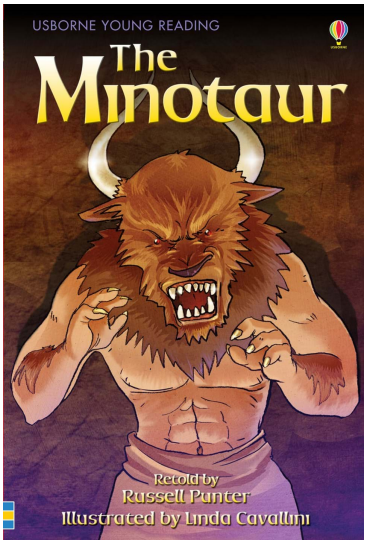
Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: The Minotaur by Russell Punter", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Hanna Paulouskaya. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/168. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Russell Punter

The Minotaur

United Kingdom (2009)

TAGS: Architecture Ariadne Athens Crete Dionysus / Dionysos Gods Labyrinth Maze Minos Minotaur Pasiphae Theseus



Courtesy of Usborne Publishing Ltd.

General information	
Title of the work	The Minotaur
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2009
First Edition Details	Russell Punter, Linda Cavallini, ill.,*The Minotaur*. English Learner's Editions 4: Upper Intermediate / Usborne Young Reading (Series), London: Usborne Publishing Ltd., 2009, 48 pp.
ISBN	9781409566809
Official Website	usborne.com (accessed: July 31, 2018)
Genre	Illustrated works, Instructional and educational works, Myths, Textbooks
Target Audience	Children (c. 4–8)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk
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Creators



Russell Punter (Author)

Russell Punter is a British children's author originally from Bedfordshire. He became a graphic designer and writer after attending art-college. He has written over forty children's books, predominantly with the publishers Usborne.

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Additional information

Adaptations

An audiobook version of this book is sold as part of a book/audio-book combination.

The text from this storybook was adapted into Usborne's *Illustrated Stories From the Greek Myths,* ISBN: 9781409531678, pub 2011.

Summary

This book is a retelling of the traditional myth of Theseus and the Minotaur (for which see e.g. Diodorus of Sicily, *Library*, book 4; Plutarch, *Theseus*; Apollodorus, *Epitome*, 1.7; Apollodorus, *Library*, 3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8.155–182). It opens with Aegeus receiving a letter from Minos, and closes with Theseus back in Athens having completed his mission but having lost his father in the process. The primary function of this retelling of ancient myth. is to provide children with reading material while they are learning to read. This edition of the story comes with a CD audiobook of the story, plus a worksheet and teachers notes (see addenda). The narrator is female. The Minotaur's roars are delivered by the narrator, rather than sound-effects, which replicates a story-telling style, rather than mimicking a radio-drama or more cinematic style. The teachers' notes indicate that it is intended that accompanying adults assist the readers in exploring the myth's moral dilemmas.

Analysis

In this lively retelling of the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, King Aegeus tries to prevent Theseus from going to Crete, but Theseus insists and persuades him. Minos imprisons the Athenians before having them led to the labyrinth, and this is where Ariadne encounters Theseus and determines to help him. She pressures Theseus into betrothal, preparing us for him breaking it. The ball of string is described as "magic," and it rolls by itself and leads them to the Minotaur as well as providing the means to get out – something that rather obscures the issue of its purpose. The Minotaur is depicted wearing a loincloth with a human torso, legs, and arms, and a bullhead with red eyes; this conveys an unusually human lower half, and a rather demonic animal head, making for an extreme hybrid monster.

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In this retelling, there is no explanation for Theseus' reluctance to marry Ariadne. The story shifts the narrative to focus on her situation when she awakes alone on Naxos. Dionysus appears, listens to her tale, and agrees to punish Theseus on her behalf. The punishment takes the form of making Theseus and his sailor forget their promise to change their sails, which creates a direct causal relationship between Theseus' betrayal of Ariadne and his father's death. Aegeus' suicide is referred to thus: "Aegeus felt terrible. He jumped into the sea and was never seen again." A picture of Aegeus falling past fish through the water accompanies. There is, therefore, a strong implication of death, but the terms "death" and "suicide" are avoided.

The illustrations throughout situate this story in antiquity, particularly through the representation of columned halls and palaces, ancient-style armaments, and tunics and gowns of varying length for male characters. The story begins with the phrase "Long ago," drawing this context to the reader's attention. An afterward explains that this is a very ancient story, and then refers to earthquakes and storage passages as possible inspirations for the Minotaur and labyrinth stories.

When this version of the myth was retold for Usborne's *Illustrated Stories From the Greek Myths,* greater emphasis was placed on Ariadne's culpability for being abandoned (Theseus was not ready to be married; Ariadne kept bossing him around). With less encouragement to excuse Theseus, the reader is left with more freedom in their interpretation of what should or should not have happened in this situation.

Overall this retelling offers an exciting adventure tale whilst challenging young readers with moral complexity. The fact that this story is situated in antiquity cushions topics such as imprisonment, killing, revenge, and punishment through distance, making it more possible to discuss them with young children than might be the case for contemporary stories. Nonetheless, these difficult topics (or connected ones) still have relevance for young children's lives, making this myth (and this telling of this myth) a valuable route into exploring them.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs,

Architecture Ariadne Athens Crete Dionysus / Dionysos Gods Labyrinth Maze Minos Minotaur Pasiphae Theseus

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Characters, and Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Coming of age Death Family Friendship Gender expectations/construction Heroism Justice Knowledge Learning Morality Parents (and children) Sexuality Teenagers Violence
Further Reading	Calame, Claude, *Thésée et l'imaginaire Athenian,* Lausanne: Sciences humaines, Editions Payot Lausanne, 1990. Webster, T. B. L., "The Myth of Ariadne from Homer to Catullus", *Greece & Rome* 13.1 (1966): 22–31.
Addenda	Part of the Usborne Young Reading series. Series One (Upper Intermediate) Online companion material: usborne.com (accessed: July 31, 2018) features a worksheet and teachers notes to go with this and other stories. These are available for free download. The teachers notes summarise the plot and provide hints on vocabulary that children may struggle with. They also suggest related activities: prior to reading the story, write "Monster" on the board and discuss the concept with the class; after the story, discuss key issues such as *What do they think of the ending? Was it wrong of Theseus to leave Ariadne on the island? Did Aegeus deserve to die in order to punish Theseus? Do you think Theseus regretted going to Crete?* **Practitioner Experience:** The present reviewer has found this to be a popular title within group work with pre-school 4-year olds. Few of these children are able to read the text, but they enjoy the story and the illustrations. The story provides many opportunities for children to deduce or guess characters' motivations and points-of-view (Questions I have asked include: *Why does Theseus tell his father that he's the best sword-fighter? What might the guards do if Theseus hadn't tied them up?*).

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As this book is really aimed at slightly older children, it is perhaps unsurprising that they sometimes struggle with the characters' motivations, and the questions this prompts can draw forth further thought-provoking issues (Questions they have asked include: *Why does Minos put them in prison - are they naughty?; What is a "deadly demand"?* - the first chapter heading*; What is "revenge"? What is "punish"? Why did he jump in the sea?*).

Discussing the marriage narrative presents certain challenges. It is problematic to suggest to young children that people should get married or stay married if that is not what those people want. As many children experience parental divorce or may face difficult circumstances around marriage and relationships in the future, it should be made clear to them that marriage should be consensual. When discussing Ariadne's abandonment on Naxos, the present reviewer found it constructive to avoid focusing on whether or not Ariadne and Theseus 'should' have got married, and to encourage the children to think about what Theseus could have done to differently to upset Ariadne less. They were able to relate this to their own experiences of friendships and to make suggestions such as not leaving her alone on the beach, and telling her that he didn't want to be friends any more.

Dionysus is depicted as very blonde, dressed in long flowing white clothes. Most of the children thought that he was female, some that he was wearing a wedding dress. Revisiting the other pictures and the idea that men might wear robes, especially in other countries and/or long ago, helped to resolve this. Most of the children loved the depictions of armour and discussing what part of the body the different bits protect; one or two found the ancient style strange and even wondered if the soldiers were robots – confusion caused by mistaking the back of a helmeted head for a metallic robot face. The children found the peril and the Minotaur frightening, but the level of fright was enjoyable to them. They often request this story, or even just a chance to "see the Minotaur".

The CD audiobook version was recorded at a low level, so while it is a solid delivery of the story, it cannot be easily used where there is background noise.

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