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Lisl Weil

King Midas' Secret and Other Follies

United States of America (1969)

TAGS: Apollo Daedalus Icarus Midas Narcissus Oedipus Pan Sphinx





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

General information	
Title of the work	King Midas' Secret and Other Follies
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1969
First Edition Details	Lisl Weil, *King Midas' Secret and Other Follies*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969, 48 pp.
ISBN	9780689312168
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Children
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Creators



Lisl Weil , 1910 - 2006
(Author)

Lisl Weil was born in Vienna, Austria. From an early age she liked to draw, and by the age of 16 her illustrations were published in local newspapers. She immigrated to the United States in 1939, being helped by New York connections who helped the young Jewish illustrator come to America. She lived in New York City, where she married Julius Marx. She established a successful career as an illustrator and writer. Her interest in music led her to work with symphony orchestras such as the Boston Pops and the Little Orchestra Society's Young People's Concerts, in which she drew illustrations and danced in response to the music: these "picture ballets" or "ballets with a crayon" toured around the United States. From 1963-1966, she hosted a television show called 'Children's Sketchbook.' Weil illustrated over 100 books for children, for about half of which she wrote the text.

Sources:

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Additional information

Summary

An illustrated retelling for children of four key Greek myths: *King Midas' Secret*; *Narcissus*; *Icarus*; *The Sphinx*. Each story is retold as a humorous cautionary tale. The introduction emphasizes the strangeness of ancient Greece, with speaking flowers and fabulous beasts, and "When the gods came down from Mount Olympus, life in this strange land became even stranger. You could never be sure the bull you saw was not a god in disguise. But the people were the same as they are today. Some were good, some were bad, and many were foolish. The father of all the gods kept this in mind. Wise people still do." (pp. 5–7)

In King Midas' Secret, (pp. 9–19), Midas is motivated by the desire to be famous, and to have the "right people" (p. 9) come to his parties. He gives the "best party ever" (p. 10), in which a musical contest will take place. Even the gods come. Apollo, "Headmaster of the Mount Parnassus School of the Arts" (p. 11) performs a sonata on a golden lyre. Midas yawns. Pan, the "great woodland piper" plays next, waking up Midas, who gives him the prize, confident of his own judgement. "Wasn't he a King, after all? And wasn't a King better than anyone else? Undoubtedly whatever he liked best, MUST be the best." (p. 13)

Apollo, not pleased, gives King Midas ass's ears. His barber, who has sworn not to talk about it helps him with "all kinds of hats and hairdos" (depicted in an illustration), and keeps the secret until he can no longer help himself, and writes on a parchment, "King Midas has Ass's ears." (p. 16). He buries the parchment, but when the grass grows, it whispers the secret, until everyone knows, laughs, and talks about it. "And that is how King Midas became famous after all." (p. 18) The moral of the story, "Wise people say: Don't be conceited, or else the wrong fame might easily shine upon your name." (p. 19)

In *Narcissus*, (pp. 20–24), Narcissus is a "nice looking boy," whose parents believe will 'go far.' Every day, the golden chariot comes to take him to school. One day he oversleeps, and he has to walk. Walking on a warm day makes him thirsty, and he bends down into a clear pool for a drink. Enamoured of his reflection, and not heeding the flowers who try to warn him, he falls into the pond, 'And that was his sad end. (24). The flowers bend their heads to try to see him, and see only their own reflections. 'They can still be seen at the edge of the pond, looking for Narcissus, the boy who missed the school

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chariot.' (24). The moral of the story, 'Wise people say: Don't you make the same mistake! Narcissus fell into a pond, you may fall into a lake.' (25).

Icarus (p. 25-33) "was a handy lad," the son of the neighbourhood inventor, Daedalus, who could make amazing things. One day he made a pair of wings, so men could "fly like birds" (p. 26). So pleased with them, Daedalus made two pairs, one for himself and one for Icarus. They practiced every day flying over the sea, but Icarus noticed that even small birds could fly higher than he did. "If they can fly to the sun, so can I, he thought." (p. 29) Despite his father's warning, Icarus persisted, stole out in the morning while Daedalus was asleep "turned a few cartwheels in the air," and "flew higher and still higher," until his wings melted. Luckily for Icarus, his father woke in time and caught him. The moral, "Wise people say: Don't fly off into the blue Unless you know what's in store for you." (p. 33)

The final story, *The Sphinx*, (pp. 34–44), was a monster, "no doubt about it," who was "also very clever" (p. 36), and whose "favorite hobby was thinking up riddles", and who was proud to think up a riddle no one could solve. "Her other hobby was eating people." (p. 36) When travellers could not solve the riddle, she would eat them up. She was growing dangerously fat, and the people very frightened, when Oedipus "came down the road." (p. 38) The Sphinx had not heard of Oedipus, but he had heard of her, and was keen to test his wits. He answered her question correctly; the Sphinx was furious, and burst with rage. The moral, "Wise people say: Riddles are here to be solved, not to fear." (p. 45)

Each story is illustrated with comic illustrations: in charcoal, blue, yellow and indigo, and at the end of each story, Weil depicts a chorus, singing the moral.

Analysis

This is a light-hearted collection of cautionary myths, in which the whimsical storytelling is accompanied by humorous illustrations. The illustrations emphasize the fantastic elements of Ancient Greek storytelling, and the use of the chorus to deliver a rhyming warning, highlights the moral elements of each story, adapting it for young readers. At the same time, Weil has removed some of the myths' more disturbing elements, likely out of concern for children's sensibilities – the Sphinx's suicide is recast as an explosion of rage; Icarus is neatly

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caught by his father's upturned umbrella; Narcissus does not leave behind a despairing Echo. King Midas's vanity is neatly satirised by the comic pictures of his ass-ear-hiding hairstyles. The illustrations, which are loose, comic line drawings, with three colours – sky blue, gold, and purple, depict a friendly world in which flowers and animals smile, and a friendly chorus delivers the rhyming moral.

The book is highly didactic, much more so than Weil's other classical works for children (see *Of Witches and Monsters and Other Wondrous Creatures*, and *Pandora's Box*), highlighting the cautionary elements of the myths, and offering direct advice to young readers, though in a humorous rhyme, and with the humorous depiction of the chorus. Didacticism is a very common aspect of literature for young readers, advising them on aspects of behaviour, and learning, with the aim of preparing the child for entry into wider (adult) society. Here, Weil restricts the didacticism to aspects of temperament – pride, vanity, heedlessness, and greed—which lead her mythical characters into danger and destruction.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Apollo Daedalus Icarus Midas Narcissus Oedipus Pan Sphinx
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Humour Morality
Further Reading	Nodelman, Perry, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

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