (2005), illustrated by Gary Baseman, their adaptation of the Herakles myths, Herakles is a hero with bulging muscles and goggle eyes, who takes on different Labours with limited subtlety. Similarly, *Pop-Up Aesop* (ill. Calef Brown; 2005) offers simple, sarcastic fables, such as "The Bold Little Crab":

One day a crab decided he was tired of living in the ocean.

"Been there," he sighed. "Done that." Life was bound to be more interesting on the land.

So he swam to the water's edge, just where the waves were breaking in little splashes, and went for a walk.

"This is so neat," he thought to himself. "Tiny seashells, strands of seaweed, sparkling grains of sand..."

And then he looked up and saw a red fox coming his way, fast.

"Uh-oh. Maybe I'll just head back home now," he thought, trying to hurry toward the ocean. But it was too late.

"Why, hello, Mr. Fox," he said to the animal looking down at him hungrily.

"It's so nice to – "

End of story.

End of crab.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Doonan, *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books*, blurb.

<sup>5</sup> John Harris, *Pop-Up Aesop*, ill. Calef Brown, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2005, 3.

Further making the point is Calef Brown's vivid pop-up image of a large, red fox which dominates these pages, its protruding jaws full of a blue-and-green crab. There is a blunt sense of humour to these books, which connects with the stories of the ancient world – nothing sentimental here, instead a savage morality shines through.

### Playful Pop-Ups

*Featuring interactive and three-dimensional elements, these books invite children to take a hands-on approach to the world of ancient myth.*

- 📖 Brian Lee, *The Book of Greek Myths: Pop-Up Board Games* (2000)
- 📖 Matthew Reinhart and Robert Sabuda, *Encyclopedia Mythologica: Gods and Heroes* (2010)
- 📖 Sam Ita, *The Odyssey: A Pop-Up Book* (2011)
- 📖 Anna Gkoutzouri, *The Twelve Gods of Olympus* (2020)
- 📖 Davey Owen, *My First Pop-Up Mythological Monsters* (2020)

Much can be communicated by simple phrases and simple lines, and it is often the case that retellings of individual myths are stylized in this way. For instance, different versions of the myth of King Midas show different styles. In her *King Midas' Secret and Other Follies* (1969), Lisl Weil's quick line-drawings of a foolish King Midas, hiding his ass's ears under a range of ridiculous hairstyles, hint at royal wealth but highlight royal ego and foolishness. Harold Berson's illustrations for Al Perkins's *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1969) use a cartoonish style and bright colours to show the mountains of gold created by the greedy king. In contrast, however, Charlotte Craft's version (1999), with illustrations by Kinuko Y. Craft, uses a hyper-real, almost Pre-Raphaelite style, emphasizing the lush ornateness of Midas' lifestyle, against which the soft prettiness of his daughter stands out; perhaps inspired by Walter Crane's illustrations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851), which in their turn seem inspired by stained-glass art.

Changes in publication standards and artistic movements affect the styles and production values of illustrated books, and the intention of different versions can be understood by the comparative lavishness or simplicity of different adaptations. When times are good, lavish and expensive books can be viable to produce and purchase. When money is short, children's books are often made simpler and more cheaply. (And for those who want to popularize learning, making good stories affordable is important – see, for instance, the "Little Golden Books" series, which aimed to bring quality reading to children of all backgrounds.) Often, simple versions encourage a sense of lively action and

humour, while more detailed, presentation editions encourage the reader to linger, to notice small points, to think about the world depicted, and to reflect on the influential place classical mythology has in world culture.

One last category of picture book is that of the adaptation, or allusive story, in which myth is present, but not always the main point. American Jessica Love's picture book *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018), for instance, is about a little boy who wants to be a mermaid, and whose supportive *abuela* (grandmother) helps him create a costume and join a festival parade where other would-be mermaids are taking part. Nowhere in the book is mention made of the great tradition of mermaids in classical and other myths, but the presence of the mythical is lightly sketched in, through Julián's imaginings at the local swimming pool, and through the costume he makes from his grandmother's curtains. And as Julián and his *abuela* (herself in a very fine dress) strut through the city streets towards the parade, Love's images of the people on the sidewalks who watch and accept them as part of the fabric of life, show how the mythic can be incorporated into the everyday. Australian Aboriginal illustrator Dub Leffler's *Once There Was a Boy* (2011), about a little brown boy on an island who is joined by a little white girl who invades his territory and breaks his heart but reconciles with him by giving him her own heart to share, has echoes of the myth of Pandora's Box, and of Adam and Eve, as well as of more recent stories, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Bluebeard*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The allusions are there to be found, in vibrant, tropical-coloured artwork that reflects on aspects of colonization, and also the beauty of life on a remote Pacific island.

Perhaps American illustrator Michael Garland sums it up best in his majestically funny picture book *Icarus Swinebuckle* (2000), a fable about a pig who is an inventor, and who pursues his dream of flight. Peopled with anthropomorphic animals in eighteenth-century dress, the story of Icarus Swinebuckle draws on the original myth of Icarus, combined with a touch of Benjamin Franklin (whom Icarus Swinebuckle resembles in dress and bearing). The illustrations show both an amusing, anthropomorphic world, and provide a plausible setting for a made-up world in which pigs might fly, and in which Icarus might be as inventive as his father, Daedalus.

From rich to simple, from brights to pastels, from lines to splashes of colour, from detailed to selective, picture books inspired by classical myth show a willingness to be inventive and experimental, to capture different elements and flavours of the source material, and to provide varying experiences for readers and viewers, depending on their ages, situations, tastes, and reasons for reading. To quote William Moebius once more:

[T]he picture book may best be viewed as an experiment for the child and even for an adult student of literature. Picture books [...] may serve as testing grounds for thought about the world. The uses of the picture book – be they psychotherapeutic, sedative, role modelling (gender), mathematic skill building, or as memory books for geography, cultural heritage, or history – are [...] limitless.<sup>6</sup>

### Further Reading on Visual Narratives

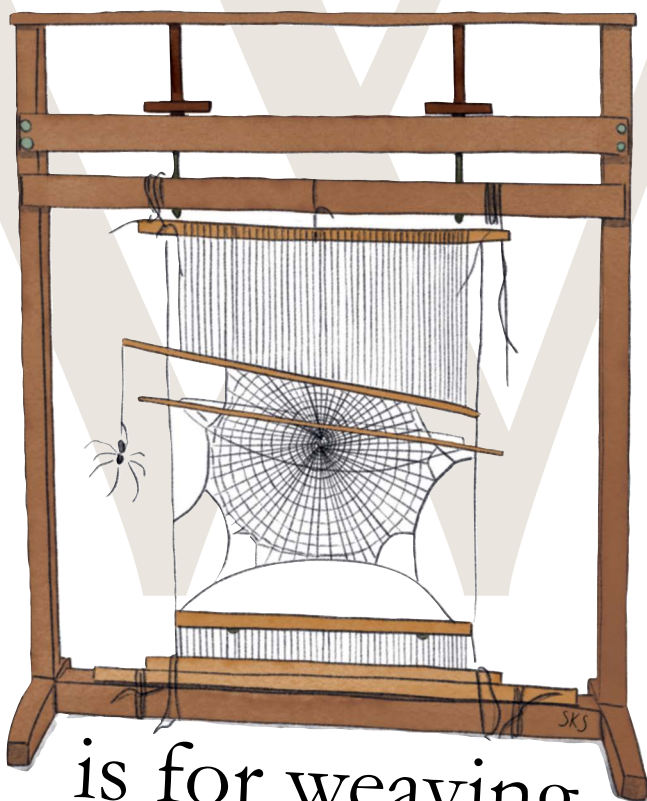
George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall, eds., *Classics and Comics*, “Classical Presences”, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall, eds., *Son of Classics and Comics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

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<sup>6</sup> See Moebius, “Picture Book”, 173.

# W



is for weaving

# W

is for weaving



In Kallie George's *The Winged Horse Race* (2019), the life of stablehand Pippa (short for Hippolyta) is changed when she is whisked to the slopes of Mount Olympus to join in a competition to identify the next horse to be Zeus' winged steed. Her first inkling that her life

is about to change comes when she meets a ragged song-stitcher, or *rhapsode*, in a storm. Pippa recognizes the woman's profession by her wooden staff:

Covered in intricate carvings, it was the staff of a *rhapsode* – a song-stitcher, reciter of myths and teller of tales. Pippa knew, for she had spent her earliest years in the care of one... The staff's symbols helped a song-stitcher remember her tales, as did tapping the staff on the ground. But Pippa hadn't heard *this* song-stitcher tapping.

Where had she come from?

"Hurt, child?" The woman extended her staff.

"Here."

Pippa gripped it and rose to her feet, noticing one symbol in particular carved on the top. Three feathers, woven together.

"What does it mean?" asked Pippa.

"Ah," said the woman, eyebrows rising. "There are more stories coming soon for that one."

Pippa was puzzled. Weren't a song-stitcher's tales old ones, the stories of gods and goddesses?<sup>1</sup>

In the ancient world, *rhapsodes* were oral performers of epic poetry, who "stitched" together lines of verse into stories, using their staffs to beat time, and to help orient themselves and their listeners. Weaving together strands of narrative, they were part of a cultural tradition that linked story, spinning, cloth-making, and creativity in general. In Greek mythology, life itself was shaped by such acts: the Fates spun, measured, and cut off the thread of each mortal's life. The hero Theseus found his way in and out of the Labyrinth by using the magic thread spun by Daedalus and supplied to him by Ariadne. Although she was celebrated as the world's greatest weaver, Arachne's arrogance led her to challenge the goddess Athena herself in a competition, with unfortunate results. Homer's

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<sup>1</sup> Kallie George, *The Winged Horse Race*, ill. Lucy Eldridge, London: Macmillan Children's Books 2019, 6–7.

*Iliad* and *Odyssey* feature memorable weaving scenes. In a key moment in the *Iliad*, Helen weaves a picture of what is happening on the battlefield below Troy's walls, showing the deeds of the great warriors, and the involvement of the gods. This serves as a narrative device to recap the story, and also to show Helen reflecting on the situation in which she plays an important though somewhat powerless part. In the *Odyssey*, waiting for her husband's return, Penelope also uses weaving to catch a moment of control. This time, she weaves to put off action – to hold off the suitors for her hand (and kingdom) by weaving and then secretly unravelling the shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes. Only once the shroud is woven, she tells them, will she consider remarriage.

### Penelope

*In the traditional version of the myth, Penelope waits at her loom while Odysseus weaves his way across the seas. Recent reworkings of the myth have given Penelope an active role in the story, and her agency is framed through the art of weaving – not only thread, but also words.*

📖 Adèle Geras, *Ithaka* (2005)

📖 Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (2005)

📖 Francesca Lia Block, *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013)

📖 Margot McGovern, *Neverland* (2018)

Spinning, weaving, knitting, stitching – all are analogous to writing and storytelling – the creating of vivid narratives, and their resonant meanings. When we speak about the telling of stories, it is frequently in vocabulary borrowed from the world of textile production. The relationship between the two practices is underscored by the common linguistic heritage of the English terms *text* and *textile* (as well as *texture*), all of which derive from the Latin *texere*, to weave, which is in turn connected to the Greek *techne*, an art, skill, or (often underhanded) craft. In stories, then, we are in the world of texts, of fabricated stories, that weave together ideas, characters, and worlds. The myths themselves become part of a tapestry of wider meaning, with interwoven threads representing the relationship between retellings, as well as between myths. The significance of these connections has been drawn out by Roland Barthes, who uses the metaphor of weaving to highlight the way in which intertextuality (that is, the connection between texts) underpins writing: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture".<sup>2</sup> His conception of the text

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, selected and trans. by Steven Heath, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977, 146.

as a woven entity comprised of diverse fragments has relevance to retellings of myth, which persistently reference other versions of the same story. The craft of weaving becomes a metaphor for the composition of myth, in which individual elements are combined into an intricate whole, or else constructed differently within each retelling, picked apart and rewoven, just as Penelope does with the shroud of Laertes.

In the ancient world, weaving is a way for women to express their creativity, and to communicate their vision. While so many of the myths and legends seem to come to us through male writers, the theme of weaving is important in storytelling – and becomes a popular theme in fantasy literature. Weavers, spinners, stitchers overlap with bards, jesters, and magicians, drawing together story, song, jokes, and spells, highlighting the patterns and meanings in life.

## Ariadne

When we think of the famous women of myth who are associated with weaving, spinning, or threads, we can see this emphasis on meaning. Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, gives Theseus the clue, or “clew”, to the Labyrinth in the form of her famous ball of yarn, instructing him to fasten one end of it to the door of the maze, and unravel it as he goes. Having vanquished the Minotaur, Theseus retrieves the thread and uses it to retrace his route back to the entrance (see “L is for Labyrinth”). This myth, with its vivid images of hero, monster, labyrinth, and clew, is possibly the most famous of all the ancient myths, and the image of the hero, unravelling the thread and using it to find his way back, is highly influential – seen in fairy tales, such as Hansel and Gretel, in which the children use pebbles and breadcrumbs as their clew to lead them home, or in episodes of Dr Who, such as “Castrovalva” (1982), in which the Doctor unravels his famous scarf to find his way through the TARDIS’s many rooms. Strands, marks on walls, even signs made in lipstick, feature in variants of this attractive motif, which makes its presence known in illustrated works.

Jan Bajtklik’s book *Greek Myths and Mazes* (2019), whose title in its original Polish is *Nić Ariadny. Mity i labirynty* [Ariadne’s Thread: Myths and Mazes], shows a purposeful Theseus heading into a large maze, holding a reel of red thread, which spools out behind him. At the entrance is Ariadne, holding the other end of the thread. This book, which presents the ancient myths as a set of mazes, takes the reader through their elements, highlighting the main characters and their roles: for example, “Ariadne, Minos’ Daughter. She gave Theseus

a thread to help him find his way out of the Labyrinth”.<sup>3</sup> But the image of each map shows only a snapshot in the time of the story. Readers must use their own skills (and a pencil or finger) to trace the path in and out of the Labyrinth.

Saviour Pirotta’s *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths* (2003), illustrated by Jan Lewis, uses the ball of wool as a decorative feature that also highlights Ariadne’s role in the story. As she presents the sword and thread to Theseus, the skein unravels from Ariadne’s hand and runs along the bottom of the page. Traversing the gutter, it meanders on to the next page, forming a border around the left and top sides of the block of text, before passing off the right side of the page. The thread reappears on the following page, a double-page spread without any text, depicting the climactic moment in which Theseus faces the Minotaur in the heart of the Labyrinth. In the far-left passage of the maze, the bright pink thread can once again be seen, trailing along the floor. The point at which the thread reappears corresponds closely to its point of departure on the previous page. Theseus holds his sword in one hand and the ball of wool in the other. With Ariadne holding one end of the thread back on page 38, and Theseus shown here in possession of the other end, Lewis’s clever design highlights the success of Ariadne’s simple, famous plan.

Many retellers of the Theseus story are frustrated by the hero’s callous egotism, and shift focus on to Ariadne and her thread. Jennifer Cook’s young adult novel *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004) gives Ariadne a candid, contemporary voice: she is a sixteen-year-old who “hated her life” in the royal household,<sup>4</sup> and was determined to “spin [her] own story”.<sup>5</sup> Cook gives Ariadne a number of weaving metaphors to talk about self-determination: at one point she declares “the thread of my past is just a part of the weft and warp of their cloth, knotted with revenge, lust and greed”.<sup>6</sup> Cook reworks the established narrative of the Minotaur by creating her own version of the tale in which the infamous monster is nothing more than a deformed child, the illegitimate offspring of Queen Pasiphae and her lover, and Ariadne’s half-brother. Retelling meets adaptation, in this version of the story, which goes beyond a linear conception of the mythic tradition – like the image of the woven tapestry, intertextual references and alterations of the standard form show that stories can be told (or spun) in different ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Bajtlik, *Greek Myths and Mazes*, 14–15.

<sup>4</sup> Cook, *Ariadne*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 17.

## Arachne

Another famous weaver is Arachne, famously transformed into a spider after challenging the goddess Athena to a weaving contest. When the judges find Arachne's work superior to that of the goddess, Athena turns her into a spider. There are differing versions of this aetiological story, which explains the origin of spiders. In some versions, Arachne hangs herself out of shame; taking pity on her, the goddess transforms her into a spider.<sup>7</sup> In others, the goddess takes vengeance on her competitor's hubris (perhaps further irritated by Arachne's weavings, which show the shortcomings of the gods). In some versions, turning her into a spider is a punishment – the spider a creature associated with fear and horror, with dust, and with weavings that nobody wants. In other versions, Arachne's transformation allows her to spin her creations into eternity.

Like the stories of Pandora and King Midas, Arachne's story has regularly been framed as an instructive parable, warning about the dangers of excessive pride, and the need to be obedient to authority. Saviour Pirotta's version in *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths* (ill. Jan Lewis; 2003) presents her as a "show-off" who needs "to be taught a lesson".<sup>8</sup> The story ends with Arachne regretting her behaviour: "Poor Arachne. How she wishes she hadn't been so rude to the great goddess Athena!"<sup>9</sup> This moral is easily applied to young children, who may be warned not to be rude to authority figures in their own lives, such as parents and other elders.

But many writers have sympathy for Arachne, and her story has also been retold as a story about creative expression. Kate Hovey's subtle picture book *Arachne Speaks* (2000), illustrated by Blair Dawson, exploits the spider web as a metaphor, highlighting the strength of the threads as a symbol of the network of different versions of this myth, their dissemination and endurance. In a proem, Arachne calls upon her descendants, the spiders, and urges them to retell her story:

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<sup>7</sup> For Arachne's suicide, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.134–135, in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank J. Miller, vol. 1, "Loeb Classical Library" 42, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1971, 296–297, via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/metamorphoses01ovid/page/296/mode/2up> (accessed 7 April 2022): "The wretched girl could not endure it, and put a noose about her bold neck. As she hung, Pallas lifted her in pity" ([N]on tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligavit / guttura: pendentem Pallas miserata levavit).

<sup>8</sup> Pirotta, *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*, 28, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 34.

Begin our tapestry again;  
 Cast to the four winds  
 my story's thread –  
 let truth spread  
 like gossamer from your abdomens  
 across the fields of time!<sup>10</sup>

From the outset, *Arachne Speaks* acknowledges Arachne's story has been told before, contextualizing Hovey's version within an extended mythic tradition. The spiders are instructed to spread the story not only throughout the world, but also through time. In this way, the spider web becomes a symbol not only for the story itself but also for the narrative's circulation.

Children, weave it well;  
 your silk will tell  
 a tale of punishment and crime [...].<sup>11</sup>

Hovey explores the notion that the gods need mortals as much as (if not more than) mortals need gods. In contrast to Athena, Arachne's fame is ensured by her legion of spider offspring. The text concludes with a message of both generational and poetic endurance:

...while my descendants thrive,  
 weaving our story again and again,  
 to the planet's end –  
 even then, we will survive.<sup>12</sup>

The title, *Arachne Speaks*, reveals the purpose of this story: to give voice to a character who does not ordinarily tell her own story, an approach which can also be seen in Elizabeth Spires's collection *I Am Arachne: Fifteen Greek and Roman Myths* (ill. Mordicai Gerstein; 2001). Arachne assumes the role of chief storyteller in this anthology, urgently introducing the volume in a "Prologue" that highlights her sense of herself as a storyteller: "*Spinning, I can't stop spinning, so stay a minute and I, Arachne, will spin a story for you...*"<sup>13</sup> Though Spires

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<sup>10</sup> Hovey, *Arachne Speaks*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Spires, *I Am Arachne: Fifteen Greek and Roman Myths*, ill. Mordicai Gerstein, New York, NY: Frances Foster Books, 2001, 3.

is sympathetic to the trapped weaver, Arachne's crime is her own egotism. In this version, Arachne represents herself in the weaving she does for the competition, an act of hubris, but also of artistic accomplishment: "I put myself in the picture as a beautiful young maiden wearing a golden crown, as if I were a goddess too".<sup>14</sup> In contrast to most other retellings, Spires does not reveal who wins the contest, but Athena's reaction implies that Arachne's work is superior, and by presenting her as the storyteller of the anthology, Spires recuperates Arachne as a figure who ends up being able to control her own story. Breaking into the rhyming couplets of a true storyteller, Arachne concludes her own tale proudly, showing how the ephemeral spider's web lasts as long, and as beautifully, as the words upon the page:

So now I spin my tale for *you*. See what I have spun?  
A web of words, a beautiful web. Do you like what I've done?  
My lines glisten and shimmer like diamonds in the sun.<sup>15</sup>

Sister-collaborators Imogen and Isabel Greenberg present Arachne's story from a different perspective, in their graphic novel *Athena: The Story of a Goddess* (2018). This time it is Athena who learns a moral lesson from the weaving competition. Athena weaves her tapestry to settle an old score with Poseidon:

[S]he spun a picture of Poseidon losing the competition to sponsor Athens, which was Athena's greatest victory so far. She was sure this would irritate Poseidon. Smaller scenes were woven into the edges of the tapestry. Athena pictured mortals trying to win against gods, and the punishment they faced for being so arrogant. She was trying to scare Arachne. How dare she try to compete with a goddess!<sup>16</sup>

In contrast with Athena, Arachne

knew what the crowd wanted, so she started to weave stories of the love affairs between the gods and the ordinary people. The gods were thrilled to see themselves, and every young mortal dreamt of being chosen by the gods. The crowd was captivated.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Imogen Greenberg, *Athena: The Story of a Goddess*, ill. Isabel Greenberg, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 30.

Athena, furious, tears Arachne's tapestry apart, and turns the girl into a spider: "If you like weaving so much, you can weave forever!"<sup>18</sup> But soon she regrets her actions, and forever is terrified of spiders, "because they reminded her of the worst thing she had ever done".<sup>19</sup> This interesting version of the myth presents the competition as one between two artistic egos – divine and mortal – in which nobody comes out well. *Athena: The Story of a Goddess* is presented as a coming-of-age story of a teenage Athena, in which the goddess learns and matures, on a sometimes rocky path to wisdom, and along the way discovers the responsibilities that go along with her powers. A similar approach is taken in Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams's "Goddess Girls" adventure *Athena the Brain* (2010), in which Athena's transformation of Arachne is a sign that she cannot control her own temper. Perhaps the moral of all these stories is that creativity (as represented by weaving) is of little use without self-control and good intentions.<sup>20</sup>

## Arachne

*Arachne boasts about being the best weaver, prompting Athena to challenge her to a contest. Arachne's superior tapestry depicts the failings of the gods, and as punishment Athena transforms the girl into a spider, whose webs will be appreciated by no one. A story about ambition and competition.*

**Retelling – Elisabeth Spires, *I Am Arachne: Fifteen Greek and Roman Myths*, ill. Mordicai Gerstein (2001)**

This chapter book collection allows Arachne and other well-known figures from classical myth to speak for themselves. The tone ranges from comical to tragic.

**Revision – Kate Hovey, *Arachne Speaks*, ill. Blair Drawson (2000)**

Told in free verse, this picture book casts Arachne as a rebellious teenager, who is given the chance to tell her own tale and lament her punishment.

**Adaptation – Stella Tarakson, *Arachne's Golden Gloves*, ill. Nick Roberts (2018)**

School boy Tim Baker meets Arachne when he travels back in time, with the help of a magical vase, to Ancient Greece. The enterprising spider has started a clothing shop, and is weaving gloves out of the Golden Fleece given to her by her boyfriend, Jason.

**Allusion – Joan Holub, *Good Job, Athena!*, ill. Leslie Patricelli (2016)**

In this board book for very young children, the little girl Athena is skilled at tying beautiful bows, but Arachne takes the credit.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion of weaving and creativity in children's literature inspired by the ancient world, see Miriam Riverlea, *My First Book of Greek Myths: Retelling Ancient Myths to Modern Children*, PhD dissertation, Monash University, 2017.

## Helen and Penelope

Weaving functions as a metaphor for storytelling in two young adult novels by Adèle Geras, *Troy* (2000) and *Ithaka* (2005), which retell events from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from the perspective of teenage characters. In *Troy*, a group of teenagers try to survive behind the walls of the besieged city in the final days of the Trojan War, observing the events of the main protagonists. In *Ithaka*, Klymene, a handmaiden of Penelope, observes the last days of the kingdom's waiting for Odysseus' return. Tapestries and weaving feature in both stories. In *Troy*, the tapestries on Helen's walls give context of the wider saga of the Trojan War, and, by implication, forge connections between mythic narratives. In *Ithaka*, Penelope's trick of weaving and unravelling the shroud of Laertes functions as a metaphor for the ongoing reworking of the mythic tradition. Klymene is herself woven into the story and takes over the task of unpicking the shroud so that Penelope can concentrate on the task of weaving Odysseus home, following the instructions of the goddess Athena, who has told her: "His life is in your hands, Penelope. It is bound up in the threads you have tied to your loom, and as long as you are here, unchanged and unchanging, he will come to no harm".<sup>21</sup> A moral dilemma occurs for this Penelope, who has fallen in love with her husband's old friend Leodes, but she faithfully carries out her task of weaving, despite distractions.

Geras's novels do not give faithful retellings of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but use them as a mixture of backdrop and context for her young characters, who are preoccupied with their own lives. Both are polyphonic, with multiple narrators telling the story – emphasizing the multiple stories of the Troy saga, many strands that are rewoven together to form Geras's retelling. In creating new characters, Geras weaves new stories into the fabric of the established story herself.

Further, Geras draws upon the Homeric tradition in representing both Helen and Penelope as individuals who weave stories as well as textiles. In different ways, both novels explore the relationship between words and pictures. In *Troy*, the walls of Helen's chambers are hung with her tapestries, created in an attempt to alleviate her boredom during the long years of the siege. "Time drags itself along like a wounded deer", Helen says, "so I am weaving pictures that tell stories".<sup>22</sup> These tapestries provide a means of introducing mythic episodes that

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<sup>21</sup> Geras, *Ithaka*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Adèle Geras, *Troy*, London: Scholastic, 2000, 23–24.

are beyond the scope of the immediate narrative – showing, for instance, how it all began, with a tapestry depicting the Judgement of Paris:<sup>23</sup>

*The background: reddish brown for earth; dark green for vine leaves, and foliage on trees; blue for the sky; gold thread for the stars*  
*Paris' tunic: dark blue*  
*Hera's robe: purple*  
*Athena's robe: white*  
*Aphrodite's robe: scarlet*  
*The apple: half pale pink, half pale green*<sup>24</sup>

Although only the stories of the Judgement of Paris and Iphigenia's sacrifice are described in detail, the reference frame of the tapestries extends beyond the tale of Troy, with one showing Theseus fighting the Minotaur and another depicting Europa on the back of Zeus. In this way, Geras envisages Helen's walls as a kind of mythic gallery, with the tapestries functioning as portals into different parts of the mythological corpus.

Similarly, in *Ithaka*, Penelope weaves vivid images of her husband's journey as she tries to weave him home. These images serve as prompts for narrative that tells the reader what Odysseus is doing at that moment, as in this extract, which shows the weaving connecting to the famous encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus:

*blue and green now*  
*a land full of grass for pasture*  
*caves high in the hills*  
*something dark on the mountain*  
*blue wool thin spun green*  
*one black thread for the ship*  
*weft warp forth back weft warp*  
*back forth warp weft back forth*  
*red red red yellow for the sun*  
*forth warp back weft*  
 The Cyclops Polyphemus lies asleep.  
 A fire burns and burns in the black cave  
 and flickers glad and scarlet in the dark.  
 Odysseus has in his hands a branch

<sup>23</sup> For the Judgement of Paris, see Homer, *Iliad* 24.25–30; Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.2.

<sup>24</sup> Geras, *Troy*, 24.

that glows white-hot from lying in the flames.  
He plunges it into the giant's head.  
The Cyclops screams and stumbles to his feet  
and writhes and groans and vainly tries to pluck  
from his huge, melting, suppurating eye  
the fiery spear on which he is impaled.  
Odysseus and his men wait for dawn.  
*thin watery blue egg white white*  
*back forth weft warp*  
*blue green more blue one black thread the ship*  
*back forth weft warp*  
*forth warp back weft*<sup>25</sup>

As in *Troy*, the tapestries function as a narrative prompt for recounting other parts of the story cycle. Penelope weaves the famous episodes from Odysseus' journey, his encounter with Polyphemus, the bag of winds, Circe, the Underworld, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and Calypso. Dreamy descriptions follow the metrical rhythm of the shuttle moving back and forth. Penelope, of course, is a woman, and this is a novel for young adults. But in a sign that she is given an active role in the story, Klymene takes over responsibility for unpicking the shroud of Laertes each night, easing Penelope's burdens, and enabling her to weave her husband home.

## Power and Storytelling

Weaving and spinning are such powerful acts that they can change the course of events, and bring stories into being.

Another famous example of weaving appears in the story of Philomela, the princess whose brother-in-law, King Tereus, captures and rapes her, before cutting out her tongue and imprisoning her. But Philomela has access to weaving, and she lets her sister, Procne, know what has been done to her, by weaving a tapestry depicting the tragic events. On seeing the tapestry, Procne secretly releases Philomela, and the two sisters take their revenge on the wicked king – in so horrifying a way (they kill Procne's son and feed him to his father, turning Tereus into a cannibal), that it is seldom we see this story retold in literature

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<sup>25</sup> Geras, *Ithaka*, 42.

for young readers (see discussion of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* [1999] in "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects").

The ancient myths are full of powerful women, but they find themselves in difficulties, and weaving is a useful way to give them a voice.

In the literature we focus on, of course, contemporary writers have found many ways to explore women's and girls' agency – giving them their own stories, showing them gaining their powers, and using them to good effect. Figures like Atalanta, Pandora, Medusa, Helen, Persephone, and more have found new roles in literature, and the literature continues the work of interpreting their stories in new ways. The act of storytelling, for women and for men, is important, and ongoing, as are the weaving and interweaving of new and old ideas that we see in these works – even the smallest and slightest book has something interesting to say, and to add to the great tapestry of literature. And in taking that idea further, we conclude this chapter by looking at one of the smallest, and slightest, but perhaps the most interesting, of all the weavers we discover in literature for children, namely, Charlotte A. Cavatica, the spider-heroine of E.B. White's children's classic, *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

This children's novel is not overtly classical, in that it does not claim explicitly to recast any myths or reclaim any particular classical figures. But it is profoundly Arcadian in spirit, exploring the world of the pastoral, being set in a cosy farm in the US state of Maine, being concerned with the cycles of the seasons, and of life, and in featuring a descendant of Arachne in the figure of Charlotte, who uses her spinning and weaving powers to write, quite literally, words that save the life of her friend, the young pig, Wilbur, whose life is often in peril.

*Charlotte's Web* is a story of friendship and sacrifice, of creativity and ingenuity, set in a barnyard among a group of creatures habitually overlooked and undervalued – a runty piglet (continually under threat of slaughter), a spider easily going unnoticed in its beams, an unpleasant and greedy rat who forages in the waste, noisy geese, and silly sheep. But in that world, White shows that matters of great import occur. Wilbur, initially rescued from the farmer's axe by his daughter, Fern, is but a child, vulnerable because his use-value is minimal, at least according to the economy of the farm. Charlotte watches from her place in the rafters, and consoles the scared piglet by talking with him, and sharing ideas about how the world is run. Eventually, she works out a plan to save the pig, and weaves a magnificent web in which she has spun the words "SOME PIG".<sup>26</sup> These words are seen as a sign that Wilbur is a marvel, and his value

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<sup>26</sup> E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*, New York, NY: Harper, 1952, 73.

to the farm increases exponentially, attracting visitors from miles around. Charlotte has to keep up the words, however, having created a demand for her stories, and with the rat's help in finding old pieces of newspaper advertisements, comes up with new phrases to tell the world about the wonderful pig, such as "RADIANT".<sup>27</sup> In a final, touching scene, when Wilbur has been taken to the fair for showing off, Charlotte comes up with a last phrase to ensure the pig's place in the farm: "HUMBLE".<sup>28</sup> She spins the life out of herself, leaving herself only enough energy to lay her eggs and spin an egg sac for them, and she dies. In gratitude, Wilbur carries the egg sac home in his mouth (no easy task) and makes sure that the eggs hatch. His place in the farm is assured – as a pig both radiant and humble, he is enough of a marvel never to be slaughtered for meat.

Holly Blackford sees in *Charlotte's Web* a connection to the Eleusinian mysteries of Persephone's journey to the Underworld – it is a story about growth, fertility, life, motherhood, and death.<sup>29</sup> This is a persuasive reading. But as well as that, it is a story about literary creativity, and about the power of weaving and spinning a story so strong that it defeats death itself. Charlotte's pulling her thread out of her abdomen is an apt metaphor for the energy and commitment it takes to make a story, to write the truth, and to create new worlds. Like her forebear, Arachne, she is egotistical – telling Wilbur about her greatness, but she also lives up to it. Like Penelope, she is patient, weaving the world towards her.<sup>30</sup>

### Getting Crafty

*There are many books in the market that encourage hands-on, direct engagement with the ancient world via activities and tactile experiences.*

📖 Laurie M. Carson, *Classical Kids: An Activity Guide to Life in Ancient Greece and Rome* (1998)

📖 Sue and Steve Weatherill, *Creative Fun: Greek Activity Book* (2006)

📖 Alison Hawes, *Go Greek!* (2010; activity book with recipes, pottery, costumes)

📖 Lisa Jane Gillespie, *Sticker Greek Myths*, ill. Emi Ordás (2014)

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<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 138.

<sup>29</sup> Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone*, 157–179.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Deacy, "'From the Shadows': Goddess, Monster, and Girl Power in Richard Woff's *Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient Greece*", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 177–196.

X

marks the spot





As any good mapmaker knows, X marks the spot on a map where treasures lie waiting to be found. X is the spot where stories take us, or where stories end, and it can show up anywhere – in civilization or wilderness, indoors or outdoors, in the home or abroad, in fanta-

sy and reality. For the purposes of this volume, X is also the spot that shows how classical storytelling moves, around the world and through time. Classical stories and figures move to different parts of the world, both by virtue of who is telling a story, where they are telling it from, and where they set it. How they change, or remain the same, in the locations of story and storytelling is an important part of classical reception, and of course of children's literature as well. Digging into a text can reveal classical treasure; digging for classical material can reveal new wonders too.

To take an Australian example, in *Loving Athena* (1997), a young adult coming-of-age novel by Joanne Horniman, nineteen-year-old poet Keats walks through the streets of Lismore, a small town in northern New South Wales. He is accompanied by Euterpe, the muse of poetry, who appears to him in visions, and offers advice and commentary on his day-to-day life. Keats is aware this is strange – what is an Ancient Greek muse doing in 1990s Lismore anyway – but his life is full of mythical apparitions. He lives in a hippie commune called Elysian Farm (a real place, but fictionalized in the novel), and he is in love with Etta, a new girl in town, who he has decided is a version of Athena, struck by her beauty and courage. Keats feels an instant bond with Etta-Athena, sensing that she has felt loss and grief just as he has (his mother abandoned him as a child). Eventually she reveals that she is grieving the death of her best friend, Artemis, who died of cancer before Etta and her family moved to Lismore. As Keats thinks about life, love, and coming of age, he finds a way to integrate the mythical into the everyday, and to understand his own life in the process.

*Loving Athena* has many typical elements of Australasian young adult novels that incorporate classical mythology into their stories about young people growing up. In such novels, figures from ancient mythology help young protagonists face challenges. Sometimes the challenges are framed in the context of particular myths; sometimes particular mythical figures provide a sounding board for young figures. Similarly, New Zealand author Margaret Mahy uses mythical resonances to help think about the challenges of growing up in dysfunctional

families, or working out what to do with unusual abilities or talents in a local setting. Her novel *Memory* (1987), also about the coming of age of an artistic young man, shows its dancer protagonist, Jonny Dart, overcoming post-traumatic stress disorder following the death of his sister. He meets Sophie, an old woman suffering from dementia, and cares for her. In her fragmented memories and oracular utterances he finds connection to Sophia, the Greek goddess of wisdom. Jonny is a kind of Dionysian figure, dancing erratically through the night-time Underworld of Christchurch, a city in the South Island of New Zealand. In these novels, then, X marks the spot, in New Zealand and Australia, showing that classical influences range widely around the world in stories written by authors who are conscious of their literary heritage. But these myths are not brought there lightly – they are carefully chosen to illuminate the conditions and problems that the young protagonists are dealing with. Nevertheless, myth shows up in surprising places, connecting towns in the far Southern Hemisphere to the classical tradition of the Mediterranean.

### Surprise Encounters

*A number of books feature mythic characters popping up in unexpected places, far from Greece and Rome.*

- 📖 New Zealand author Margaret Mahy brings a Roman *lemur* to suburban Christchurch in *The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance* (1984).
- 📖 Toni and Slade Morrison's *Who's Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (ill. Pascal Lemaître; 2003) transports Aesop's talking animals to Central Park in New York.
- 📖 In Diana Wynne Jones's *The Game* (2007), the Pleiades and their children are living in a chaotic, run-down mansion in Ireland.
- 📖 Japanese graphic novelist Mari Yamazaki's *Thermae Romae* (2012) features a Roman bath designer who travels by a magical underwater portal to modern Japan and is inspired to reinvent his career by modifying Japanese bathroom gadgets for Roman contexts.
- 📖 Achilles makes an unexpected appearance in the mountain settlement Jindabyne, Australia, in Kendare Blake's *Mortal Gods* (2014).
- 📖 In David Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014), Orpheus appears in the industrial town of Newcastle, Northumberland.
- 📖 In Connie Collins Morgan's *Hercules on the Bayou* (2016), illustrated by Herb Leonhard, the hero's Labours are played out in the swamps of Louisiana.

Place names such as "Elysian Farm" show that classical references are part of Australian settler culture, and that the heritage is more than merely literary. Other Australian authors show that the heritage is cultural – in stories connecting

with Greek migration to the country. In Irini Savvides's *Willow Tree and Olive* (2001), another novel that focuses on overcoming past trauma, Greek-Australian teenager Olive encounters the goddess of wisdom Sophia, and finds help resolving an anxiety disorder. She discovers that she has repressed the memories of a childhood assault, and travelling to Greece, where the assault occurred, she meets the goddesses Sophia and Athena on a mountain hike, where the process of healing is enabled. More than Mahy or Horniman, Savvides highlights the connection of specifically Greek heritage to Australia, which has a sizeable population of Greek Australians. Nadia Wheatley's short story "Melting Point" (1994), in which another Greek-Australian teenager translates Ovid's Fall of Icarus in her Latin class, shows a girl with Greek heritage thinking about what it means to be an immigrant, participating in more than one culture at a time. "Melting Point" ends with Xenia taking a Sydney ferry with her *Yiayia* (her Greek grandmother). The waters of Sydney harbour connect in her mind with the waters of the Mediterranean, and she makes a point that the ocean connects all worlds on earth, be they ancient or modern, northern or southern, real or imaginary.<sup>1</sup>

Stories like these highlight how far classical myth travels, both in the world and in the mind – its universality applies neatly to all kinds of situations that young people find themselves in, wherever they may be situated in the modern, or ancient, world. And the universality or timelessness of classical referents enables writers from places the world over to apply them, knowing they will be understood, but also that they can reflect (gently or directly) on how different places receive classical material in differing ways.

Thus, Bruce Coville's *Juliet Dove, Queen of Love* (2003) reflects on the nature of love by drawing on the myth of Cupid and Psyche in a story set firmly in an American seaside town where the pressures of fitting in, having friends, and achieving success are highlighted. Or Anne Ursu's "The Cronus Chronicles" (2006–2010) show a pair of cousins, one from the Midwest of the United States, and one from the United Kingdom, teaming up to help Hades battle a horde of rebellious shades. Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (2005–2009) series pushes this line more strongly still, arguing that throughout time the battle between the light (Olympians) and the dark (Titans) replays itself, and is focused in different parts of the world. In his series, the battle takes place in the United States – an America whose global dominance is attributable

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<sup>1</sup> See Miriam Riverlea, "'Icarus Is Seventeen, Like Me': Reworking Myth in Young Adult Fiction", *Melbourne Historical Journal* 40.2 (2012), 26–44.

to its hosting the Olympians, but one that is under threat from the powers of darkness.

Mari Yamazaki's whimsical graphic novel *Thermae Romae* (2012) brings Ancient Rome and modern Japan into contact, when a Roman bath designer named Lucius travels through a magical underwater portal into a Japanese bathhouse. This popular series shows Lucius learning from Japanese bath innovations and becoming increasingly successful back in Rome as he applies his learning, rising to become Emperor Hadrian's designated designer, but also becoming involved in political intrigue. Yamazaki points out the parallels between the bath-obsessed Romans and Japanese, including their polytheistic societies. Here, X marks the spot where two cultures overlap, to interesting comic effect, but also showing how shining a light from different angles reveals fresh elements of the ancient world. Classical mythology appears in a number of Japanese manga, including the popular teen-romance series "A Centaur's Life" (2011–present) by Kei Murayama, featuring the daily life of a centaur schoolgirl, Himeno Kimihara. The series is set in an alternative world, mostly like ours, but populated with mythical creatures such as centaurs, satyrs, demons, and alicorns. Here, X has much in common with "S is for Speculation", showing the role that imagination and fantasy have in bringing the mythical to new places around the world.

But the Greeks and Romans did not conquer the whole world, and there are rich mythical traditions the world over. Another aspect of our "X Marks the Spot" involves the way that writers connect classical and local traditions. Māori writer Witi Ihimaera's crossover novel *The Whale Rider* (1987) highlights the parallels between Māori and classical myth in the story of Paikea, a girl who inherits the ability to ride whales, in the manner of Kahutia Te Rangi, the son of a chief of Hawaiki. Ihimaera explicitly links the journeys of Kahutia Te Rangi with those of Odysseus – a "Pacific version of Odysseus", a link that ennobles and puts in contexts the myths of both hemispheres, a link too that highlights how firmly myths can be located in specific places – the sea, above and below water, the land, the skies. Another New Zealander, Karen Healey, for instance, intertwines classical myth with Māori myth. The heroine of Healey's *Guardian of the Dead* (2010), Classics student Ellie, uses her interest in mythology to help her when she is drawn into a plot involving Māori fairies, the Patupaiarehe, who are scheming to shake up New Zealand and cause major destruction through a series of earthquakes.

### **A Southern Studies Perspective?**

As writers living and working in the Southern Hemisphere, we are aware that the subject we study is dominated by a Northern Hemisphere perspective. Much, indeed most, of the scholarship in classical reception studies is produced and read in Europe and North America, and the mythology of Greek and Rome, of course, comes from that part of the world. But there is a vibrant tradition of classical scholarship in Australia and New Zealand (the countries we come from), and children's literature production and scholarship are also flourishing in our countries.

Nevertheless, when we began this project, finding children's literature from Australasia that drew on classical material felt like going on an archaeological dig – we were working from clues and hints, particularly because the publications we were finding were often not obviously, or directly, written to educate children about the classical world. Instead, we found that the classical tradition was thriving in fantasy literature, in moments of adaptation and allusion, whereby mythology was woven into texts otherwise located in our part of the world. Some texts were easy to find, because they did have classical names in the titles: *Loving Athena* (1997), by Joanne Horniman, or *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* (2004), by Jennifer Cook. Some texts we knew about because of our prior work – for instance, the work of Margaret Mahy, the great New Zealand writer of fantasy who incorporated mythical elements into her young adult fantasies but did not draw attention to those elements in her titles. Sometimes we found texts through conversations with other scholars and writers – for example, the novels of Ursula Dubosarsky, who trained as a Latin teacher before she became a writer, have subtle but compelling classical elements. Works like these seldom promote their mythical origins, and so blurbs and library catalogues are less useful than they might seem. And perhaps because of the nature of the Australasian literary marketplace, which until recently has tended to emphasize works with a local focus, the classical inspiration of texts was not considered a major selling point.

That has changed in recent years, perhaps because of the boom in children's literature publishing globally and because of the nature of global publishing in general. Furthermore, because of the market-changing role of works like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) and Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" series (2005–2009), there was renewed interest in fantasy, along with a renewed interest in mythology and folklore. Currently, promoting a text's classical origins is more likely to make it saleable. Trends change quickly in children's and young adult publishing, and the mythical world in children's literature is on-point, in our part of the world as well as elsewhere.

Is Australasian children's literature distinctive? We believe so: certain themes predominate – an interest in place (the places we live and our relationship to them, as well as the places that other people come from, and the differences and connections expressed therein); a concern about heritage (both Indigenous and settler heritage, with all that these different lines imply); a concern to express the diverse cultures of our countries, and continually to be

working out what it means to be from where we are. (This is not to say that other cultures are not working out similar issues.) Authors of children's and young adult literature from our part of the world are highly aware of the impact of colonialism and are part of the conversation that is reforming society through enhanced understanding of ways to challenge the status quo. This political aspect of classical reception cannot be underestimated: writers are not uncritically adopting classical tropes, but use them to challenge assumptions about hierarchy and canon.

It was important to us to include texts from multiple cultures, within some limits: we are aware that there are strong traditions of classical reception in children's literature in non-English-speaking countries, but we were limited by our own language in what we could usefully discuss, and so have only been able to consider works that have been translated into English. (For readers wanting to explore further, the *Our Mythical Childhood Survey* is a useful place to start, and the scholarly publications from that project also provide very interesting analysis of reception in multiple language traditions and cultures.) There is clearly scope for much more work in this field!



## Cross-Cultural Anthologies

*Every culture has its own myths. Many storytellers have sought to tie them together by theme or geography.*

- ▣ Geraldine McCaughrean, *The Golden Hoard* (1995; others in the series: *The Silver Treasure* and *The Bronze Cauldron*)
- ▣ Maurice Saxby, *The Millennium Book of Myth and Story*, ill. John Winch (1997)
- ▣ Korwin Briggs, *Gods and Heroes: Mythology around the World* (2018)
- ▣ Thiago de Moraes, *MythAtlas: Maps and Monsters, Heroes and Gods from Twelve Mythological Worlds* (2018)
- ▣ Vita Murrow, *High-Five to the Hero*, ill. Julia Bereciartu (2019)

## Encircling the World

Mythical traditions encircle the world, and links and parallels between them can be found in creation myths and aetiological stories – the Australian Aboriginal creation story of the Seven Sisters, young women chased into the sky by a hunter whose journey can be traced across the vast continent of Australia, has parallels with the myth of the Pleiades, nymphs in the train of Artemis chased by the hunter Orion.<sup>2</sup> In Māori, the constellation is known as Matariki, the eyes of the

<sup>2</sup> Hale and Foka, "Myths of Classical Education in Australia".

god of the winds Tawhirimatea, who flung them there out of rage at the separation of earth and sky. European writers, such as British children's and young adult fantasy writer Diana Wynne Jones, explore the resonances of these myths, showing the constellations operating in mythical and modern contexts – in her case connecting with life in contemporary Ireland in her novel *The Game* (2007). Whatever their name, the constellation that makes up the Pleiades can be seen in all hemispheres (likely accounting for the wealth of associated myths).

Finding and exploring the parallels and contrasts between different mythical traditions show the inventiveness and inquisitiveness of writers and illustrators around the world. They show the reach and influence of classical culture. They also show writers and illustrators using their imaginations, thinking comparatively, thinking questioningly, and raising awareness of the similarities and differences among mythical and cultural traditions. X, in these cases, shows the crossing of paths, the way that myth moves from place to place, culture to culture, and mind to mind. In television, film, and gaming series we can also see another kind of path-crossing, through “mash-up” culture, whereby elements from different traditions are brought together, to create hybrid stories, often drawing on traditional formats but using a variety of deities, heroes, and villains – an approach that is also seen in children's and young adult fiction, such as Neil Gaiman's crossover novel *American Gods* (2001), in which gods from many countries (Nordic, Arab, African, Asian, European) have come to America, and have to band together against a common enemy. Informational texts, such as Anita Ganeri and David West's “Monster Fight Club” series (2012), mash up the myths by pitting gods and heroes from different cultures against one another – readers can play along, seeing, for instance, how Hades would fare in a fight against Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec god of the dead (in *Gods and Goddesses*), or Penthesilea the Queen of the Amazons would fight Hua Mulan, the Chinese warrior heroine (in *Heroes of Myths and Legends*). In the “Lumberjanes” series of comic adventures (2015–2020), the gods Artemis and Apollo cause trouble for an enterprising group of girl scouts in the American North West, but the scouts also find themselves encountering mythical figures from other traditions, such as Bigfoot, zombies, and even dinosaurs (see “G is for Girls and Boys”, “K is for Kidding Around”, “N is for Nature”). And in *The Subway Cyclops* (ill. Remus San Diego; 1995) by Marivi Soliven Blanco, two Filipino-American children solve the mystery of a glowing eye they see in the shadows of a Boston subway tunnel. Researching the myth of the Cyclops with the help of their knowledgeable nanny, Cordelia, and looking into the history of Boston transport system, they discover that the Cyclops is a track worker named Charlie, who lost an eye in the 1978

explosion of the Boylston tunnel, and has been living in the tunnels ever since. This story is one of several readers intended for Filipino-American children, helping them adjust to life in America, and showing them the kinds of history to be explored. X, then, is an interplay of place, culture, history, and imagination.

## Finding Mythical Realms

X does not have to refer to a real place, however. Finding X can take us into mythical realms, or bring them to us. In *Fire in the Sea* (2012), novelist Myke Bartlett brings the lost city of Atlantis to the Indian Ocean, off the west coast of Australia. A priestess of Atlantis seeking immortality has found it in the form of a magical talisman, and much of the action involves a chase to gain control of the talisman. The heroine, Sadie, a recently orphaned Perth teenager, comes into possession of the talisman, and with the help of her friends overcomes the wicked priestess, releasing her slaves (including a powerful Minotaur), and restoring order.

### Atlantis

*First mentioned by Plato, the fictional island of Atlantis has become popular in literature as a model of utopian (and dystopian) society, travelling around the world and appearing in many forms.*

#### **Retelling – Christina Balit and Geoffrey Ashe, *Atlantis: The Legend of a Lost City* (1999)**

Drawing on ancient sources, this picture book brings the underwater city to life in evocative, vibrantly coloured illustrations.

#### **Revision – Allyson Braithwaite Condie, *Atlantia* (2015)**

This young adult fantasy novel tells the story of Rio, a girl from Atlantis, who has the secret powers of a Siren to make others do her bidding, and longs to visit the world Above.

#### **Adaptation – Myke Bartlett, *Fire in the Sea* (2012)**

An example of intrusion fantasy, in which the city of Atlantis and other mythological elements invade the West Australian city of Perth, and must be overcome by sixteen-year-old Sadie, who is grieving the death of her parents in a car crash.

#### **Allusion – Danielle Jawando, *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly* (2020)**

A confronting young adult novel addressing themes of bullying, suicide, and the impacts of social media on the mental health of young people. This novel touches upon the mythological aspects of astronomy and links the death of Al, the protagonist's brother, to the disappearance of the city of Atlantis.

## The Sirens: Mythical Mermaids

*Whether monstrous, cursed, or alluring, these sea creatures, drawn from the story of the Odyssey, are invariably popular in many forms of children's literature, from picture books and story anthologies to young adult fiction and graphic novels.*

- 📖 Donna Jo Napoli, *Sirena* (2000)
- 📖 Peter Stuart, *Sirens* (2004)
- 📖 Mary Schulte, *Sirens* (2008)
- 📖 Tamra Orr, *The Sirens* (2011)
- 📖 Anna Banks, "The Syrena Legacy" series (2012–2014)
- 📖 George Perez, *George Perez's Sirens* (2015)

In bringing Atlantis to Australia, Bartlett is like Rick Riordan, who brings Olympus to the United States in his "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" series (2005–2009), featuring Percy Jackson and friends. In this series, Olympus moves around the world according to where the seat of cultural power is: the Olympians take up residence in New York's Empire State Building, a symbol of American cultural achievement, and adventures take Percy around the country (for example, meeting the goddess Athena at the Hoover Dam, on the border between Nevada and Arizona). Both writers are exploiting a common trope in fantasy fiction whereby real and fantasy worlds are closer at hand than we imagine. Ordinary places become infused with the glamour and magic of fantasy realms. In these cases, they show how the magical and the mundane exist close at hand, offering young readers exciting ways of infusing the imagination into the ordinary world. This is not to say that non-classical parts of the world do not possess magic of their own. Of course, Modern Greek and Italian culture retain exciting associations with the mythical world, through the ruins of ancient buildings, through place names, heritage, and memory, and indeed through living mythical traditions. Some parts of the world, colonized in the past by the Greeks and Romans, retain echoes of their traditions, and classical mythology may also intertwine with local myth and folklore. For readers from non-classical parts of the world, the appeal of travelling to Europe, for instance, is access to that tradition, and logic and history mean that X does have some more obvious places to start. For instance, Australian novelist Belinda Murrell's novel for young teenagers *The Golden Tower* (2021), takes a young Australian girl, Sophie, to an alternative world, the Remulan empire, by means of a mysterious cave, paved with a Roman mosaic. When she encounters the cave and the mosaic, Sophie is in England on a family holiday, rather than at home in Australia.

Similarly, another Australian novel, Anna Ciddor's *The Boy Who Stepped through Time* (2021), takes a boy named Perry to Ancient Rome while he is on a family holiday in France.

X can also stand for mystery and the unaccountable, places that are unknowable, fictional, mythical, and simply made-up. In "U is for Underworld Adventures" we discuss how the Underworld is one version of an ultimate fantasy world. Greeks and Romans, and writers and illustrators for generations after, enjoy depicting the different areas of the Underworld. Olympus itself is often less described in myth, mainly being presented as an idyllic pastoral realm high above the clouds, though writers enjoy showing the adventures of ordinary children on Olympus, consorting with gods. Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams's "Goddess Girls" series (2010–present), of course, imagines Olympus as a superior high school for adolescent goddess girls and god boys. Lucy Coats's "Beasts of Olympus" series (2015–2018) features Demon, a child of Pan, who is apprenticed to look after the mythical beasts of heroic exploits: here, Olympus is a kind of Arcadian space – a back stage to the adventures of heroic figures. (Here, X stands for the place where adventures are possible and can be made to happen.)

## The Paradoxes of X

The shape of the letter X reflects its paradoxes – it is both a pinpoint and a crossing-over: the myths are both fixed and open to interpretation and modification. You know where you are with a classical myth, because it is so instantly recognizable, but you can also find it popping up in unusual places, and appearing in surprising forms. That is the power of being influential, and of being key figures in a dominating and colonizing culture – as Western civilization spread, it took its myths with it into its various empires and colonies. But no empire is forever – as we know from the Greeks and Romans: they are open to challenge, or to collapse from within. And X takes us into that territory – in which assumptions are questioned and images are altered and modified. Stories about the gods' fading influence abound, showing the limits of their power, and showing how new versions and ideas arise. Excitingly, children's and young adults' fiction (especially young adults' fiction) is pushing X into crossings-over of many cultures from around the world, from First Nations myths to European fairy tales. Perhaps in recognition of readers' need to hear voices from a multitude of cultures, we see imprints such as the "Rick Riordan Presents" series publishing young adult fantasy novels inspired by global mythology (to date: Hindu, Aztec,

Mayan, Cuban, West African, African-American, Mexican, Korean, Ghanaian, Navajo, Mesopotamian, and Hmong).

We also see writers such as Sydney young adult novelist Will Kostakis, himself Greek-Australian, building on the idea of an ancient cosmology in his fantasy duology *Monuments* (2019) and *Rebel Gods* (2020). In *Monuments*, Sydney teenager Connor joins with new friends Sally and Locky, to save the “Monuments”, a set of gods who are protecting the world from chaos. To do so, they themselves must become gods, and in *Rebel Gods*, their newfound powers are tested when a group of rebel gods throw the world into chaos. Who can be trusted with the power of a god? What happens if you suddenly become godlike? Where can new myths take you? Stories like these, and, indeed, most of the stories we discuss in our book, show that X is moving on – the crossings-over of myth into modernity, its fluidity and flexibility in travelling around the world, as well as the inventiveness of writers for young readers, and the spirit of the imagination.

### ***The History of Mischief: How the Mythical Spirit Travels around the World***

Western Australian author Rebecca Higgie also shows the mythical spirit coming to Australia in her novel *The History of Mischief* (2020). In a corner of their grandmother’s library, orphaned sisters nine-year-old Jessie and twenty-year-old Kay find a book purporting to be written by “A Mischief”. It traces the voyage of the spirit of mischief from Ancient Greece to modern Australia, through the stories of an array of characters. The first story involves a child inspired by the Cynic philosopher Diogenes to access the spirit of mischief. Becoming a librarian at the great library of Alexandria, he writes down his story in a seemingly magical book that travels the world. As the girls read, they encounter new characters, also filled with the spirit of mischief, a spirit that enables them to move quickly and carry out extraordinary acts. The spirit travels through the ages to a Chinese woman warrior, a worker in a medieval Polish salt mine, an Ethiopian interpreter who travels to Britain, a French seamstress who sews silk for a balloonist, and more. The spirit of mischief is always mysterious; it is never clear how it reaches new characters, and yet it retains the magical qualities of insight and quickness.

The sisters are entranced: how did the book come to them, and who wrote it? Jessie is precocious and determined and tracks the book’s production... to their own grandmother, now in a nursing home. The spirit of mischief turns out to be a projection: as a young woman, fleeing the tragedy of her late teenage years (a forbidden romance with an Aboriginal boy resulting in an unintended pregnancy and his death), she had used her imagination to write new lives for her neighbours (Greek, Polish, Chinese, African, French).

In *The History of Mischief*, the classical spirit of mischief seems akin to the impishness of Pan or Hermes, one with the legs of a goat, the other with wings at his heels. An unaccountable spirit of levity and cynicism. Here, it is linked to the philosopher Diogenes, a Cynic who knew the power of irony and of laughter (and that laughter is not always kind). In the novel's employment of fantasy, magic, imagination, history, and storytelling, Higginson conveys the spirit of X as we have identified it – showing how myth and the imagination travel the world, entwined with history, places, and culture, and appearing in different, but recognizable, forms on its journey.



### Further Reading

Nina Goga and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, eds., *Maps and Mapping in Children's Literature: Landscapes, Seascapes and Cityscapes*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017.  
 Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019.



Y



is for young adulthood

# Y

is for young adulthood



We are drawing near to the end of our *Alphabetical Odyssey*, and so it feels appropriate to return to some of the important concepts raised throughout the book – but with a slight difference. Early in our journey, in “C is for Childhood”, we explored the special affinity

that the young have with the world of myth, and throughout the volume we have looked at how the stories of classical myth are infinitely adaptable for retelling to (and by) young audiences. Youth has its divisions – in publishing, there are almost as many categories as years of childhood (board books for infants, picture books for pre-schoolers, and readers for those entering primary school, moving on to chapter books for older readers, then transitioning to novels and graphic novels for tweens and young adults). Childhood gives way to adolescence, and children’s books change their style as they adapt to older readers. We now focus on young adulthood – commonly defined as the years from thirteen to nineteen – the teenage years, in other words, years marked by certain ideas about growing up, coming of age, finding oneself, and planning for one’s future.

Where the world of children’s literature is almost timeless, in that it concentrates ideas about the literary child into the space of childhood where the pressures of future adulthood do not intrude, in young adult fiction, the relationship between youth and adulthood is fraught because growing up is so visible, and entry into adult society so imminent. How to fit in? What roles are possible? What roles are daunting or restrictive? How to understand oneself and one’s place in the world? Literature is here to help, giving expression to these ideas, and using narrative, art, and other forms, to help think through what it means to be young, and facing the world. So too is mythology: its stories are full of trials and challenges, and offering ways of thinking through ideas about the world and our place in it (see “D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects”; “P is for Philosophical Approaches”).

While children’s stories are generally simple, young adult literature explores topics in greater depth. Young adult readers have mostly developed an appetite for longer narratives and more sophisticated engagement with ideas. Longer stories are not necessarily more complex than shorter ones, but they have the scope to range more widely, and young adult treatments of classical myth are frequently more intense than those written for younger readers. They are also more private. While children’s books, especially picture books, are often designed to be read aloud or performed, as part of a shared reading and listening

experience (imagine a parent reading to a child, or a teacher to a group of students), young adult literary forms are aimed at individual, internal experiences (imagine a silent reader, absorbed in the story unfolding in front of their eyes).

Alongside the literary approach are certain major preoccupations in the young adult genre. The experience of being young is key, especially as it connects to identity, growing up, and relationships. Seeing how protagonists learn to navigate the delicate dynamics of friendships, managing struggles with family members and authority figures, as well as surviving the private and public agonies of school, could be useful for young readers, even if only for the feeling that someone else understands what they are going through. Romance and sexuality are a key part of this coming of age – how to handle romance, how to understand one's sexuality, both in terms of maturation, and in terms of sexual identity and orientation. These concerns are given new perspectives within stories with ancient-world contexts, but many show that the experiences of teenagers are in fact universal. Regardless of the specific emphasis of a young adult novel, balancing individuality with diversity, finding one's way in a complicated world is something all protagonists have to do (and so do we all). Unlike in children's literature, where parents, guardians, or teachers can appear as stable figures of authority, in young adult fiction, the tension between the teenage protagonists' needs and the expectations of the adult world means that every novel is a fraught journey – towards empowerment and understanding, certainly, but also one that goes through peril on the way (see "J is for Journeys").

Some young adult fiction pulls it all together, showing just how full of issues and challenges life is. Francesca Lia Block's *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013) features a cast of characters with diverse sexual identities, ethnicities, and class backgrounds. This dystopian novel, which appropriates narrative and thematic elements of Homer's *Odyssey*, is set in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. A devastating earthquake and tsunami have caused widespread destruction, and a genetic experiment gone wrong has unleashed a group of flesh-eating giants into the ruined city. Like Odysseus, the spirited heroine Pen (short for Penelope) is searching for her lost family and a new home. She is joined by a trio of companions: the warrior Hex, who becomes her lover, the musician and model Ash, and the artistic, sensitive Ezra. Hex's transsexual identity – he was once female – is one element of his complex character, and Pen's past bisexual encounters help to shape their intense connection. The chaotic backdrop of the novel highlights the mutability of mythic motifs – Block populates Los Angeles with one-eyed giants, drug-addled Lotus Eaters, alluring Sirens, witches who used to be television stars, and more. In the face of this, relationships between Block's young

characters reveal the enduring importance of courage, steadfastness, and the family unit – whatever form it takes. But at its core the novel's focus on Pen's journey is traditional, emphasizing her development from fear to confidence, from dependence to maturity, and from anxiety to self-acceptance.

These are key elements in young adult fiction, and even the Olympian gods are not immune to adolescent angst. Imogen and Isabel Greenberg's *Athena: The Story of a Goddess* (2018) presents the coming of age of the goddess Athena, stringing together key episodes from myths about the goddess into a narrative that takes her from birth to maturity and shows her developing sensitivity and wisdom, and learning to control her temper. For instance, the famous episode with Arachne (discussed in "W is for Weaving") shows Athena overcome with shame at her treatment of the mortal weaver, and determined to do better in the future. It is rare in the Greek myths that a god learns a moral lesson, but in young adult fiction, with its didactic slant, and its aims to help teenagers think through how to get along with others, and to be comfortable with one's self, even a goddess may need to come of age. Rick Riordan teaches Apollo a lesson in his series "The Trials of Apollo" (2016–2020), perhaps viewing the god, commonly presented as arrogant and spoiled, as in need of chastisement: in the opening novel, *The Hidden Oracle* (2016), Apollo is punished by Zeus and reborn in the awkward, flabby body of mortal teenager Lester Papadopoulos. As a god, Apollo was perfect in every way, yet flawed by his arrogance. As Lester, he is humbled by being trapped in the imperfect body of a mortal: the novel charts his journey towards self-acceptance, courage in the face of fear, and loyalty to his friends.

### Phaethon

*Phaethon begs his father to let him drive the Chariot of the Sun across the sky, but Helios refuses, saying he is too inexperienced. Phaethon disobeys his father and steals the Chariot anyway, causing terror and destruction before tumbling to his death. Regularly cast as a cautionary tale about the need for children to be obedient, the myth has also been employed as a parable for the devastating impacts of climate change.*

**Retelling – Geraldine McCaughrean, *Phaeton and the Sun Chariot*, ill. Tony Ross (2001)**

A simple picture book retelling of the myth of Phaeton for young children that focuses on his spoilt and impetuous character.

**Revision – Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *PHEME the Gossip* (2013)**

Phaeton figures as a minor character in this instalment in the "Goddess Girls" series, which centres on the character of PHEME, goddess of rumour.

**Adaptation – Sabrina Malcolm, *Zeustian Logic* (2017)**

A young adult novel from New Zealand that engages with Greek myth and its influence on astronomy.

**Allusion – Rachel Sharp, *Phaethon* (2016)**

In this science-fiction novel for crossover readers, the Phaethon is the name given to an all-powerful smartphone device that, it emerges, is controlled by an ancient energy source.

Some of the ancient myths do reflect on the need for teenagers to mature, or to do what their parents tell them (not necessarily the same thing!). The myth of how Phaethon, the son of the sun-god, Helios, takes out his father's chariot without permission, like a naughty teenager borrowing the keys to his parent's car, is a cautionary tale that presents adolescents as unruly and heedless. Phaethon loses control of the horses who sense his inexperience, scorching the earth below, and himself falling to a grisly death. The story of how Icarus, the son of the inventor Daedalus, flew too close to the sun, is similar in scope. Both make their presence known in young adult literature, such as in Michael Cadnum's *Starfall: Phaeton and the Chariot of the Sun* (2004), in which the mortal Phaeton (*sic*) learns that trying to fly like a god is beyond what he is meant to do; or Paul Zindel's *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* (1984), in which a boy suffering from schizophrenia believes he is the reincarnation of Icarus, and that he can somehow solve the problems of the world by taking to flight. One set in the ancient world, one in the modern, these novels are tragic stories, emphasizing the value of having achievable goals – and indeed many young adult novels struggle with this particular trope: is it better to encourage adolescent ambition, or to promote rational goal setting? Is it better to encourage young readers to believe they can change the world, or to suggest that they accept its limitations? Scholars of young adult fiction, such as Roberta Seelinger Trites, suggest that young adult novels are caught up in an industry-wide hegemonic discourse that aims to produce docile readers – regardless of what a novel promotes (ambition or settling), the goal is to show teenagers how to fit in, and to become productive citizens rather than to soar rebelliously into brave new futures.<sup>1</sup> But young adults are not yet fully-fledged members of the workforce, and, as any outsider would be, are keenly observant of what is ahead of them, and wondering about how they will steer a path that suits them.

<sup>1</sup> See Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*.

## Myths of Transformation and Transition

While many stories of transformation connect to young adult fiction, works for younger readers also draw from the tales featured in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These stories about transformation can help children to manage change within their own lives.

- ▣ Antonia Barber, *Apollo and Daphne: Masterpieces of Greek Mythology* (1998)
- ▣ Adrian Mitchell, *Shapeshifters: Tales from Ovid's Metamorphoses*, ill. Alan Lee (2010)
- ▣ Anthony Horowitz, *Tricks and Transformations* (2012)
- ▣ Lisa Owings, *The Constellation Ursa Major: The Story of the Big Bear*, ill. J.T. Morrow (2014)

These tensions (about what kind of life the teenager will transition into) can be seen in all sorts of retellings. The story of Persephone, abducted by Hades and searched for by her mother, Demeter, connects strongly to the theme. For child readers, the story usually ends with Persephone happily reconciled with her mother for the months of spring and summer. For adolescents, the story is more complicated – Persephone's desires to stay with Hades are explored (as we discussed in "U is for Underworld Adventures"), and the story's pattern is a common trope in novels about teen romance, in which the allure of sexual partnership is framed as a trip to a forbidden but attractive world. Several, such as George O'Connor's graphic novel *Hades: Lord of the Dead* (2012), and Rachel Smythe's web comic *Lore Olympus* (2018–present), present Persephone as desirous of change, and eager to leave the shelter of an overprotective mother. A slightly different dilemma appears here: should parents let their children go, or keep them safe at home? What are the dangers? What are the benefits? Such novels may be almost as much about the adults in the novels adjusting to their children's maturation, allowing them to spread their wings, and giving them the freedom to fly, but also to fall.

Nostalgia for childhood is not generally something felt by children, as Maria Nikolajeva notes in *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children's Literature* (1991).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Perry Nodelman suggests, children's literature that is infused with nostalgia for childhood risks making children nostalgic for the very state in which they exist already.<sup>3</sup> But for teenagers, who are poised on the threshold of a new life, time's winged chariot hurries near, and some of them do resist, holding back from adulthood until they are ready. We have discussed how Peter Pan symbolizes that resistance to maturation in "T is for Time". Australian young adult novelist Margot McGovern draws on the idea of Peter Pan's island kingdom, Neverland, in her novel of the same name. In *Neverland* (2018), seventeen-year-old

<sup>2</sup> Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear*, 118.

<sup>3</sup> Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*, 46–47.

orphan Kit has attempted suicide at school, and is sent to her childhood home by the sea to recuperate. That home is an idyllic island, owned for generations by her wealthy family, and universally referred to as “Neverland”. In Kit’s mind, it is a place of magic and adventure, populated with mermaids, pirates, and sea monsters, and made famous in her author father’s bestselling book, *Kingdom by the Sea*. It was once the site of extravagant parties, but now Neverland has been transformed into a treatment facility and school for sick and damaged teenagers, known as the Lost Ones, under the care of Kit’s psychiatrist uncle, Doc, and his colleague. Kit discovers that far from being an idyllic retreat, the island is now a place of entrapment and pain, and furthermore that her idealized visions of her childhood are illusions masking a difficult past.

*Neverland* presents the challenges faced by teenagers as battles requiring fortitude and endurance, and does not shy away from difficult topics. Kit’s best friends are anorexic Gypsy Jones, who is still besotted with her actor ex-boyfriend, and sociopath Alistair Morden, who was Kit’s first friend on the island and still her casual lover. Now the senior kids on the island, the group resume their old habits, including smuggling cigarettes, drugs, and booze down to the lighthouse for all-night parties. The representation of the practicalities and emotional impact of acts of self-harm is confronting. McGovern has written that “challenging stories are vital because they promote empathy and show readers that they are not alone”, but there are moments when the book risks glamourizing Kit’s illness (see “D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects”). Indeed, glamour is a theme of the novel – Kit’s parents were dazzling, but the idyllic childhood she remembers is gradually revealed to be a falsehood, covering up Kit’s mother’s, Nerissa’s, own battles with bipolar disorder. Nerissa remains an obscure, distant figure in Kit’s memories in contrast to her charismatic, storytelling father, and it is painful for her to confront her mother’s rejection and remoteness. The book explores the allure of fantasy when the real world is difficult or frightening: ultimately, however, *Neverland* asserts that trauma can only be healed through direct confrontation, supported by therapy and medication.

### Adolescent Angst

*Drawing upon multiple mythic and historical narratives and featuring a variety of modern and ancient-world settings, these young adult novels confront the darker aspects of the teenage experience.*

📖 Jenna Black, *Dark Descendant* (2011)

📖 Jennifer Estep, *Touch of Frost* (2011)

📖 Andrea Domanski, *Pandora* (2015)

📖 Jennifer Derrick, *Broken Fate* (2015)

📖 Michelle Madow, *The Prophecy of Shadows* (2016)

This kind of young adult fiction is dark, and could be overwhelming, but McGovern gives Kit a thread to hold on to as she goes into the maze of her memories and emotions – and that thread is classical learning. Kit is a keen scholar of the ancient past, with knowledge of Greek and Latin that she uses to make her own translations of Homer’s poems. Throughout the novel she persistently draws connections between ancient texts and her own life, although they are not always accurate. In particular, she repeatedly invokes the *Odyssey* as the model for a courageous and arduous journey, with its hero cast as the prototypical pirate, both brave and wily. *Neverland* engages not only with Homer, but also with the tradition of the poem’s reception. Furthermore, *Neverland* explores nostalgia for a lost childhood, whether real or imaginary. As adults, we seek to reconnect with our lost youth by returning to the favourite books of our childhood.<sup>4</sup> McGovern describes the unsettling experience of rereading *Peter Pan* as an adult:

I was surprised by how dark it is and how different from the innocent bedtime story I remembered. Barrie’s *Neverland* is a frightening place and there’s a prevailing sense of melancholy throughout the narrative. I became intrigued by my misremembering.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes stories that do not frighten children do frighten adults – because adults know more, because adults are no longer innocent. If eternal youth were possible, would we reread our childhood favourites? Regardless, the thought of being trapped in an eternal childhood is difficult for most adults to properly contemplate, however much we might feel nostalgia for past times.

Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992), a crossover novel about wealthy Classics students at a New England college who re-enact Dionysian rites with disastrous effect, draws on a similar vein of inspiration to *Neverland*: the care-less callousness of wealth and youth. The novel is narrated by a middle-class observer, Richard, who watches as his new friends flirt with disaster, murdering Bunny, a hapless follower, during a Bacchanal ritual. Classical rites, which take mythology out of the stuffy classroom and out into the wild, connect with

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<sup>4</sup> See Alison Waller, *Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Lian Hingee, “Memory Trick: Margot McGovern on *Neverland*”, *Books and Publishing: Inside the Australian and New Zealand Publishing Industry*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2018/04/13/105221/memory-trick-margot-mcgovern-on-neverland> (accessed 12 November 2021).

rule-breaking and danger – another theme that is popular in young adult fiction. For adolescent readers, the protagonists overlay the glamour of carefree youth with the somewhat sinister shimmer of wild mythology – the allure of the classical world that sits outside of the rules of ordinary life.

We do not wish to give the impression that young adult literature is only concerned with difficulties and darkness, however. Indeed, it is a fascinating field, which demonstrates significant creativity, especially in the way that it uses traditional storytelling to make dramatic and innovative points. There is something about a story with a beginning, middle, and end, a connection to the traditional hero's journey, that draws readers in – providing a sense perhaps of reassurance – but also that allows writers to explore issues, character, and worlds. The exciting adventure stories, for instance, such as the *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) or the “Hunger Games” (2008–2010) novels, take us to narrative worlds in which protagonists start out small and grow powerful as they overcome trials (see “J is for Journeys” and “H is for How to Be Heroic”) – as with adolescents, they come of age as they grow and learn. A familiar structure allows writers to innovate with setting and character, and the sense of a satisfying ending (which is generally required in young adult fiction) means that readers have a sense of narrative direction. Thus, Harry Potter's encounters with Cerberus, phoenixes, hippogriffs, and dragons make sense as part of a fantasy narrative of adventure and maturation. Katniss Everdeen's rise to fame as the leader of a generation has a logic of its own in the “Hunger Games” series – and novels like these open up a sense of political engagement for young readers who are worrying about the state of the world, giving them a sense that they too could be part of a movement to do better. *Harry Potter* novels, for instance, have inspired fans of the series to become part of “Dumbledore's Army”, and to be active in social justice and political movements. So too has the “Hunger Games” series – even inspiring a sense of revolutionary hope in some parts of the world (see Thailand, for instance<sup>6</sup>). These novels' (and their films') impact on young audiences is not to be underestimated – especially because it reveals both how impressionable young readers are, and how ready to be inspired. They can be inspired creatively, as Katarzyna Marciniak shows in her investigation of classical

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<sup>6</sup> Ryan Gilbey, “How the *Hunger Games* Salute Is Fighting Oppression in Thailand”, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/shortcuts/2014/jun/02/hunger-games-salute-fighting-oppression-thailand-panem> (accessed 12 November 2021); Caleb Quinley, “Three-Finger Salute: *Hunger Games* Symbol Adopted by Myanmar Protesters”, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/three-finger-salute-hunger-games-symbol-adopted-by-myanmars-protesters> (accessed 17 November 2021).

fan fiction on the internet site fanfiction.net, in which young writers revise mythology and ancient literature, combine it with new stories, insert themselves into the ancient world, and express a sense of mythology's continued vibrant relevance to their lives.<sup>7</sup> In sites like fanfiction.net, we find a Californian thirteen-year-old's invocation to the Muse, based on the *Odyssey*:

O Muse of my heart, weave a song through me of the young woman  
of many places,  
The girl who brought to the advanced world dreams of another land.  
Guilty only of memories of a better time was she.  
In Claremont in the New World she stared freshman year in the face,  
Scared of seeing former friends bygone, of classmates in whose minds  
have forgot.<sup>8</sup>

Teenage readers and writers come together in sites like fanfiction.net in an explosion of creativity. In poems like these we see them reflecting on their lives, and drawing on mythology to do so. Mythology for them is living and vibrant, full of references and thought patterns that have meaning for them today. Marciniak quotes a Swedish teenager expressing her sense of this:

I see it here as well as in every art museum, in the movies, computer games, on the stages and the catwalks. The gods are still alive and vibrant around us in their own way.<sup>9</sup>

There are so many young adult novels inspired by classical mythology that this chapter can only skim the very surface of this marvellous field. But it is fitting that a young writer expresses so clearly the sense of relevance that mythology holds for teenagers, and that she does so in a way that connects to a key issue in young adults' lives, namely, the idea of "their own way". Teenagers are making their own ways into the world, and the literature expresses authors' sense of their needs and concerns, and exploring them through narrative and mythology. As we have written this book, and gone on this literary odyssey, we have found that the field we research is continually expanding, and this is especially the case in young adult fiction. And what is most distinctive of this field is the investigation of what it is like to be – well, anything, really – what

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<sup>7</sup> Marciniak, "Create Your Own Mythology".

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 447.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 450.

it is like to walk in others' shoes. So when we read young adult fiction, we find ourselves immersed in the minds of others – of writers and protagonists, and we visit their worlds. This means that we can find ourselves learning what it might be like to be a Harpy, as in Justina Ireland's novel *Promise of Shadows* (2014). Or what it is like to fall in love with Hades along with Persephone, as in Jennifer Cook's *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess* (2005), or Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus* (2018–present). We can slip into the shoes of a demigod by reading Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (2005–2009) series, or fly with Pegasus in Kallie George's "Wings of Olympus" (2019–2020) series and Kate O'Hearn's "Pegasus" series (2013–2017; vol. 1 ed. pr. 2011). Are these stories escapist? Perhaps, but in slipping into other worlds (and other minds) through literature, we also confront issues that connect with ourselves. And in the sheer variety of topics and storylines, young adult fiction encourages empathy, understanding, and fellow-feeling – that there is someone out there (the character, the author, other readers) who recognizes the references, and understands their meanings.

### Some Further Reading on Young Adult Literature

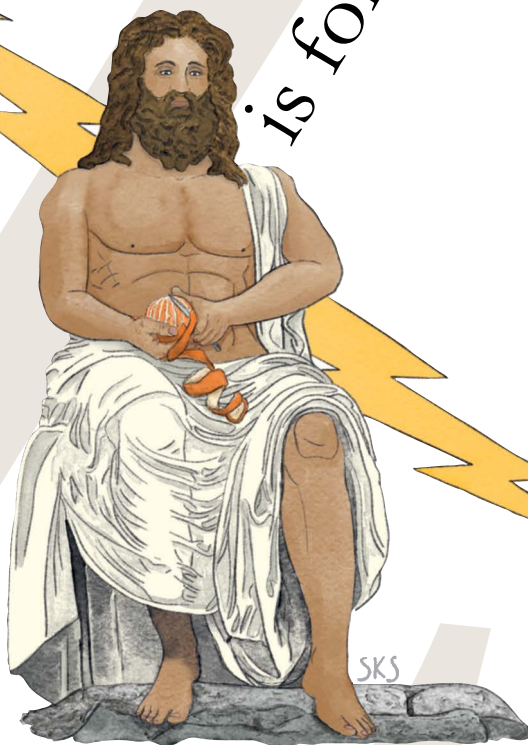
Lydia Kokkola, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013.

Paul Venzo and Kristine Moruzi, eds., *Sexuality in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021.



Z

is for zest



SKS

# Z

is for zest



The word *zest* comes from a fifteenth-century French word, “*zeste*”, for the membrane of an orange or lemon peel, a sense in which it is still used. It also is used to refer to the feelings of piquancy, freshness, enthusiasm, and sheer excitement – feelings that

we hope pervade our book, and notes that we want to end on. For in its freshness, liveliness, and pure sense of fun, children’s literature *is* full of zest. Our book celebrates the many beautiful, interesting, thought-provoking, instructive, well-intended, and carefully produced children’s books we have found while travelling on our *Alphabetical Odyssey*.

The zest (and zeal) with which writers, illustrators, retellers, and adapters approach classical literature is remarkable. Classical myths that seem familiar to us take on all sorts of new shapes, and perspectives. Classical figures appear in unexpected places; child characters find themselves unexpectedly participating in classical stories, helping the heroes, hindering the gods, or simply hanging out. Stories and images of myths and legends draw us in so fully to the world and experiences of ancient culture that we feel we belong there – that it is ours to share.

Edith Nesbit, the great fin-de-siècle children’s fantasist, and an extraordinarily zestful writer, shows the fun of playing with classical material in *The Enchanted Castle* (1907). In it, a group of children, stuck at school in the holidays owing to illness at home, find their way through a hole in the hedge of a grand estate nearby, and find there a magic ring that makes all sorts of interesting things happen. Not least, under a midnight moon, the statues on the estate come to life, and the children who become made of living marble themselves, join with a group of Olympian statues, and play with them, joining in a swimming-pool party and picnic:

On the further side of the pool was a large group, so white that it seemed to make a great white hole in the trees. Some twenty or thirty figures there were in the group all statues and all alive. Some were dipping their white feet among the gold and silver fish, and sending ripples across the faces of the seven moons. Some were pelting each other with roses so sweet that the girls could smell them even across the pool. Others were holding hands and dancing in a ring, and two were sitting on the steps playing cat’s-cradle which is a very ancient game indeed with a thread of white marble.

As the new-comers advanced a shout of greeting and gay laughter went up. "Late again, Phoebus!" someone called out. And another: "Did one of your horses cast a shoe?" And yet another called out something about laurels. "I bring two guests," said Phoebus, and instantly the statues crowded round, stroking the girls' hair, patting their cheeks, and calling them the prettiest love-names.

"Are the wreaths ready, Hebe?" the tallest and most splendid of the ladies called out. "Make two more!"

And almost directly Hebe came down the steps, her round arms hung thick with rose-wreaths. There was one for each marble head.

Everyone now looked seven times more beautiful than before, which, in the case of the gods and goddesses, is saying a good deal.<sup>1</sup>

In her fantasy novels for children, Nesbit drew on ancient cultures to come up with interesting magical figures: in *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), a phoenix causes wishes to come true for another group of children, though only when it is sitting on a magic carpet. Similarly, in *Five Children and It* (1902), a Psammead (a Persian "sand fairy") appears to a further group when they are digging at the beach. These magical creatures give children what they wish for, but with comic effect – misinterpreting or wilfully misunderstanding their requests. "Be careful what you wish for", is the moral of her stories, though in many ways her work was resolutely anti-moral, offering a challenge to Victorian mores and didacticism. Instead, in her works she promoted a zestful sense of enjoyment – of childhood, of fantasy, and of *fun*.

Indeed, what could be more fun for a kid interested in Classics than a gentle moonlight picnic with the ancient gods? Children of this period, like children now, would have known enough about the Olympians to recognize the names of the gods, and to understand their attributes, and if adults thought that this kind of pagan playfulness was crossing a line, they might also feel pleased that their children were learning, or recognizing, important ideas from Classical Antiquity. The children explain the magic of the ring they have found, and they join together with the gods in worshipping by the light of the moon, in a scene that probably seems mawkish today, but might seem powerful by the standards of its time. Or perhaps it is intended to be funny, as much of Nesbit's work is. *The Enchanted Castle* is not her best-known work and may only appeal to the sort of person who likes the idea of having a moonlit pool party with the Olympians while transformed into a statue oneself. But the point is that Nesbit does

<sup>1</sup> Edith Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907, 281.



**Figure 17:** Michael Garland's *Icarus Swinebuckle* conveys the power of invention in this recasting of the Icarus myth. Cover of Michael Garland, *Icarus Swinebuckle*, Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 2000. Used with the Author's kind permission.

not hold back, and that spirit of zestful imagination lives on in the work of many of the authors and illustrators we have discussed in our book.

One particular favourite is John Dougherty's *Zeus on the Loose* (ill. Georgien Overwater; 2004), another fantasy novel in which a pair of schoolboys, Alex and Charlie, accidentally invoke Zeus when Charlie puts Alex's school-project cardboard temple on his head and calls the mighty god's name. Zeus pops in immediately, as if he was only waiting for the opportunity to pass some time in a suburban English primary school, and spends the rest of the novel (and the following two in the trilogy) causing mayhem which Alex, a cautious and careful boy, finds ways to tidy up. Dougherty cleverly comes up with classroom parallels

to core myths – after Charlie gets into trouble with their teacher, Miss Wise, for missing class, Alex and Zeus smuggle him back into the school in a vaulting horse. These sorts of comic classical parallels add pleasurable nuances to an already funny story, rewarding the readers who know a little bit about the Trojan War. In *Zeus Sorts It Out* (ill. Georgien Overwater; 2011) the boys are being bullied by one “Eric Lees” (a pun on Heracles). When Eric puts Charlie’s head in the toilet, Zeus accuses him of defiling his temple (he has taken over the toilet block as his special zone), and gives him twelve tasks to complete.

Dougherty exploits every comic and classical parallel he can, but perhaps the most delightful character of the book is Zeus: large, brawny, hairy, impetuous, impatient, rude, and rambunctious. Zeus commandeers Alex’s mother’s best nightdress, causing the cautious Alex considerable anxiety (and allowing full play on comic ideas about the chiton as a form of dress). He demands night-time meat sacrifices and takes to the roast-beef crisps Alex finds in the kitchen cupboard. In short, he behaves as badly as most children are encouraged not to, acting as a kind of fantasy surrogate for them. (A subtext of the story suggests that Alex learns from Zeus how to be more confident and assertive.) *Zeus on the Loose*, like *The Enchanted Castle*, is firmly on the side of children, encouraging them to have fun, and though it might be argued that in doing so, Dougherty reduces the gods to simple stereotypes, the stereotypes hold true to some degree. When we think about the characterization of Zeus in the myths more generally, it is clear Dougherty has captured his wilfulness, his arrogance, his greed, his take-no-prisoners attitude, and also his sense of humour. At the end of *Zeus on the Loose*, Zeus returns to Olympus, leaving a note, and a thunderbolt for Alex:

“Dear Alex, Just a note to say thanks. You weren’t a bad High Priest for an eight-year-old. Keep this thunderbolt safe and I’ll bring you luck. And think of me every time you eat a bag of roast bull flavoured crisps. Yours, Zeus. High King of the Gods of Olympus.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether this is an accurate representation of Zeus or not, is beside the point: Dougherty captures the spirit of the “High King of the Gods of Olympus”, and does so in a way guaranteed to appeal to kids – not least in his suggestion that Zeus wants to be part of the modern world as much as we want to connect with antiquity.

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<sup>2</sup> John Dougherty, *Zeus on the Loose*, ill. Georgien Overwater, London: Random House Children’s Books, 2004, 89.

## Zeus

*Zeus is the youngest son of Cronus and Rhea. His father has swallowed his older brothers and sisters but Zeus is spirited away. He overthrows his father and releases his siblings, claiming the title of King of the Olympians. This story has been used to explore sibling and generational rivalry, as well as the nature of power and authority.*

### **Retelling – G. Brian Karas, *Young Zeus* (2010)**

A picture book version of how Zeus was born, grew up, and, with the help of his friends, became the ruler of the cosmos.

### **Revision – Kate McMullan, “Myth-O-Mania” series (2002–2014)**

This series of chapter books for older children presents Zeus as a megalomaniac, whose lies have been perpetuated to shore up his Olympian rule. Hades sets the story straight.

### **Adaptation – John Dougherty, *Zeus on the Loose*, ill. Georgien Overwater (2004)**

A madcap, modern school story, about a boy who summons Zeus by building him a temple out of cardboard and toilet rolls.

### **Allusion – Crispin Boyer, *Zeus the Mighty: The Quest for the Golden Fleas* (2019)**

This is the first book in the “Zeus the Mighty” series, starring Zeus, an ambitious hamster whose cage sits on a shelf high above the other animals at Mount Olympus Pet Centre.

Zeus is, of course, a most zesty god, as seen in his perpetual meddling, trickery, and bad behaviour. Children’s writers tend, however, to elide his more reprehensible actions (his rape/seduction of Leda, or Callisto, or Danae, or Europa, or Io...), portraying his activities as part of a comic tussle with Hera. Some versions, such as *Brick Greek Myths: The Stories of Heracles, Athena, Pandora, Poseidon, and Other Ancient Heroes of Mount Olympus* (2014), present Zeus’ different unions as part of a myth cycle, showing his many affairs as part of an exuberant, creative instinct (rampant male, naughty boy), listing his various affairs and marriages, for example:

Now that the world was put in order, Zeus decided that they needed joy to put everything in balance. So he made love to an Oceanid named Eurynome and created the Charities, also known as the Graces. These became the goddesses of festivity and happiness.<sup>3</sup>

*Brick Greek Myths* is a weighty graphic novel using LEGO reconstructions of the Greek myths. It is admirably thorough, but the graphic novel format

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<sup>3</sup> Brack, Sweeney, and Thomas, *Brick Greek Myths*, 23.

balances words and images, making it also admirably concise. LEGO figurines are a curious blend of cute and serious, and there's something very delightful about the posed figures in the series – for instance, on the cover, we see a rampant Zeus, dressed in white, waving his thunderbolts, while riding in a white carriage pulled by a white horse. In a nearby frame, a cute snake-haired Medusa waves her arms; below, a similarly cute stubby Minotaur seems to be holding the legs of a vanquished Athenian. The presentation strikes an interesting balance (or recognizes the tension) between the attractions and the dark sides of the myths.

The piquancy of zest for us comes from the creativity and ingenuity of artists and writers in retelling these myths, which are so popular and so perennial. Exciting new versions are continually appearing, as in the work of Imogen and Isabel Greenberg, whose *Athena: The Story of a Goddess* (2018), a graphic novel that presents the myths of Athena as part of a coming-of-age cycle for the goddess who springs out of the head of Zeus (after he swallowed her pregnant mother, Metis, who had transformed into a fly). The Greenbergs' Athena is a new broom, who upsets the comfort of the other gods; like many a teenager, she rubs up against the old order, before establishing her own power.

To begin with, the other gods and goddesses were suspicious of Athena. She was new, she was loud, and she had caused chaos when she was born. Athena would soon learn that doing things in a new way could make the old gods very cross.<sup>4</sup>

Athena has a certain *zest*, an energy and power that unbalances the status quo. She has to learn to control it, in this version. Like the *Brick Greek Myths* team, the Greenbergs strike a balance between thinking about the myths as myths, and retelling them as stories. *Athena's* coming-of-age story focuses on her relations with humans as much as with the other gods. They introduce the Arachne episode like this:

After helping Perseus, Athena became famous amongst the mortals. Every young warrior wanted Athena to help with their adventures. Although Athena had earned her fame, it was starting to go to her head and she was getting a little bit vain. Hera, wisest of all the goddesses, was just about to give her some words of advice, when a young mortal caught Athena's attention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, *Athena*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 25.

That mortal, of course, is Arachne, and, as in other of the stories of Athena's coming of age, this episode shows her making mistakes and learning to be kinder to mortals. Should gods be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them, or are they to be held to account? This might be the sharpness of a zesty approach, and the Greenbergs find a nice balance, showing Athena falling into trap after trap, but growing from her experiences, learning "to advise and help the mortals, but only intervene when they called on her. And to only intervene for the best of causes".<sup>6</sup> She and Aphrodite learn from the trials of Odysseus "what true adventuring and true love" look like.<sup>7</sup>

Again, this is an approach to the myths shaped by the authors' historical moment. Athena is currently extremely popular as a figure of female wisdom, and the coming-of-age script dominates retellings of myths for young readers. Of note in this version are the bold, loose drawings and vibrant colouring of the novel, in which oranges, browns, golds, and purples dominate, underscoring the boldness of Athena, in a fresh new approach. Adding zest to versions like these is the slight tension between modern and traditional interpretations of the myths, which feature sympathy for the underdog, and criticism of traditional overlords and heroes (see "H is for How to Be Heroic").

In other words, writers are kept fresh by the need to write for modern audiences, and their own modern perspectives mean that they are not uncritical purveyors of the classical tradition. And so it should be! It is precisely this combination of adoption and modification, retelling and writing back that keeps the tradition alive, and keeps its zest.

## Old Wine in New Jugs

Finding new ways to tell familiar stories is part of this mode, in which different aesthetic or storytelling approaches provide new ways of looking at Classical Antiquity. Aspects of visual storytelling are increasingly innovative, and many texts break the mould – for instance by crossing the boundary between book and game, such as the Italian series published by Fatatrac, "Carte in Tavola". These versions of the myths are told through a series of cards. The image is on one side, and the story is on the other. Each image connects to the next, and when laid out together, the images form one large picture. So, *Ulisse, la maga*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

*Circe e le sirene* (2016), by Lucia Scuderi, shows Odysseus and his men facing Circe and the Sirens, connecting into one extended picture of scenes from the Odyssey. Nicoletta Ceccoli's *Teseo e Arianna* (1999) does similar work with the Theseiad, showing Theseus and Ariadne working together to combat a rather cute-looking Minotaur. Author-illustrator Dominique-Jacqueline Féraud's *Le fil d'Ariane: ou Jouer e jeu pour vivre le mythe* (1994) combines the myth of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur with poetry, rough printed imagery, and a lavish board game, modifying the famous European game the "Game of the Goose" into a labyrinth-like puzzle. These versions come in boxes, and a part of their charm is opening the box to find out what is inside.

### Choose Your Own Adventure

*Initially popular in the 1980s, these interactive adventure stories, in which the reader determines the course of the narrative, have had a recent resurgence.*

- 📖 John Butterfield, David Honigmann, and Philip Parker's "Cretan Chronicles" trilogy (1985–1986). A series of role-playing fantasy fiction in which the reader, as Altheus, brother of Theseus, is able to shape their identity (choosing a patron god, selecting weapons and fighting attributes) as they re-enact well-known mythological storylines.
- 📖 Blake Hoena, *Greek Mythology's Adventures of Perseus* ("Can You Survive?"; 2012). In the role of Perseus, the reader must face the odds, making choices along the way, to help save his mother.
- 📖 Brandon Terrell, *Greek Mythology's Twelve Labors of Hercules* ("Can You Survive?"; 2013). This time the choose-your-own-adventure model lets readers help Hercules make the choices that will lead him to succeed in his famous Labours, and achieve immortality, despite the enmity of the goddess Hera.
- 📖 Deborah Lerne Goodman, *The Throne of Zeus*, ill. Marco Canella ("Choose Your Own Adventure"; 2018). Guided by the goddess Athena, the reader travels back in time to search for Zeus, re-enacting many famous heroic deeds along the way, including facing the Minotaur, flying with Icarus, and journeying to the Underworld with Persephone.

Novel writers, too, find ways to remodel the classical experience. David Almond's young adult novel *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014) experiments with form in a sad story that resets the Orpheus myth among a group of Northumbrian teenagers – his song of Orpheus is written in chalk on black pages – suggesting the power of the Underworld, and the pain of the story. Several writers of young adult novels use verse to tell their stories, drawing on its intensity to express the intensity of protagonists' emotions and experiences. Shari Green's *Macy McMillan and the Rainbow Goddess* (2017) takes us into the mind of a deaf girl

whose divorced mother is remarrying. Her friendship with an elderly neighbour (the Iris of the title) helps her cope with change and transition. Joseph Coelho's *The Girl Who Became a Tree: A Story Told in Poems* (2020), illustrated by Kate Milner, uses verse forms (including pictograms and other surprising techniques) to explore the story of Daphne from the perspective of a lonely girl who reads to assuage her grief from her father's death. Wendy Orr's *Swallow's Dance* (2018) and *Dragonfly Song* (2016) explore the experiences of teenagers from Ancient Greece using verse to capture their connections with the gods.

Laura Ruby and Neal Shusterman fragment classical retellings through other kinds of postmodern techniques. Ruby's *Bone Gap* (2015) is about a small town that has portals to other worlds; its inhabitants are split and fragmented, coming together only at its resolution. Its protagonist, Finn, suffers from prosopagnosia, meaning he cannot recognize faces; this ailment shapes his interactions with others, and is symbolic of the novel's glancing approach to telling a modern Persephone story in which a young Polish woman, Roza, is snatched away to another world by a man calling himself the Scare Crow. Faces, and their meanings, are a large part of this story, in which Roza disfigures her face with the shard of a mirror, in order to make herself undesirable to the Scare Crow, and in which Finn's love affair with Petey, an "ugly" girl who keeps bees, is threatened by her anxiety about his condition.

Postmodern fragmentation is also key to the narrative of Shusterman's *Challenger Deep* (2015), about the struggles of Caden, a fifteen-year-old boy with schizophrenia, split between scenes in a juvenile psychiatric hospital, and time on a mysterious ship on a voyage to the deepest part of the ocean in the Mariana Trench. On board the ship, Caden becomes obsessed with Calliope, the ship's figurehead, who symbolizes both the muse of poetry, and Calypso, the nymph who tried to keep Odysseus with her; his sister Mackenzie functions as the Penelope figure that Caden eventually returns to. The touching qualities of the *Odyssey* – Odysseus' conflicted desires to remain on the journey, and also to return home – take on an acute poignancy when mapped onto a story of a teenager struggling with his mental health.

Storytelling techniques like these keep us on our toes, making us piece together fragments of stories, and of the myths that lie behind them, and it is notable that writers often refuse to tell entire myths, repeating only fragments, glancingly and allusively. Ursula Dubosarsky's creepy mystery novel, *The Golden Day* (2011), is a further case in point, interweaving allusions and references to classical myth and history in a novel about a specific point in time in Australia. Here, a schoolgirl from the late 1960s reflects on what it all means to be

thinking about Classical Antiquity when there is so much real life to think about as well. When her vibrant (and foolish) school teacher goes missing on an expedition to a cave on the foreshore of Sydney Harbour, Cubby, the schoolgirl, and her friend Icara are shaken by her disappearance. Classical allusions are dotted throughout the book, and throughout the girls' reflections and coming of age – Cubby's pet guinea pig Agamemnon reminds her of the myth of Leda and the Swan;<sup>8</sup> Icara's name reminds us of the boy who flew too close to the sun and fell to his death. Sydney itself is dotted with classical statues – most tellingly on the Cenotaph, an empty tomb in honour of fallen soldiers. The girls study Thucydides, and reflect at the same time about the horrors of the Vietnam War, happening not that far from Australia. When their missing teacher appears to the girls, in a café they are visiting on their last day of school, it is clear that she is both dead, and a more foolish person than they had remembered. Their coming of age, then, results from piecing together the fragments of wisdom and knowledge – of myth, of history, and of the real world. The novel ends with them staring at the waters of Sydney Harbour, contemplating their forthcoming plunge into grown-up life:

What would happen to them? They might struggle in the cold depths, with only the occasional glimpse of the sunlit world above. They might even die, their tiny fragile bones sinking to the ocean floor to turn slowly into grains of sand. Or they might prosper and grow sleek and strong, and shine like silver.

That afternoon, they felt no astonishment at any of it. Perhaps a butterfly, too, is unimpressed by its transformation from those worm-like beginnings. Why shouldn't it crawl out from the darkness, spread its tiny wings and fly off into the windy mystery of the trees? The grub lies quietly in its soft cocoon, silent, thinking. It knows everything.<sup>9</sup>

This is another kind of zest – the zest for life, in its strangeness and wonder. Children know a lot – indeed, they often know everything they need to know at the moment they need to know it. The best writing for them is respectful of that knowledge, that brilliance, that appetite for life. Novels like *The Golden Day* show children (teenagers in this example) using their wisdom, working things out, and finding out what they want their lives to be like. Mythology floats through their minds, helping them think life through.

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<sup>8</sup> For Zeus in the form of a swan and Leda, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.109–110, *Heroides* 8.67–68. Cf. Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.5–7.

<sup>9</sup> Ursula Dubosarsky, *The Golden Day*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2011, 148–149.

## Living On...

Which is as it should be. If the books we have discussed in this volume show anything, it is that classical mythology and ancient wisdom are of no use if they are not used. Kate Hovey's *Arachne Speaks* (ill. Blair Drawson; 2000) ends by saying that Athena lost her contest with Arachne because to this day spiders proudly spin their webs, while Athena lives alone in the clouds, ignored and unworshipped. Except that the myths are alive and well and living in the pages of children's books, making their presence felt, brought to life, rejuvenated, and able to think things through.

For generations, it was thought that classical sculpture and architecture were pure, elegant, balanced. But archaeological research has made us understand that in fact even if they were perfectly proportioned, they were brightly painted, lively, and vivid. And we might see children's literature performing a similar function, putting the roses back into the cheeks of classical mythology... not only making ancient culture alive for young readers, but enlivening it as it they go.

We would like to conclude with one particularly marvellous example of literary zest, Christopher Myers's picture book *Wings* (2000; discussed already in "C is for Childhood"). In this lovely book, a quiet girl narrates her feelings about a boy with wings who joins her school, and is picked on for his difference, until he leaves, despondent. Students, staff, passers-by, even the police, try to control this child – whether he stays on the ground, or flies to show what he can do. The girl, who it seems has suffered from bullying or being shut down, tries to speak up in his defence, but to no avail. But the girl is entranced by his majestic flight, and she follows him through the city until she finally manages to speak to him:

I called to Ikarus  
and he sailed closer to me.  
I told him  
what someone should have long ago:  
"Your flying is beautiful."  
For the first time, I saw Ikarus smile.  
At that moment I forgot  
about the kids who had laughed  
at him and me. I was just glad that  
Ikarus had found his wings again.

"Look at that amazing boy!"  
I called to all the people  
on the street as I pointed  
to my new friend Ikarus  
swirling through the sky.<sup>10</sup>

The words are accompanied by equally vibrant pictures, in which silhouetted characters soar against a cityscape background. Ikarus finds his wings, and flies, and we see the girl come alive with joy at his salvation. The power of beauty, the power of friendship, the power of understanding, and the power of myth.

The zest and beauty of this adaptation – taking the Icarus myth, so often a cautionary tale, didactically telling children to clip their wings – is a fitting place to end this book: if our *Odyssey* takes us anywhere, we hope it is into the flight of the imagination, the joy of creativity, and a sense of zest for life. That is what mythology is about after all – why, and how it survives – retaining a freshness and relevance to this day and beyond.

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Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Story Cure: An A–Z of Books to Keep Kids Happy, Healthy, and Wise*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2017.

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<sup>10</sup> Myers, *Wings*, 34–38.



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The book *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey*, written by Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea (illustrations by Steve K. Simons), is an excellent contribution to contemporary discussions on the function, place, role and status of mythology in the education of children and young people, its relation to children's literature, its significance in the broader circulation of literary culture and the scope of international interdisciplinary research conducted on this literature. The authors' considerations, which focus on the phenomenon of literary adaptation, are very extensive and go far beyond the area of literary studies (with particular emphasis on narrative theory), as they touch upon anthropological issues (here, for example, the issue of childhood), cultural studies, and visual art.

Dorota Michułka, University of Wrocław  
From the editorial review

I have learnt a lot about contemporary children's literature and its multifarious reception of mythology and admire the authors for taming the topic in a delightfully readable study.

Christine Walde, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz  
From the editorial review



[Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea], using a method of integrating the approaches of classical reception and children's literature studies, [...] developed the *Alphabetical Odyssey*. Their shared enjoyment of children's literature informed their study, as did a deep respect for the authors and illustrators whose works are created with children's needs so carefully addressed. As a result, a unique amalgam was formed. On the one hand, the *Alphabetical Odyssey* is a guide showing the breadth of the creative field of children's literature that blends the ancient and the modern for readers of all ages, thereby making it possible for them to travel beyond time, to learn about new things, but also to rediscover what may already seem familiar. [...] On the other hand, this volume stimulates scholarly reflection on what classical culture contributes to children's literature and, reciprocally, how children's literature enriches our reception of classical material.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw  
From the foreword by the Editor of the Series

