Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Terry Deary's Best Ever Greek Legends / Top Ten Greek Legends by William Terence Deary, Dave Smith, Michael Tickner", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Dorota Mackenzie. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/375. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

William Terence Deary , Dave Smith , Michael Tickner

Terry Deary's Best Ever Greek Legends / Top Ten Greek Legends

United Kingdom (1998)



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TAGS: Achilles Aetiology Agamemnon Ancient Slavery Andromeda Aphrodite Apollo Apples of the Hesperides Arachne Ares Ariadne Artemis Athena Athens Atlas Centaur(s) Cerberus Chiron / Cheiron Cyclops / Cyclopes Daedalus Demeter Diomedes' Mares Dionysus / Dionysos Erinyes Eurydice Furies Golden Fleece Hades Harpies Hector Hephaestus Hera Heracles Hercules Hermes Icarus Jason Katabasis Medea Medusa Midas Minos Minotaur Narcissus Odysseus / Ulysses Orpheus Pandora Pandora's Box Perseus Phaethon Polyphemus Poseidon Prometheus Sirens Sphinx Telemachus Theatre Tragedy (Ancient) Trojan Horse Trojan War Twelve Labours of Heracles Zeus



General information	
Title of the work	Terry Deary's Best Ever Greek Legends / Top Ten Greek Legends
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom; Czech Republic
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1998
First Edition Details	Terry Deary, *Terry Deary's Best Ever Greek Legends*. London: Scholiastic Children's Books, 1998 (1st ed. published as *Top Ten Greek Legends*), 2014 (2nd ed.), 191 pp.
ISBN	9781407147352
Genre	Humor, Illustrated works, Myths, Short stories
Target Audience	Children (c. 9+)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

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.

Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Dorota Mackenzie, University of Warsaw, dorota.mackenzie@gmail.com

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Creators



William Terence Deary , b. 1946
(Author)

Terry Deary is a bestselling British children's author. He is also a professional actor and singer, and has written for the stage, television, radio and film. He was born in Sunderland, England, UK. His father was a butcher and he worked in the shop as a boy. He attended Monkwearmouth Grammar School, which he hated. In his mid-twenties, he worked as head of drama in a comprehensive school, an experience that shaped his way to engage with children: 'I wrote my own curriculum – I was able to tell my students things that were relevant to them. I was able to explore their thoughts, their feelings and way of communicating, and I learnt a hell of a lot from them' (Preston 2013). Now he is a prolific British author, also known as an actor and a writer of popular non-fiction and TV, theatre, radio, audio and new media scripts. Terry Deary is the creator of the hugely popular *Horrible Histories* book series, which includes Groovy Greeks and Rotten Romans. In 2009 CBBC Television launched a Horrible Histories TV series. A set of Horrible Histories theatre plays have also been created in collaboration with Birmingham Stage Company, and a film is planned. Terry Deary's other fiction incudes the The Fire Thief trilogy, a comedic retelling of the myth of Prometheus, and True Time Tales; both have been adapted and will be televised – True Time Tales as a children's animation created by Canada's Eggplant Media. His 2010 novel Put Out the Light (published by A&C Black) won the 2012 Sheffield Children's Books Award. Deary has published over 300 books, spanning the genres of fiction and non-fiction and both child and adult audiences. His books have sold over 30 million copies worldwide and have been translated into 40 languages, and in 2012 he was listed as the tenth most borrowed author in British children's libraries.

Terry Deary's Best Ever Greek Legends develops the concept in his Greek Legends (Twisted Tales series, 2004), and Best Greek Legends Ever (2009).

Sources:

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Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk and Giacomo Savani, University College Dublin, giacomo.savani@gmail.com and Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com



Dave Smith (Illustrator)



Michael Tickner (Illustrator)

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Additional information

Summary

This is a collection of humorous retellings of myths for children designed to introduce them to Greek mythology and to ancient culture more broadly. Many of the stories are told from unusual perspectives and they are delivered in a variety of literary forms and fonts.

Contents:

- *Introduction*.
- *Legend 1: Zeus. Hera's Tale*. The myth of Io told with Hera narrating events from her perspective.
- *Fantastic Facts 1*: *10 Best Victims*. Summaries of myths of: Semele, Aphrodite, Echo, Nemesis, Europa, Danae, Thetis, Leda, Alcmene.
- *Legend 2: Aphrodite. Helen and the Horror Horses*. "As usual the Greeks managed to blame a woman (or two) for the troubles of the world." The myths of Aphrodite's birth, marriage to Hephaestus, revelation of affair with Ares, Adonis, Glaucus, Paris' decision and origin of Trojan War, are all told in the form of Aphrodite's defensive letter to Zeus.
- *Fantastic Facts 2: Wicked Women*. Summaries of the myths of: Pandora, Danaus' daughters, Ino, Scylla and Minos, Athene and Arachne, Ariadne, Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, Deineira, the Harpies, and Phaedra.
- *Legend 3: Orpheus and Eurydice. If Looks Could Kill*. The traditional myth told in the form of a poem.
- *Fantastic Facts 3: Gruesome Greek Life*. Gruesome things from Greek history: How to make a lyre; harsh punishments; sacrifices; athletics events people could die in; painful symposium entertainments; animal blood sports; slavery; predicting the future; hunting; burial rituals; exposure of new-borns.
- *Legend 4: Perseus and Medusa. Monstrous Medusa and My Mum*. The myth of Perseus, Medusa, and Andromeda told in format of Perseus' juvenile diary (including hand-written script).
- *Fantastic Facts 4: Killer Creatures*: Cerberus, The Chimera, The Harpies, The Minotaur, The Python, The Typhon, The Sphinx, Centaurs, Sirens, The Furies.
- *Legend 5: Theseus and the Minotaur. Butchering the Bull*. The traditional myth told in the form of a newspaper report in an ancient Athenian newspaper.

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- *Fantastic Facts 5: The Legendary World*. Zeus tells the readers about creation, with the help of a labelled diagram featuring: earth, sky, Underworld - Styx, Underworld – Asphodel fields, Underworld –Tartarus, Underworld – Elysian Fields, Underworld – Islands of the Blessed, Olympus, Ocean, and the Sun; Zeus then summarises 10 deities and their "top jobs": Hephaestus, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Hestia, Poseidon, Demeter (Hera had been introduced earlier).
- *Legend 6: Oedipus. The Killer King*. The myth of Oedipus is retold as a modern police report, beginning with the police being called to the palace, "Report into the death of Queen Jocasta (and quite a few others)."
- *Fantastic Facts 6: Gory Gods*. This is a count-down of myths in which the "gods, heroes, and villains" hurt people gruesomely: Dionysus and Pentheus, Polyphemus and Odysseus' crew, Pan and Syrinx, Zeus and Prometheus, Theseus and Prokrustes, Kreon and Antigone, Medea. A quiz in which the reader attempts to match Killer, Victim, and Motive follows.
- *Legend 7: The Labours of Heracles*. *The Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) of Heracles*, includes 10 of Heracles labours related in the form of school set task, student report, and teacher's comment: Nemean Lion, Hydra, Stag, Augean stables, Stymphalian birds, Cretan Bull, Diomedes' mares, Hippolyta's belt, Apples of Hesperides, Cerberus.
- *Fantastic Facts 7: Hooray Heroes*. Hero myths summarised as dating profiles: Ganymede, Cadmus, Pelops, Daedalus, Arion, Calchas, Diomedes, Asclepius, Hyacinthus ("special friend of Apollo"), Telemachus.
- L*egend 8: Jason and the Argonauts. The Magic of Medea*. The myth of the quest for the Golden Fleece told as Medea's letter to an agony aunt.
- *Fantastic Facts 8: Have you seen this criminal?* This section includes wanted posters summarising the wrong-doings of 10 mythical figures; "the sentences described are the ones carried out": Sisyphus, Ixion, Phaethon, Midas, Narcissus, Tantalus, King Lycaon, Sceiron, Procne, Polycrates.
- *Legend 9: The Odyssey*. The introduction asserts that "the truth about Troy became mixed-up with the old legends… The story was written down about three hundred years after it happened in 1200 B.C." An example story from the *Odyssey* is given: a retelling of the Cyclops story in the form of a boisterous rhyming ballad.

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- *Fantastic Facts 9: Legendary Words*. A game in which the reader guesses the myth-based origin of ten English words, from multiple choice options: Panic, Volcano, Cereal, Hypnotize, Lethal, Syringe, Siren, Demon, Money, Atlas.
- *Legend 10: The Trojan War. The Wooden Head of Troy*. The story of the Trojan War, from the quarrel to the horse, told at a brisk pace in play-script format.
- *Fantastic Facts 10: Play Time*. Ten true or false questions based on scenarios from ancient Greek theatre practice.
- *Epilogue*: The book closes by reminding the reader that these stories are very old and that, unlike many other stories, they will continue to be told for a long time even after everyone alive today is dead. The reader is urged to "keep them in your heart and your head and pass them on."

Analysis

An enormous number of myths and mythical characters are introduced in this collection. Some are included within stories while others are summarised within one or two lines. This maximises the mythological material that young people are introduced to and it gives an overall impression of the wealth of material available within mythology which serve as a prompt for young people to follow-up further if they choose to.

The use of unusual perspectives or narrators is an effective way to add freshness to the myths. They are told in a very direct way, and the combination of perspective, directness, and varied form invites the reader to consider the personal perspectives of different figures and to regard mythology in general with a flexible, creative outlook. Hera, for example, frequently appears aloof and vindictive in retellings for children, yet here, in *Legend 1: Zeus. Hera's Tale*, the reader hears from Hera directly in an intimate, chatty conversation that covers Zeus' rise to power and many Zeus amours. There is a lot of engaging and amusing direct speech which, combined with the personal, confessional format, invites the reader to sympathise with Hera and to regard the whole situation as a light-hearted romp.

Legend 2: Aphrodite also has something of a confessional quality, as it comes in the form of Aphrodite's defensive letter to Zeus. In the introduction, the narrator notes that, *As usual the Greeks managed to blame a woman (or two) for the troubles of the world*. This sets-up a questioning gender-conscious perspective which is coupled with

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Aphrodite then becoming the narrator of myths which she is usually only the subject of: Aphrodite's birth, marriage to Hephaestus, revelation of affair with Ares, Adonis, Glaucus, Paris' choice and origin of Trojan War. While Aphrodite's defensiveness is part of what makes her letter amusing, it also subverts the usual narrative of these myths and invites the reader to consider how people's impressions can be influenced by how myths are told. This creates a useful precedent for *Wicked Women*, the section which follows. This includes an introduction which reiterates the social constructs underpinning myths and their role in demonising women. When the summaries for each of these myths are given, they are sub-headed with a "weakness" which helps to clarify the moral point being stressed in each myth (e.g. Scylla. Weakness: Betrayal; Clytemnestra. Weakness: Temper; Deineira. Weakness: Stupidity).

The introduction to *Orpheus and Eurydice* invites the young reader to note that few of the myths have happy endings. While that anticipates events to come in *Orpheus and Eurydice*, it also encourages the reader to observe trends across the myths. Rather unusually in children's retellings, this myth goes beyond Orpheus' separation from Eurydice to finish with his dismemberment. In a ring-form, two of the participants watch the head float away and note, as had the introduction, that there is no happy ending to this story.

Legend 4: Perseus and Medusa, Monstrous Medusa and My Mum tells an extensive version of the myth of Perseus, from birth to the death of his grandfather. The format, a handwritten journal, domesticates the fantastic adventure to one very familiar to most young readers. While the end of the story features quite harsh material, it is softened by finishing on a darkly humorous play on words about "fate" and "feet". *Legend 7. The Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) of Heracles*, brings myth into the world familiar to young people in a similar way by comparing the Labours to school tasks.

Legend 5: Theseus and the Minotaur is also somewhat domesticated by its presentation in a newspaper. Theseus is frequently asked about his relationship with Ariadne and always replies, "No comment," which is both a funny modern touch and an indication that he is equivocal about their relationship. When it comes to leaving Ariadne on Naxos, a crewman is quoted in the newspaper. The crewman says that they did not like to question Theseus about why they were leaving her there, but undercuts this show of loyalty by noting that it is not surprising Ariadne fell asleep on the beach as Theseus can be so

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boring. This light-touch way of criticising Theseus reminds the reader that they need not admire everything that happens in the myths. The grim ending of Aegeus' suicide is similarly softened with some gallows humour. Aegeus is said to fall off the cliffs straining to see the ship properly; when he learns that Theseus is safe but "forgot" to change the sails, he calls him a "silly little beggar," then dies.

Legend 8: Jason and the Argonauts. The Magic of Medea. While this myth is typically told from Jason's perspective and frequently ends with the hero fleeing Cholchis, this retelling subverts these comfortable conventions to include Medea's perspective and some of the subsequent events. The format is Medea's letter to an agony aunt, a format which naturally foregrounds her cause for complaint. Most of the story's gruesome elements are told with grisly delight (e.g. there is a cartoon picture of Medea's brother's head being cut off), but the traditions in which Medea (or a Corinthian mob) murders her children are omitted (presumably considered a gruesome step too far). Although Jason's desire to marry princess Glauce is included, this comes after Jason is said to have left Medea because she "poisoned the king of Corinth" – which runs contrary to the popular tradition that he left Medea *in order* to marry Glauce. This seems to be done for comic effect more than anything else, as Medea uses striking understatement in describing the murder. The agony aunt's advice features the plan to kill Glauce that Medea does indeed implement in Euripides' *Medea*. The text ends with Jason's death and a fairly explicit moral that it served him right.

The introduction to *Legend 9: The Odysse*y explains the importance within Greek culture of the Trojan War myths and that they were primarily told through *The Odyssey* and *Iliad*. *The Odyssey* chapter then subverts expectation by telling the cyclops' story from the cyclops' perspective. The rhyming ballad is reminiscent of sea shanties and tall stories, a format appropriate to the tale of a marauding sailor but providing a playful contrast to the introduction's emphasis on the cultural importance of the story. *Legend 10: The Trojan War* follows on, presenting the events of the war through a flippant humorous script that moves through the main events from the quarrel to the fall of Troy. The script form allows a lot of ground to be covered quickly while the provision of yet another format refreshes the reader's engagement and acts as a reminder of the many ways in which myths are communicated.

This is a well-informed and informative collection of retellings that

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	maintains a warm, light hearted approach throughout. The enjoyable tone and brisk pace belies the clever way in which many of the myths are subverted and the thoughtful approach that is encouraged, with young people prompted to retain a critical eye on the heroes' actions.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Aetiology Agamemnon Ancient Slavery Andromeda Aphrodite Apollo Apples of the Hesperides Arachne Ares Ariadne Artemis Athena Athens Atlas Centaur(s) Cerberus Chiron / Cheiron Cyclops / Cyclopes Daedalus Demeter Diomedes' Mares Dionysus / Dionysos Erinyes Eurydice Furies Golden Fleece Hades Harpies Hector Hephaestus Hera Heracles Hercules Hermes Icarus Jason Katabasis Medea Medusa Midas Minos Minotaur Narcissus Odysseus / Ulysses Orpheus Pandora Pandora's Box Perseus Phaethon Polyphemus Poseidon Prometheus Sirens Sphinx Telemachus Theatre Tragedy (Ancient) Trojan Horse Trojan War Twelve Labours of Heracles Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Character traits Coming of age Death Disability Family Friendship Gaining understanding Gender expectations/construction Heroism Identity Individuality Knowledge Learning Love Parents (and children) Past Relationships Society Step-parents Storytelling
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Addenda

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