Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Aranea: A Story About A Spider by Ron Brooks, Jenny Wagner", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1125. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Ron Brooks , Jenny Wagner

Aranea: A Story About A Spider

United Kingdom (1975)

TAGS: Arachne





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

General information	
Title of the work	Aranea: A Story About A Spider
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom, Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1975
First Edition Details	Jenny Wagner, *Aranea: A Story About A Spider*. Illustrated by Ron Brooks, Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1975, 32 pp.
ISBN	9780140502749
Awards	1976 – Children's Book Council of Australia – Picture Book of the Year (commended)
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Children
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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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



Ron Brooks , b. 1948
(Illustrator)

Ron Brooks is one of Australia's most distinguished illustrators. He was born in Pambula, on the far south coast of New South Wales, and grew up in Mallacoota in Gippsland in eastern Victoria before moving to Melbourne. He trained at Swinburne Technical School, and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. After working as a freelance artist and designer, he began illustrating children's books with Jenny Wagner, including the award winning *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* (1973) and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* (1977). His illustrations have a distinctive style, with prominent linework and detailed backgrounds, but each of his books is unique.

He has illustrated many highly regarded picture books, which have won multiple awards in the children's literature industry. His collaborations with Wagner (*The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek, John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat, Aranea*) as well as Margaret Wild (*Fox* and *Old Pig*), Ursula Dubosarsky and Margaret Peversi have established him as a key figure in the development of Australian children's books. His autobiography, *Drawn from the heart: a memoir*, describes his approach to illustrating many of his classic works.

Sources:

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"Brooks, Ron 1948–" in Lisa Kumar, *Something About the Author*,vol. 212, Gale: eBooks, 2010, 5–10.

Ron Brooks, *Drawn from the Heart: A Memoir*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010.

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Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au and Miriam Riverlea, Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com



Jenny Wagner , b. 1939
(Author)

Born in England, Jenny Wagner emigrated to Australia when she was nine years old. She studied German, Dutch, Swedish and Philosophy at Melbourne University. In the 1970s she began to write picture books for children, including several collaborations with illustrator Ron Brooks. *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* (1973) and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* (1977) were both recognised with Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year awards. Her chapter book *The Nimbin* (1978) and its sequels tell the story of a young girl's friendship with a mythical creature. Other writing projects have included screenwriting for the Australian television series *Bellbird* and a sourdough cookbook, published in 1992. She lives in Queensland.

Sources:

austlit.edu.au (accessed: September 22, 2020).

Megan Everitt, *Book buffs turn new leaf for author*, sunshinecoastdaily.com.au, published February 15, 2005 (accessed: Septe,ber 22, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

Aranea tells the story of an orb weaving spider who seeks to construct the perfect web. From her home in the "lilac bush in somebody's garden", she works persistently and secretly at her weaving. Sometimes she herself destroys what she has created before anyone wakes up to see it; other times her webs are broken by stick-wielding schoolboys or housewives hanging out their washing. But while the people register her weaving, Aranea herself remains hidden from sight.

Late in the summer a huge storm destroys her web and Aranea retreats inside the house. But the stark white walls of the living room offer no protection and when the storm abates she returns to the garden. Back in the lilac bush, she begins to build yet another web:

"First the cross piece

Then the frame

Then round and round the long spiral.

Until it was perfect."

Though the story does not reference classical myth directly, its central character, the female spider Aranea (whose name signifies the genus of orb weaving spiders), recalls the myth of Arachne. Shy, modest, and industrious, Aranea embodies Arachne's interminable existence after Athena transforms her into a spider. In Ovid's famous retelling of the scene, Athena curses her to spin for eternity:

"Your fate shall be to dangle on a cord,
and your posterity forever shall
take your example, that your punishment
may last forever!"

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.135–137 (translated by Brookes More)

There is also potential homage to the story of another spider with special talents, Charlotte, from E. B. White's children's classic *Charlotte's Web*, first published in 1952. Aranea may not weave words into her webs, but both books emphasise life's seasonal rhythms and urge their young readers to notice the little details in the world

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around them.

Analysis

In his autobiography, Ron Brooks describes Aranea as "a beautifully clear story about a spider weaving its web, living its life, night to day, day to night, putting up with difficulties, setbacks, doing it all again..."*. He also highlights the story as an allegory about "the courage and perseverance once might bring to the life lived."** At the time of the book's publication, a spider is an unlikely central character for a children's picture book. Unlike Charlotte, in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, Aranea is not anthropomorphised. She does not speak or interact with other creatures, and the reader is given only limited insight into her subjectivity. She simply weaves her webs.

Brooks' illustrations challenge the picture book tradition which assumes children like bright colours and bold shapes. As in *Bunyip* and *John Brown*, he uses the technique of very fine cross hatching, in pen and ink, but unlike those contemporary books, *Aranea* is rendered in a monochrome palette of black on white (with the exception of the description of the storm, in which the words are printed in white on a black background). Brooks writes: "I wanted my pictures to be as much like spider-webs as I could make them – very fine and light, with no colour at all."*** The circular form of the web is emphasised throughout the book, with many of Brooks' illustrations given a round frame, surrounded by white space and with the sparse written text appearing at the bottom of each page. In contrast, the illustrations featuring human figures and the dramatic storm fill the whole page, with only a tiny black page border to frame them. The presence of terraced mews, private school boys, and a pillar box imply a setting more English than Australian, but the focus of the work is less upon the cultural context than upon the life of the tiny spider, who is almost impossible to find in these images.

Arachne's crime is her hubris in her skills as a weaver. Aranea does not gloat, but she too seeks perfection in her designs. Wagner presents her weaving method in a rhythmic, repeated ekphrastic refrain that elevates the spider-web to a thing of beauty, and Brooks' accompanying illustrations distinguish each step of the process, charting the change from a single thread to a complete circular web. This understated and unorthodox picture book balances the minute world of a minibeast with the powerful forces of nature (including both the elements and human nature), and the grand task of creating

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	something beautiful. * Ron Brooks, *Drawn from the Heart: A Memoir*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010, 83. ** Ibidem. *** Ibidem, 85.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Arachne
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Character traits Isolation/loneliness Knowledge Life Loss Nature Resilience Small town life Subjectivity Survival Transformation
Further Reading	Brooks, Ron, *Drawn from the Heart: A Memoir*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010.

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