Susan Deacy, "Entry on: Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient Greece by Richard Woff ", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1078. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Richard Woff

Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient Greece

United Kingdom (1999)

TAGS: Arachne Athena Athens Cecrops Daughters of Kekrops Demeter Erichthonius Giants Gods Gorgon(s) Medusa Mysteries Panathenaia Pandora Persephone Perseus Poseidon Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient Greece
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom, United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1999
First Edition Details	Richard Woff, *Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient Greece*, "Looking at Myths and Legends". London: British Museum Press, 1999, 48 pp.
ISBN	0892365587
Genre	Mythological fiction, Retelling of myths*
Target Audience	Children (and young adults)
Author of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk
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Creators



Richard Woff (Author)

Richard Woff is a British educator, classicist and children's author whose career has included roles as lecturer in Education at the University of London and as Head of Schools and Young Audience Education at the British Museum. The many books Woff has authored for children include *The Ancient Greek Olympics* (2000), *A Pocket History of Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses* (2000), *Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient Greece* (1999) and *Explore the British Museum: A Family Souvenir Guide* (2007).

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Additional information

Summary

In the women's quarters of a house in ancient Athens, a young woman learns the art of spinning from older women as they create intricate tapestries while narrating inter-related stories about deities, creatures, heroines and heroes. The stories bear especially upon Athena, the goddess whose cult the women serve as creators of the Panathenaic robe. The young woman – herself to be an initiate in the Mysteries of Athena – listens spellbound to the stories which include Athena's contest for patronage of Athens with Poseidon, Athena's contest in weaving with Arachne, Perseus's quest for the head of Medusa, and the arrival in Athens of the mysterious Erichthonios – who might be Athena's child. The text is illustrated from artefacts from ancient Greece which are held in the British Museum and elsewhere, each of which is accompanied by a detailed caption explaining how it represents ancient Greek myth, religion or culture.

Analysis

Unlike many books retelling classical myth for children – and indeed adults – this one refrains from starting at the 'beginning' with e.g. creation myths and moving through the origins of gods, stories of heroes etc., instead taking as a premise the stories that a group of Athenian women tell as they spin and weave intricate tapestries. The stories the women tell ("spin") are inspired by what they are weaving and vice versa. Woff's approach – modelled on the stories-within-stories of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – is concerned not with presenting a set of key 'facts' about classical myth but with the stories' richness and flexibility and with how ancient tellers create their own new myths with each fresh narration (see further Deacy 2020, which includes quotations from Woff about his research and writing processes). In the myths as narrated by the women as they work, women's role in creating and transmitting culture is key. The women's knowledge about myth, and of the cult practices that the stories relate to, is conveyed as distinct from the stories and values of the men of Athens. The men of the city, indeed, do not share in the knowledge that women pass on down the generations.

As well as presenting the fluidity and variability – and thus the enticement – of ancient Greek myth for children, the book introduces artefacts via its illustrations, most of which are of artefacts held in the British Museum, where, at the time of the book's creation, the author,

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	was part of the Education and Young Audience team. In this role, Woff was involved in stimulating children's interest and curiosity about classical culture. Woff brings this commitment to stimulating children to the book. Rather than telling readers how to respond to each artefact, readers are invited to make their own interpretations under Woff's guidance. Indeed, the illustrations, like the narrated stories in the main text, invite the reader to form their own relationship with the ancient world, exemplifying the goals of the series of which the book forms part of presenting "[e]xciting new retellings of myths from around the world for children illustrated with photographs from museum collections" (Woff 1999, back cover).
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Arachne Athena Athens Cecrops Daughters of Kekrops Demeter Erichthonius Giants Gods Gorgon(s) Medusa Mysteries Panathenaia Pandora Persephone Perseus Poseidon Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Knowledge Learning Religious beliefs
Further Reading	Deacy, Susan, *Athena* (*Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World* series), London: Routledge, 2008. Deacy, Susan, ""From the shadows": Goddess, Monster, and Girl Power in Richard Woff's *Bright-Eyed Athena in the Stories of Ancient* Greece", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, in the series "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020. Hodkinson, Owen, and Lovatt, Helen, eds., *Classical reception and children's literature: Greece, Rome and childhood transformation*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2018..

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Marciniak, Katarzyna, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood… The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* trans. David Raeburn, Harmondsworth: Penguin 2004 (many other editions also available).

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