Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: The First Marathon. The Legend of Pheidippides by Daniel Minter , Susan Reynolds ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/869. Entry version as of July 29, 2025.

Daniel Minter , Susan Reynolds

The First Marathon. The Legend of Pheidippides

United States (1997)

TAGS: Ancient Slavery Athens Divination Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Pan

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

General information	
Title of the work	The First Marathon. The Legend of Pheidippides
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1997
First Edition Details	Susan Reynolds, *The First Marathon. The Legend of Pheidippides*. Illinois: Albert Whitman Co., 2006, 30 pp.
ISBN	9780807508671
Genre	Fiction, Historical fiction
Target Audience	Children (8+)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk
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Creators

Daniel Minter , b. 1963
(Illustrator)

Daniel Minter is a painter and illustrator originally from Georgia and now based in Maine, USA. He graduated from the Art Institute of Atlanta. His paintings and prints have been exhibited across the USA. He has illustrated 11 children's books, including: Minter has illustrated 11 children's books, including *Step Right Up*; *How Doc and Jim Key Taught the World about Kindness*,*Seven Spools of Thread: A Kwanzaa Story*, and *The Riches of Oseola McCarty*.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: October 22, 2019).

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

Susan Reynolds , b. 1954
(Author)

Susan Reynolds (also known as SusanMaryZ Reynolds) is an artist and writer based in New Mexico, USA. *The First Marathon* was her first children's book, conceived after she had run a marathon event. Susan Reynolds' *Author's Note* says that her (unnamed) husband is a classicist who helped her with the historical details. In 1975 she graduated from New Mexico State University with a Bachelors of Individualized Studies. She began work as an artist, often drawn to 'ladies who look wise and ancient', based on Greek myths. Long

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distance hiking plays a big part in her life. She writes for magazines and has published two books, *The First Marathon* and *Walking Outside the Box* (2006).

Sources:

Profile at wildwoodstudionm.com (accessed: October 22, 2019)

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Additional information

Summary

The inner covers of *The First Marathon* depict a map of Greece and of the Persian Empire up to the Euphrates and down to Sidon. Persian territory is coloured orange, Greek yellow. The opening of the story shows Pheidippides as a child, running. The text explains that "before there were telephones, cars, or computers, there was a boy named Pheidippides." (p. 1). Pheidippides loved to run, even running around his mother as she shopped. As he got older he ran the hills around Athens and told his bemused parents, "someday I might have to run clear across Greece" (p. 5). Like other young men, he had to join the city's army; Pheidippides often served as herald. It is asserted that many Greeks had moved to Persian lands and got blamed when a revolt broke out; this led to the "mighty empire" of Persia invading Greece in revenge (p. 9). They came to Marathon so that their cavalry could perform well on the flat plains. Pheidippides was sent to Sparta to ask the "tough" Spartans to help. He ran the 140 miles in 36 hours. When he got to Sparta, their leaders said that they would send their army, but only once the full moon appeared. Pheidippides ran 140 miles back. The generals' hearts hurt to know that many of their soldiers would die, although they knew that they would fight bravely. The army marched 25 miles to Marathon. Pheidippides fought bravely in the battle. 6400 Persians were killed and they ran away to their ships. Pheidippides was told to run to Athens to bring the good news. When he arrived, very tired, he had a heart attack and died. A follow-up explains that this is not actually a sad story because, 2500 years later, Pheidippides is remembered through the modern marathon race. Readers could do a marathon one day and show that they have a 'brave heart' like Pheidippides.

A further two-page *How the Marathon Came to Be* section follows. It describes the traditions about the marathon runs. The run to Sparta is considered 'fact', while that to Athens from Marathon is 'legend' because of the confused traditions around it; "A legend is a story that can't be proven but is often based on people who really lived and true events from their lives" (p. 28). Herodotus on Pheidippides is mentioned and contrasted with his lack of reference to the post-battle run, and the traditions for that second run in Plutarch and Lucian. It is explained that the Athenians returned to Athens to defend the city and that the Sparta army did arrive albeit after the battle. There is reference to the beginning and end of the ancient Olympics and this moves into a discussion of the development of the modern marathon.

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The foundation of the modern Olympics is described, as well as the exclusion of women and Melpomene's off-course run, completed after she was prevented from competing officially. The development of further marathon races in America is then detailed, including the eviction of Katherine Switzer in 1967, followed by the inclusion of women in the Boston marathon in 1970 and the women's Olympic marathon in 1984.

Analysis

The initial presentation of Pheidippides as a child is an unusual feature of this storybook which encourages the child reader to identify with him. It normalises life in antiquity and this is re-enforced by the illustrations which show the boy and his mother shopping in the marketplace. There is the familiar trope of parents who do not quite understand their child and he is proved to have been unusually prescient in anticipating the necessity of his great run across Greece.

The illustrations are bold and bright. They are presented as double-page images with small text sections on one or both pages. They frequently feature period detail such as ancient pottery, people in ancient-style clothing, with Greek keys framing each image and forming an interior dividing line within each scene, such as a Greek key hedge or shoreline. This gives the book a distinctly Greek feel and introduces the young reader to basic iconography. The Athenian army is erroneously depicted wearing identical uniform when they would have worn a variety of self-sourced equipment. Both Greeks and Persians are depicted fighting barefoot, when this is extremely unlikely. Greek and Persian clothing is distinguished, with Greeks in Corinthian helmets and kilts and Persians in long caps and trousers, however the equipment is merged, with members of both groups shown fighting with swords and spears. This may have been driven by the text, which specifically states misleadingly that Pheidippides fought with a sword. Persian archers, typically a prominent part of the battle tradition do not feature in text or illustration. There is a rather wonderful illustration of the Persian cavalry aboard ships, however cavalry are mentioned in relation to the choice of Marathon as a location but then dropped from the narrative without explanation.

The emphasis of the story is, as the story's name suggests, firmly on the run rather than the battle itself. The narrative gives a good sense of the emphasis on athletics in ancient Greek culture and the importance of training if one is to run a marathon. There are some

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specific details about the run: 140 miles to Sparta in 36 hours, followed by a return run and a 25-mile march to Marathon. The former part of this essentially follows the Herodotean tradition, although that would have had the runner joining the army at Marathon rather than marching out with the army from Athens, but these are not essential details and they provide an opportunity for specifying roughly how far Marathon is from Athens. The only reference to religion in the story is to the 'religious laws' which prevent Sparta from marching (p. 15); most noticeably there is no reference to Pheidippides' famous claim to have experienced an epiphany of Pan (Herodotus, 6.105–106). The result of this is that ancient religion appears only as a hindrance rather than a source of support (psychological or otherwise).

"Nobody realized" that Pheidippides had already run such a long way and Pheidippides' obediently ran without objection when he was told to run to Athens (p. 24 with p. 23). There is no apparent reason for Pheidippides to do it; none is given in the story beyond the desire to declare victory. In *How the Marathon Came to Be* there is reference to the army returning to prevent an attack on the city but no explanation of why a runner might have been sent ahead. This combination makes Pheidippides' death appear rather pointless and more a case of military negligence than anything else. Typically stories have the runner insisting on being the one to carry the news (with occasional reference to the attempt to prevent a pro-Persian coup). That creates a sense of noble self-sacrifice and while that has its own problems it is more satisfying than the idea that he dies because his commanders forgot what he had done for them. The follow-up note's insistence that it is not a sad story because he is remembered now rings a little hollow. The story celebrates uncomplaining obedience but without a convincing sense of the sacrifice being worth it. The emphasis on obedience feels somewhat dated, however it is not the only virtue to be celebrated. There are frequent references to the Athenians being brave and determined. Athletic ability is highlighted as a major virtue, within which determination also features. These elements compliment the book's emphasis on sporting endeavour in the modern world.

The account of the war itself misrepresents some key details. It is stated that "Many Athenians had moved to Persian settlements, and when rebellion broke out there, the Athenians were blamed" (p. 9). The Greek settlements in Asia Minor far pre-dated the foundation of the Persian Empire, so there was no sense of them moving into Persian territory, rather their cities had been drawn into one empire (Lydian) and then another (Persian). When people in Ionia revolted, Athens sent

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help and the Athenians also breached an agreement that they had made to join the Persian Empire. The story is therefore misleading in representing the Persians' desire for revenge as an act of unjust scapegoating. In addition to this, while the inclusion of a map helps the reader with basic orientation, the sizing used is somewhat counter-productive as it prevents the inclusion of Persia and creates the impression of the war being between Greece and modern-day Turkey. Given that the author places emphasis on the use of a classicist to inform the story one might have expected it to reflect the traditions of the campaign more evenly, whereas this rendering places all the emphasis on misplaced Persian vengeance.

The battle is depicted with an image of isolated melee fighting, so the reader gets no impression of the use of massed fighters or the arrangement of men a fighting line with wings. The tradition that the Greeks ran into battle does feature (p. 18; Herodotus, 6.112) as does the Greeks' decision to attack, although there is no sense of the wait for the Spartans (as the army departs from Athens knowing that the Spartans will not make it). The Plataeans do not feature. The Greeks are depicted watching as the Persians flee, with no attempt to pursue them (Herodotus 6.113–114). Post-battle killings were perhaps regarded as unsuitable for a young audience. *How the Marathon Came to Be* helps to convey the importance of the battle by referring to the 'new confidence' that it gave to the Athenians, however this is somewhat undermined by referring to them developing democracy 30 years later as a result, when Marathon is typically regarded as having given the Athenians confidence in their newly founded democracy (a more radical version of which was developed later).

How the Marathon Came to Be is written in smaller font than the main story and appears to be aimed at a slightly older age-group. This may be intended for reading with an adult or to provide an adult reading with a child with further information to discuss with them. It is positive that it mentions Herodotus, Plutarch, and Lucian so that readers may find out more about those authors if they please and so that readers get an impression of the way that ancient stories have been passed down. It is erroneously stated that Herodotus actually called "Pheidippides" "Philippides". Robert Browning's contribution to the tradition by joining the various traditions together is not included. Connections and contrasts between the ancient and modern worlds are established throughout. This appears in the opening lines, when it is stressed that the story took place before various items of modern technology existed. This helps the reader to step beyond their own

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	experience into a different environment and aids in them picturing what might be different. The contrast between how long it would take to travel between Athens and Sparta in a car and how long it took Pheidippides reminds the reader of the special connection while re-enforcing the sense of the runner's achievement. The move into discussing the modern marathon provides extensive details about the development of the modern race. It is perhaps an unfortunate choice of words that the reader is finally invited to run and have a 'brave heart' like Pheidippides when the story had just finished with a double reference to his heart taking too much leading to heart attack and death. It is unusual to finish a children's story with the death of the protagonist and this instance comes close to inadvertently suggesting that the modern child runner might die too. Other than that, this work presents a lively image of antiquity in which families are warm, peril is present but surmountable, and determination is the most celebrated virtue.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Ancient Slavery Athens Divination Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Pan
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Child, children Childhood Child's view Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Freedom Heroism Historical figures History Nation Parents (and children) Teenagers Violence War
Further Reading	Bridges, E., Hall, E. and Rhodes, P.J., eds., *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007. de Souza, Philip, *The Greek and Persian Wars 499–386 BC*, Oxford: Osprey, 2003. Fink, Dennis L., *The Battle of Marathon in Scholarship: Research, Theories and Controversies since 1850*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc., 2014.

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Addenda

First Edition Date: 1997.

New edition: 2006.

Daniel Minter's TEDx talk (accessed: October 22, 2019).

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