Annie Sullivan

A Touch of Gold

United States of America (2018)

TAGS: Golden Touch Midas Odyssey Poseidon Sirens Triton





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

General information	
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Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
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Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Annie Sullivan (Author)

American writer of young adult fiction, Annie Sullivan is based in Indianapolis. She teaches at the Indiana Writers Center and works at the publishing company John Wiley and Sons. She is the author of two young adult novels, *A Touch of Gold* (2018) and *Tiger Queen* (2019), based on Frank Stockton's short story *The Lady, or the Tiger?* Her latest novel, *A Curse of Gold* is sequel to *A Touch of Gold*, and is due for release in September 2020.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: September 22, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

Kora is the daughter of King Midas. When Dionysus grants him the golden touch, Midas inadvertently turns her, aged seven, into a golden statue. After begging the deceitful god to reverse the power, the king submerges himself and his daughter in the nearby river, but while celebrating Kora's return to human form, Midas forgets to adhere to the terms of Dionysus' bargain – that all the items he turned to gold must be washed in the river before sunset. Twelve objects are forgotten: a table, a necklace, a tapestry, a pheasant, a platter, two chalices, a knife, and three coins. They remain solid, alluring gold, with a special hold over the once greedy king. Kora, though no longer a statue, finds that her skin and hair has taken on a golden tone, and that she has developed the alarming ability to absorb the gold from anything she touches and transfer it to another object or person. Her power was discovered when she accidentally turned a palace guard to gold, and when the magic was reversed he promptly committed suicide, leaving her with a horrific sense of guilt for his death.

Ten years on, Midas is king in name only. Since the loss of the magic touch he has become a shadowy, depleted figure who craves constant contact with the remaining gold objects. His kingdom has been ravaged by marauding pirates, the treasury is empty, and other aristocrats are vying for power. Midas' brother, Pheus, manages the administration of the kingdom. Kora lives in lonely seclusion in the palace, with wild rumours circulating about her powers and her strange appearance. She wears gloves at all times to avoid touching anything made of gold, and Pheus has outlawed the substance, issuing a directive establishing silver as the main currency.

Since the curse Kora has had little to do with her father, who strenuously avoids her. She doesn't have much in common with her bossy, flirtatious cousin Hettie, and spends much of her time reading stories of fantasy islands and swashbuckling pirates. But now that she is seventeen she must marry, and Pheus manages the parade of suitors who come to the palace for an audience with the strange golden girl. Kora knows that they are repelled by her appearance, and seek her hand only in order to gain the kingdom or because they believe she can turn anything to gold. When the handsome Duke Wystlinos arrives, she is initially wary, but soon falls for his sensitive manners and stories of his own cursed father, who was also tricked by Dionysus.

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While they are talking the palace is invaded and an unknown assailant makes off with the special gold objects. The crime is the work of Captain Skulls, a notorious pirate with a penchant for decapitating his victims and collecting their skulls. Kora knows her father will waste away without his treasures and Duke Wystlinos offers her the use of his ship and crew to retrieve them. Kora's time as a golden statue has given her the ability to trace their whereabouts. The ship is captained by Royce, a disgraced member of the kingdom's armada. Kora's cousin Hettie is revealed to have stowed away, and once she overcomes her initial horror at the rustic conditions aboard a sailing ship, proves herself to be a loyal friend to Kora as well as a formidable sword fighter.

What follows is a swashbuckling adventure on the high seas, involving powerful storms and sinking ships, tavern brawls, and dalliances with the sirens who lure sailors to a watery grave. It turns out that Aris, the Duke of Wystlinos is a charlatan, and has manipulated Kora for his own ends, all the while in league with Captain Skulls. He has presented Royce's story as his own, pretending that it was his own father who wished for a pile of money so large he could never see the top of it. As with Midas, Dionysus granted the wish, but twisted it so that he is buried by his own mountain of wealth.

Through this painful betrayal, Kora comes to learn who her true friends are, and gains the loyalty and support of the rough and ready crew of sailors. Gradually, she begins to falls for Royce, while Hettie forms a strong connection with the ship's cheeky cook, Rhat. In the final showdown with Captain Skulls and his masked crew, she transforms Aris into a golden statue, which sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Though she is injured, Kora fights the fearsome pirate and smashes his face in with a golden skull. After a jubilant final night at sea they return to Kora's palace to reunite Midas with his precious objects, but find that her uncle Pheus has engineered a coup to claim the kingdom for himself. In another fight, both Pheus and Kora fall out the castle window, but while her uncle tumbles to his death, Kora has the strength to save herself and climb inside. Midas is still weak, but Kora is committed to supporting him, and the novel ends with her making an empowered declaration:

"He's going to need all the support he can get in the coming months while he regains his strength. But I'll be there for him – and for Hettie. I'll be the princess I should have been. United, we'll put the kingdom back together. We'll put our lives back together. We'll find a way to

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forget about the past." (p. 305)

Analysis

Where traditional retellings of the Midas myth for children often frame the narrative as a moralising story about the sin of greed, Sullivan's novel uses the myth to explore more complex philosophical territory, including the fine line between a gift and a curse. The golden touch reduces Midas to a weakened, elderly figure, no longer able to rule effectively and unhealthily dependent on the presence of the surviving golden objects. Whether out of shame, guilt, or sickness, he withdraws from Kora, leaving her feeling both abandoned and responsible for his weakened state. The bond between daughter and father is an important element of the story, as Kora and her friends battle violent pirates and overcome the perils of the ocean to retrieve the objects that will keep the king alive. *Touch of Gold* is also a coming of age narrative, with Kora learning to control her powers and recognise her own strength:

"What your father did to you doesn't change who you are. You aren't your father's mistakes. You aren't your father's curse. Your legacy rests with you." (p. 28)

These words are spoken by the treacherous Aris, who appropriates Royce's family history as his own to charm and manipulate Kora. But while he himself is false, his words ring true. Both Royce and Kora have inherited suffering as a result of the foolish decisions of their fathers, but their relationship helps to heal them of the legacy of trauma. Kora's name derives from the Greek word for "maiden", and the way her youthful energy enables her to break with the past is an important element of the novel.

Dionysus does not appear as a character in the story (in the forthcoming sequel, Kora tracks down the god to confront him directly). Nor do the gods of the sea Poseidon and Triton, though they are invoked by the sailors on several occasions. The narrative has a fantasy setting that draws on the myth of Midas' eastern associations, but blends them with the tropes of pirate tales. The sailors fight with swords and daggers, but the ships are also equipped with cannons that date the story to a post ancient world.

Other than King Midas himself, whose sickness relegates him to a minor role within the story, the most overtly mythological characters

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are the Temptresses, the mermaid sirens who lure sailors to their deaths. Their origins highlight the novel's preoccupation with the way in which men abuse and manipulate women.

> "They used to be human women whom Triton, son of Poseidon, fell in love with. But once his interest in them waned, he refused to return them to land, instead turning them into creatures of the sea. Part human and part aquatic. They supposedly guard a watery treasure trove, which, along with their enchanted voices, they use to lure greedy sailors to their deaths." (p. 191)

Because men are most susceptible to their charms, Kora and Hettie accompany Rhat to retrieve one of Midas' cups that Skulls has hidden within their trove. Like in the *Odyssey*, they stuff their ears with pieces of cloth to down out the sirens' song, but the plan goes awry when Rhat is pulled under. The Temptress reminds Kora of the myriad ways that the men in her life have hurt her, but she is repelled by the golden aura of the mermaids' treasure and manages to rescue Rhat and retrieve the chalice. Her aversion to gold and rejection of greed is what saves her.

The feminist preoccupations of the novel extend to the empowerment of Hettie and Kora as formidable swordfighters within the final showdown with Captain Bones, and repeated references to Kora's favourite book, *Captain Corelli's Account of the Sea*, about the little known first female captain to sail the seas. Kora's knowledge of the text provides helpful strategies on her adventure, and links her to her long dead mother, who, like Captain Corelli, was Sunisian, a race renowned to have a special affinity with the ocean.

First invented by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the figure of King Midas' daughter has come to play a central role in children's retellings of the myth, to the point that Robert Graves mentions her in his summary, overlooking the fact that there is no reference to her in any ancient source. Sullivan's book expands her story into a full length young adult novel that uses the Midas myth to address gender politics, the emotional baggage we inherit from our parents, and the hollow allure of shiny things.

Golden Touch Midas Odyssey Poseidon Sirens Triton

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs,

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Characters, and Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adolescence Adventure Adversity Appearances Character traits Coming of age Desires Emotions Freedom Gender Love Magic powers Parents (and children) Princes and princesses Psychology Punishment Revenge Romance Superstition Transformation Treasure-hunting Values Violence Water

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