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Esther M. Friesner

Nobody's Prize

United States (2008)

TAGS: Acastus Aeëtes Aethra Agamemnon Aphrodite Argos / Argus (Constructor of "Argo") Atalanta Boreads Calais Castor Clashing Rocks / Symplegades / Cyanean Rocks Clytemnestra Harpies Helen Heracles Hylas Iolaus Jason Medea Menelaus Orpheus Phineus Phrixus Polydeuces Theseus Zetes Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Nobody's Prize
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	English speaking countries
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	Esther Friesner, *Nobody's Prize*. New York: Random House, 2008, 336 pp.
ISBN	9780375849855
Genre	Fiction, Historical fiction, Mythological fiction
Target Audience	Young adults (teens, 12+)
Author of the Entry	Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com
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Creators



Esther Friesner by Catriona Sparks. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 2.0 (accessed: January 3, 2021).

Esther M. Friesner , b. 1951
(Author)

Esther Mona Friesner (b. New York 1951) is an American fantasy and science fiction author, editor and college professor. She attended Hunter College High School, studied Spanish and Drama at Vassar College, and has a PhD in Spanish from Yale. Prior to becoming a full time writer, she was a Yale professor of Spanish.

Friesner is author of over forty novels and editor of many anthologies. She also frequently writes short stories. Much of her work draws on ancient history or myth. *Nobody's Princess* is the first of her four two-book series about legendary princesses. The other three look at Nefertiti, Himiko and Maeve. Additional novels in which she draws on ancient history include *Druid's Blood* (1988) and *Child of the Eagle: A Myth of Rome* (1996). She has also written novels tied into the Star Trek and Sabrina the Teenage Witch franchises.

Friesner has two children and multiple cats and hamsters. Her married name is Esther Friesner-Stutzman. She lives in Connecticut and has won multiple writing awards.

Sources:

Back cover of book.

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Additional information

Summary

The sequel to *Nobody's Princess*, *Nobody's Prize* tells the story of Helen of Troy as a teenager, before the events of the Trojan War. In this novel, the adventure-loving Helen sneaks on board the *Argo* to participate in the quest for the Golden Fleece. She is disguised as a boy named Glaucus, and accompanied by her friend and freed-slave, Milo.

After running into trouble in Iolkos, Helen persuades Heracles' nephew, Iolaus, to take her and Milo on as weapons bearers and hide their true identities. This means keeping away from her brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, who are also on the ship as Argonauts.

Helen is immediately smitten with Heracles' weapons bearer, Hylas, and is oblivious to the fact he and Heracles are lovers. This causes jealousy from Milo, who unbeknownst to Helen is in love with her. Things are complicated by Heracles, who, taking Helen for an extraordinarily beautiful boy, keeps trying to win her attention, much to the jealousy of Hylas.

Helen befriends the ship builder, Argus, and learns he is the exiled son of Phrixus and grandson of Aeetes, returning to his homeland of Colchis because of a prophecy. She also begins to distrust Jason, who is clearly out for his own gain.

After a confrontation between Helen, Heracles and Hylas, Hylas slips and dies, and Heracles falls back into his lifelong madness and stays to look for him. Later, Castor and Polydeuces confront Helen with her true identity, but are stopped when she suddenly gets her first period in front of all the men. Since she can no longer pass as a boy, Helen pretends to be her old friend, the huntress Atalanta. Wanting the fame of having Atalanta on his quest, Jason goes along with this, although he obviously does not believe her.

In Colchis, Medea immediately falls in love with Jason and becomes convinced Helen is a rival. She attempts to kill her, whilst Jason, who it is implied does in fact desire Helen, tries to stop her. Knowing she cannot escape Medea forever, Helen flees with Milo and gets a ship to Athens. On the same night, Argus accidentally takes poison meant for Helen and dies.

In Athens, Helen is discovered and captured by Theseus, whose

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guards apparently kill Milo. Theseus holds her captive to force her to marry him. Helen eventually escapes by corrupting Theseus' half-brother Telys and fleeing to Mykenae, where her sister Clytemnestra is queen. Here, for the first time in the series we briefly meet Helen's future husband, Menelaus, and Milo is revealed to have survived. Milo, however, says goodbye to Helen, acknowledging that since he cannot be with her he must strike out on his own. He becomes a successful merchant.

The story ends with Helen receiving a mirror that depicts art of the future Judgement of Paris, which she understands has some mysterious relevance to her future life. She acknowledges this could be perceived as ominous, but since her destiny is in her own hands she will not see it this way.

Analysis

In this novel, Helen still does not seem fully aware of her own beauty or the effect she has on others, both in the persona of a boy and as a girl. Part of this is because she has not seen her face in a mirror for a long time.

She remains heavily swayed by good looks in her attraction to others, however. Whilst in *Nobody's Princess* she was initially smitten by Theseus' appearance but put off as soon as he began to speak boastfully, here she is drawn to Hylas, pleased to discover that unlike Theseus he is a good person, then dismayed to discover he is not attracted to women. In spite of Friesner's generally positive portrayal of Helen's intelligence, bravery and decision-making, Helen does not yet appear to have good instincts regarding romantic attraction. This hints at the portrayals of her as the archetypal foolish-in-love woman in such other Young Adult adaptations as McLaren's *Inside the Walls of Troy* and Cooney's *Goddess of Yesterday*.

There is perhaps also a positive message that one's early teen attractions need not be made to be more important than they are, and are not something for which one needs to feel shame. Helen's brothers worry that she will eventually develop status-inappropriate feelings for Milo, but this never happens. When Helen finally meets Menelaus at the end of the book, she seems to like him well enough but the idea of him as a marital or romantic prospect never occurs to her, whilst he appears smitten with her.

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This novel is unusual for a children's reception piece in acknowledging ancient Greek pederasty, as well as the marrying off of pubescent girls. These are treated as facts of life by Helen. Discomfort is somewhat skirted around by not always making the ages of such characters as Hylas clear. Helen in boy form is perceived by male heroes as the beautiful young teasing boy of Greaco-Roman poetry. On hearing Helen needs to avoid Castor and Polydeuces, Heracles wonders what she can have done to offend them and asks if she rejected their advances.

Heracles' pursuit of Helen is made yet more uncomfortable by the fact they are, unbeknownst to him since he does not know her true identity, alleged children of Zeus. As in the first book, however, the existence of the gods is never definitively proved and Helen herself is highly sceptical of anyone's claims to be the child of one. Aphrodite continues to be her favourite god, and one with whom she feels herself to have a special relationship.

This is a rationalistic retelling of Jason and the Argonauts, of the sort that might earn the approval of ancient Hellenistic scholars. Mystical events almost always have rationalistic explanations. For example, the harpies fought by Calais and Zetes are actually woman warriors whom Orpheus immortalises in song as harpies, and the clashing rocks are actually a people who attack travellers through the pass. Helen saves everyone from these supposed clashing rocks by releasing the daughter of the leader back to them, whose name is Dove, leading to the more fantastic myth of the dove and clashing rocks.

Medea is first introduced into the novel as a rather pathetic, shy princess to whom her father Aeetes is openly cruel. However, Helen quickly realises she has latched onto Jason and become obsessed with him after seeing him once. Helen explains this not with the power of the gods as in ancient versions, but with the fact that Aeetes' cruelty makes Medea desperate for connection. It also quickly becomes clear that Medea revisits her father's cruelty on everyone around her, and sees Jason as her property to be controlled. Jason, meanwhile, opportunistically pretends to love her but is obviously disturbed by her. After leaving the Argonauts, Helen later hears a rumour Medea killed her own brother to help Jason but does not know whether to believe it.

In order to make Argus' story flow more effectively, some of the mythology associated with his father Phrixus, and Theseus' son

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Hipploytus, has been ascribed to him instead. In this version, Argus' stepmother, Phrixus' wife, falsely accuses Argus of rape. Argus is accordingly exiled. The presence of the 'cry-rape' trope stands out in a novel that presents itself fairly explicitly as a feminist retelling. For example, when Argus praises Helen for her cunning, she protests that if she were a boy he'd call her 'smart or clever, not cunning' (p.152), suggesting fairly nuanced engagement with gendered language.

This book evidently does not exist in a continuous universe with Friesner's short story that began the series, *Thunderbolt*, which also told the story of Helen's escape from Theseus in Athens. The methods she employs here to escape are very different, and whilst *Thunderbolt* was light-hearted in tone, the equivalent section in *Nobody's Prize* is morose since Helen believes Milo to be dead during it.

Overall, *Nobody's Prize* is somewhat darker in tone than *Nobody's Princess*, with more nuanced portrayals of famous mythical characters and slightly more open references to sexual material.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Acastus Aeëtes Aethra Agamemnon Aphrodite Argos / Argus (Constructor of "Argo") Atalanta Boreads Calais Castor Clashing Rocks / Symplegades / Cyanean Rocks Clytemnestra Harpies Helen Heracles Hylas Iolaus Jason Medea Menelaus Orpheus Phineus Phrixus Polydeuces Theseus Zetes Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Adventure Appearances Desires Gender expectations/construction Tale vs reality

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