Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: The Tricksters by Margaret Mahy", peer-reviewed by Miriam Riverlea and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/120. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Margaret Mahy

The Tricksters

United Kingdom (1986)

TAGS: Ariadne Athena Labyrinth Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Minerva Minotaur Oceanus / Okeanos Ovid Theseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Tricksters
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1986
First Edition Details	Margaret Mahy, *The Tricksters*. London: J. M. Dent, 1986, 266 pp.
ISBN	9780460062039
Awards	2006 – Young Observer Fiction Prize; 2006 – Honour Book; 2006 – Phoenix Award.
Genre	Alternative histories (Fiction), Magic realist fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au
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Creators



Portrait of Margaret Mahy with her dog, courtesy of David Alexander.

Margaret Mahy , 1936 - 2012
(Author)

Margaret Mahy was born in 1936, in Whakatane, in the North Island New Zealand, the daughter of an engineer (a bridge-builder) and a teacher. From her early years, she was a precocious reader and writer. She studied for a BA at the then University of New Zealand, before training as a librarian in Wellington. Her first stories were published in the New Zealand School Journal, and were published internationally from 1969, following their discovery by an American editor. Before she was able to support her full time writing, Mahy drove a book bus in Canterbury, in the South Island, and worked as a librarian at the Christchurch Public Library. She wrote over 100 works, including novels, story collections, picture books, songs, essays and plays, and received many literary awards, both nationally and internationally. She was awarded the New Zealand Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement (2005), and the Hans Christian Andersen Award (2006) and the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Services to New Zealand Science Fiction and Fantasy (2006). She died in 2012. In 2015, the *Margaret Mahy Family Playground* was opened in central Christchurch.

Sources:

Dossier, *Nomination to IBBY Hans Christian Andersen Awards DATE. Country of Nomination: New Zealand; Writer Candidate: Margaret Mahy*.

Duder, Tessa, *Margaret Mahy: A Writer's Life*, Auckland: Harper Collins, 2012.

Profile at the bookcouncil.org.nz (accessed: June 27, 2018).

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Additional information

Translation

Danish: *Fortiden vender tilbage*, trans. Ilse M. Haugaard, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1986.

Dutch: *Listen en lagen*, trans. Karin Bron, Amsterdam: Querido, 1988.

French: *Les Ensorceleurs*, trans. Camille Todd, Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

Japanese: □□□□□□□□□ [Kurisumasu no majutsushi], trans. Junko Yamada, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996.

Swedish: *Trixarna,* trans. Mats Thorell, Stockholm: AWE/Geber, 1988.

Summary

In *The Tricksters*, 17 year old Ariadne ("Harry") Hamilton's family makes their Christmas annual visit to "Carnival's Hide," their family holiday house, on the Banks Peninsula, formed by the eruption of an ancient volcano, near Christchurch. The house is comparatively old for New Zealand, being built in the nineteenth century, and it is haunted by Teddy Carnival, who was accidentally killed by his father, the builder of the house. While she is swimming in the bay, Harry dives into an underwater cave, and putting her hand into a crack at the back of the cave is frightened when a ghostly hand takes hers. It is Teddy Carnival's ghost, who surfaces in the form of three brothers, the "tricksters" of the novel's title. The tricksters take their names from books in the house: Ovid, Hadfield, and Felix, and correspond roughly to the ego, id, and superego. Ovid is the guiding intelligence of the three, and he challenges Harry for the happiness of her family, revealing the secrets that her family has been hiding. Furthermore, Harry is an apprentice writer, who has written a "bad" novel that is partly responsible for allowing the tricksters into the world, uttering as it does an adolescent wish for romance and power. The tricksters are defeated, partly by Harry, and by Anthony, an English visitor, who turns out to be a descendent of the Carnivals. With their secrets revealed, a sense of balance is restored to the family. Underpinning this family drama are the myths of Theseus and Ariadne, and a contest for literary authority between the adolescent writer, Harry, and the master-creator, Ovid.

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Analysis	*The Tricksters* is a plot-heavy novel with multiple interlocking character arcs and is Mahy's most complex work, incorporating her interest in feminism, the New Zealand teenager's experience, the New Zealand landscape, and the power of intertextuality from post-colonial perspectives. In *The Tricksters*, Mahy uses the myth of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur as an underlying metaphor for family secrets and repression. As Ariadne, Harry finds the thread to navigate the maze of her family's, and the Carnivals' secrets. As a novice writer, in competition with the master-writer, Ovid (who takes his name from a copy of the *Metamorphoses* in the hallway at Carnival's Hide), Harry competes for control over the family. As a New Zealander and a teenage writer, she competes with Ovid, a voice of adult, canonical, European mastery. Other classical metaphors abound. The idea of metamorphosis can map onto the transformation of Harry as she comes of age, as a writer and sexually (through a relationship with Felix), and also to the changes wrought on the family by the power of repression: "like metamorphic rock . . . rock altered after formation by heat and pressure" (p. 253). The Minotaur is both the repression of Teddy Carnival, and the secret the Hamiltons have been hiding from themselves. Harry's father, Jack, has had an affair with the friend of his oldest daughter, and she has had a baby, Tibby. Further themes of feminine power connect Harry with the goddess Athena, through her owl-like glasses, and with the sea, when she puts a sea-shell ring on her finger and claims the identity of Mrs Oceanus. Teddy's sister is named Minerva, and it is her grandson, Anthony, who returns to help resolve the family drama. In this novel, as Adrienne Gavin argues, Margaret Mahy overcomes post-colonial anxiety of authorship, using classical reception as a way of doing so.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Ariadne Athena Labyrinth Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Minerva Minotaur Oceanus / Okeanos Ovid Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant	Coming of age Divorce Family Femininity Romance Sexuality Siblings

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Further Reading

Gose, Elliott, "Fairy Tale and Myth in Mahy's The Changeover and The Tricksters", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 16.1 (1991): 6–11.

Hale, Elizabeth, "Katabasis "Down Under" in the Novels of Margaret Mahy and Maurice Gee", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood . . .The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults,* Leiden: Brill, 2016, 256–266.

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Gavin, Adrienne, "Becoming New Zealand Writers: Margaret Mahy and *The Tricksters*' Harry Hamilton", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39.2 (2015): 166–185.

Jackson, Anna; Miles, Geoffrey; Ricketts, Harry; Schaefer, Tatjana; Walls, Kathryn, *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011.

Pohl, Michael, *Classical Myth and Margaret Mahy's Young Adult Fiction: A Thesis Submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature* [thesis], Victoria University of Wellington, 2010.

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Addenda

Mahy is a New Zeland writer, though many of her books were first published overseas.

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