Robin Diver, "Entry on: Greek Myths by Ann Turnbull, Sarah Young", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1131. Entry version as of November 04, 2026.

Ann Turnbull , Sarah Young

Greek Myths

United Kingdom (2010)

TAGS: Alpheus Arachne Arethusa Ariadne Atalanta Bellerophon Demeter Echo Hades Hippomenes Midas Narcissus Orpheus Pan Pandora Persephone Perseus Phaethon Theseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Greek Myths
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	English speaking countries
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2010
First Edition Details	Ann Turnbull, *Greek Myths*. London: Walker Books, 2010, 165 pp.
ISBN	9781406339383
Genre	Anthology*, 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 Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Creators



Ann Turnbull , b. 1943
(Author)

Ann Turnbull (b. 1943, Hertford) is a British author of fiction for children and teenagers. Much of her work is historical fiction, including themes of women's history and religious persecution such as *No Shame, No Fear* (2003), *In That Time of Secrets* (2018) and *Josie Under Fire* (2004). Her historical novels about girls appear in a series with works by Adèle Geras, author of *Troy*.

As a child, she was shy and never enjoyed school, particularly prior to her teens. As an adult, she worked as a secretary, then trained as a teacher but decided teaching was not for her. Whilst training, however, she became inspired to try her hand at children's fiction. Her first novel was published in 1974. She then had two children and became a stay at home mother, saying "I loved being at home with young children. It was the best and most fulfilling job I ever had – and the children had an enormous influence on my writing."* She says about writing after raising her children and changing her direction from the former fantasy influence, "I found I was drawn to more character-led, domestic themes – at least in my books for older children. I've always been interested in history, and many of my stories are set in the past or involve the mingling of past and present."**

Turnbull says her favourite books as a child were C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*. She currently lives in Shropshire with her husband and enjoys walking in woodland, reading, dancing and singing.

According to O' Reilly, "Her work as a whole shows great empathy for child readers, as well as confidence in their abilities. She does not shy away from difficult topics."***

Sources:

Official website (accessed: September 24, 2020).

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Elizabeth O' Reilly, *British Council Biography*, 2007 (accessed: September 24, 2020).

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

* walker.co.uk (accessed: September 24, 2020).

** Ibidem.

*** Elizabeth O' Reilly, *British Council Biography*, 2007 (accessed: September 24, 2020).



Sarah Young (Illustrator)

Sarah Young is a British printmaker, painter, designer and illustrator whose work often looks at myth. She first went into business as a travelling puppet show, which eventually evolved into an art enterprise. Her paintings appear in galleries throughout the UK; for example, her 'Castor and Pollux' painting is on show at Brighton. She is based on the South Coast of England and works in Brighton. She creates a huge range of products, including dolls, tea towels and puppet making kits.

Sarah was born in Surrey, and during the 1950s her mother was a fashion designer and her father a sculptor and art teacher. She gained a Foundation Diploma at Reigate School of Art and Design, then studied Illustration at Brighton. Falling in love with Brighton, she became a pavement artist, then travelling puppet show performer with Jon Tutton. She is the founder of the Brighton Art Fair.

Sarah's illustrations to date include those for *Greek Myths* (Walker

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Books 2012) and *Endless Odyssey: A Mythic Storytelling Game* (Laurence King 2019). Sarah says of her role in illustrating *Greek Myths,* 'I loved these myths as a child, so it was a dream job, though daunting, to be asked to illustrate them. I hope the pictures help to convey something of the excitement of these beautifully-told stories.' Her inspirations include Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, Picasso, and Eric Ravilious. Information about her personal life and birth dates is scarce on the internet, possibly by choice.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: August 3, 2020);

Biographical information at back of book;

Yale Books Blog (accessed: August 3, 2020);

Toovey's Blog (accessed: August 3, 2020);

laurenceking.com (accessed: July 30, 2020);

stjudesprints.co.uk (accessed: July 30, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

This is a collection of a select number of Greek myths retold for children, with accompanying illustrations and artwork that visually dominates the page, often changing the colour of the page to match the art. The illustrations are lavish, to the point this is almost a presentation book. The stories primarily focus on myths about nature and nature spirits. In contrast to the twenty-first century trend towards more anachronistic and humorous retellings, these retellings stick closely to ancient source material, usually telling it in a neutral tone without didacticism.

The introduction begins with a personal note from Turnbull about her own experience of the myths, as told to her by her father. He loved them for their invocation of a bright world and she loved nature spirits such as Pan. This is reflected in the myths Turnbull chooses to include in her anthology, which feature a large number of myths about nature spirits.

She goes on in the introduction to explain the Olympian gods were descended from the Titans, and introduces the Muses and different types of nymph. She explains she has omitted the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* because they require books of their own, and that she has tried to go back to the earliest versions by the "ancient Greek poets" (p. 8). Therefore, she will not be including certain staples of most children's anthology books, such as Pandora having a box and Midas having a daughter. Finally, Turnbull says she has always used Greek names over Latin names, Ks over Cs in names (reflecting the ancient Greek script better) and tells children Greek names are easy to pronounce if one remembers the es on the end are not silent.

Featured Stories:

- Introduction.

Earth, the Heavens and the Underworld

- Arethusa.
- Persephone.
- Orpheus and Eurydice.
- Phaethon and the Chariot of the Sun.

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Monsters and Heroes

- The Minotaur.
- Ariadne on Naxos.
- The Kalydonian Boar Hunt.
- Atalanta's Race.
- Perseus and the Gorgon's Head.
- Bellerophon and the Winged Horse.

Gods and Mortals

- Pan and Syrinx.
- King Midas and the Golden Touch.
- King Midas and the Music Contest.
- Arachne.
- Echo and Narcissus.
- Pandora.

Analysis

Walker Books, the publisher, describe this book on their website as a retelling of the "timeless stories" of the Greeks (see here, accessed: September 24, 2020). Turnbull's own website calls the book a "timeless collection for all ages" and includes quotes from reviews discussing the importance of Greek myths for children (see here, accessed: September 24, 2020). The marketing around this book, therefore, would seem to play to the idea of the Greek myths as timeless tales that are "worthy" for children.

This is a lavishly presented book, with strong emphasis on aesthetics and stories about nature spirits, and a fairly morally neutral writing style. The stories are unusually accurate retellings of ancient myth. In her introduction, Turnbull mentions going back to ancient Greek poets. However, Ovid's Roman *Metamorphoses* is evidently used heavily as a source.

In particular, Ovid's influence can be seen in the regular appearance of rape and attempted rape. This is often portrayed in the neutral, uncritical language of describing predation among wild animals, as if nature spirits carrying out sexual violence is analogous to animals hunting their prey and cannot really be judged. For example, of Pan the book says "Pan often pursued nymphs for love, and only those who were wary and fast escaped him" (p. 122). It goes on to retell the myth

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of Syrinx, in similarly neutral language with Syrinx's flight from Pan somewhat eroticized.

This neutrality might be a conscious choice. Turnbull's anthology stands out from other commercially successful children's receptions of the time which adapt ancient myth more loosely, and include humour, particularly anachronistic humour, sometimes with the intent of drawing in reluctant readers. See, for example Kate McMullan's *Myth O' Mania* series, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* franchise, Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams' *Goddess Girls* series and the anthologies of Terry Deary (*Top Ten Greek Legends* 1998) Lucy Coats (*Atticus the Storyteller's 100 Greek Myths* 2002) and Michael Townsend (*Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders* 2010). With the beautiful artbook style of the work, and its sometimes surprisingly sexually explicit language, it may be aimed at a crossover adult as well as child audience.

Whilst the language of the rape episodes is never entirely explicit, the text becomes surprisingly explicit elsewhere. For example, Atalanta and Hippomenes "made love" in the temple of Rhea and are turned into lions as punishment (p. 89).

Turnbull's anthology also differs from the aforementioned books by not being particularly didactic. Such works as Riordan and Deary, whilst often presenting themselves as "cool" and rebelling against adult authority (see Murnaghan 2011 for a discussion of this)*, are frequently significantly morally didactic. For example, Rick Riordan in his 2014 anthology *Percy Jackson's Greek Gods* is at pains to explicitly point out the wrongness of the sexual violence depicted. Turnbull's anthology may wish to differentiate itself from the more "cool", humorous competitors by rejecting their didacticism as well as their alterations and anachronisms. It may also be written for a more highbrow, middle class audience that considers didacticism condescending. If avoiding perceived moral preaching was the goal, however, one wonders why so many rape myths were chosen for a child's anthology and not material that might be better suited to neutrality. The nonjudgmental tone of episodes of rape like the Pan passage mentioned above and the Arethusa one mentioned below might seem to children to by default give the power of right to the rapist.

The anthology begins, unusually, with the story of Arethusa. This turns out to be because Arethusa's story leads into the tale of

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Persephone. Arethusa jumps into a pool naked, and the god Alpheus appears. Arethusa, without thought on her part or explanation from the narrative, immediately runs away when she sees him, although what she fears he will do is never made explicit. The whole story is told in language strikingly devoid of moral judgment. Alpheus is described menacingly – e.g. whilst she is hiding he "prowled outside" and "the nymph shook with fear" (p. 14), but the narrative does not suggest his behaviour is wrong. Whilst fleeing Alpheus, Arethusa catches sight of Persephone, newly abducted by Hades, sitting sadly beside him and identifies instantly with her, knowing they are in the same situation. This camaraderie between victims of sexual violence is the closest the narrative comes to condemning it with its otherwise neutral tone. The phrasing at the end becomes more sexual, using their different waters as a form of euphemistic sexual violence: "some say that in time Alpheus, his love unquenched, found his way at last across the sea and mingled his waters with hers" (p. 17). Turnbull leaves it to the reader to decide whether this actually happened.

The illustrations are very distinctive, and are often brought up in reviews of the book (e.g. here and here, accessed: September 24, 2020). Many look like works of art in themselves that could be displayed in galleries, as other of Young's work has been. At times they are creepy, at times very sexualised – for example naked Arethusa fleeing from Alpheus with her hand moved down to just cover her genitals from view. Other illustrations use the natural environment of the myth to create an aura of exciting wish fulfilment for the child. For example, Arethusa relaxing in Alpheus' pool at the beginning of her story looks like she is in a jacuzzi, and when Arethusa sees Persephone and Hades, she is shown going down the flume of a transparent, twisting natural water slide, with Persephone and Hades in a cave beneath. The art is not always confined to a small illustration, often spreading out across the page. Pages change colour; for example when Orpheus descends into the Underworld the pages become black.

The focus on nature spirits also leads to a focus on the beauty of nature, and scenery and movement through scenery is described extensively. For example, Pan's love of the rustic Arcadian world he moves through is given at length.

Like many other children's anthologists, Turnbull is sympathetic to Ariadne. *Ariadne in Naxos*, after she is abandoned, is its own separate chapter, and we are shown her despair and sense of betrayal once she

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realises Theseus has left her. Her agency in the action is also emphasised; for example she is the one who tells Theseus his ship is ready when he emerges from the labyrinth. Yet Turnbull also points out the naïve, even problematic elements in Ariadne thinking she can win Theseus' love by promising to save his life. When she initially promises to help him, he comments internally that he is hardly in a position to refuse her. He also, however, has a more cynical reason for accepting her offer: thinking that stealing his daughter will strike an additional blow to Minos. On the voyage home, Theseus grows weary of Ariadne and regrets promising to make her his wife, hence his abandoning her.

Turnbull is fairly critical of Pandora. When she is initially created, Hermes gives her "the power to lie and deceive" (p. 162), which seems to emphasise the idea of women as inherently more deceitful. When she wishes to open the jar, she "pestered her husband" (p. 164), which makes her sound rather childlike. There is also a corresponding idea of wives as able to "sweeten" a household in a way men cannot; as Epimetheus' wife, Pandora "made his home sweet with her womanly arts" (p. 162).

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* Sheila Murnaghan, "Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children", *Classical World* 104.3 (2011): 339–353.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Alpheus Arachne Arethusa Ariadne Atalanta Bellerophon Demeter Echo Hades Hippomenes Midas Narcissus Orpheus Pan Pandora Persephone Perseus Phaethon Theseus

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Abandonment Adventure Environment Heroism Nature Rape

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Further Reading

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Addenda

Entry based on edition from 2012.

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