

Ross Collins , Tanya Landman

## The World's Bellybutton: The Greek Gods Need a New Hero

United Kingdom (2007)

TAGS: [Charon](#) [Gorgon\(s\)](#) [Pegasus](#) [Zeus](#)



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## Creators



### Ross Collins (Author, Illustrator)

Ross Collins is an award winning illustrator from Scotland. He graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1994. At 1994 he also won the MacMillan Children's Book Prize for his first book *The Sea Hole*. He has illustrated over 100 books and written more than a dozen, including *Medusa Jones*. London's Royal National Theatre adapted his book *The Elephantom* into a play with puppets which won great acclaim.

Source:

Photo courtesy of the Author/Illustrator.

Official [website](#) (accessed: September 10, 2019)

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University,  
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## Questionnaire

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

I grew up reading the greek myths and watching dramatisations of them like *Clash of the Titans* Ray Harryhausen films and *The Storyteller* so have always had a fondness for them. I always particularly liked Medusa as a character and wanted to imagine what life would be like for a young Gorgon. I played pretty free and easy with the mythology so was able to just use the characters as archetypes to build my own story around.

### 2. Why do you think classical/ancient myths, history, and

### **literature continue to resonate with young audiences?**

I think children will always be drawn to stories of heroes and monsters and the Greek myths have seldom been bettered. A lot of the stories are fairly simple and easy to grasp for a young mind and then the author can play with the characters and update them for each new generation.

### **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 studied Latin in secondary school and was appalling at it. My main inspiration were the books and films that I grew up with. I wrote the outline for my story, then researched the myths online and in libraries. I'm afraid as I wrote the book a number of years ago I can't remember particular sources.

### **4. Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers, esp. in (insert relevant country)?**

My idea was to put Medusa in school with friends, Chron & Mino [see *Medusa Jones*]. They were the "freaks" and the "heroes" were the "cool kids". Young readers in any country could then easily identify with the characters.

### **5. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelity" to the original? (another way of saying that might be - that I think writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail - is this something you thought about?)**

I wasn't overly concerned with "accuracy or fidelity" as I was just using the characters for my own story and mixing up the legends. I didn't really have to be faithful to the original myths. In saying that, I didn't want to do anything that was completely wrong for a character - you come up with strange "lines in the sand" in your head when writing

that isn't always evident to readers! However I did hope that young readers who already knew the myths would get a kick from seeing these great characters as children and that other readers who hadn't read the myths may have their curiosity spiked by my tale and use it as a jumping off point into the original stories.

## **6. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?**

Not at the moment but never say never. I'd hoped to write a sequel to *Medusa Jones* where Medusa and her friends travel to Hades but sadly that never happened. I have had several notes of interest from animation companies for the characters so who knows...

Prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, [ayelet.peer@gmail.com](mailto:ayelet.peer@gmail.com)

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### **Tanya Landman (Author)**

Tanya Landman is a prolific and renowned British writer. She studied English literature at the university and became a writer in 1992.

In the book's introduction of her [*The World's Bellybutton*], she is quoted as saying: "I've always loved the Greek myths and one morning I was thinking about the gods. Being immortal they can't have just died out when people stopped believing in them. I started wondering what had happened to them and where are they now. *The World's Bellybutton* is the result."

Photo courtesy of the Author.

Source:

Official [website](#) (accessed: September 10, 2019)

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University,  
ayelet.peer@gmail.com

## Questionnaire

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

I've loved the Greek myths since I encountered them in primary school. I have a very vivid memory of being told the story of the Cyclops for the first time, listening wide-eyed and terrified by the ghastly one-eyed man-eating monster, then being overawed at Odysseus's ingenuity in outwitting him. After that I devoured as many tales of gods, monsters and heroes as I could get my hands on. But there was always something about Odysseus – who relied on human wit and intelligence rather than divine parentage – that I found particularly appealing. When I started writing, I wanted to do something that involved the Greek myths but I wanted it to have a contemporary setting. I reasoned that if the gods were immortal, they must still be around but with no one worshipping them they'd be fairly fed up about the state of the modern world. The idea amused me and *The World's Bellybutton* started to take shape in my head.

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

On a superficial level – with gods, monsters, flying horses, heroes with super powers, the Greek myths have got it all!

But on a deeper level I think what appealed to me as a child was the capricious nature of the gods. As a child you're not in control of your own life – everything is dictated by parents/teachers/other god-like adults. They are all powerful and their reasoning is completely incomprehensible to a child. So I really understood the idea that if you were human your life was steered by forces beyond your control. And the world view in the Greek myths actually seemed to make more sense to me than the Christian one. At school, I was told that God is just and loving and yet no one could explain why he allowed dreadful things to happen to good people. I found it baffling. Yet with the Greek



myths being moral or immoral, well behaved or not didn't seem to matter. What made a difference to your fortune was whether a particular god liked you or not. A god could lift you up and then cast you down just as easily. It wasn't fair, or just or deserved – it was just the way it was. And that was an accurate reflection of the world I saw around me.

**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 English Literature at university and that involved reading Greek and Roman mythology (in translation).

**4. Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers, esp. in (insert relevant country)?**

I think most children's writer write for the children they once were. I was telling the tale that would have amused me at 9 or 10 years old.

**5. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelity" to the original? (another way of saying that might be - that I think writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail - is this something you thought about?)**

Yes – absolutely. It's very easy to get bogged down in detail and lose the spirit of the story. I was more concerned about creating an exciting adventure than writing something "authentic."

**6. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?**

Not in the immediate future, but I wouldn't rule it out.

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### Additional information

#### Summary

This is the story of William Popidopolos, an English boy, about 10 years old. William travels with his mother, Kate, to Greece, to the island of Spitflos, in order to meet his father Nikos, whom he never met. In his father's tavern, William is approached by a large swan, who confides in him that he is Zeus and in need of his help. William must tie the knot at the center of the universe, the omphalos, since it is starting to break apart. While William's parents are under Zeus' spell, William travels with Zeus to meet his ancestor, Odysseus, in the underworld, and then they travel to England and back to Greece. In Greece they go to the omphalos and face the gorgons who dwell there. William succeeds in tricking the gorgons and securing the knot once more.

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#### Analysis

There are various stories that focus on a human child who must miraculously save the ancient Greek gods and subsequently the world. (for example, Stella Tarakson's [Hopeless Heroes](#) series or Gerald Vinestock's [Crib and the Labours of Hercules](#), reviewed in this survey). Many of them involve time-travel of some sort. They also constantly play on the tension between viewing the Greek myths as just stories yet also proving their truth, and the consequent implied existence of the Greek gods. However, their main objective is usually an empowering of the young hero (and readers) and they actually employ the fantastic elements to address family issues more than those involving the ancient world.

This story is an example of this type of book. While there is no time traveling and the narrative unfolds within a contemporary time line, the main hero is facing family problems. William's father is an estranged parent, who hardly even writes to him. His mother loves him, yet she is described as having mood swings and can be a difficult person.

The spell which Zeus casts on his parents makes them ignore William completely and think that they have only just met (they mentally return to their first encounter ten years ago, so this is the only nod at time-traveling in the story). Their odd behavior, especially his mother's, makes William feel lonely and unwanted, and probably magnifies his deepest fears of being deserted.

In order to come to terms with his father and create some kind of a

relationship with him, William must go through his own journey of maturation, in the form of his assistance to Zeus and his triumphant attempt to tie the knot at the omphalos. Furthermore the tying of the omphalos could also be deemed as allegorical to William's own circumstances. The two ends of the rope can be seen as representing his parents and it is up to William to try and connect them once more, since he is the center of his parents' union. It is the child who is the center of the family (= the center of his own world) and his presence can connect the loose ends of his family. While his parents do not get back together, still this encounter emphasizes William's sense of family and belonging. He discovers his Greek roots and accepts them.

Since Odysseus is mentioned as William's ancestor, William not only gains a father, but also deeper roots and a sense of identity. He is not alone, but a part of a very long and respectable tradition of heroes. William always wanted to "blend in with everyone else" (p. 11) but his mother kept his strange-sounding Greek surname. By introducing him to Odysseus, who represents the Greek tradition, William is made proud of his heritage and embraces his uniqueness.

The presentation of the Greek gods is also interesting. Zeus explains his strange appearance to William, saying: "there I was, king of the gods one minute... - then wallop! Stuck as a swan, Greek civilization in tatters, no one believing in me anymore, temples all in ruins. Tragic. That's what it is. Tragic." (p. 35). It is a powerful message. What happens when people stopped believing in the ancient gods? Did they disappear? While we do not receive a definite answer, it seems very likely that most of them simply disappeared. Do gods disappear when we do not believe in them? This is a deep theological question which is not answered here. However, it does refer to the abandonment of the Greek heritage. Later Zeus refers to this deterioration in his conversation with Charon. Charon, who is referred to simply as "the boatman", asks Zeus what happened and Zeus replies: "change of management" (p. 53). While this reply appears comical, could it have deeper meaning? Who took over the ancient gods? The monotheistic Christianity?

Another reference to ancient beliefs concerns the underworld. William asks Zeus of they are visiting the place where people go to after death. Zeus replies: "it's where the Ancient Greeks came...it's what they believed in so it's what they got." (p. 56). Once more there is a reference to the power of belief. The ancient Greeks created this underworld according to their own vision, inventing it according to their

beliefs. However, it is not just a fantastical place dependent on their beliefs, since William visits the underworld in modern times. Yet it seems that the underworld only contains the ancient Greeks and is limited to them. This is a blend of fantasy and reality. The vision and creation of the ancient Greeks is very real to modern William as well. Furthermore, at the end of the story, after William vanquishes the gorgons by making them turn each other to stone and returns home, he reads a news article about the recent discovery of statues of gorgons, who are believed to be related to Odysseus. Again, fantasy and reality intertwine, and William is connected to his ancient ancestor.

Thus the new hero who saves the world does so by returning to the ancient traditions and also by believing. After the swan sends a thunderbolt as proof, William does not doubt the existence of Zeus. He accepts the ancient tradition and combines it with his modern knowledge, defeating the mythical gorgons using modern materials he bought at a department-store near his home in England. Thus we could say that William invents a new form of reception in order to save the world, the physical as well as the more abstract, philosophical notion of the ancient world. William does not deny Zeus' request, but rather understands the importance of preserving the past as a means to protecting the present as well as the future. The Greek traditions lie at the center of the world and we must not let them dissolve and disappear, since to do so would be to lose our own civilization as well.

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Classical, Mythological,  
Traditional Motifs,  
Characters, and  
Concepts

[Charon](#) [Gorgon\(s\)](#) [Pegasus](#) [Zeus](#)

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Other Motifs, Figures,  
and Concepts Relevant  
for Children and Youth  
Culture

[Adventure](#) [Animals](#) [Emotions](#) [Family](#) [Journeys](#) [Magic](#)