Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Max and Ruby's First Greek Myth: Pandora's Box by Rosemary Wells", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/131. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Rosemary Wells

Max and Ruby's First Greek Myth: Pandora's Box

United States (1993)

TAGS: Pandora Pandora's Box





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

General information	
Title of the work	Max and Ruby's First Greek Myth: Pandora's Box
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1993
First Edition Details	Rosemary Wells, *Max and Ruby's first Greek Myth: Pandora's Box.* New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1993, 32 pp.
ISBN	0803715242
Genre	Alternative histories (Fiction), Mythological fiction, Picture books
Target Audience	Children (the recommended age range for the text is 4–8 year olds)
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 Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaounde 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com

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



Rosemary Wells , b. 1943
(Author, Illustrator)

Rosemary Wells is an American children's author and illustrator. Her mother was a ballet dancer and her father an actor and playwright, and Wells grew up in a cultured, loving household. She was determined to be an artist from a very young age and practiced her drawing skills diligently. After finishing high school she enrolled in the Museum School in Boston, but was unhappy there and left without completing her degree. She married at the age of nineteen, and began working as a book designer first in Boston and then in New York. After collaborating on other projects, she wrote and illustrated her first picture book, *Unfortunately Harriet*, in 1972, and published the well-known *Noisy Nora* the following year.

She is best known for her numerous Max and Ruby books. Like most of Wells' work, they feature anthropomorphic animal characters. Ruby is the precocious, bossy big sister, and Max the curious, irresponsible younger brother. The books explore the complexities of sibling dynamics, and regularly conclude with Max getting the better of Ruby. The series has been adapted as a children's cartoon, with a sixth season premiering in late 2016.

In addition to *Max and Ruby's first Greek Myth: Pandora's Box*, Wells has also published *Max and Ruby's Midas: Another Greek Myth* (1995). She has also written creative and historical fiction for young adults.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: June 28, 2018).

Profile at the Penguin Random House website (accessed: June 28, 2018).

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.

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

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.

Additional information

Translation

French: *Max et la boîte interdite*, Paris: L'École des loisirs, 1994.

Summary

Ruby the rabbit doesn't want her younger brother Max to come into her bedroom, so she pins a note to her door that says "NO! This means YOU!" But Max can't read and keeps sneaking in to look inside Ruby's special jewellery box. So Ruby sits him down in her chair to read him "a story about sneaking and peeking," the myth of Pandora's Box.

Pandora is a little girl (also a rabbit), who gets left at home while her mother goes shopping. She is allowed to eat honey cakes, and play in the sprinkler, but she has to promise not to touch her mother's magic jewellery box, which is labelled with a sign saying "NO". She tries to distract herself, but cannot resist having a peek "for half a second." A horrible swarm of insects flies out and fills the room. Over their buzzing, she hears a tiny voice calling from inside the box. It is a little green spider, who tells Pandora "I'm your only hope" and spins a huge web that catches all the insects. Pandora's mother returns and is delighted to find the house in order. As a reward for her good behaviour, Pandora's mother will take her to the movies. They dress up for the occasion. Pandora is allowed to wear her mother's golden necklace (adorned with beetles), and her mother puts on her emerald pin, shaped like a spider.

After finishing the story, Ruby checks that Max has understood its meaning. "What did Pandora's sign say, Max?" she asks. "No!" he replies. "And what does my sign say, Max?" "No!" he answers again. "And who does it mean, Max?" she finally asks. "You!" says Max. The ambivalence of Max's answer is typical of Wells' work (in one way he is correct, as the sign does indeed say "you," but at the same time he seems unaware that the pronoun refers to himself). Has Max understood Ruby's reading of the myth of Pandora, or has its significance passed him by?

Analysis

Wells' text is unique in introducing a Greek myth to very young readers. The recommended age range for the text is 4 – 8-year-olds. As a result, it is not only Max and Ruby's "first" Greek myth; it is also

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.

likely to be the first time the book's young readers encounter the story of Pandora. A number of scholars have commented on the profound influence of the initial exposure to a mythic narrative.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's version of the Pandora story, *The Paradise of Children* from *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, is an intertext of this work, though it is not referenced directly. The way in which the Pandora myth is embedded within a contemporary frame narrative recalls Eustace Bright telling the tale at Tanglewood Manor. In Wells' text, Ruby's retelling is demarcated by blue pages featuring special borders decorated with olive leaves, waves, and the Greek meander pattern. The swarm of insects which escape the box also seems to draw upon Hawthorne's depiction of the buzzing, stinging Troubles.

Wells' illustrations are significant for their representation of the ancient world. They feature a range of signifiers of antiquity, including clothing, architectural elements, and stylistic motifs. The authenticity of these details is made to contrast with the anachronisms of the narrative, the most striking of which is the trip to the movies that Pandora's mother grants her as a reward for her good behaviour.

At this point in the story, the visual narrative contains information that is not included in the written text. Pandora's mother is shown zapping her jewellery box with her magic powers so that the contents transform into wearable jewellery. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum have interpreted the design of the beetle necklace Pandora borrows as a manifestation of her guilt over her undiscovered crime. Their reading of this moment serves to highlight the complexity of the messages contained within this seemingly short, simple story.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Pandora Pandora's Box
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Child, children Disobedience Family Morality Siblings Storytelling

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.

Further Reading

Riverlea, Miriam, "Out of the Box: Refashioning Pandora in Children's Literature", in Jessica L. Wilkinson, Eric Parisot, David McInnis, eds., *Refashioning Myth: Poetic Transformations and Metamorphoses*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 259–277.

Stephens, John, Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature,* New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.

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.