Anna Mik, "Entry on: The Skylarks' War by Hilary McKay", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1444. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Hilary McKay

The Skylarks' War

United Kingdom (2018)

TAGS: Ithaca Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Troy





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Skylarks' War
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	Hilary McKay, *The Skylarks' War*. London: Macmillan Children's Books, 2018, 320 pp.
ISBN	9781509894963
Awards	2018 – Costa Children's Book Award.
Genre	Historical fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Children (12 years)
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Creators



Hilary McKay , b. 1959
(Author)

Hilary McKay is a British writer. She was born in Boston, Lincolnshire, where she grew-up surrounded by readers and books (her favourite authors were: Joan Aiken, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula le Guin, Beatrix Potter). McKay studied Zoology and Botany at the St. Andrew's University (she loves natural history), however, she was always keen to pursue English literature and Fine Arts. After following other professions (e.g., a chemist, a teacher), she decided to write books. The most popular now are the "Tilly", "Charlie", and "Lulu" series, "Paradise House" books, and many others to be found here [link: https://www.hilarymckay.co.uk/books]. "The Skylarks' War" is her most popular book so far. As McKay asserts: "I am always working on a new book, there has never been a gap" [source: interview (accessed: June 14, 2021)].

Source:

The Author's Website (accessed: June 14, 2021),

Scoopthemag.co.uk interview (accessed: June 14, 2021).

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Additional information

Translation	Multiple translations.

Summary

The Skylarks' War by Hilary McKay is a historical fiction novel set just before the outbreak and during WW1 (the title relates to skylarks, appearing both in memories of childhood and of the war, connecting both experiences). The main characters are siblings, Clarry and Peter Penrose, their cousin Rupert and several family friends. The story opens with carefree moments spent in fabulous Cornwall, where all three live with their grandparents, making the most of their childhood: playing on the beach, eating sweets, taking their first swimming lessons. From the outset, McKay introduces customs and ideas of the early 20th-century England. This is a time of revolutionary ideas – Darwin's *Origins*, automobiles, as well as girls gradually being admitted to typically male pursuits – studying at universities or even being able to enjoy sports, such as diving. We gain the feminist perspective thanks to the character of Clarry growing up with her brother and cousin, who by no means discourage her from taking up new challenges – even if they do not gain the approval of adults. McKay's story is also a classic coming-of-age story (Bildungsroman). The novel introduces the characters at an early stage of puberty and ends with an epilogue in which they are all adults.

Analysis

One of the many themes in McKay's novel is the motif of exile/ being away from home and trying to return home. When the war breaks out, the siblings remain in England (Peter is unable to join the army due to a lame leg he broke as a child to avoid boarding school). Throughout the war, little news from the front reaches families at home – the fate of many soldiers remains uncertain even after the conflict ends. This is also the case of one of the characters who fought in the war – the father of the siblings' friends, Vanessa and Simon (he remains nameless).

Clarry explicitly identifies the friends' father with Odysseus travelling from Troy through Constantinople (where he is captured) to his Ithaca (home in England). Allegedly, like the ancient hero, the father steadfastly tries to overcome all odds to reach his beloved family,

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experiencing numerous adventures along the way. As we find out later, bored with the life of a prisoner, the English "Odysseus" escapes from the enemy camp in Constantinople and decides to set out for home. His first stop is Greece, which strengthens the connection to the classical motif. On his journey, he meets many wonderful people, dances at festivals, fishes and sails. Eventually, he meets a captain who takes him to England.

Throughout this whole time, the family only knows that he is a prisoner, but they are optimistic. They say he must have certainly escaped and is heading home – just like Odysseus – so they refuse to worry. The main aspect associated with both stories – by Homer and McKay – is the strong need for hope in times of war. The uncertainty of the family remaining at home is contrasted with the certainty that the father will return – just like Odysseus – even if it takes a decade. The English Odysseus starts his journey near the ancient Troy, only his Ithaca lies elsewhere. However, this only proves the metaphorical value of Ithaca, the home everyone wants to reach. Odysseus may serve here as a symbolic figure of the hero returning from war, whose journey, although very long, in a sense has a happy ending.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Ithaca Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Troy

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

Childhood Coming of age Homesickness War

Further Reading

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, *"If they ask us why we died:* Children's Literature and the First World War, 1970–2005", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 31.2 (2007): 176–188.

Parandowski, Jan, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian* [Mythology. Beliefs and Legends of Greeks and Romans], Poznań:

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Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1989 (ed. pr. 1924).

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