Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Persephone by Simon Spence", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1038. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Simon Spence

Persephone

Ireland (2018)

TAGS: Afterlife Cerberus Ceres Demeter Eleusinian Mysteries Gods Greek Art Greek History Hades Heracles Hercules Hermes Katabasis Persephone Pluto / Plouton Proserpina Sisyphus Styx Underworld Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Persephone
Country of the First Edition	Ireland
Country/countries of popularity	Ireland, United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	Simon Spence, *Persephone*, "Early Greek Myths", Book 7. Createspace (Independent Publishing Platform), 2018, 28 pp.
ISBN	9781723980817
Official Website	earlymyths.com (accessed: June 18, 2020)
Genre	Illustrated works, Myths, Retelling of myths*
Target Audience	Children (4–7 years)
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Creators



Portrait, courtesy of the Author.

Simon Spence (Author)

Simon Spence studied at University College Dublin before completing a PhD at the University of Nottingham. An adapted version of his PhD thesis is available as *The Image of Jason in Early Greek Myth:An Examination of Iconographical and Literary Evidence of the Myth of Jason Up Until the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (self-published via Createspace, 2010). Simon Spence launched the *Early Myths* series in 2013.

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Additional information

Summary

The *Early Greek Myths* series of children's books presents myths for very young readers. The books tell the myths in simple language. Each double page includes a full-page illustration on the left page and a page of text on the right. Stephen Fry provides a forward to *Persephone*. He explains that myths tell us the stories of inspirational characters and of the way things came to be. Persephone is "one of the most delightful" myths, relating "how young Persephone got lost and how her mother's sorrow changed the world."

The story begins with a large illustration of Demeter holding baby Persephone. Demeter is introduced. She is the goddess of the forest and plants. Zeus is baby Persephone's father but he is too busy to spend time with her. Demeter looks after Persephone and teaches the growing child about plants and how to sow the seeds which create crops for the people of Greece. Hades lives below the ground guarding the ghosts of the dead. He is lonely and comes up to earth "in search of love and friendship" (p. 4). He wishes Persephone would be his wife but does not ask her as he thinks that she will run away. Instead he asks Zeus, and Zeus gives permission, "without talking to Persephone or to Demeter first!" (p. 4). Hades bursts out in front of Persephone as she is out gathering flowers for her mother. It was "quite a shock" for her (p. 6). Persephone disappears without a trace.

For nine days and nights, Demeter searched for Persephone. The sun god, Helios, then explains that Zeus was responsible. "Demeter was shocked" (p. 8) and refused to speak to the other deities for a year. She ignored the plants and crops and they withered without her help. Zeus asked her to change her mind but she "angrily refused until he brought their daughter back" (p. 8).

Hades had found that Persephone was unhappy in "her new home" (p. 10). She ate nothing but a single pomegranate seed. Zeus sent Hermes to instruct Hades to let Persephone leave for a visit, but Hades was reluctant to let her go as he thought Persephone would not come back. By then, however, she was warming to life in the Underworld and had a new pet, Cerberus. She was caught between two worlds.

Demeter was delighted to see Persephone again. She welcomed her warmly and the plants began to grow. But because Persephone had

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eaten a seed from the Underworld, Zeus decreed that she would go back to Hades for part of the year. This created the seasons: in Winter the plants would die during Demeter's sorrow; in Spring Persephone returned.

"Persephone was busy in the Underworld" (p. 16). She met Herakles and listened to his appeal about returning Queen Alcestis. Sometimes she was less kind. She was angry with Sisyphus for tricking his way out of the Underworld, so when he came back she made him endlessly push a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down: "this was his punishment for being a rogue and a cheat!" (p. 18). In the Spring Persephone returned to Demeter and they had a helper called Triptolemus who helped them spread seeds to farmers.

The book concludes with a section called "Some interesting notes for grown-ups" (pp. 22–28). This section describes the myth as "the perfect tale for a children's book" because the myth is such a neat version of "the growth of a girl into a woman". There follows a discussion of the ancient iconography of Demeter, Hades, Persephone and Triptolemus.

Analysis

When a myth features the abduction and rape of a young woman it presents challenges for retelling to a young audience. Spence's *Persephone* manages this challenge by placing emphasis on the creation of the seasons and, rather unusually, in telling some of Persephone's stories from after she becomes Queen of the Underworld. With this focus, the young reader could experience the story without thinking too much about Persephone's abduction. That element is fundamental to the story, however, and in that sense it still remains problematic as a children's tale.

One key aspect of the story is the relationship between Persephone and her mother Demeter. Rather refreshingly, this aspect is presented very positively. Demeter is shown as a caring mother, and Persephone is shown to return her mother's love and to enjoy her company. Demeter is "shocked" to discover what Zeus and Hades arranged behind her back; she ignores the plants, and she is angry when Zeus calls on her to change (p. 8). Unlike many modern children's books, however, there is no attempt to place blame on Demeter or to represent her as an irresponsible or hateful figure (as in, for e.g, Glen Huser's *Time For Flowers, Time For Snow*) – Demeter has simply

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withdrawn from her usual activities. The relationship between the crisis and the seasons is a little back-to-front. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the main source for this myth, Demeter teaches humans how to farm in response to the creation of the seasons (so that grain can be stored then eaten during the winter months). In this retelling, as in many others, Demeter has already taught this skill to humans before the myth unfolds; this makes the end section a little redundant, in which she and Persephone urge Triptolemus to share the secret of farming. The sense that Demeter provides a gift to balance out the new situation is therefore muddied, but she nonetheless remains a figure of bounty. This frequently seen reordering is perhaps done in order to introduce Demeter with a clear-cut identity early on in the work – she is "the goddess of the harvest."

The issue of the abduction is hard to navigate. The narrator provides disapproval by noting (with an exclamation mark) that Zeus and Hades did not consult Persephone or Demeter, thereby gently drawing attention to the lack of consent. This element is hard to avoid even if a writer wishes to present a mild version of events, because it is necessary for the plot that Demeter search for answers. The narrator also indicates a problem by referring to Persephone's "shock", and the illustration compliments this by having Persephone look back in anguish towards the flowers dropped upon the meadow (p. 5). A further illustration shows Persephone angrily turning her back on Hades in the Underworld, and the narrator explains that Persephone was unimpressed with Hades' "magic, horses, and chariot" (p. 10). These features are undermined, however, by minimisation of what has happened. Hades is "lonely" and looking for "love and friendship" (p. 4), a framing that excuses Hades' act and presents abduction as an act of love. The introduction refers euphemistically to Persephone getting "lost", a formation which removes the active cause. There is no negative comment on Hades' desire to keep Persephone away from her mother. Persephone becomes happy in the Underworld (as stated by the narrator and reinforced by an illustration of her with her hand familiarly on Hades' shoulder, p. 12). It is unclear how or why she has become happy, although she does like Cerberus, her "new pet". These factors normalise what is really abusive behaviour – forced marriage and isolating a young woman from her family and support.

The theme of an abducted woman falling in love with and rescuing her rapist from loneliness is familiar from a great deal of mythology and other forms of story-telling, ancient and modern. It features in the ancient myth of the Rape of the Sabine Women (Livy, 1.9–13), retold

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in cinema as *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954); also in *Beauty and the Beast* (a French fairy-tale first published in 1740 and retold in many forms; and more recently in films such as *The Running Man* (1987), *V for Vendetta* (graphic novel 1983–1985, film 2006), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), or *Passengers* (2016). Elements of it feature in *Jane Eyre* (albeit subverted, 1847 with numerus adaptations), in *Dracula* (1897, numerus adaptations), and in the *Twilight Saga* (2005–2008, films 2008–2012). These narratives celebrate the violation of women's rights by men who are "then rewarded with a romantic relationship" (Jonathan McIntosh*). While Spence's *Persephone* handles the story fairly sensitively, the narrative still reinforces this dynamic for a young readership, celebrating damaging behaviours that contemporary young people may face, such as forced marriage and abuse. Forced marriage and unsought sexual contact is represented in this narrative as an act of love, a characterisation that provides an unhealthy model for both boys and girls. With this in mind, it is somewhat remarkable to see the myth described in the notes as "the perfect tale for a children's book... the growth of a girl into a woman" (p. 23) (likewise, described as "delightful" in the introduction). It is arguable that there is no way to tell this story in a way that is appropriate for very young children.

The two pages exploring Persephone's life after marriage add some balance and reduce the sense that womanhood is fully achieved or concluded through marriage. The two examples chosen offer different reflections on her role. In the first, she is kindly, using her power to help the unhappy Alcestis and obliging the hero Herakles. In the other she takes a more active role in enforcing morality and guarding her power. Sisyphus' crime and punishment is detailed briefly, and the narrator guides the interpretation by adding that he is punished for being "a rogue and a cheat." Persephone may not have chosen her life in the Underworld, but she is not entirely passive in how she lives it.

The final section's emphasis on iconography is informative and presents the opportunity for adults and their young reading companions to seek out and identify more images of the deities involved. The artwork in the book is simple and faux-naïve, filled with bright colours, child-like figures, and a wealth of flowers.

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* *Abduction As Romance*, by Jonathan McIntosh (Pop Culture Detective), popculturedetective.agency, published June 24, 2018

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	(accessed: June 18, 2020).
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Afterlife Cerberus Ceres Demeter Eleusinian Mysteries Gods Greek Art Greek History Hades Heracles Hercules Hermes Katabasis Persephone Pluto / Plouton Proserpina Sisyphus Styx Underworld Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Character traits Child, children Coming of age Death Family Gender expectations/construction Justice Love Morality Parents (and children) Rape Sexuality Teenagers
Further Reading	Blackford, Holly, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, London: Routledge, 2011. Fant, Maureen B., and Mary R. Lefkowitz, trans., "Homeric Hymn to Demeter", *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 4th ed. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. *Abduction As Romance*, by Jonathan McIntosh (Pop Culture Detective), popculturedetective.agency, published June 24, 2018 (accessed: June 18, 2020).
Addenda	Createspace (Independent Publishing Platform) (accessed: June 18, 2020).

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