Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: Athena the Brain (Goddess Girls, 1) by Joan Holub, Suzanne Williams ", 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/290. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Joan Holub , Suzanne Williams

Athena the Brain (Goddess Girls, 1)

United States (2010)

TAGS: Aphrodite Artemis Athena Cyclops / Cyclopes Hermes Hydra Medusa Metis Pandora Persephone Pheme Poseidon Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Athena the Brain (Goddess Girls, 1)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2010
First Edition Details	Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *Athena the Brain* (Goddess Girls). New York: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division, Aladdin Press, 2010, 168 pp.
ISBN	9781416982715 (paperback) / 9781405511629 (ebook)
Genre	Alternative histories (Fiction), Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Fiction, Humor, Mythological fiction, Novels, School story*
Target Audience	Children (Older children, 8–12 years)
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



Photo courtesy of Joan Holub.

Joan Holub , b. 1956
(Author)

Joan Holub is a prolific children's author from the USA. Graduated from college in Texas with a fine arts degree. Worked as an art director at Scholastic trade books in New York. She has written and/or illustrated over 150 children's books. She has developed a range of series for teenagers on mythological themes: *Goddess Girls*, set in Mount Olympus Academy, *Grimmtastic Tales* series, set in Grimm Academy, *Thunder Girls*, about Norse gods set in Asgard Academy, and *Heroes in Training*, in which the male Greek gods, as very young men, set out on a range of adventures. For pre-school children, Jan Holub has written on a range of topics including several works with religious and historical themes. These include: *This Little President*; *This Little Trailblazer*, *Hooray for St. Patrick's Day!*, and *Light the Candles: A Hanukkah Lift-the-Flap Book*. Joan Holub trained in fine art and worked as an art director at a graphic design company before becoming a children's illustrator and then author.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 2, 2018).

Profile at the penguinrandomhouse.com (accessed: July 2, 2018).

Profile at the simonandschuster.com (accessed: July 2, 2018).

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk and Allison Rosenblum, Bar-Ilan University, allie.rose89@gmail.com and Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Questionnaire

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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 learned to love Greek and Norse mythology in elementary school. I'm very comfortable adapting the framework of an existing myth or fairy tale by pushing it into a different setting, adding humor, and/or building in a nonfiction component. Staying true to the essential core of each myth along the way is important to me. A young *Goddess Girls* reader once told me she enjoyed the series because she "learned something". In other words, while she liked being entertained, she appreciated that her familiarity and factual understanding of the original myths was broadened at the same time.

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

Kids have questions about their world. So it's interesting to them to learn how ancient Greeks and other cultures answered questions about how their world worked in exciting tales of heroes and beasts. How did the sun cross the sky? In a chariot drawn by the god Helios. What caused night? The goddess Nyx's starry cape covered the sky. Thrilling stories of courage and danger, such as Heracles' twelve labors, the Trojan Horse, and the Argonauts never go out of style.

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?

I have an entire shelf of mythology resource books. Some of my favorite go-to sources are the *Scholastic Mythlopedia* series, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology, Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, and www.theoi.com (accessed: May 28, 2018).

4. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelity" to the original? (another way of saying that might be – that I think writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its

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spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail – is this something you thought about?)

Each book in the *Goddess Girls* series (ages 8–12, Simon and Schuster) and *Heroes in Training* series (ages 7–10, Simon and Schuster) is a retelling of one or two Greek myths, with a twist. We stay as true as possible to the core bones of an original myth in order to give young readers a good understanding, but we include kid situations and humor to entertain. As an example, in *Goddess Girls #1: Athena the Brain*, Athena is summoned to attend Mount Olympus Academy, where Zeus is the principal. MOA teachers include Mr. Cyclops, who teaches Hero-ology, a class where students are graded on their abilities to maneuver small hero figures such as Odysseus, around a gameboard to enact the Trojan War, etc. Meanwhile, Athena, who is the goddess of invention among other things, inadvertently turns mean-girl Medusa's hair to snakes and gives her the power to turn mortals to stone by means of a shampoo-like invention called Snakeypoo at the MOA invention fair.

5. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

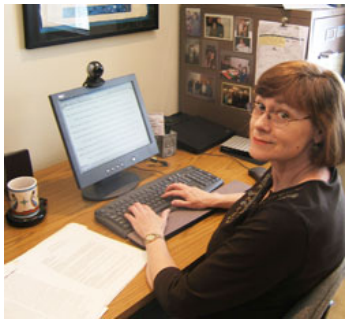
Suzanne Williams and I have written a new middle grade series called *Thunder Girls* (accessed: May 28, 2018), which is a twist on Norse mythology featuring strong girl characters. The first book Freya and the Magic Jewel releases May 2018 for ages 8–12, published by Simon and Schuster.

Prepared by Allison Rosenblum, Bar-Ilan University, allie.rose89@gmail.com and Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Suzanne Williams , b. 1953
(Author)

Suzanne Williams is an American prolific children's author and former

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Courtesy of the Author from her personal website.

elementary school librarian. She has written over 60 books for children.

She grew up in Oregon and graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's in library science from the University of Oregon. She currently lives in Reno, Washington.

Source:

Official website (accessed: May 29, 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?

Writing about Greek mythology was my co-author, Joan Holub's idea. She's loved mythology since childhood. Her enthusiasm for the subject got me excited about it too. *Goddess Girls* (ages 8–12) was our very first collaboration. Soon there will be 26 books in that series. One of the challenges we've faced in writing our (soon to be four) myth-based series for young readers is how to handle the sexual and violent content of many of the myths.

To downplay the violence, we often make it cartoonish and lighten it with humor. Since most of our gods and goddesses are pre-teens (as are our readers!), we deal with inappropriate sexual content by making changes that still allow us to keep to the spirit of the myth. For example: in introducing the Adonis myth, in which Aphrodite and Persephone fight over a beautiful youth they both desire, we decided to make Adonis a kitten, rather than a young man.

Another challenge has involved familial relationships among the

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various gods and goddesses. In *Goddess Girls*, Zeus is an adult, the principal of Mount Olympus Academy, the school attended by our "goddessgirls" and "godboys". In mythology he would likely have fathered a good portion of the student body! So we made a decision that only Athena would call him "Dad". (Until Hebe popped forth from a lettuce in Book 21, that is.) We do acknowledge many other family relationships. For example: Apollo and Artemis as brother and sister. Medusa and her sisters Euryale and Stheno. Persephone and her mother, Demeter.

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

Myths have got all the elements that draw us to stories: action, conflict, drama, humor, etc. What's not to like?

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?

Neither Joan nor I have a classical education. I did take an online Greek and Roman mythology class a few years ago, however. (Taught by Peter Struck, University of Pennsylvania.) Terrific class!

For our Greek mythology-based series, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* is the reference we rely on the most. My co-author and I do consult Wikipedia and other online resources, especially for lists of monsters and maps and general information about ancient Greece. References for *Thunder Girls*, our soon-to-be-published Norse mythology-based series include: *The Norse Myths* by Kevin Crossley-Holland, D'Aulaires' *Book of Norse Myths*, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* by John Lindow, *The Poetic Edda* (translated and edited by Jackson Crawford), and *The Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson (Penguin Classics).

4. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

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In addition to *Goddess Girls*, my co-author and I have also collaborated on a second Greek mythology-based series called *Heroes in Training* (ages 6–9). It's a humorous quest/adventure series with Zeus, Poseidon, Hades and other Olympians as ten-year-olds on the run from King Cronus and the Titans. *Freya and the Magic Jewel*, the first book in *Thunder Girls*, our Norse mythology-based series, publishes May 1, 2018. I travel to Norway frequently to visit my daughter, granddaughter, and Norwegian son-in-law, so I am very excited to be doing a Norse-myth series. Aladdin (Simon & Schuster) publishes all three of Joan's and my mythology-based series. We will be doing a fourth myth-based series with them soon – for ages 5–8. Tentative title is *Little Goddess Girls*, and it will be another Greek myth-based series.

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

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Additional information

Summary

This is the first book in the *Goddess Girls* series and in which we are introduced into the world of MOA (Mount Olympus Academy). The academy is the school for various little gods and goddesses from Greek mythology, who are referred to as goddessgirls and godboys. The series is aimed at older readers, especially girls, with an emphasis on girl-power.

Using the format of the American teen high-school comedy romance, Holub and Williams retell different Greek myths (there is no identification regarding a specific source for the myths, but the authors certainly researched many myths relating to each of the goddesses). The emphasis on growing up, having adventures, and learning from mistakes, shapes the delivery of the myths. A strong emphasis is on emotional development (fitting in, controlling emotions, having empathy, self-confidence) and on teamwork and friendship.

In this book, Athena, daughter of the principal Zeus, is admitted into the academy where she encounters the students and makes friends. In this story she needs to get accustomed to the new school while trying to stand against the bully Medusa and the competitive Poseidon. As well, the book serves as an introduction to the series.

Analysis

When dealing with mythology for younger readership, there is always the question of how much could or should we sugar-coat the original myths. In this opening book in the *Goddess Girls* series, the authors, seem to be very familiar with the ancient myths (there are references to Arachne, Arion, Athena's inventions and various myths in the series), have decided to tell the stories from a different angle. Not a censored narration of the various myths, but rather they chose the school environment as the setting for the various stories. The gods are boys and girls, yet the adventures they experience relate to the known myths (for example Hades and the underworld, Hercules' labors).

The myths are softened since the series is aimed at young readership and the tone of it is quite comical. Nevertheless, the authors make the anthropomorphic gods more human by attributing to them thoughts and insecurities and confused emotions – like their intended

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readership. The gods may have extraordinary abilities, yet they too are facing school works and struggle to find their own place. Therefore this is not another rendering of the myths adapted for younger readership, but a clever incorporation of said myths into a different environment where they are evaluated and thought about yet in an ancient setting. There are no gods in jeans here, but chitons and scrolls to keep everything more authentic. For example, Athena addresses the consequences of turning Medusa's hair into snakes. The reason is entirely different than in the original myth, yet at the same time we are granted a glimpse into the thoughts of the goddess and the dealings with the afterwards of her actions, which are always obscured in the original myths. The gods seldom take any responsibilities in the original myths or have any real relations with others; yet here they must think of their actions and learn the meaning of friendship. This way the myths are used as a non-preachy pedagogical tool to convey ideas such as friendship, acceptance, responsibility etc.

The goddesses are not cookie-cutter images of their respective roles, although they of course stay true to them (Athena – the clever one, Aphrodite – the beautiful). Their characters have more depth and nuance than in their original myths. In this first installment of the series, 12 years old Athena discovers she is Zeus' daughter: "Athena jumped to her feet, unsure if she should be happy or upset, but feeling a little of both." (pp. 5–6). "She wasn't sure what she'd expected to see in the glass. To suddenly look beautiful, wise and powerful? In other words – more like a goddess?" (p. 6). What does it mean to be a goddess?? In the story we will find out, like Athena, that goddess is just a title; what is really important is who you really are inside. Athena needs to come to grip with her parents as well, especially her mother who is very loving, yet she is a fly living in Zeus' head.

Ironically, Athena's friend is called "Pallas" – with whom Athena lived. Athena's childhood on earth is humorously depicted; she was very smart and also "had invented the very first flute and trumpet ever seen on Earth" (p. 12). Here we see an example of how the myths are harmoniously integrated within the overall narrative. Being a goddess may be frightening at first, yet also reassuring: "'I'm tired of trying to hide that I'm different. It would be nice to fit in for a change,' Athena admitted." (p. 13). This is a coming-of-age story and Athena is no different than any other 12 years old girl who wishes to find her place. The academy is built in Ionic style, the bell is a lyre bell, the lunch bowls are decorated with black-figure painting – everything is in very

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ancient Greek style. Even the fortune cookie is telling real fortunes like an oracle. The head secretary is a Hydra. Again we see a comic tone, mixing real life experiences of children at school with a mythical being. The curriculum is based on the following classes: “Hero-ology, Spell-ology, Revenge-ology, Beast-ology, and Beauty-ology.” (p. 27). Apparently the gods have no need for mathematics. The academy almost has the feeling of the X-MEN school for gifted mutants or a regular high school with jocks and cheerleaders. Only here they are real mythological beings and not humans. Athena thinks: “Maybe she could be herself here, where everyone was a bit weird.” (p. 32). The first teacher Athena encounters is Mr. Cyclops who teaches Hero-ology. Again we see how the humour fits in the narrative; a cyclops is not a frightening monster; he is a teacher! It’s an interesting twist that a being that was affected by a hero in the original myth would now teach about heroes. The teacher tells them he would grade the following skills: “manipulation, disasters and quick saves” (p. 42). This is another intriguing view of the heroic nature of a Greek hero. Each student gets a figure who represents a mortal. Athena gets Odysseus while Aphrodite gets Paris. So here we see the beginning of the known myth but from a very different starting point. Aphrodite the student arbitrarily decides to make her figurine fall in love. There is no malice behind her actions, she is just a girl as she proudly tells: “‘I made Paris fall in love with a pretty mortal named Helen. He just took her to his fortress in Troy to show her around. Isn’t that romantic?’ She sighed blissfully.” (p. 92).

At the academy lineage matters Aphrodite is ridiculed and called “bubbles” by Medusa because she was born from the sea foam. What is considered marvellous in the original myth is used here as a point of ridicule at school. Because kids make fun of other kids; gods or not. Another hint at Medusa is referred to when Athena sees Medusa smirking in reflection in her own mirror. Again we see how the different myths are combined together to create an homogenous story. Bits and pieces form the different mythological tales are brought together. Another character cleverly represented is the goddess of rumour, Pheme, who tries to hear what everyone is talking about and at times twists their words – true to her name. Pandora, Athena’s roommate, is described as nosy; she tells Athena: “I accidentally opened a box of disasters in Mr Epimetheus’s class, and most of them escaped to Earth” (p. 88). Everything, the goddesgirls and boys do, effects the mortals on earth. Their child-play of heroes for class started the Trojan War and Odysseus’ journey. It is a very graphic and

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visual manifestation of how the gods literally play with humans' life. Whether the authors intended for this deeper philosophical level or not, it is very evident from the story. The gods can be careless and the mortals are affected. Poseidon tries to win over Athena, and Odysseus, just a game figure to them, is caught in the middle. Also, Athena and Aphrodite are on different sides in this played Trojan War because these are the assignments dealt by the teacher. So here again we have an allusion to the original myth with a very logical explanation from the new setting. The mortals are thus stripped from any decision-making. The famous Trojan horse is in reality Athena's toy. At the end, as the girls say, it was just homework:

> "I'm sorry I spoiled your plans for Paris and Helen's happily-ever-after."
>
> "That's okay," said Aphrodite, shrugging. "It's just a class assignment." (p. 116).

One of Athena's renowned acts is also turned into a reasonable tale. Her rivalry with Medusa is blamed on the latter, who picks on Athena at school. (Medusa has a crush on Poseidon and she thinks he favours Athena; while the connection with Poseidon is kept from the original myth, it might be considered a bit tactless to make Medusa fall in love with her mythological assailant). Then Medusa steals one of Athena's inventions and this is how she could turn people to stone and her hair accidentally turns into snakes. Athena is horrified: "Oh, no! This is all my fault! Snarkypoo was supposed to turn snarky words into stone. But because I misspelled the name as Snakeypoo, it turned hair into snakes. And it gave whoever used it the power to turn—" (p. 127). Comically Medusa reflects on herself in the mirror and turns to stone. Since Medusa was bullying Athena, it seems as if she received a proper punishment. What in the original myth was a show of cruelty by Athena to a helpless girl is now being turned around and Medusa received what she deserves. Yet no one is truly hurt in the series. Athena's status at school then improves with her win at the inventive fest for the invention of olives! Again, a funny way to explain how the Greeks believed Athena gave them the olive tree.

The story ends with Athena now feeling more loved and secured and willing to accept herself.

Aphrodite Artemis Athena Cyclops / Cyclopes Hermes Hydra Medusa

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Metis Pandora Persephone Pheme Poseidon Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Friendship Gaining understanding Individuality Knowledge Learning Love Teachers Violence
Addenda	The review refers to the Kindle edition.

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