Sarah F. Layzell, "Entry on: Sons From Afar (Tillerman Cycle, 6) by Cynthia Voigt ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/875. Entry version as of November 19, 2026.

Cynthia Voigt

Sons From Afar (Tillerman Cycle, 6)

United States (1987)

TAGS: Aeolus Apollo Homer Icarus Lotus Eaters / Lotophagoi Orion Penelope Phaethon Pleiades Scylla Sisyphus

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

General information	
Title of the work	Sons From Afar (Tillerman Cycle, 6)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America, Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1987
First Edition Details	Cynthia Voigt, *Sons From Afar*. New York, NY: Atheneum, 1987, 280 pp.
ISBN	9781442428836
Official Website	cynthiavoigt.com (accessed: January 20, 2020).
Awards	An ALA Best Book for Young Adults, A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year.
Genre	Fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Sarah F. Layzell, University of Cambridge, sarahlayzellhardstaff@gmail.com
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Creators

Cynthia Voigt , b. 1942
(Author)

Cynthia Voigt is an American author best known for the Tillerman family novels. She is the author of 33 books for children and young people, and two books for adults, spanning a range of genres and audiences. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Voigt graduated from Smith College in 1963 and later became a secondary school English teacher. Her novels have won numerous awards, including the prestigious Newbery Medal for *Dicey's Song* in 1983. The first Tillerman novel, *Homecoming*, was nominated for a National Book Award in 1982.

Source:

Official Website (accessed: 04 September, 2019).

Bio prepared by Sarah Hardstaff, University of Cambridge, sflh2@cam.ac.uk

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Additional information

Translation

Dutch: *De verloren vader*, trans. M Slagt-Prins, Querido, 1989.

Finnish: *Isän jäljillä*, trans. Sirkka Salonen, WSOY, 1989.

French: *L'Enquête*, trans. Rose-Marie Vassallo, Flammarion, 1990.

German: *Der Schatten des Vaters: James und Sammy Tillerman*, trans. Matthias Duderstadt, Sauerländer, 1991.

Swedish: *Spåren efter Frank*, trans. Rebecca Alsberg, Bonniers juniorförl, 1989.

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs

The other titles in the Tillerman Cycle are:

- *Homecoming* (1981),
- *Dicey's Song* (1982),
- *A Solitary Blue* (1983),
- *The Runner* (1985),
- *Come A Stranger* (1986) and
- *Seventeen Against the Dealer* (1989).

Summary

Sons from Afar (1987) is the only Tillerman novel that focuses on two main characters, with the perspective alternating between James Tillerman and his younger brother Sammy. As they go through adolescence, the brothers (James in particular) struggle to cope with the lack of a father figure and begin a quest to find out more about their father, Francis Verricker. They visit Francis's former schoolteachers and discover that their father was a gambler and a cheat. Eventually, the boys' investigations lead them to a Baltimore bar, where the revelation that they are Francis's sons leads to them being beaten up by one of his creditors. Alongside this storyline, James struggles with the ethics of helping a school bully to cheat in his work. He also switches his career goals after starting part-time employment at a local medical practice. Sammy learns about different family setups through his friendship with a boy called Robin, and both brothers continue to learn how to look out for their sister Maybeth.

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Analysis

More so than any of Voigt's other Tillerman novels, *Sons From Afar* makes its classical references overtly. Classical myths and characters are presented in the context of the themes of father-son relationships, questing and detective-work, futility, and far-away travel.

At the start of the novel, James looks up at the sky and picks out three constellations: Orion, the hunter, Polaris, associated with navigation, and the Pleiades, the sisters. He then tells his brother Sammy the story of Daedalus and Icarus escaping from Minos and Icarus flying too close to the sun. These references establish the major plotline and themes of the novel, which centres on the boys' search for their father, an errant merchant seaman. The Pleiades perhaps represent the female influences that have surrounded the brothers so far, who James thinks cannot understand his need to know about his father.

Another important classical reference is the myth of Sisyphus, a figure associated with fraternal conflict, cheating and futility. James and Sammy often have false starts on their quest and find themselves right back where they started, one of the ways in which father-son relationships are associated "with failure and frustration" in this novel (Watson 2003, 115). There is a further implication that James is making life difficult for himself through his tendency to overthink. Sisyphus is mentioned explicitly when a school bully asks James to help him cheat on a school presentation on Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. James wrestles with the ethics of cheating in his French class and later exposes his bully.

Sammy similarly provokes James' ire when he also asks for help with a school presentation. Forced to think for himself, Sammy delivers his talk on the story of Apollo and his son Phaeton, killed by Zeus after driving the chariot of the sun and causing chaos. By choosing a story both similar and different to the Icarus myth related by James at the start of the novel, Sammy pays tribute to the influence of his older brother while showing his ability to do his own work and make his own choices.

Throughout the novel, both real and mythological fathers are associated with the excitement of faraway travel and abandonment of their children. This can be seen in the career of James and Sammy's father, reflected in Sammy's desire to become an astronaut. Similar

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themes emerge in the family setup of Sammy's new friend Robin, whose biological father is a jet pilot and Vietnam veteran. Robin initially glamorises his father and his profession, but later confesses that he doesn't miss having him around.

The novel's 'good father', Robin's step-father (also James' French teacher), is connected to the domestic and school spaces rather than the need to escape or go on quests. One of the novel's many Shakespearean references, the use of the song 'Full fathom five thy father lies' from *The Tempest*, implies that death is a likely outcome of the quest for ever more risky adventuring – indeed, the novel's climax, in which James and Sammy are beaten up, shows the dangers of emulating their father's behaviour.

As Suzanne Reid argues of the connection between the novel's outcomes and its imagery, "Like the stars, which are so near and yet actually are so far away, [the Tillermans'] relationship to their father and mother sheds only a faint light on who they might become." (1995, 45) At the end of their quest, in which the father remains absent, James and Sammy appear to have heeded the warnings of classical mythology and instead consolidate their own relationship as brothers.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aeolus Apollo Homer Icarus Lotus Eaters / Lotophagoi Orion Penelope Phaethon Pleiades Scylla Sisyphus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adolescence Adventure Adversity Child, children Coming of age Fairy tale references Freedom Journeys Loss Masculinity Names Orphans Other literary figures, texts and writers Parents (and children) Philosophy Relationships Resilience Siblings Travel Youth
Further Reading	Hylton, Jaime, "Exploring the 'Academic Side' of Cynthia Voigt", *The ALAN Review* 33.1 (2005). Reid, Susan E., *Presenting Cynthia Voigt*, New York, NY: Twayne

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Publishers, 1995.

Watson, Victor, “The *Tillerman* Series”, in Margaret Meek and Victor Watson, eds., *Coming of Age in Children’s Literature: Growth and Maturity in the Work of Philippa Pearce, Cynthia Voigt and Jan Mark*, London: Continuum, 2003, 85–124.

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