Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Bull by David Elliott ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/490. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

David Elliott

Bull

United States (2017)

TAGS: Androgeos Ariadne Asterion Athens Crete Daedalus Fate Labyrinth Minos Minotaur Pasiphae Poseidon Theseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Bull
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2017
First Edition Details	David Elliott, *Bull*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, 185 pp.
ISBN	9780544610606
Official Website	davidelliottbooks.com (accessed: September 24, 2018)
Awards	2017 – Kirkus Best Teen Books; 2017 – Booklist Editor's Choice; 2017 – Bulletin Blue Ribbon Book; 2017 – New York Public Library Best Book for Teens; 2017 – Junior Library Guild Selection; 2017 – Cybils Award, Poetry Finalist.
Genre	Myths, Novels, Poetry
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, miriam.riverlea@gmail.com

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Creators



David Elliott , b. 1947
(Author)

David Elliott was born into a working-class family in a small farming town in Ohio. He began writing stories as a teenager, although his first submission to *The New Yorker* was returned to him torn in half. He aspired to be an opera singer, and studied classical singing at a conservatory. He has had a number of unusual jobs, including being a pop singer in Mexico, washing cucumbers in Greece, and making popsicle sticks in Israel. He also taught English in Libya, and lectured in creative writing and literary studies at Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire.

He is the author of a number of picture books, including *This Orq* (2014), about a cave boy and his wooly mammoth, and *Baabwaa and Wooliam* (2017), a love story about two sheep. He has also written chapter books for juvenile readers, including the *Evangeline Mudd* series (2004) and *Jeremy Cabbage* (2008), and currently has several books in production. The verse novel *Bull* (2017) is a radical departure from his lighthearted, humorous work for younger readers, but reflects another aspect of his enduring interest in wordplay. Elliott has a wife, Barbara, and a son, Eli. He lives in Warner, New Hampshire.

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Additional information

Summary

Bull is a unique retelling of the Cretan mythic cycle in the form of a verse novel. The story is related through monologues by Poseidon, Minos, Pasiphae, Asterion, Ariadne, Daedalus and Theseus. Poseidon takes control of the narrative, relating how Minos prays to the gods for a sign to justify his right to rule. The god obliges by sending a beautiful milk-white bull out of the ocean. But when Minos conceals the creature within his herds and sacrifices an inferior animal in its place, he incurs Poseidon's wrath. After considering a range of hideous punishments for the king, the god instead chooses to target him through his wife, causing her to desire the beautiful bull. Pasiphae enlists the engineer Daedalus, and though he is disgusted, he builds her a wooden cow that will enable her to copulate with the creature.

The baby is born, a hybrid human with the head of a bull. Pasiphae calls him Asterion, "Ruler of the Stars," and loves her baby, but the fractured way that she speaks of him marks the beginning of her descent into madness. The text follows Asterion through childhood, from a three-year-old making up nursery rhymes, to a nine-year-old bullied by his peers, and finally as a teenager pondering existential questions. Meanwhile, Minos and Pasiphae have been having other children, including a favoured son called Androgeos, and Ariadne, a beautiful daughter. Androgeos sails to Athens to compete in a games contest and is killed when a javelin accidentally strikes him. Poseidon takes credit for the death, which devastates Minos. He charges Daedalus with the task of building the labyrinth, and imprisons Asterion, now aged seventeen, within the maze, and commands Athens to send an annual tribute of seven young men and seven young women to Crete as a reprisal for the loss of his beloved son.

Ariadne despises her father and his kingdom and had been planning to flee Crete with Asterion on the ship that took Androgeos to Athens. With this escape route closed to her, she blackmails Daedalus into crafting a tiny hole in the labyrinth through which she can communicate her plans with her brother. Her assurances that she will help him allay his descent into madness, depression and violence. After threatening to reveal Daedalus' own escape plan once more, she obtains from the engineer the simple solution to navigating the maze – a piece of string. But when the Athenians arrive, everything changes. Ariadne falls in love with Theseus, and though he promises to help her

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rescue her brother, all the while intending to slay the monster in the maze. Realising he is forsaken, Asterion's transformation into the Minotaur is complete, moments before he is slaughtered. The text concludes with Poseidon's reflections on the sorry saga, including confessions that he didn't actually have the power to kill Androgeos or make Ariadne fall in love with Theseus, as he had claimed. Longing for the sea, he returns to his watery kingdom.

Analysis

In an epilogue Elliott writes that '[w]hen a story is still going strong after two thousand years, it must be telling us something important about ourselves, maybe even something we *need* to hear.' (p. 179) He highlights his fidelity to the traditional version of the Minotaur myth, and comments on his decision to follow the variant in which the Athenian tribute is an annual rather than seven yearly event. He also justifies his invention of the scenario in which Ariadne discovers that Daedalus has built wings and is preparing to flee Crete, and blackmails him into cutting a tiny hole in the labyrinth through which she can communicate with her brother.

The text interrogates the notion of monstrousness through giving Asterion an opportunity to speak for himself. Elliott refers to him as 'a boy, unlike most of us, whose deformities lay on the outside, visible for all to see.' (p. 181) Through the representation of Asterion's childhood and the love that his mother and sister have for him, Elliott renders him a sympathetic figure who meets a tragic end. When confined to the labyrinth, his monologues appear on coloured paper that gradually shifts from white, through shades of grey, to black. His final speech, 'HELL is the freezing / scorn for who you are / that transforms a faultless boy / to Minotaur' (pp. 167–169), signifies that the change from boy to beast is complete, yet the words are still delivered in articulate verse form.

Each player in the story speaks in a different poetic form that reflects their character. Asterion uses an Italian form, similar to the sonnet, called the *ottava rima*, which Elliott feels highlights the nobility of his suffering, while Minos speaks his kingly decrees in split couplets. The text features a number of experimental textual and visual elements. Like Nadia Wheatley's 'Melting Point', Elliott uses concrete poetry to depict the emotional state of his characters. Pasiphae's words, in 'roughly syllabic lines' (p. 186), become increasingly senseless until they are scattered randomly across the page.

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Bull is a unique and contemporary retelling of the Minotaur myth, which successfully recontextualises the traditional narrative within the form of the verse novel.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Androgeos Ariadne Asterion Athens Crete Daedalus Fate Labyrinth Minos Minotaur Pasiphae Poseidon Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Depression Desires Disability Disobedience Emotions Family Freedom Innocence Isolation/loneliness Storytelling Survival Transformation Violence
Further Reading	Baker, Deirdre F., "Elliott, David: *Bull*", *The Horn Book Guide* 28. 2 (2017): 126. St. George, Hillary, "Elliott, David. *Bull*", *School Library Journal* 63, no. 2 (2017): 102. Interview, theconcordinsider.com (accessed: September 24, 2018). *The Myth of the Minotaur? That's BULL*, momreadit.wordpress.com (accessed: September 24, 2018).

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