Adèle Geras

Ithaka

United Kingdom (2005)

TAGS: Amphimedon Antinoos (Penelope's Suitor) Argos (Dog) Athena Eurycleia Homer Ithaca Melantho Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Penelope Poseidon Telemachus Trojan War

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Ithaka
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2005
First Edition Details	Adèle Geras, *Ithaka.* Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2005, 404 pp.
ISBN	0385603916
Genre	Mythological fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators

Courtesy of the author.

Adèle Geras , b. 1944
(Author)

Adèle Geras was born in Jerusalem in 1944. Owing to the fact that her father was in the Colonial Service, she travelled a lot and lived in several countries (e.g. Cyprus, Tanzania, Nigeria etc.) when she was a child. She attended Roedean School in Brighton and later graduated from St. Hilda's College, Oxford, in 1966. She has been a full-time writer since 1976.

Adèle Geras is a prolific writer – she has penned more than ninety books for children, young adults and adults. *The Girls in the Velvet Frame* was her first full-length novel. She is best known for books such as *Troy*, *Ithaka*, *Happy Ever After*, *Silent Snow*, *Secret Snow* and *A Thousand Yards of Sea*. She has received prizes for poetry and two of her books: The Sydney Taylor Book Award for *My Grandmother's Stories* and the National Jewish Book Award for *Golden Windows.*

She lives in Great Shelford, near Cambridge. Her late husband, Norman Geras (1943–2013), was a Marxist political theorist based at the University of Manchester. One of her two daughters, Sophie Hannah, is also a published author, writing crime fiction and poetry.

Bio prepared by Agnieszka Maciejewska, Univesity of Warsaw, agnieszka.maciejewska@student.uw.edu.pl and Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

Questionnaire

1. What drew you to writing about Classical Antiquity and what challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular myths or stories?

I have always been interested in the Classics and knew the stories of Homer and the Greek myths from a very young age. I've written three novels set in Classical Antiquity: *Troy*, *Ithaka* and *Dido*.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

For one reason: they are amazingly exciting stories. About things that matter and emotions that we all still feel.

3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

I did Latin at school till age 16. But I grew up with translations of the myths and also later read Homer in translation. I don't use much research. I reread the *Iliad* for *Troy*, the *Odyssey* for *Ithaka* and Vergil's *Aeneid* Book four for *Dido*. For *Cleopatra* I had a research assistant appointed by the publisher called Alison Stanley and she was wonderful and provided me with all the relevant facts and she was also my editor on *Cleopatra*.

4. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelity" to the original?

I wanted it to be true to the spirit of Homer and I didn't knowingly alter things BUT invented my own characters and made up the story that they were involved in. Accuracy was sometimes not so good. I have cooks using LEMONS in *Ithaca*, to baste the meat they are cooking and it seems lemons were unknown in Classical Greece!

5. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

I would love to do more but only if someone commissioned me to write such a novel. I am too old now to be writing novels which I'm not sure someone will want to publish.

Prepared by Agnieszka Maciejewska, Univesity of Warsaw, agnieszka.maciejewska@student.uw.edu.pl

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Ithaka by Adèle Geras", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/398. Entry version as of July 26, 2025.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Additional information

Translation: Turkish: *İthaka,* trans. Zeynep Alpaslan, İzmir: Tudem, 2011.

Summary

Just as her novel *Troy* imagines new stories playing out within the final days of the Trojan War, in this text Geras locates her tale on Ithaca during the long years of Odysseus' absence. The story centres on the teenager Klymene, granddaughter of the old nurse Eurycleia. Orphaned as a baby, she and her twin brother Ikarios have grown up in the royal palace alongside Telemachus. The trio have always been friends, but Klymene is beginning to have other feelings for the Prince. Telemachus is blind to her affections, preoccupied with a conflicting sense of loyalty to his father and anger at his long absence. Telemachus falls for Klymene's fellow handmaid Melantho, a beautiful but nasty girl, who is also flirting with Ikarios, among others.

While Klymene's perspective dominates the story, the text is also focalised through other characters, including Penelope, and even Argos, Odysseus' ancient dog. Penelope has faithfully endured her husband's absence, but she no longer waits passively. Athena has given her the responsibility for weaving Odysseus home. She is told: "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." (p. 8). When the marauding suitors establish themselves in the palace, Penelope must keep up with this weaving work, as well as prepare the shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. But the queen is distracted from both these tasks by the presence of her husband's old friend Leodes, and as they fall in love, it is Klymene who ends up entrusted with the task of unpicking the fabric of the shroud each night. She befriends Mydon, a Trojan refugee in the retinue of the suitor Antinous.

Both Penelope and Klymene can see and communicate with the gods, and as Odysseus returns to reclaim his palace, the Olympians foreshadow the grisly events to come. Artemis saves Klymene from being raped, but Ikarios is betrayed by Melantho and brutally slaughtered by Antinous. Reunited with her husband, Penelope gradually begins to forget that she loved another man, just as Odysseus puts his adventures with Circe and Calypso behind him and normal life resumes on Ithaca.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Analysis

In her Acknowledgements section, Geras states that this "book is not a version of Homer nor a retelling of the Odyssey, but a novel written under the influence of stories that I first read as a young child and that I've loved ever since." The familiar details from Homer's story of Odysseus' return to Ithaca are present, but framed within an entirely new narrative. Rather than a *nostos*, this is a tale of the *oikos*, the home, and those who reside in it, particularly the women. Odysseus himself is depicted largely through the perceptions of others, and the text invites readers to critique his piracy and philandering.

As in *Troy,* weaving is a significant and symbolic art closely linked with the performance of storytelling. "The threads will tell the story." (p. 105). Penelope reflects, as if her weaving has agency beyond her control. The tapestries function as a narrative prompt for recounting other parts of the story cycle. She weaves the famous episodes from Odysseus' journey, including his encounters with Polyphemus, Circe, and the Sirens, and journey into the Underworld. The colours used to illustrate each scene vary, but the "thin black line for the ship" remains a constant. The descriptions are dreamy and poetic, rendered in italics and short, isolated phrases, yet the text follows the steady rhythm of the shuttle moving back and forth.

The invention of Klymene offers readers a teenage character with which to identify, and her role as both witness and active player in crucial elements of the narrative provides a kind of vicarious enjoyment. Overwhelmed with her work on the two projects, Penelope gives Klymene responsibility for the unpicking of the shroud. And when Klymene suffers from heatstroke and faints, she is placed in Penelope's bed to recover. In the *Odyssey* the unmovable bed is a symbol of Penelope's fidelity, but in Geras' story it takes on other meaning. In a significant departure from Homer, in this text the secret of the bed is known to everyone: "famous in the whole of Ithaka and beyond, and travelling minstrels sang songs about it." (p. 39). When Penelope and Leodes make love, they do so not in the bed, as Klymene is in it, but on the floor in front of the loom (p. 203). Klymene – and with her the reader – plays witness to this scene, just as she is the sole observer of Anticleia's death at the start of the novel. In celebrating the bed's widespread renown, the text looks beyond its narrative borders, so that the allusion to the "travelling minstrels" acknowledges Homer, as well as Geras herself.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Amphimedon Antinoos (Penelope's Suitor) Argos (Dog) Athena Eurycleia Homer Ithaca Melantho Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Penelope Poseidon Telemachus Trojan War
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Death Family Love Relationships Teenagers War
Further Reading	Miles, Geoffrey, “Chasing Odysseus in Twenty-First-Century Children's Fiction”, in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, 213–232. Wilson, Leslie, “Penelope’s Loom”, *The Guardian,* 22 October 2015, available at theguardian.com (accessed: July 12, 2018).

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw.