Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Sun Flight by Gerald McDermott ", 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/496. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Gerald McDermott

Sun Flight

United States (1980)

TAGS: Crete Daedalus Icarus Labyrinth Minos Minotaur Monsters





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

General information	
Title of the work	Sun Flight
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1980
First Edition Details	Gerald McDermott, *Sun Flight*. New York: Four Winds Press, 1980, 36 pp.
ISBN	9780590076326
Available Onllne	Full text available at International Children's Digital Library (accessed: october 5, 2018)
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Children
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Creators



Gerald McDermott , 1941 - 2012
(Author)

Gerald McDermott was a filmmaker, illustrator and storyteller with an interest in trickster tales, creation myths, and folktales from cultures around the world. He was born in Detroit, Michigan, and his family nurtured his creativity from an early age. He studied music and ballet, and began art classes at the Detroit Institute of Arts at the age of four. He went on to study at Cass Technical, a public high school renowned for its art program, and won a National Scholastic scholarship to the Pratt Institute of Design in New York. During this period he became the first graphic designer for Channel 13, New York's educational television channel, produced his first animation, *The Stone Cutter*, and toured Europe where he met with other filmmakers.

After completing his degree in 1964, he produced several short films, including *Sun flight* (1966), *Anasi the Spider* (1969) and the *Magic Tree* (1970). His friend Joseph Campbell served as a consultant on these projects, and several of the films were adapted into picture books. *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti* was named as a Caldecott Honour Book, and another work, *Arrow to the Sun*: *A Tale from the Pueblo* won the Caldecott Medal in 1975. McDermott's artwork uses vibrant colours and strong shapes, and draws on the iconographic traditions of the cultures from which the stories derive.

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

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Additional information

Adaptations

The picture book *Sun flight* (1980) is an adaptation of McDermott's animated film of the same name, made in 1966.

Sun Flight: the Myth of Daedalus and His Son, Icarus (1966) at YouTube Kunst Kraai channel (Accessed July 29 2018)

Summary

In contrast to other retellings, which contextualise the story of Daedalus within the Cretan mythic cycle, *Sun flight* begins at the point at which Daedalus has completed the construction of Minos' palace, with the labyrinth below it 'to hide the horrible monsters of King Minos' (no page numbers). The labyrinth is represented by a repeating pattern of Greek square spirals in shades of blue and purple, which contrasts with the warm colours of the palace buildings above, which resemble a child's building blocks topped with horns of consecration. Having finished the project, Daedalus takes his small son to bid Minos farewell, but the King, who is huge and terrifying, refuses to let them leave the island, since Daedalus alone knows the secret of the maze. The craftsman and his son are imprisoned in the labyrinth, encountering frightening monsters and dead end passages. Then they observe a pair of birds living in the labyrinth, that fly upwards to freedom, scattering feathers in their wake. Daedalus instructs Icarus to collect the feathers and spends the night fashioning them into two sets of wings. As dawn breaks they too take to the air, flying away from Minos who stands gigantic over his city, shaking his fist at them in anger. Daedalus cautions Icarus to plot a middle course, not too low 'lest you fall into the depths of the sea', not too high 'lest you perish in the burning rays of the sun', and uniquely, not too fast 'lest your fragile wings fail you.' Apart from Daedalus' cry 'Icarus...Icarus!', the following pages have no written text and show Icarus heading towards the sun, which is depicted as a series of concentric circles in yellow, orange and pink with black in between. In flames, the boy falls into the sea, dissolving into the blue and green waves. The closing page shows a grieving Daedalus, still wearing his wings, crouched on a rock.The text juxtaposes his sorrow with the beauty of the scene, as the 'sun glistened on the bright isle and the dolphins sang in the blue Aegean sea.'

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Analysis

The vibrant colours and repeated motifs that illustrate McDermott's text imbue this retelling of the Daedalus myth with strong visual impact and aesthetic appeal. The picture book, which has a brighter colour palette than the film, renders the movement and transitions of the animated version into a series of striking tableaus. McDermott exploits the impact of visual contrasts – between the huge, imperious figure of Minos and the tiny, cowed craftsman and his son, between the black space of the labyrinth and the golden sky, and between the square shapes of the buildings and the curves of the wings, waves and sun.

The Minotaur plays only a minor role in this version. Daedalus and Icarus flee from a horned beast in the maze, but this threatening creature is not named explicitly within the written text. Instead, it is Minos who is the true monster of the story. McDermott endows him with the symbols of Minoan culture – the headdress, collar, and double headed axe – drawing upon the iconography of the frescoes of Knossos as well as some of Arthur Evans' more spurious reconstructions in developing his own representation of the myth.

While the story features Daedalus' traditional warning to his son to plot a middle course (adding a reminder not to go too fast), Icarus' character remains un-illuminated and the text does not make a moral statement about his failure to listen to his father.Instead, the dominant visual narrative emphasises the bond between father and son through repeatedly placing them in proximity as they approach Minos, run through the maze, and prepare the wings. The two birds that inspire the escape and provide the necessary materials function signify Daedalus and Icarus, with one bird slightly larger than the other.

Where other retellings of this myth for young readers frame the narrative around Icarus' disobedience (such as Saviour Pirotta and Jan Lewis' 'The boy who flew too close to the sun' in *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*) or Daedalus' hubris (as in Jane Yolen and Dennis Nolan's *Wings*), McDermott's version does not conclude with a moral message. Instead, the text highlights the beauty of the ocean, which absorbs the fallen Icarus, while Daedalus weeps 'bitter tears'. Without the wider mythic context there is a senselessness to this sad story, but the power of McDermott's visual imagery makes the text a compelling work of art.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Crete Daedalus Icarus Labyrinth Minos Minotaur Monsters
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Death Family Freedom Invention Loss Parents (and children) Punishment Relationships Survival
Further Reading	Stott, Jon C., Christine Doyle Francis, and Sonia Landes, *A Literature Guide to Myths and Legends of Gerald McDermott*, Cambridge MA: Book Wise, 1989. Wooldridge, C. Nordhielm, '*Sun Flight*. (Review)', *School Library Journal* 27 (1980): 148.

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