Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: Problem with Pythagoras (Hopeless Heroes, 4) by Nick Roberts, Stella Tarakson ", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/679. Entry version as of October 07, 2026.

Nick Roberts , Stella Tarakson

Problem with Pythagoras (Hopeless Heroes, 4)

United Kingdom (2018)

TAGS: Hera Hercules Pythagoras Socrates Theseus

Cover courtesy of Sweet Cherry Publishing.

General information	
Title of the work	Problem with Pythagoras (Hopeless Heroes, 4)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	Stella Tarakson, *Hopeless Heroes: Problem with Pythagoras.* Leicester: Sweet Cherry Publishing, 2018, 208 pp.
ISBN	9781782263487
Genre	Action and adventure fiction, Fantasy fiction, Fiction
Target Audience	Children (age 6–10)
Author of the Entry	Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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.

Creators

Nick Roberts (Illustrator)

Nick Roberts is an English illustrator. He likes cartoons, monsters, robots.

Source:

Official website (accessed: January 23, 2019)

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Stella Tarakson , b. 1968 (Author)

Stella Tarakson is an Australian author of Greek descent, who writes for children as well as adults; her work includes both fiction and non-fiction books. She began her career working at a law firm, but then decided to focus on writing. She won several awards for her books. In her blog, she writes that she has been interested in Greek mythology for a long time; she also writes: “Like many Greek Australians, I grew up on a steady diet of Greek mythology. Herakles and Theseus were as familiar to me as Cinderella and Snow White. That’s why I’m so excited to add my voice to the stories that have been told and retold over the millennia.”

Sources:

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Official website (accessed: January 23, 2019);

evelyneholingue.com (accessed: February 26, 2019).

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University,
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Questionnaire

1. What drew you to writing the *Hopeless Heroes stories*? How did you develop your particular literary style / idiom / aesthetic for your works inspired by Classical Antiquity? (These are overlapping questions, so feel free to answer them as one)

Being the daughter of Greek migrants, I've grown up on a steady diet of Greek mythology. When I was very young, my father used to tell me many of the tales – I suppose he was continuing the great oral tradition of our ancestors! Books came next, and I'm lucky to still have most of them. My parents were very keen to pass their culture and identity on to their children, especially in a new country far from home. Now that my own children are growing, I also feel the need to "pass it on", keeping the link alive for future generations. I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to share these stories with a wider audience, and it's wonderful to have readers from all around the world enjoying my books! My literary style is not traditional, though. I've also grown up with a love of British comedy, which comes out quite strongly in the *Hopeless Heroes* series.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

The myths continue to resonate with young audiences because we've never lost our fascination with monsters and heroes. Greek mythology is filled with passion and excitement, the characters are larger than life, and there are continuing parallels with our lives today. The human condition hasn't changed in thousands of years and I don't think it ever will.

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3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

I don't have a classical education – I have degrees in Economics and Law from the University of Sydney – but I've always been interested in the classics. Once I started writing *Hopeless Heroes*, I decided I wanted to learn more. I've re-enrolled at USyd part-time and I've been studying ancient history and classical archaeology. It's wonderful to be able to study something purely out of interest! My main source is Barry Powell's *Classical Myth* published by Pearson. I also like the website theoi.com (accessed: March 19, 2019).

4. Did you think about how aspects of Classical Antiquity (myth, history) would translate for young readers?

As you know, many Greek myths are rather Adult Only. I had to think very carefully about how to be age-appropriate, while staying as true to the myths as possible. I avoided the bloodier tales, and edged carefully around sexual issues. For instance, Hera hates Hercules (yes, I had to use the more familiar Roman name) because she's jealous of his beautiful mother. Which is true. However, I didn't come right out and say why! Even so, children learn a lot about Greek history and mythology from the books. Many teachers in the UK have been reading them to their classes as part of the class studies. I'm actually teaching by stealth!

5. How do you go about working with the comic / comedic aspects of classical antiquity?

I've incorporated comedy by accentuating the flaws of the Greek heroes and by placing them in unexpected situations. For example, Hercules is super-strong but not exactly super-smart. In book 1, which is set in the modern day, he insists on using skills he developed while performing the Twelve Labours. Sadly they don't work so well when it comes to tackling housework and school bullies.

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6. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

Yes, I'm definitely planning further forays! I've already had a few plays published in the *Australian Readers Theatre*, (Blake Education), that combine the classics with Australian history. I've written *The Flying Finish*, where Pegasus and Bellerophon enter the Melbourne Cup; *The Gold Rush Touch*, where a goldfields prospector succumbs to the Midas Touch; and *Pandora's Ballot Box*, where a young girl encounters the suffragette movement. They bring the classics to life in a new way, and show that they are still very relevant and relatable today!

7. Anything else you think we should know?

The *Hopeless Heroes* books aren't just retelling of the myths – that's been done many times before. The stories begin when 10-year-old Tim Baker accidentally breaks an ancient amphora, and discovers that Hercules had been trapped inside it for thousands of years. Once repaired, the vase allows Tim to travel back to Ancient Greece. He befriends Hercules' daughter Zoe (an addition to the traditional myths), and together they encounter famous heroes, escape bizarre monsters, solve baffling puzzles, and even defy the gods themselves. I only hope they don't hold grudges …

Prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

This is book 4 in the *Hopeless Heroes* series. This is a series of portal-fantasy adventures in which a timid boy travels to the world of ancient myth by means of a magic vase, and learns to be brave through adventures with classical heroes. Our hero, Tim Baker, faces two difficult problems. The first – a failing math test. The other – his mother's new boyfriend who happens to be a teacher from his school, Larry Green. Tim is dumbfounded and is not sure how to react to this awkward situation. He does not know how to treat Larry at school or at home, and is very concerned as to whether Larry would be a good stepfather.

Tim feels lonely and disturbed and has no one to talk to in his own present world; that is why he decides to travel back to Greece to meet Hercules and his (fictional) daughter Zoe, despite the fact that after his last adventure there, Hercules warned him not to come back since he thought that Tim was putting Zoe in danger. Nevertheless, Tim's anxiety leads him to feel that he must talk to his friends and he therefore risks making Hercules angry with him.

When Tim arrives, Hercules and Zoe welcome him warmly. Tim explains his problem and they decide he should ask Socrates about Larry. On their way, they encounter Hera, who traps Zoe inside a giant lock. The lock has a secret code which Tim must solve. Tim, who is accompanied by the vain hero, Theseus, tries to get Pythagoras to help them solve the code. Yet Pythagoras is more interested in telling them about his transmigration of souls theory. When they ask Socrates for help as well, he is too busy philosophizing with Pythagoras and as a result neither of them can solve the code. Then Tim decides to trust Larry and reveal the truth to him. He returns home and asks Larry for help, Larry agrees to travel to ancient Greece with him and then successfully solves the code and rescues Zoe. Larry then confronts Hera as well, and he and Tim safely return home. A new bond is thus formed between the two. The story ends with a cliff-hanger in which Larry tells Tim that he saw a vase at the British museum with a boy painted on it, who resembles Tim.

Analysis

In this chapter book for young readers, portal fantasy journeys help a boy named Tim with emotional challenges of his ordinary life. Tim's

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problem is very easy for young readers to relate to. When one parent finds a new companion, it can be difficult for the children. This story uses the fantastic voyage to ancient Greece in order to help Tim cope with his anxiety and ultimately show him he can trust Larry.

Interestingly, Hercules in this story is a reliable, over-protective father figure whom Tim admires, and who fears that something bad might happen to his daughter. This is of course quite different than the mythological tragic tale, in which Hercules posed the greatest menace to his family in that he kills his own children in a Hera-induced fit of madness. While Zoe tells Tim that a good father will let him do whatever he wants, Tim understands that Hercules' over-protectiveness of his daughter is rooted in his deep love and concern for her. He also longs for a father who will take such close care of him. Hence the situations Tim faces in the fantasy world shed light on his own emotions.

The fact that his mother's boyfriend is also a teacher at his school only makes matters more complicated, since Tim is not sure how to act. It is yet another secret he needs to keep. Tim's escape to Greece, while it is very real in this story, could also be understood as a metaphorical escape to a fantasy world. Many children who face hardships and trying circumstance, sometime escape to an imaginary world where they feel safe, protected and loved. Tim is no different. The mythological figures are not alarming (except cruel Hera) and he has friends who completely support him, and the actions within enable him to be heroic in a way he could not be at home.

In this imaginary mythological world, populated by gods and heroes, it is somewhat surprising to find two real historical figures as the ancient philosophers, yet they seem to fit in perfectly in the story, becoming mythical figures by their own right, no less than their divine equivalents. The two philosophers, Pythagoras and Socrates are mostly meant as a comic relief; they are so obsessed with their own theories that they forget the real problem they were asked to solve. On the contrary, the reliable and cool-headed Larry immediately solves the puzzle. Thus it could be seen as a comic comment about those who speak too much without getting to the point, while ignoring the real world.

In the end, Tim understands that he needs to try and trust Larry and this trust is repaid. As Hercules' wife, Agatha, tells Tim, the quality which Larry has and is more important than strength or intelligence is

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	trustworthiness.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Hera Hercules Pythagoras Socrates Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Family Friendship Heroism Intellect Magic

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