Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Strong Stuff: Herakles and his Labors by Gary Baseman, John Harris ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1141. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Gary Baseman , John Harris

Strong Stuff: Herakles and his Labors

United States of America (2005)

TAGS: Amazons Augean Stables Cerberus Ceryneian Hind Diomedes (of Thrace) Eurystheus Geryon Hades Hera Heracles Hercules Hesperides Hippolyta Hydra Nemean Lion Stymphalian Birds Twelve Labours of Heracles





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

General information	
Title of the work	Strong Stuff: Herakles and his Labors
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America, Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2005
First Edition Details	John Harris, *Strong Stuff: Herakles and his Labors*, ill. Gary Baseman. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005, 32 pp. (unpaginated).
ISBN	9780892367849
Genre	Mythologies, Picture books
Target Audience	Children (recommended for ages 7–10 years)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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Creators



Gary Baseman by Mark Hanauer. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: February 1, 2022).

Gary Baseman , b. 1960
(Illustrator)

Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Baseman is a high profile interdisciplinary artist whose work blends popular culture and fine art. His parents were Holocaust survivors who had emigrated from Eastern Poland (now Ukraine), and instilled in Baseman the importance of compassion and advocacy for others, free speech and other democratic ideals. He studied Communications at UCLA, and in 1986 moved to New York to develop advertising campaigns for well known brands including Nike, Levis, Gatorade, and Mercedes-Benz, and content for publications including *The New Yorker*, *TIME* and *Rolling Stone*. In the 1990s he created the character for the board game Cranium and created the award winning cartoon *Teacher's Pet*. Influenced by the style of Walt Disney and Andy Warhol, his characters are simultaneously cute and weird, moving through landscapes that are appealingly surreal.

Baseman has been a regular speaker at international conferences about visual culture. His works have been exhibited in galleries across the world, including a career retrospective in Los Angeles, Shanghai, and Taipei from 2013-15. He has created a documentary feature film about his family heritage called *Mythical Creatures*.

Source:

Official website (accessed: October 20, 2020).

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

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John Harris , b. 1950
(Author)

John Harris was born in Washington D.C.. He studied at Middlebury College, the University of Virginia, and the University of California at Berkeley. He worked as an editor of museum publications — the Smithsonian and the Getty. He has written for several magazines, including The Atlantic, Harpers, and Esquire. He has written a number of books for children, including *A Giraffe Goes to Paris*, *Pop-up Aesop*, *Strong Stuff: Herakles and his Labors*. He lives in Savannah, Georgia.

Sources:

goodreads.com (accessed: April 16, 2020);

amazon.com (accessed: April 16, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

This is an irreverent retelling of Herakles' labours, recounted in John Harris' informal, contemporary prose and vividly illustrated by Gary Baseman's loud, graphic paintings. The hero's brawn is used as a literary metaphor: the cover credits Harris for his "fierce words" and Baseman for "powerful art". The Introduction, entitled "Our Story Begins", contextualises the time (Long, long ago) and place (Greece and far beyond), and briefly outlines the animosity between Hera and Herakles that leads to the murder of his wife and children and subsequent enslavement to his weak cousin Eurystheus. A baby Herakles, with the same five o'clock shadow and receding hairline, appears on the title page with the strangled snakes, and his encounter with the Delphic Oracle, depicted as a blue lady with a bizarre proboscis-like nose and beehive hairdo, set the tone for the adventures that follow.

The book departs from the traditional order of the Labours, as established by Apollodorus in the *Bibliotheca*. In this version, the twelve labours are arranged as follows:

1. The Nemean Lion
2. The Hind of Keryneia
3. The Erymanthian Boar
4. The Lernaean Hydra
5. The Stymphalian Birds
6. The Augean Stables
7. The Cretan Bull
8. The Horses of Diomedes
9. The Girdle of the Amazons
10. The Oxen of Geryon
11. Cerberus
12. The Golden Apples of the Hesperides

Each exploit is presented individually on a double page spread, without reference to the other exploits. In the bottom left corner is a "How's that again?" section offering pronunciation help for tricky character and place names, cleverly integrated into the illustration. Greek spellings are used.

Throughout the book there are repeated references to geography, both real and imaginary, illustrated on the map that features on the

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book's endpapers. Harris urges readers to seek out the locations that Herakles visits ("Find it on the map at the front of the book. It's there!"). And as Herakles searches in vain for the Keryneian Hind, Harris quips "If only he'd had our handy map!"

Baseman's pop-art paintings suit the violent, gross performance of the hero's exploits. The colours are loud and lurid, and stray streaks of paint mar the surface, giving the impression of chaotic speed. Recalling the style of the 1990s Ren and Stimpy cartoons, the monsters have bloodshot eyes which become glazed over with crosses when killed. In contrast, Herakles has an open countenance, with elongated eyes, a crosshatched brown beard, and black hair in a pompadour style. Clothed in nothing but a brown loincloth, strappy sandals, and his lionskin cloak, his fleshy physique is dominated by huge pectoral muscles. His enormous chest descends into an absurdly tiny waist and feet.

The final page, entitled "Enough with the Labours", depicts a rotund, no longer muscular Herakles casually reclining as his new wife Hebe pours him a drink. The text explains that Eurystheus "decided to throw in the towel", having realised that Herakles was able to overcome any challenge he set for him. The hero "just kept on going, until even he ran out of adventures." With a scrawled "The End", the book ends fairly abruptly with Herakles happily established on Mount Olympus.

Analysis

Some children's retellings of the story of Herakles, such as Lucy Coats' *Beast Keeper* series, have challenged the established core of the myth by highlighting the subjectivity of the victim monsters and questioning Herakles' actions in vanquishing them. Strong Stuff does not interrogate Herakles' character or his acts of violence, choosing instead to celebrate his power and popularity. In the introduction Harris declares:

> "Herakles made the world a more livable place by removing terrifying creatures and major nuisances, sometimes using his brawn (which was considerable), sometimes using his brain. No wonder the Greeks loved him so!"

Baseman presents the hero as a simple figure, endowed with superlative strength. Perspective varies so throughout the book so

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that he is variously huge and dwarfed by the monsters he faces, but while he sometimes frowns, he never appears overly troubled by what he is doing. The one exception to his mild expression is in the ninth labour, when he is sent to retrieve the girdle of Hippolyta. Baseman depicts Herakles with his tongue hanging out, drooling as he gazes at the attractive female warrior. Only the top half of his body is visible, and his weight rests, apelike, on his fists. This quite confronting depiction of male desire is defused by the humorous tone of the written text, which clarifies that "a magic girdle is probably not what you're thinking it is – it doesn't go with a magic bra." As a publication of the Getty Museum, this book subscribes to a visual and cultural aesthetic associated with the California region, and aims to appeal to an audience familiar with this cool, arty vibe.

Despite this satirical and ironic approach to Herakles' exploits, *Strong Stuff* has a didactic agenda, encouraging its young readers to become familiar with the geography and terminology of the ancient world, as well as the specifics of the myth of Herakles. The variation in the order of the Labours in this version highlights the episodic quality and the flexibility of this myth. The incredible feat of retrieving Cerberus from the Underworld has traditionally been the climax of this saga, and in this retelling its impact is somewhat reduced.

Despite his informal tone and style, Harris' storytelling stays close to traditional versions. Baseman's paintings are the most striking and memorable aspect of this book, but Herakles remains a one-dimensional figure renowned for his physical prowess, and motivated by basic desires.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Amazons Augean Stables Cerberus Ceryneian Hind Diomedes (of Thrace) Eurystheus Geryon Hades Hera Heracles Hercules Hesperides Hippolyta Hydra Nemean Lion Stymphalian Birds Twelve Labours of Heracles
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Appearances Gender, male Heroism Humour Journeys Masculinity Travel Violence

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Further Reading

Blanshard, Alistair, *Hercules: A Heroic Life*, London: Granta, 2005.

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