Alan Gibbons

Shadow of the Minotaur (The Legendeer Trilogy, 1)

United Kingdom (2000)

TAGS: Ariadne Daedalus Danae Labyrinth Medea Medusa Minos Minotaur Pan Perseus Polydectes Theseus

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General information	
Title of the work	Shadow of the Minotaur (The Legendeer Trilogy, 1)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2000
First Edition Details	Alan Gibbons, *The Shadow of the Minotaur*. London: Dolphin, 2000, 217 pp.
ISBN	9781858817217
Awards	2000 – Winner of the Blue Peter Book Award in 2000; 2001 – ('The Book I Couldn't Put Down' category) Shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal in 2001.
Genre	Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Fantasy fiction, Mythological fiction, Novels, Science fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com Second analysis by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

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Creators

Alan Gibbons , b. 1953
(Author)

Alan Gibbons is a well-known English writer of juvenile and young adult fiction, with over seventy books to his name. Trained as a primary school teacher, Gibbons began writing stories for his students. His first novel, *Whose Side Are You On?* was published in 1988. His work confronts difficult themes – racism, bullying, domestic violence, and terrorism – in both realistic and fantasy contexts.

Since winning the Blue Peter Book Award for Shadow of the Minotaur in 2000, Gibbons has worked full time as a writer, in addition to visiting schools and libraries, both in the UK and internationally. He has been an outspoken advocate of literacy, organising the Campaign of the Book, Authors against the SATs Campaign and National Libraries Day. In 2010 he led a large scale campaign against library closures, with Read Ins held across the country.

Source:

Official website (accessed: December 10, 2019)

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

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Additional information

Translation

Spanish: *La sombre del minotauro*, trans. Amalia Bermejo, Madrid: SM, 2002.

Summary

Fourteen year old Phoenix is the only son of John and Christina Graves. His father is a talented computer programmer, and has been headhunted by a shadowy company to be involved in the development of a radical new computer game. The *Legendeer* game features state of the art virtual reality technology that provides a fully immersive sensory experience, enabling players to smell, eat and drink and feel pain. John has drawn upon the legends told to him by his wife and son, who are passionate about their Greek heritage, in developing storylines about the heroes Perseus and Theseus.

Although their relationship is often tense, Phoenix and his father bond through playing *Legendeer* together. Even though the game is still in an experimental phase, Phoenix finds the experience highly addictive, an exciting means of escaping the boredom of Brownleigh, the quiet town to which his father's work has forced the family to move. Taunted by the school bully, the game also allows him to feel heroic, although his first attempts to confront the Minotaur end in failure. But when the virtual reality suits that enable the immersive experience become difficult to remove, it becomes clear that *Legendeer* is far from a harmless diversion from real life. Along with his friend Laura and enemy Steve Adams, Phoenix and his dad find themselves trapped within the game, where Phoenix must re-enact the quests of his much-loved heroes in order to escape the machinations of the sinister Gamemaster, who seeks to gain access to our world. After finally overcoming the game by infecting it with a computer virus, Phoenix and his parents undertake a pilgrimage to Greece. Ultimately, their experiences within the world of myth serve to reunite this unhappy family.

Analysis

1) Analysis by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com:

Shadow of the Minotaur features many of the tropes of a traditional

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coming of age story. Phoenix is unhappy in a new town, picked on at school, and embarrassed by his geeky father. The tension in the father-son relationship centres on the fact that John Graves has made the family leave London for the sleepy (fictional) town of Brownleigh. While his dad hated the stresses of city life, "the noise, the pollution, the rat race, the crime" (p. 10), Phoenix adored the excitement of living in a big city and the status he felt it conferred on him. "London was what Phoenix craved – something big and important – and Dad had taken him away from it'" (p. 11).

His obsession with the Greek myths isolates him from his peers. The *Legendeer* game provides an opportunity to escape his troubles, and the chance to act as a hero, rather than just read about them. Christina, his mother, tries to explain to her husband the significance of the hero myths as paradigms for growing up. She says, "These are some of the greatest stories ever told. They're about reaching manhood, about young men growing up and proving themselves, surviving in a hostile world. They're about great friendship and crushing betrayal..." (p. 16) Phoenix's familiarity with the stories of myth allows him to navigate the myth-world (his surname, Graves, could be read as a reference to the renowned mythological scholar, Robert Graves). But it is his mother's family line that ties him directly to Greece. The painful headaches he suffers link him with his mother's Uncle Andreas, who was incarcerated as a madman, but was actually being visited by Pan and other creatures from the world of myth.

Although its position is not always clear or consistent, the text examines the relationship between myth and reality, inviting readers to consider the accuracy of Phoenix's conviction that 'stories can be better than real life.' (p. 13). With its soaring mountain peaks and harsh sunlight, the ancient Greek landscape is a vibrant alternative to the dull suburbia of Brownleigh. The myth-world is conceived as a parallel universe, with the game a portal through which malign forces, led by the Gamemaster, are seeking to enter our world. There are numerous stories in which characters from contemporary time journey into myth, but Gibbons is fairly unique in linking ancient mythology with modern computer games. The text plays around with the notion of Phoenix's adventure being a harmless game, when in fact his life, and the security of his own world, are at stake.Playing the game is presented as necessary for Phoenix's maturation, but the text is also critical of the addictive form of escapism the *Legendeer* offers. The experience of playing myth is linked to the notion of playing with myth, a process that implicates

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both John Graves, as he appropriates the stories of Theseus and Perseus into the platform of the game, and Gibbons himself, in creating this text.

2) Analysis by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com (the review refers to the 2010 Kindle edition):

A game which becomes real and poses a mortal danger is a popular theme, especially in the current millennium; a few examples are the Japanese graphic novels series *Sword Art Online* from 2009 (which was turned into a successful animated show in 2012), *The Karazan Quartet* series from 2003–2005, and more recently *Trapped in a Video Game* book series by Dustin Brady from 2018. The first edition of the book appeared in 2000, right at the beginning of the millennium and the concomitant scare regarding the year 2000 and the anticipated millennium bug (Y2K Bug). Therefore the horror-like atmosphere of the book regarding the alluring yet menacing power of technology could also be understood in light of this unique and specific chronological setting.

This book offers an interesting addition to the present-day discussion on the benefits vs. the dangers of video games and gaming addiction. The hero of the book, Phoenix, can be considered an anti-hero, a common trope in Time-Traveling stories as well. A similar boy hero can be found in Stella Tarakson's *Hopeless Heroes* series (2018–present), in which the main hero is a common boy, also suffering from a bully at school. Usually such stories carry the message of empowerment; anyone can be a hero, you do not need special powers, just believe in yourself and have someone you want to protect. Family and friendship relations become strong motivations which turn regular children into powerful heroes. Therefore the readers of such works can identify with the heroes of the stories and with these empowering messages as well.

The mysterious game allows Phoenix to become the hero he dreamt of being, or, as he believes, he was destined to be. This is not a matter of game-addiction, but a deeper feeling, as if the game is linked to Phoenix's existence. While it seems at first as if Phoenix is using the game as an escape from his mundane life and his thoughts of grandeur are simple fantasies, in the end it is revealed that he is indeed the hero who was intended to end the game, for the sake of humanity, again, a familiar trope in fantasy stories. Phoenix is a

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bookish boy; he admits to his father that “you know, it’s true. Stories can be better than real life.” (p. 13). Consequently, Phoenix is not just caught in a technological environment mimicking an ancient world (or a “parallel reality” as his father refers to the game’s settings), he is caught within a myth. This enables him to create his own myth, in which he is the ultimate hero. The game’s guide, Pan, also notes that in the end, Phoenix must fulfil his calling: “He chose his path. This is his destiny.” (p. 112).

Why was Pan chosen as the guide of the game? Athena is the more traditional guide of heroes, yet she does not appear at all in this story/game. Although the gods exist in the realm of the game, they do not intervene, with the exception of Pan. As Pan explains to Laura: he is a minor god and also subject to the rules of the game. “This is a world where gods exist, but it isn’t *about* them.” (pp. 111–112). This is an interesting idea, which recalls for example, Tanya Landman’s *The World's Bellybutton* (2007). In her book, a conundrum arose, whether the gods cease to exist when humans do not believe in them anymore. As Lisa Maurice notes, This is also a common trope in modern screen productions, such as the *Star Trek* episode *Who Mourns for Adonais*, and the recent *Clash of the Titans* movies.

Either way, Pan appears to be a more accessible god and less intimidating than the Olympians; he does try to guide the players and help them in his own mysterious way. Although, he can be sinister, and it is difficult to decide whether he is trying to help Phoenix or obstruct him, yet in the end it appears as if Pan is truly worried about his hero.

Like his mother, Phoenix feels a strong connection to the ancient myths, as he confesses, “legends are not just one of my interests, they’re my life.” (p. 19). This is why the game is so compelling for Phoenix, and why he is the one who must see to its end. It is not a parallel reality for him, it is the only reality. Numerous times he describes his feeling within the game as returning home. For Phoenix, the myth is a real, close and even comforting environment. As in other fantasy or time-travelling stories, the “real" hero has the advantage of knowing the true story. Thus Phoenix uses his vast knowledge of the myth (which the characters in the game do not possess) in order to accomplish his tasks.

This story might also echo the feelings of children who feel out of place in the “real" world and escape to their own make-up world,

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which makes them feel safe and at ease (of course there are various reasons for children to become addicted to video games, but in my opinion this is one possible reason). Phoenix is facing a transition to an unfamiliar surrounding after leaving his friends in London and he is also badly bullied by Steve. Therefore it is hardly surprising that his sense of belief in his destiny intensifies, especially as things get worse for him at school or at home, due to his parents' constant bickering. The escape to a fantastic world as a means to find one's inner courage, especially due to a confrontation with a bully, can be found in Brandon Terrell's *Greek Mythology's Twelve Labors of Hercules: A Choose Your Path Book* (2013), in which a boy who hides from a bully in a library is magically transported into a myth book about Hercules. In both books, the experiences shared by the hero in the fantastic environment, assist in enhancing his self-esteem and face the bully in his real life.

The uniqueness of this book is that the game, as mentioned, conveys the feeling of the myths come to life. Phoenix does not simply play Perseus or Theseus, he becomes them. Thus, as readers, we can also get a glimpse of what these adolescent heroes might have felt. The mythological heroes are also given life and true existence via their linkage to Phoenix.

The author also alludes to such association, especially between Phoenix and Theseus. Phoenix shares a complicated relationship with his father. At times he is even embarrassed by him, or feels like his father is caught up in is work and pays less attention to him. The game not only enables Phoenix to save the world form a hostile takeover by computers, it allows him to make amends with his father and unite his family. At the beginning, Phoenix thinks his dad is no hero, and that he is a feeble man. Yet by the end of the game he realizes how strong his father truly is and the lengths to which he is willing to go to save his family, even sacrificing himself.

The connection with Theseus is amplified when, during the game, while escaping form the rogue Minotaur, Phoenix is holding his father's hand and trying to help him get to safety, but his father's hand slips from his grasp. Phoenix blames himself for letting go of his father and for his virtual death: "He'd done it. He'd done the most terrible thing. He'd let go!" (p. 67). This scene recalls Theseus' negligence in changing his ship's sails while returning to Athens, which caused his father's suicide (by falling/jumping from a cliff). Phoenix, who is well-versed in the myths, makes this association

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himself, while consumed with guilt. In the end, Phoenix kills the Minotaur and escapes with Laura and his father, thus changing the end of their own myth. The distinction between Phoenix and Theseus is clear; while Phoenix also kills the Minotaur, he saves his friend and keep her by his side, not abandoning her and he also saves his father.

Another intricate myth-within-a-myth occurs when in the final stage of the game and the story, Phoenix arrives at the labyrinth, and his father assumes the role of Daedalus. While recalling the inventor immediately brings to mind how he lost his son, Icarus, this time the heroes do not relive this sad ending. Theseus, the boy who unknowingly killed his father and Daedalus, whose invention was the cause of his son's death, are given redemption when they are played by Phoenix and John. Their family ties are so strong that they save each other and do not succumb fully to the myth.

A final word on the supporting characters. Laura, as mentioned, is Phoenix's close friend. She is black, a fact which is reveled when the two of them are transported into the game, and it turns out that being a black girl in a mythological world might create a problem. In the end, Laura is presented as a slave, so as not to arouse suspicion. There is an ironic play at the presentation of her as a slave (perhaps with a hint at real historical enslavement of people from Africa, and the fact that she is a true heroine by her own right, who skillfully assists Phoenix while also acting as his moral compass. The addition of black characters into mythological setting was more recently emphasized by Netflix's *Troy: Fall of a City* series, in which the main character, Achilles, was portrayed by a black actor, David Gyasi.

Another recurring character is Steve Adams, the bully. Steve is also transported to the game, as the villain. Yet unlike Phoenix and Laura, he completely succumbs to his various evil roles, embracing this virtual identity which corresponds to his real nature. In the end, he prefers to remain in the virtual world, having become so evil that he cannot and will not get out. Steve is forever lost, not only because he was trapped in the game, but because of his own emotions. He is not the reformed bully or a bully one can reason with. He is evil. The author does not present a psychological explanation regarding the bully's character, or any justification for his acts. This contrasts, for example, with books such as Richard Clark's *Pandora's Lunch Box: Don't Open!* (2017), in which Pandora, the titular hero, ponders about the behavior of her class bully, Lexy, and comes to the understanding that she too suffers insecurities. While Lexy does not reform, she is

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	not described as complete evil. In our book, there is no redemption for Steve, which is quite tragic. Finally, Christina, Phoenix's mother. While she does not actively play the game, she watches her son and husband from afar. Yet it is she who taught Phoenix to love mythology and she is the one who finds the connection to her late uncle, Andreas. In the end, she is the glue who holds the family together. To conclude, Phoenix's emotional and physical engulfment by the game teaches him valuable lessons about himself in his path for adulthood. While he begins the game as a mythological hero, and mimicking his favorite book-characters, in the end he finds his own individual identity and even rises above the mythological heroes, especially due to his sense of family and friendship.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Ariadne Daedalus Danae Labyrinth Medea Medusa Minos Minotaur Pan Perseus Polydectes Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Conflict Emotions Family Friendship Heritage Heroism Identity Masculinity Parents (and children) Peers Tale vs reality
Further Reading	Gloyn, Liz, *Book Review: Shadow of the Minotaur – Alan Gibbons* from the blog Classically Inclined, posted March 4, 2014, lizgloyn.wordpress.com (accessed: July 12, 2018).

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