Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: The Gods in Winter by Patricia Miles ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/350. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

Patricia Miles

The Gods in Winter

United States (1978)

TAGS: Demeter Eleusis Gods Hades Homeric Hymns Persephone Underworld





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Gods in Winter
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States; United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1978
First Edition Details	Patricia Miles, *The Gods in Winter*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978, 140 pp.
ISBN	9780525307488
Genre	Magic realist fiction, Mythological fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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Creators



Patricia Miles , 1930 - 2015
(Author)

Patricia Miles was born in Bolton, Greater Manchester, on September 8th, 1930. Her father was a grocer. She aspired to be an author from a young age, and won a scholarship to Somerville College at Oxford, where she studied ancient history and classical languages. She married Francis Miles in 1953 and they had three children. The family settled in Hertfordshire, where Miles taught English and French, and later, creative writing. Her first novel, *Nobody's Child*, was published in 1975, followed by *If I Survive* (1976), *The Gods in Winter* (1978) and *A Disturbing Influence* (1979), *The Mind Pirates* (1983), *Sweet Peril* (1987) and *Beloved Enemy* (1987). Her last completed work, written with Jill Williams, was *An Uncommon Criminal*, a story of the life of the suffragette Lady Constance Lytton. Her work draws upon both the places and people in her life.

The Gods in Winter was republished in 2005 thanks to the efforts of young adult fantasy writer Tamora Pierce, who first read the novel whilst working at the literary agency Harold Ober Associates in the early 1980s. Pierce never forgot the story, but was unable to source a copy for many decades. Finally, her own agent at Ober tracked down the book for her, and arranged for Front Street to republish the text.

Miles passed away in 2015, after suffering dementia for a number of years.

Source:

Miles' obiturary (accessed: February 4, 2018).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

The Gods in Winter draws on the retelling of the myth featured in *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which recounts Persephone's abduction by Hades and the establishment of the seasonal cycle. While searching for her beloved daughter, Demeter disguises herself and takes on the role of nursemaid to the child of the royal family of Eleusis. Miles' text alludes to these events taking place in 1970s England, witnessed by the Brambles, an ordinary, middle class family with a scientist father, teacher mother, and three children, Adam, Lottie and Zach, with another, the baby Beth, born during the course of the narrative. As Miles' son highlighted in her obituary, the Brambles closely resemble Patricia Miles' own family.

The narrator Adam recounts how while driving to their new home in the Midlands, they catch sight of an attractive young girl picking poppies in a field, then soon after see her being driven away at breakneck speed by a man in a huge black car. Soon after, the warm autumn day becomes bleak and miserable. Settling into their new home, the family take on a housekeeper, Mrs Korngold, to help with the new baby. Although her domestic skills are unreliable and her moods often unpredictable, through the course of the long, harsh winter Mrs Korngold becomes an important part of the family unit. Gradually it emerges that she has lost contact with her own daughter, and that she has extraordinary powers; saving Lottie's life after she falls off a pony, and transforming the children's annoying cousin Crispin into a lizard. As the family begins to suspect her true identity, events come to a head with a confrontation between Mrs Korngold and her sinister brother Mr Underwood. Reunited, at least temporarily, with her daughter Cora, the story concludes with Mrs Korngold departing the Bramble household having bestowed important gifts on each member of the family.

Analysis

In this narrative classical myth exists on the borders of everyday life, around its edges and in particular, below its surface. The story is set in Derbyshire, central England, in a region shaped by the effects of coalmining, with old tunnels running beneath the ground, and signs warning of the danger of subsidence. In the final part of the novel, the Brambles watch the neighbouring mansion, a once grand but now dilapidated reproduction of the Winter Palace in St Petersburg,

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collapse into the ground. The text draws attention to the fact that the classical accoutrements of the property – the mansion's urns and pillars, and the statues in the surrounding formal garden – vanish "into a deep gash in the ground" (142). Adam concludes that this subterranean world serves as "one of those places where you can enter the underworld" (146). The local landscape - pastoral, quaint, and very British – is a portal through which elements and characters from the world of Greek myth can enter.

As well as emphasising the presence of classical details in the region's art and architecture, the text makes several references to the value of a classical education and laments its decline. Adam says his parents have "a proper education with Greek and Latin and a lot of English poetry, not like us poor modern kids" (3). Yet although the younger Brambles "mightn't learn Latin and Greek and all that" (132), they are familiar with the core elements of the myth of Persephone, and ultimately recognise Mrs Korngold's true identity. Her personal distress at the loss of her daughter is linked to other historical traumas; in her presence, the children have visions of WWII refugees fleeing persecution, the Berlin Wall, and the fall of Troy. Mrs Korngold tells them "we just borrow a shape" (135) and Adam feels that "she drags thoughts you've got in the back of your head out to the front." (87). He wakes one night to witness a spectacular storm, in which Mrs Korngold presents him with visions of England's past and future.

In placing an immortal goddess within this domestic setting, *The Gods in Winter* plays with the notion that this myth is ancient and remote, yet at the same time a recurring event that impacts directly on modern life. It is as if Demeter, Hades, Persephone and the other gods are compelled to repeat their roles in the saga. The children suspect that Mrs Korngold "goes and stays with someone every year" (141). The myth's focus on seasonal change, alluded to in the book's title, underscores this sense of a perpetual cycle.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Demeter Eleusis Gods Hades Homeric Hymns Persephone Underworld

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Emotions Family Loss Parents (and children) Storytelling
Further Reading	Miles' obituary, *The Guardian*, 19 May 2015, available at theguardian.com (accessed: July 12, 2018).

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