Joanna Bieńkowska, "Entry on: Mortal Engines by Philip Reeve", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/738. Entry version as of November 04, 2026.

Philip Reeve

Mortal Engines

United Kingdom (2001)

TAGS: Medusa Pandora Pandora's Box





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

General information	
Title of the work	Mortal Engines
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2001
First Edition Details	Philip Reeve, *Mortal Engines*. London: Scholastic Children's Books, 2001, 293 pp.
ISBN	0439979439
Official Website	www.philip-reeve.com
Awards	2002 – Nestlé Smarties Book Prize, Gold Award, 9–11 years category
Genre	Apocalyptic fiction, Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Dystopian fiction, Fantasy fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Joanna Bieńkowska, University of Warsaw, joanna.bienkowska@student.uw.edu.pl
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

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Creators



Retrieved from Wikipedia, public domain (accessed: December 30, 2021).

Philip Reeve , b. 1966
(Author, Illustrator)

Philip Reeve was born on 28 February 1966 in Brighton. He studied illustration at Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology as well as at Brighton Polytechnic (now the University of Brighton). In his early professional life, he was occupied with writing comedy sketches and various no-budget theatre shows. He is an author and illustrator ofchildren's books. Due to lack of free time, he could no more work on film or theatre like he used to and turned to writing. As a result, he published his first novel entitled *Mortal Engines* (2001), currently being adapted for the screen by Peter Jackson. His other notable works are *Here Lies Arthur*, an alternative depiction of the Arthurian legend; the *Larklight* series in a steampunk setting; sequels to *Mortal Engines*, the *Fever Crumb* trilogy. In recent years Philip Reeve has been collaborating with Sarah McIntyre on illustrated books, the first of the series being *Oliver and the Seawigs.* Lives on Dartmoor with his family; loves writing, drawing, acting and history. Reeve has produced illustrations for many books including those in the Horrible Histories and Dead Famous series.

Sources:

Profile at the Wikipedia (accessed: June 25, 2018).

Profile at the www.mbalit.co.uk (accessed: February 10, 2017).

An interview about his books for children, is available on his publisher's site (accessed: September 20, 2018)

Another interview, on the occasion of the release of *Railhead* (accessed September 20, 2018)

He answers questions about his writing preferences and process (accessed Semtember 20, 2018)

The Author's Official Website

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The Author's Blog

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Additional information

Adaptations	A film adaptation under the same title by Peter Jackson, announced in 2009, to be released in 12/2018 (with collaboration of Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, directed by Christian Rivers).
Translation	German: *Mortal Engines: Krieg der Städte*, transl. Anja Hansen-Schmidt, Ravensburger Buchverlag, 2008. French: *Mécaniques fatales*, transl. Luc Rigoureau, Hachette Jeunesse, 2003. Italian: *Macchine mortali*, transl. Maria Bastanzetti, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2004. Polish: *Żywe maszyny*, transl. Jan Hensel, Amber, 2003. Worldwide translations and re-editions in preparation for to coincide with the upcoming movie *Mortal Engines,* directed by Christian Rivers (release date: 12/2018).
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Sequels: *Predator's Gold* (2003), *Infernal Devices* (2005) and *A Darkling Plain* (2006). Prequels: the Fever Crumb series – *Fever Crumb* (2009), *A Web of Air* (2010), and *Scrivener's Moon* (2011). Spin-offs: *Traction City: World Book Day* (2011), *The Traction Codex* (2012), *Night Flights* (2018). Illustration book: Jeremy Levett, Philip Reeve, *The Illustrated World of Mortal Engines* (2018).
Summary	SETTING Three thousand years after Sixty Minute War, a short yet disastrous

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conflict that caused mass extinction of humans and major geological shifts, a part of the surviving civilization lives in the so-called traction cities, following the laws of Municipal Darwinism. These monstrous tank-like cities roam the arid lands of Europe, called the Great Hunting Ground, ravishing soil by gathering whatever they deem necessary not only for survival, but also for prosperity. There is a saying – "It's a city-eat-city world", i.e. where bigger cities "eat", i.e. catch and dismantle, smaller towns to get hold of resources. However there are people who returned to the ancient way of life and settled down behind the Asian border, where the Anti-Traction League was born and resides. Both worlds, representing different ideas of living, engage in conflicts with each other, which are thoroughly explored by the series.

PLOT

The story revolves around Tom Natsworthy, a member of the Historian Guild in London and Hester Shaw, a tragic, vengeful girl who had lost her family to a man whom later on she swore to kill – one of London's most admired adventurers and Head of the Guild of Historians, Thaddeus Valentine.

London, in a standstill for many years, begins its journey into the Great Hunting Ground to once again find prey. The first town it finds, Salthook, is rather small, but the Londoners are excited nonetheless and cheer when their gigantic city devours it. Hester, hidden in the crowd of Salthook inhabitants, proceeds quickly with her plan. She spots Thaddeus and his daughter and pushes forward to kill him. Tom, being in the company of Valentine that day, prevents her from striking and chases her to a cul-de-sac. There, she reveals her horribly scarred face, accusing Valentine of doing this to her and escapes through a chute. After that scene, Thaddeus Valentine approaches Tom and pushes him down the very hole Hester escaped and returns to his daughter to inform her of their deaths.

They end up below the city, on the Great Hunting Ground, clueless what to do next. Tom prefers to follow rather than lead, while Hester stays true to her original plan; they venture forth in hope to reach London once again. Both are broken – Tom betrayed by his idol and Hester unsuccessful in her mission.

Katherine Valentine is another protagonist in Mortal Engines. She seems naive, but Hester's sudden attack on her father, Hester's and Tom's disappearance and her own unanswered questions, makes her suspicious and eager to find out the truth.

She receives help from a young Engineer, Bevis Pod, whom she met

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on the day her father was assaulted. Thanks to Bevis' affiliation, they infiltrate the Guild of Engineers and learn about the plans of Magnus Crome, the Head Engineer and the Mayor of London.

MEDUSA – A reception case
It turns out that the reconstruction of St. Peter's Cathedral on the city's top tier is just a cover for raising MEDUSA, a deadly weapon from the Sixty Minute War. MEDUSA fires beams of light which pulverize its target.
With his new weapon, Magnus Crome leads London to the Asian border to crush the Anti-Tractionist League and claim its treasures.
Tom and Hester meet various people during their journey together, the crucial one being Anna Fang, a fierce aviator and one of the most prized spies of the Anti-Traction League. While the protagonists travel with her and quickly get attached to her, they do not side with her party's political beliefs, when a conflict breaks out. After her death, they inherit Anna's airship, the Jenny Haniver and travel to London to prevent Magnus Crome from using MEDUSA on the Anti-Tractionists and causing vast civilian casualties.
In the end Katherine uncovers her father's work for Magnus Crome, yet the family bonds don't stop her from sabotaging MEDUSA; she perishes in the process. Tom and Hester manage to escape on the Jenny, but the city is destroyed, consumed by MEDUSA's overcharge and explosion.

Analysis

Mortal Engines depicts clashes of various ideas and Philip Reeve develops them consistently, even when the results of his characters' actions are disastrous. His first design was to write a novel for adults, but the publisher was interested in a book for children and the author accepted the change. However, even though he had to abandon certain themes, an adult approach to certain aspects of life has remained. Among them is certainly the creation of MEDUSA.

MEDUSA, an all-powerful, ancient cannon is able to accurately shoot at its target from 200 miles away. Its blueprints and degraded computer brain containing an artificial intelligence were found on so-called Dead Continent (previously known as the USA) by Thaddeus Valentine and Hester's mother, Pandora Shaw. Later on, MEDUSA is assembled in secret in St. Paul's Cathedral. Magnus Crome and his Engineers do not know much about it except for the fact that its original construction took place during the Sixty Minute War.

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MEDUSA is described as opening like a flower and taking shape of a gun covered by a cobra's hood. Its light beams reach targets with precision and leave nothing but ash-woven silhouettes. The name is an obvious reference to a mythological beast – Medusa, originally associated with snakes on her head and ability (curse) to turn people into stone with her gaze. Just like in Greek mythology, MEDUSA turns people into ash that bears form of people and buildings perished in the explosion – almost like they were made of stone.

MEDUSA's gaze is deadly, causing devastation whenever launched. It is curious that it was Pandora Shaw who claimed its computer brain, the crucial part needed for construction.

Associated closely with the box placed under her protection as punishment for Prometheus' theft of fire, the mythological Pandora was responsible for releasing all evil hidden within it. In case of Pandora Shaw, she understood the wrongs linked to the ancient MEDUSA and refused to let Thaddeus Valentine and London have it. She and her husband died because of it, while her daughter barely survived the homicide. Hester, scarred and alone, survived all odds only to let revenge rule her life. Her scar and cruel past determine her actions until the end of the series, bringing pain and death to others. Pandora Shaw did release evil to the world, but definitely unwillingly.

Interestingly, in the second book, *Predator's Gold*, Hester's look is described as "Gorgon's gaze". It is understandable, as Hester's face is depicted as ugly, horrid and fearsome, due to her diagonal scar across all her face, from eyebrow (no eye) to nose (with its tip cut off) and upper lip cut open into a constant sneer. Her attitude reaffirms the first impression; she tends to engage in conversations only when she sees profit in doing so and doesn't care about anyone except the person she loves. She's cruel, egoistic and achieves her goals by any means necessary, no matter at what cost or whether there would be victims.

Beyond that, she is described as someone who would have been beautiful if not for the scar. It may also be a reference to the mythological Medusa – the one presented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to be precise – a woman, raped by Neptune for her beauty in Athena's temple and turned by Minerva into a gruesome monster. Beauty not hidden, but taken away.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Medusa Pandora Pandora's Box
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Child, children Heroism Humanity Individuality Invention Isolation/loneliness Journeys Love Morality Revenge Social class Society Survival Travel War
Further Reading	mortalengines.wikia.com (accessed: September 20,2018) amazon.com (accessed: 20, 2018) philip-reeve.com (accessed: 20, 2018) Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, transl. Allen Mandelbaum, Harcourt Brace, 2017, Kindle edition.
Addenda	*Mortal Engines*, the first book of the *Mortal Engines Quartet,* also unofficially referred to as *Predator Cities Quartet* or the *Hungry City Chronicles* The edition used in the preparation of the entry: Philip Reeve, Mortal Engines, Marion Lloyd Books, 2011, Kindle edition.

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