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Ursula Dubosarsky

Black Sails, White Sails

Australia (1997)

TAGS: Aegeus Archaeology Ariadne Minos Minotaur Theseus

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

General information	
Title of the work	Black Sails, White Sails
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1997
First Edition Details	Ursula Dubosarsky, *Black Sails, White Sails.* Ringwood, Viking, 1997, 129 pp.
ISBN	0670870676
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Target Audience	Young adults
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Creators

Courtesy of the Author.

Ursula Dubosarsky , b. 1961
(Author)

Ursula Dubosarsky is an Australian writer of children's and young adult fiction. Born in Sydney in 1961, she received an education in classical languages and literature at the University of Sydney (1982). She has a PhD in English Literature from Macquarie University (2008). She travelled to Israel and worked on a kibbutz, where she met her Argentinian husband. Her work is influenced by her travel, by an enjoyment of word play, intertextual referents, and an empathy with her child characters. Her child characters tend to be intelligent, intense, and observant loners. She is also very fond of guinea-pigs, which appear in many of her works.

Source:

Official website (accessed: September 4, 2020).

Bio prepared by Margaret Bromley, University of New England, brom_ken@bigpond.net.au and Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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?

Well, things you read stick in your mind as a writer and I suppose you store them away for the future, without conscious intentions. I loved the tone and energy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from my very first reading when I was 12 in a Year 8 Latin class, translating the Pyramus and Thisbe episode and then the story of Io. I found them enchanting,

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unsettling and very funny. They were not stories I had ever read before.

At much the same time as I was reading the *Metamorphoses* I also saw a school French production of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* which made an enormous impression as a work of art; then a couple of years later I saw another school production of Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. A very different approach to Anouilh! and yet the works have much in common, in their apprehension of the classical world, not something alien and distant from modern society, but endlessly resonant. Then we read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and another extremely entertaining incarnation of Pyramus and Thisbe. I'm sure all these works, all written for stage, were fundamental to my choice of Ovid when I was asked, 35 years later, to write some plays for primary school children for the *NSW School Magazine*.

I was under a certain constraint with the plays, particularly in regard to the sexual activity which is central to several of the stories, as the School Magazine is an official publication of the NSW Department of Education. There was some concern from higher up in the Department (not the Magazine itself) from the very first play, "Io, the Girl who turned into a Cow" – it was felt to be crossing the line of decent behaviour and a bad model for children. There was a meeting called, and a discussion held, but in the event the play was published without alteration, and no objections were raised to further plays.

In the novels, *Theodora's Gift*, *How to Be a Great Detective*, *Black Sails White Sails*, *The Golden Day* and *The Blue Cat*, for the most part the classical myths are adapted almost secretly – the reader often may have little idea that I am working from a classical story, which they may or may not be familiar with. It is almost something that feeds me as a writer, than helps me find mirrors of meaning, watery shadows deep under water of centuries of human storytelling. The same is true of the use of Biblical stories in *The First Book of Samuel* and again *Theodora's Gift*, which draws on both Biblical and classical mythology.

2. 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 six years of Latin at high school, then another two years of Latin

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and two years of Greek at Sydney University. But my pleasure has always been literary and not scholarly – I read the works as a reader and a writer, not a scholar. Later in life I have joined Latin reading groups, through organisations such as the Workers Educational Association. As a writer I suppose I prefer to respond directly to the texts, word for word, as works of literature, as one reader to another, without mediation.

Courtesy of the Author.

3. 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 certainly did think about it when I was writing the plays, and I worked all the time with the original Latin texts, hoping to include as much detail as possible. But what I wanted most of all was to give children a sense of what the experience of reading Ovid might be like, that they would come away from the plays with an impression that these are not heavy, ponderous works, but witty, light, accessible and at the same time strange, dramatic and surreal. My primary motive is that children will have the pleasure of reading in the moment, but I'm also hoping that when they see the name Ovid anywhere in the future that they will associate it with laughter and wonder – and that they may be drawn to

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read more.

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

Not specifically, but as you can see, I think I can't help myself! The literature of the classical world seems inseparable from the way my mind works as a writer. I'm sure there will be more …

Prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

The foreword of Ursula Dubosarsky's *Black Sails, White Sails* tells the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, of how Theseus slays the Minotaur that was menacing his people, the Athenians. Theseus persuades his father, Aegeus, to let him kill the monster, but forgets to let his father know of his success by hoisting the white sails on his ship and dropping his black sails. When Aegeus sights Theseus' ship approaching, black sails raised, Aegeus assumes the worst, that his son has failed to kill the Minotaur and perished in the process. Thereupon, Aegeus commits suicide by casting himself into the sea.

Black Sails, White Sails is an intimate narrative of a young woman who recalls her childhood and adolescence yearning for love, friendship, and acknowledgment, firstly by her parents and then from her only friend, Olivia. It tells of a prolonged painful period of time, lasting several years when she is frequently failed by her parents and her friend. The narrator never divulges her own name. There are no explanations for people's behaviours or the constant betrayals that she experiences.

The narrator's strange friend, Olivia Lindstrom, is so dissembling that she reveals little about herself, except for her fascination with the Greek story of Theseus and the Minotaur, which leads the narrator to question "Why should a teenage girl be so fascinated with the outrageous life of a self–seeking hero, whose very adventure in my eyes at least, made him more and more discreditable?".

When they first meet in school at the age of six, Olivia is wearing a hearing aid. Their friendship is short-lived as Olivia leaves the school "forever...to go to America to be a guinea-pig". We are led to assume that Olivia is to have an operation which will rectify her hearing disability. Eight years later a chance meeting in the local park elicits a very strange friendship between the narrator and the fourteen-year-old Olivia. They have both led odd, lonely childhoods, living amongst adults who have little empathy for children. Indeed, most of the adults they encounter actually seem to dislike children.

Parents who are physically and psychologically absent determine behaviour and attitudes in the novel. The unacknowledged spectre of mental illness hangs over the narrator's daily life as her mother is "preoccupied" and "never seemed altogether present". Gradually, she

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realises that her father, Michael, who stays with them intermittently, “was not sick, just selfish”. And Olivia’s parents “always seem to be asleep” when she visits.

Fourteen-year-old Olivia lives in a house that is brand new, with walls “painted a pale icy grey, bare of any sort of decoration”, except for a framed painting by Olivia herself (she claims) of “a tiny sailing boat in the middle of a blue wide dangerous sea, with not a wisp of land in sight”. Olivia’s interpretation of Theseus, sailing away from Crete, having slain the Minotaur, is limited by her artistic capability. She would have liked to have painted him cutting off the Minotaur’s head; but, she admits that she can’t draw people.

Olivia is very interested in ancient things. Her favourite books were “ancient mythologies, stories of gods and demons and beauties and troublemakers, fabulous beasts, vengeful husbands, rocky Grecian clifftops”. Homeschooled, as it turns out, Olivia is even learning Ancient Greek.

Whilst having no knowledge of the Greek myths, our narrator senses Olivia’s attraction to the violence in the Theseus stories. She senses Olivia’s disturbed nature and admits to feeling “rather trapped” by the psychological manipulations of Olivia and her family members. This sense of entrapment and manipulation propels the novel. Olivia’s conversations don’t ring true; they are fantasies of her imagination. Meanwhile, Olivia’s older brother Randal, a university student and therefore supposedly an adult, deviously escapes the control of his dogmatic atheistic parents by attending the local Quaker meeting house. The narrator’s reflections are revealing: “I’m quite sure that in private life Randal was both promiscuous and dishonest, whereas I who was nothing of the kind, had no knowledge of the presence of God”.

A pivotal event occurs when Randal escorts his sister and the protagonist to the museum of antiquities at his university. Randal maintains a menacing physical and psychological distance from the young girls. In the museum, Olivia is entranced by a tableau of ‘Black Sails, White Sails’, “a scene made of some sort of ceramic and paint, of ships with black sails lying still on a hard rippled sea…Some tiny figures were standing on the decks, and on the shore there was a cliff, with another figure, small and fierce, waiting.”

The drama of the scene is embedded in the narrator’s conscience, yet it remains uninterpreted for most of the novel. Olivia is supposed to be

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her best friend, yet she doesn't behave as a best friend should. Olivia's gift of a book of *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece* seems tainted and ominous. She is devious and untruthful, as is the narrator's own mother who could have been more supportive of her daughter by revealing more of what she remembers of her primary school friend Olivia's childhood deafness.

When Olivia and her family mysteriously disappear for a second time without notice, the narrator realises that she has been entrapped in a game, set up by Olivia and her family, for her to assume take on the identity of the original Olivia who suffered from deafness. Four years after the second Olivia's mysterious departure she sends a letter to the narrator. Despite the betrayal and the lies, the narrator admits to "a wistfulness, a longing to see her, to speak with her, to be her friend".

However, ultimately, the narrator realises that there was no meaning to their friendship, that Olivia was not Olivia. In a quirky twist of fate, a few months later at university, she encounters the original, the real, Olivia. In a few lines of conversation, Olivia seems sincere and friendly and, importantly, she is wearing a hearing aid. Yet, the narrator chooses not to admit that she recognises her.

The behaviours depicted in the novel are often disturbing but psychologically credible. The narrator's response to the original Olivia's reappearance is somehow liberating as it evokes "a kind of delight mixed with panic. As though the god Pan himself was standing playfully in front of me, watching to see what I might do".

Analysis

The narrator describes *Black Sails, White Sails* as "a story of accident, deception, disillusion, heroism, despair, death, triumph".

The novel alludes to the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Dubosarsky's account of the myth and the protagonist's own narrative are both incomplete stories. An extended version of the Greek myth shows Theseus as an imperfect, flawed character, despite his heroic qualities. As a young girl, the narrator questions her friend, Olivia's fascination with the two-dimensional character of the heroic self-seeking Theseus.

Black Sails, White Sails is "a story of accident, deception, disillusion, heroism, despair, death, triumph". However, Greek heroes are flawed,

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imperfect people. Through different tellings of the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, readers can appreciate concise two-dimensional depictions of Theseus and other characters or more nuanced versions of the story.

Dubosarsky's novel is told from the self-effacing point of view of a child and teenager who is learning to negotiate friendships and relationships in a hostile environment. Unknowingly, the narrator is often set up to fail the test of friendship and love, whilst she wonders who to believe and how much to believe. She is often cast adrift on what could be the sea of despair as she navigates devious behaviour, including betrayals and exclusion.

The expectations of a "good parent" and a "best friend" are thematic concerns of the novel. What influence do our childhood friendships and parental relationships or parenting styles have on our adult lives?

Reflecting on the choices that she has so far made in life, the adult narrator states that she "studied archaeology, which fitted me for nothing," and that she supposes she will never have any children of her own. Is this ambivalence or even negativity indicative of another phase of her life? Evidently the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur offered the narrator an entrée into the study of classical history, as, indeed, it might for the reader. Contemplating the motives and actions of these classical mythological characters for the narrator and the reader elicits questions about human society and behaviour of the past, including our understandings of identity, power, and ideology. This is what the study of archaeology can offer as a discipline that contributes to the understanding of the human condition, a concept which is alluded to in the novel.

Black Sails, White Sails eludes time and place and, most poignantly, the identity of its nameless narrator. No one ever utters her name. She lives in a rented apartment with her mother with occasional visits from her father. They are both absentee dysfunctional parents, with no interest in her as a child or as an adolescent. Surrounded by manipulative, selfish adults, she is ill-equipped to negotiate friendships, and consequently to appreciate the nuances of trust and loyalty that underpin all close relationships. The adult narrator looks back on these years with acuity. It is for the reader to work out if she is permanently damaged by her not so distant difficult childhood.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aegeus Archaeology Ariadne Minos Minotaur Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Friendship Integrity Love Obedience Resilience Respect Self Socialisation Values
Addenda	Circumstances in which the work was created: *Black Sails, White Sails* was written during a three month stay in Buenos Aires.

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