Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: Hercules by Geraldine McCaughrean", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/264. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Geraldine McCaughrean

Hercules

United Kingdom (2003)

TAGS: Admete Alcmene Amphitryon Apollo Artemis Athena Atlas Cerberus Chiron / Cheiron Deianeira Eurystheus Hebe Hera Heracles Hercules Hermes Hippolyta Hydra Iole Linus Megara Minos Nemean Lion Nessus Pluto / Plouton Poseidon Prometheus Stymphalian Birds Twelve Labours of Heracles Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Hercules
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2003
First Edition Details	Geraldine McCaughrean, *Hercules.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 121 pp.
ISBN	9780192742001
Genre	Myths, Novels
Target Audience	Crossover (Older children/ teens)
Author of the Entry	Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, mauril68@gmail.com Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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



Courtesy of the Author.

Geraldine McCaughrean , b. 1951
(Author)

McCaughrean is a British novelist who currently resides in Berkshire, England. She is a prolific writer, who wrote of over 170 books – mostly children's books but also several historical novels for adults. She won numerous awards for her books. In addition she also wrote a play for the radio and stage-plays. She grew up in North London and studied at Christ Church College of Education, Canterbury.

McCaughrean was the only author who won the Whitbread Children's Book Award three times; she won it for her children's novels: *A Little Lower than the Angels* (1987), *Gold Dust* (1993) and *Not the End of the World* (2004).

Sources:

Official website (accessed: May 28, 2018).

Profile at the literature.britishcouncil.org (accessed: May 28, 2018).

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University,
ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Questionnaire

1. What drew you to writing / working with Classical Antiquity and what challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular myths or stories?

I loved the Classic myths as a child, though the books were a bit dull, illustrated with Greek statuary or Roman urns. There was a resurgence of interest in publishing them for children at the time I

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.

was newly surfacing as an author, so naturally I leapt at the chance to retell them. The illustrations were a lot better this time round.

The choosing of stories is largely guided by which are best known and (especially nowadays) those which feature on the National Curriculum. That, in turn, is largely guided by which are not too salacious or amoral. The Greek myths win out every time in terms of what the publishers choose to publish and what the schools choose to teach. I am particularly fond, however, of the Epic of Gilgamesh and like to harp on about that whenever I get the chance.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

It is one of the few chances children get to be treated like adults. Since the stories were originally told to a diverse audience, and they are distinctly not "kiddies' stories", young readers/listeners are for once given a glimpse of adults (and gods) behaving badly, death, battle, love, fate and so on, as well as identifying with heroes, superhuman beings and adventurers, all in a heady, sun-and-sea setting. Other "educational" retellings I am asked to write (such as fairy tales) come with a prohibition list of no-nos – knives, soldiers, witches, religion, war, sex, alcohol... All of that goes out of the window with Myth because (of course) such things are the substance of Myth. They are also the substance of Life and there are important things to be said about them – passed on from one generation to the next by means of story.

The sheer strangeness of times-long-gone are intriguing to children. I have never seen the need for "contemporary relevance" when it comes to entrancing children with Story. They can, after all, dart imaginatively through Time and Space with more ease than adults, and relish unquestioningly the most mind-boggling fantasy without turning a hair.

3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

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.

I'm no classicist. I did do Latin to O-level at school, but none of it has stuck unless residually in my spelling. I wrote a collection of *101 Myths and Legends from Round the World* which helped me see "Classical" myth in its global context, and how its influence travelled far farther afield than the Greeks themselves ever did.

For sources, I don't go to other children's versions, for obvious reasons, but to Robert Graves or adult encyclopaedias of Mythology or Penguin versions of the epics.

4. Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers?

The arrant misogyny and gynophobia of the ancient Greeks are an undoubted problem. Almost every monster is female, almost every female is scheming or dangerous, a snake under her skirts, or only there to be conquered and bedded. Heroes like Hercules get through droves of women – and then there are his dubious shield-bearing beloved boys...

I do an exercise in schools whereby Perseus goes off to kill Medusa clad in all the language of heroism and admirable virtues... and then, as the kid raises his sword to strike, I point out that, by the way, he has abandoned his mother in her hour of need because he fell for a flattering trick and boasted he could kill the gorgon, so has flown off to kill a woman he has never met and knows nothing about – a woman who was transformed and deformed through no fault of her own, and – ooo – who happens to be pregnant with twins when Perseus slashes her head off her shoulders. It's a nice exercise in "viewpoint". ... But of course in retelling the myth in writing I can't do that. I have to be true to the stories I loved myself as a child, and trust to the appeal that has kept them alive and popular for thousands of years.

5. Writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail – is this something you thought about when writing your stories?

I do feel quite strongly that the tradition – the etiquette, if you like – of storytelling is that while the storyteller has charge of the story it is

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.

theirs to do with as they like. Which source should I go back to for perfect accuracy, after all? The oldest? The first-time told? Hardly. Where a culture's religion is involved, then it's wrong to mess with a mythic story. But there can be very few Olympian-worshippers these days I could offend by missing out a detail or two. The patchwork-quilt way that the canon of Greek myth grew gives rise to lots of anomalies anyway – e.g. Hercules doing his deal with Atlas at least two generations after Perseus turned Atlas into a mountain.

All the same… when TV series or novelizations credit the wrong heroes with the wrong adventures, I go ape!

As for details… Those three drops of olive oil that Psyche spills on to Cupid's shirt as she takes a peek at him after dark… when you see how they survived over the centuries to turn up as three drops of blubber oil in a telling of East of the Sun and West of the Moon… well it makes you believe that myths have DNA that will survive somehow despite the worst time and interfering storytellers can do to them. Details like that are truly precious.

Prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@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

Summary

The book narrates the life of Hercules, from his early youth to his tragic death and following deification (or rather becoming a constellation). Due to the subject matter and the mentions of murder and tragic deaths the book is more suitable for older children.

Analysis

Hercules is a work for young readers that recounts the myths of Hercules/Herakles in a novel format. To engage young readers and make ancient myth more immediate for them, McCaughrean uses a personal approach: her narrator addresses readers directly. In the preface the author appeals in second person to her reader(s): "You there! Think you're strong, do you?" It immediately creates anticipation and curiosity regarding what is to follow. The author finishes her short preface with quite a strong and menacing sentence: "Hercules is gone." Although the reader knows the Hercules does not exist in this modern world, there is a sense of dread in the preface but also it creates a sense of mystery and wonder. The tale about to be told is of a special kind, of a unique person who no longer exists.

McCaughrean makes sure to inform readers of the context of the story, providing information about Prometheus. The first chapter discusses the creation of human kind, because, as the author admits, she felt it was necessary for the background of the story. She explains very briefly how Prometheus was tortured for stealing the fire and then she concludes this part by stating (p. 3): "and yet the picture would not be complete without that background skyline, without those distant crags specked red by Prometheus's torment. It tells you something about the gods, it tells you something about strength and weakness, about tyranny and freedom." This hints at the following themes the book shall cover, and not surprisingly the story of Hercules begins with his killing the snakes which tried to hurt him as an infant. From these first few pages we understand that this is not a happy tale, since it will narrate the harshness of the gods and their nature (as the author deems it) and of tyranny and freedom. Very mature subject matters.

McCaughrean's use of direct remarks makes for a sense of engagement, urgency and relevance, which connect with the didactic lessons imparted throughout. In the first chapters we learn of

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.

Hercules' youth and the story of Hercules' meeting with Vice and Virtue is inserted when Hercules is only 13 years of age. There are obvious parallels here with young readers' experiences, and a moral message about how to choose wisely. They can relate to the character.

It appears that the renowned author had made an extensive research into all the different tales surrounding Hercules from the various sources, although she does name her sources. Since the book is aimed at young teenagers, the author goes over quite briefly on the murder of Hercules' family by his own hands, as if the readers, like Hercules himself, are oblivious to what is going on and find out the horrible truth later. The event is briefly mentioned – Hercules was put in a frenzy state after drinking the wine Amphitryion offered him at dinner. Hercules was warned in the past by his teacher Chiron not to drink, yet he disregarded this advice. And at the dinner he drinks extensively and in his in his drunkenness kills his family. When he finally comes to (p. 22): "Hercules stared at his two hands as though they were trusted friends who had unaccountably betrayed him. 'I want to die.'" This is a powerful moment; losing one's family and being alone in the world and it is much more difficult to handle since it was his fault.

When he meets his Centaur teacher again during one of his tasks, Hercules is disappointed to learn things of his former teacher (p. 45): "the hero of his childhood suddenly seemed small and flawed – a disappointment." This is one of the feelings which accompanies growing up; when people we idolized in our youth (whether family or teacher) are at one point being seen in their natural, flawed self. One must learn to understand that they are people too. Yet when Hercules breaks his promise again and drinks, he is again filled with madness and this time kills Chiron. It appears that Hercules' murderous acts are only the result of the wine (or maybe the breaking of his promises?) the young readers can receive here a moral lessons regarding alcohol consumption but I think the issue here is moderation. Hercules does not know how to control himself – his drink, his anger and until he does only bad things happen.

The involvement of the gods is emphasized in the story, as they accompany the events and make their judgments, especially Zeus who decides his son's fate, and of course Hera who causes the grief in Hercules' life. Chapter 4 even opens with a special and secret gathering of Hermes, Apollo and Athena who take pity on Hercules

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.

and enounces Hera's actions. In the end though, in an ironic twist of fate, Hera's daughter, Hebe, falls in love with Hercules. There also another closure when Hercules saves Prometheus, with whose fate the book opened.

At the final pages of the book, nearing Hercules' death, he starts a dialogue with Iole regarding devotion to the gods. Hercules tells her (p. 118): "I'm afraid I can't see the use or the reason any more for saying my prayers." Hercules is having a crisis of faith that seems a bit like a modern one and not that suitable of the ancient Greek religion. (Iole tells him she would have made him (p. 118) a "devout Greek", yet it seems a bit out of place in the context of the Greek religion). We know from the story that the gods exist; whether they help or not is another story, but they did listen to Hercules and some of them even helped him, so this religious conversation sounds strange. But again, the cruel irony: Iole is certain that Hercules needs to sacrifice to the gods and should wear the robe sent to him by Deianeira; this sudden devotion would kill Hercules. In the end, all Zeus wanted was to hear Hercules' prayer for him. Again, the author chose to end the story with this pious note on the gods and religion. Yet there is some small hope at the end, when she writes that all the creatures of earth will warm Hercules' cold heart.

To sum up, McCaughrean is facing a difficult task; she has a very complexed hero whose character unfortunately is not well developed in the ancient myths, and she also needs to make the intended readers of the modern world care about him and his exploits and understand the moral of the story. She achieves that by putting herself and the readers in the story by the direct reference to the readers and also by starting the story at a point when Hercules is as old as the readers. When young Hercules feels lonely or engages with his family, the reader would probably automatically think about their family. Choosing to view the story form teenage Hercules makes the family the heart of the narrative and not just the pretext for the labours. Another interesting aspect of family life is presented via Zeus-Hercules Father-Son relations. All Zeus wanted was for his son to need him; a very basic human emotion, to feel relevant and needed and loved. Zeus is presented as the caring father and his help to Hercules complete the circle, Hercules returns to the family. Violence is presented as the result of thoughtlessness and madness, yet it is also result from one's character and decision. Hercules chooses to drink despite the warning of his wise teacher and the results are destructive. Yet one can overcome his violent nature and learn to

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.

	change if they strongly wish to. There is hope. A hero is the one who learns to control himself, the monsters within and not just the monsters he sees.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Admete Alcmene Amphitryon Apollo Artemis Athena Atlas Cerberus Chiron / Cheiron Deianeira Eurystheus Hebe Hera Heracles Hercules Hermes Hippolyta Hydra Iole Linus Megara Minos Nemean Lion Nessus Pluto / Plouton Poseidon Prometheus Stymphalian Birds Twelve Labours of Heracles Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Coming of age Family Good vs evil Heroism Isolation/loneliness Values

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.