Robin Diver, "Entry on: The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes by Alice Low , Arvis Stewart ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1118. Entry version as of September 14, 2026.

Alice Low , Arvis Stewart

The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes

United States of America (1985)

TAGS: Arachne Atalanta Athena Cassiopeia Castor Echo Europa Hera Heracles Io Jason Medea Narcissus Odysseus / Ulysses Oedipus Orion Perseus Pollux Theseus Zeus

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

General information	
Title of the work	The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	English Speaking World
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1985
First Edition Details	Alice Low, *The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985, 184 pp.
ISBN	0027613909
Awards	1985 – Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies selection – Children's Book Council; 1988 – Washington Irving Children's Book Choice Award – Westchester Library Association.
Genre	Fiction, Myths
Target Audience	Children
Author of the Entry	Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com

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Creators

Alice Low , 1926 - 2012
(Author)

Alice Low (b. 1926, New York) was an American children's author, editor and teacher. In 1947, she graduated with a Bachelor's degree from Smith College, and attended Columbia University from 1956–1958. She married film studio owner Martin Low in 1949, and they had three children. Her first children's book, *Open Up My Suitcase,* was published in 1954. She is particularly known for her picture book *The Witch Who Was Afraid of Witches* (1978), which she turned into a New York play in 1993. Subsequently, it was made into an animated film by Learning Corporation of America. Witches are a common theme in Low's work. In her later career she was also an editor, editorial consultant, teacher of creative writing and maker of educational filmstrips.

Low enjoyed singing and playing tennis. She also volunteered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She said about herself "Painting and ceramics were my first interests. I still sing in a local chorus. Travel stimulates, and many a line has come to me on a tennis court." At the time of the publication of her classically-themed book *Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*, she lived in Briarcliff Manor, New York.

Sources:

Biographical note at back of Alice Low 1985. *The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*. New York: Macmillan;

Scholastic (accessed: August 5, 2020);

Biography J Rank (accessed: August 5, 2020);

Speculative Fiction Database (accessed: August 5, 2020).

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Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk

Arvis Stewart (Illustrator)

Arvis L. Stewart is an illustrator of many children's books and a fine artist about whom little information can be found. His children's works include *Bible Stories for Children* (1980), *Felicia the Critic* (1973), *A Gift of Magic* (1971) and *Witch of the Cumberlands* (1974). At the time of the publication of *Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*, he lived in Amarillo, Texas.

Sources:

Biographical note at back of Alice Low 1985. *The Macmillan Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*. New York: Macmillan;

Worldcat (accessed: August 5, 2020);

Jacketflap (accessed: August 5, 2020).

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

This is a collection of short, abbreviated retellings of Greek myth with bright and sometimes gory illustrations for children. It is divided into sections such as "Triumphs of the Gods", "The Heroes" and "Constellations".

Academic Barry R. Katz's afterword adds that myths "tell us how the Greeks understood the world before science, as we know it, existed" (p.179). He also discusses the difference between Greek and Roman myth, saying it is thanks to the Romans we have the treasure of Greek myth and giving a chart of Greek and Roman god names.

- Foreword.
- Mother Earth and Her Children.
- The Gods and Goddesses of Mount Olympus.

Zeus and the Creation of Mankind.

- Prometheus and His Gift to Man.
- Pandora.
- Deucalion and Pyrrha and the Great Flood.

Triumphs of the Gods (essentially a list of gods visiting revenge, tricks or cruel acts on mortals).

- Io and Europa.
- Persephone.
- Arachne.
- Niobe.
- Pygmalion.
- Echo.
- Narcissus.
- Phaethon.
- Orpheus.
- Oedipus.
- Bellerophon.
- Atalanta.

The Heroes:

- Perseus: I. The Prophecy II. Medusa
- Heracles: I. The Crime II. The Labors

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- Jason: I. The Argonauts II. The Golden Fleece III. The Return Home
- Theseus: I. The Banquet II. The Minotaur III. Daedalus
- Odysseus: I. The Trojan War II. The Voyage of Odysseus

The Constellations:

- Orion
- Cassiopeia
- Castor and Pollux
- Afterword
- Index

Analysis

With regards to the critical reception of this work, according to J Rank biographies, "While some reviewers found that these shortened, simplified versions lack animation, many have agreed that this attractive collection is ideal for presenting complex ancient myths to a young audience." (accessed: September 18, 2020).

As alluded to by reviewers, these are short, simple retellings of myth that embellish little and do not generally attempt to be moralistic. The Heroes section is somewhat longer and more detailed. The illustrations are bright and colourful, using a red based colour palette. There are also a number of black and white line drawings. Many illustrations are quite disturbing, with bones and blood featuring in several. They often focus on moments depicted in famous art; e.g. the death of Laocoon or the birth of Aphrodite.

The foreword and afterword are written by Barry R. Katz, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Classics at New York University. Katz begins by asserting that Greek myths are 'The best stories anyone has ever heard' (p. VII) "with the most interesting characters imaginable". Katz adds that myths "Tell us what the people of ancient Greece thought about their world". This is the explanation of myth as primitive science associated with the James Frazer school of thought, and frequently appearing in introductions to children's books of myth (e.g. Alexander, Hamilton, see further reading section for full references). Katz, however, adds a message presumably inspired by growing environmental concerns – "Many stories explained nature. If the pattern of particular stars in the sky looked like a bull, people told a story about a bull that had been placed in the sky long before. The

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natural world, then, was alive. It had feelings; it had to be treated with respect."

A 1980s family values mould is somewhat awkwardly placed on the gods. As in other anthology introductions (e.g. McCaughrean 1992, the D'Aulaires' 1962), Katz tells us the Greek gods "were not very different from human beings" (p. VII). Whilst McCaughrean used this to show the weakness and follies of the gods and the D'Aulaires to show that the gods are better than humans, Katz uses it to argue, "They were just another family. Zeus was the father, his wife, Hera, was the mother, and there were various children and relatives. Zeus and Hera loved each other, but sometimes they argued and even fought. Zeus thought *he* was the head of the family, but occasionally Hera outsmarted him." Zeus here resembles a buffoonish but lovable sitcom father outsmarted by his wife. Likewise, in the main anthology, Low claims, "Sometimes the gods and goddesses of Olympus quarrelled so intensely that Zeus would threaten to throw a thunderbolt to quiet them. But most of the time they lived in peace and joy." (p. 21).

Katz also hints at the great goddess theory as popularised by such authors as Robert Graves, Merlin Stone and Marijia Gimbutas that Indo European invaders brought patriarchal storm gods such as Zeus into a matriarchal pantheon that worshipped earth goddesses (for this see Cantarella; Doherty pp.106–115; Davies). This theory is also referenced in the 1999 children's anthology of Joan Vinge, *The Random House Book of Greek Myths*.

Finally, Katz tells us "these stories about Olympian deities reflect the human world of ancient Greece – its understanding of nature, its personal relationships, and its wars. They tell us much about ancient Greece, and they give us much pleasure."

Whilst this 1985 anthology is not as openly critical or mocking of the Greek gods as later versions would become (see the works of Rick Riordan and Kate McMullan, as well as Coats 2002 and Townsend 2010), the gods are often implicitly criticised through their victims being portrayed positively. For example, Arachne is sympathetic in her story. When Athena hits her, forces her to feel ashamed and kill herself, this shame is implied to be not only excessive but completely undeserved. About Echo, Low says, "Echo's delightful life was destroyed, all because she tried to protect her friends from Hera's wrath." (pp. 54–55.)

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As in other versions (see Roberts 2015), the queer elements of the Narcissus myth are somewhat obscured. It is a nymph not a man who now curses Narcissus for rejecting her, but Narcissus does appear to understand the reflection he loves as male, saying, "What a magnificent man you are! … I have never seen anyone so handsome!" (p. 58).

The Oedipus retelling, meanwhile, works to portray Laius unsympathetically and Oedipus sympathetically. It opens with a brutal descriptor of Laius snatching baby Oedipus from Jocasta's arms and piercing the baby's foot with a nail. When the two later meet on the road, Laius demands without preamble, "Can't you see that you are blocking the path of an important person?" (p. 71). He then runs over Oedipus' lame foot and hurts it.

In the Jason and the Argonauts retelling, both Jason and Medea are initially portrayed positively, but both of their characters deteriorate over the story. Medea is called so hardhearted she does not even grieve her brother after killing him (p. 123), and Pelias, previously a stereotypical storybook villain, is called "poor Pelias" after Medea causes his death. Jason continues to be positively described until the ending, where Low tells us, "But the dreadful Medea had no power to keep Jason's love. He fell in love with a princess of Corinth" (p. 126). Suddenly describing Jason negatively after this sentence, the narrator calls his abandonment "a heartless desertion" (p. 126). The killing of the children takes place, and we are then told that Jason is no longer favoured by the gods after breaking his promise to Medea. His death from the ship is related rather pathetically.

Whilst Theseus is depicted more sympathetically throughout his retelling, his slaying of the Minotaur is oddly unheroic. He comes upon it sleeping and strangles it from behind, rather than entering in a fair fight. This is depicted somewhat disturbingly in the illustrations. At the end of the story, Theseus is celebrated as a bringer of democracy.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Arachne Atalanta Athena Cassiopeia Castor Echo Europa Hera Heracles Io Jason Medea Narcissus Odysseus / Ulysses Oedipus Orion Perseus Pollux Theseus Zeus

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Authority Family Heroism Journeys Violence

Further Reading

Alexander, Heather, *A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology*, New York, NY: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2011.

Cantarella, Eva, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, trans. Maureen B. Fant, forward by Mary R. Lefkowtiz, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981.

Coats, Lucy, *Atticus the Storyteller's 100 Greek Myths*, London: Orion Children's Books, 2002.

Davies, Peter, "Matriarchy and Utopia", in Zajko Vanda and Hoyle Helena, eds., *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2017, 213–228.

D'Aulaire, Ingri and Edgar, *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 2003.

Doherty, Lillian, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003.

Hamilton, Edith, *Mythology*, New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2011.

McCaughrean, Geraldine, *The Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, London: Orchard Books, 2013.

McMullan, Kate, *Have a Hot Time, Hades!*, North Mankato, Minnesota: Stone Arch Books, 2012.

McMullan, Kate, *Phone Home, Persephone!*, North Mankato, Minnesota: Stone Arch Books, 2012.

Riordan, Rick, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, London: Puffin Books, 2005.

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Riordan, Rick, *Percy Jackson's Greek Gods*, New York: Hyperion, 2014.

Roberts, Deborah H., "The Metamorphosis of Ovid in Retellings of Myth for Children" in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature: Heroes and Eagles*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015, 233–258.

Townsend, Mike, *Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders*, New York, NY: Puffin Books, 2014.

Vinge, Joan D., *The Random House Book of Greek Myths*, New York: Random House, 1999.

Addenda

Republished in 2002 as *The Simon & Schuster Book of Greek Gods and Heroes*.

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