Sarah F. Layzell, "Entry on: Looking for Atlantis by Colin Thompson", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy, Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1042. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Colin Thompson

Looking for Atlantis

United Kingdom (1993)

TAGS: Arcadia Atlantis Styx Titans Underworld





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

General information	
Title of the work	Looking for Atlantis
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1993
First Edition Details	Colin Thompson, *Looking for Atlantis*. London: Julia MacRae, 1993, 32 pp.
ISBN	9780099645214
Official Website	colinthompson.com (accessed: July 31, 2020).
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Children
Author of the Entry	Sarah F. Layzell, University of Cambridge, sarahlayzellhardstaff@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk 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



Self-portrait with timer, 2006. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: January 11, 2022).

Colin Thompson , b. 1942
(Author)

Born in London in 1942, Colin Thompson went to school in Yorkshire and London before going to art school in Ealing and Hammersmith. Following a varied career in design, theatre, television, ceramics and textiles, Thompson began writing and illustrating in 1990, becoming an author of picturebooks, poetry, young adult and adult fiction. He is the author-illustrator of more than 20 picturebooks as well as other books for children and adults, and is known for the level of detail in his illustrations, for example, featuring his dog Max on almost every page. The details create rich, absorbing worlds which readers can spend hours poring over, with new discoveries to be made on every reading. Thompson also produces artwork for jigsaw puzzles and cross-stitch patterns. He writes openly of his experience of depression, urging others to seek help when they need it. Thompson visited Australia on an author visit to a school in 1995, moved to Australia two weeks later and subsequently married Anne, the teacher-librarian who organized the original visit. He currently lives near Bellingen in New South Wales.

Thompson has received several Australian awards for his work and has been nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Award.

Sources:

Official author website (accessed: April 23, 2020);

penguin.com.au (accessed: June 28, 2020).

Bio prepared by Sarah Hardstaff, University of Cambridge, sflh2@cam.ac.uk

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.

Sarah F. Layzell, "Entry on: Looking for Atlantis by Colin Thompson", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy, Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1042. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

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

Summary

Looking for Atlantis is a picturebook featuring a boy and his grandfather. As he is dying, Grandfather tells his grandson that he must look for Atlantis, a reference to the famous lost city of antiquity. Rather than being a story or a faraway place, Atlantis is all around you, or so Grandfather says. When Grandfather dies, the boy searches through his wooden chest and finds a door to Atlantis, pictured here as a surreal, magical seascape. The boy then tries to see the world with his grandfather's imagination, looking for glimpses of Atlantis in his everyday environment. While the boy expresses scepticism, the book's illustrations reveal hidden doors, secret worlds and intricate details embedded in walls, under floorboards and in the eaves of the boy's home.

Eventually Grandfather's old parrot, Titanic, falls down the stairs into the boy's basement. The boy cradles the bird as it too dies, feeling the loss of his grandfather keenly. It is at this moment that a shift occurs in the boy's imagination: he sees the sun rise in the basement to reveal a harbour town on the book's final double spread. On the last single page, the boy is in bed looking out of his window, reflecting on his new-found ability to perceive the world differently and thus "keep Atlantis and Grandfather in my heart forever".

Analysis

The book's title, verbal narrative and visual content all feature Atlantis, a famous mythic lost city of antiquity discussed by Plato. Atlantis may or may not be based on real island Thera (Santorini), which was covered in volcanic ash after an eruption during the Bronze Age. However, Thompson's idea of Atlantis seems to have little in common with the story told by Plato of a degenerate island sinking beneath the waves as a divine punishment. Instead, Atlantis appears in its more recent cultural guise as a lost wonder waiting to be discovered: the process of exploration and discovery is more important than the content represented by Atlantis itself. This is emphasised by some of the book titles on display in the boy's house – *Five Go to Atlantis*, *Atlantean Family Robinson* – which connect Atlantis with classic children's literature adventures. A review of Thompson's picturebook concludes: "Does the boy find Atlantis? Asked literally, the question is beside the point; in a mythic sense, however, it is the point, and one exceptionally well made." (Roback

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.

and Devereaux, 77). Similarly, Atlantis as place appears in mythic rather than literal form.

Along with multiple puns and intriguing details, the word 'Atlantis' can be found on multiple books within Thompson's pictures. 'Atlantis' also appears in letters, address labels, on a submarine in the floorboards underneath a leaking toilet, the side of the bathroom extractor fan, on a travel timetable, and so on. This creates an ironic contrast with the words on the page: when the boy questions, "Maybe Atlantis *was* just an old man's dream?", we can find the word 'Atlantis' displayed on the spine of the phone book, as well as a large neon arrow pointing to the basement. The demand the picturebook makes on its readers – to really look – mirrors the boy's eventual realisation that he can see Atlantis all around him. It is possible to spend a lot time poring over the book's pictures and imagining the worlds behind the tiny doors, through tunnels and archways. Carole Scott identifies *Looking for Atlantis* as an example of a picturebook that "offers the opportunity for a collaborative child-adult interpretation, wherein each reader finds meanings that elude the other" (Stan, 120). The possibilities the book offers to readers of different ages reflects its core theme of intergenerational exchange.

The book's only wordless spread, presented before we see the boy on the verge of giving up his search, features a signpost on a pile of rocks by a river under the floorboards which reads, "STYX AND STONES". In Greek mythology, the river Styx is one of the three rivers of the Underworld. This association of water and death recalls the description of Grandfather's passing at the beginning of the book: "Grandfather set out on his final voyage across a sea of dreams and grey feathers." As Styx is associated with promises, through the gods' use of the river as a place to make binding vows, perhaps it also represents the unspoken promise the boy has made to his grandfather to find Atlantis. The Styx detail may also foreshadow the death of Grandfather's parrot, Titanic, given that Styx fought on the side of Zeus against the Titan gods. Titanic's name suggests a classical motif as well as the more obvious connection to Grandfather's past as a sailor. This parallel between the old parrot and the Titans echoes the book's theme of mourning for Grandfather, who seems almost like a vanquished god in the eyes of the boy.

The book's association of Atlantis with Robinson Crusoe's island evokes the many islands and sea voyages of children's literature, sometimes associated with Arcadia and childhood innocence,

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.

	sometimes more explicitly associated with colonial exploration and extraction. The motif of descent into the underworld also appears frequently in children's literature and is often accompanied by a loss of childhood innocence, as the boy experiences when Grandfather dies.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Arcadia Atlantis Styx Titans Underworld
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Appearances Character traits Child's view Death Emotions Family Gaining understanding Intertextuality Isolation/loneliness Journeys Loss Names Old age (Old people) Other literary figures, texts and writers Past Philosophy Relationships Resilience Scepticism Transformation Water
Further Reading	Blackford, Holly V., *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. Gagarin, Michael, ed., *"Atlantis," The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, Oxford University Press, 2010, (accessed: April 23, 2020). Gagarin, Michael, ed., *"Styx," The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, Oxford University Press, 2010, (accessed: April 23, 2020). Roback, Diane and Devereaux, Elizabeth, "*Looking for Atlantis* [book review]", *Publishers Weekly* 241.14 (1994): 77. Stan, Susan, "Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults, Ed. Sandra Beckett [book review]", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25.2 (2000): 119–120. Vaclavik, Kiera, *Uncharted Depths: Descent Narratives in English and French Children's Literature*, Abingdon: Legenda, 2010.

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.

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.