Sarah F. Layzell, "Entry on: The Black Flamingo by Dean Atta ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/963. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Dean Atta

The Black Flamingo

United Kingdom (2019)

TAGS: Aphrodite Charites Gladiators Gorgon(s) Graces Medusa Orion Pegasus Perseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Black Flamingo
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2019
First Edition Details	Dean Atta, *The Black Flamingo*. London: Hodder Children's Books, 2019, 360 pp.
ISBN	9781444948585
Official Website	deanatta.com (accessed: February 25, 2020).
Genre	Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Sarah F. Layzell, University of Cambridge, sarahlayzellhardstaff@gmail.com
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Creators



Dean Atta (Author)

Named one of the most influential LGBT people in the UK by the *Independent on Sunday*, Dean Atta is a British poet of Greek and Jamaican descent whose work deals with race, identity, growing up, gender and sexuality. His debut poetry collection, *I Am Nobody's Nigger* (2013), was shortlisted for the 2014 Polari First Book Prize. Atta holds a BA in Philosophy and English from the University of Sussex and an MA in creative writing and education from Goldsmiths, University of London. *The Black Flamingo* is his first novel and first book for young adults. Atta regularly delivers live performances, including at a recent event at Shakespeare's Globe.

Sources:

google.com/site/deanatta (accessed: February 25, 2020);

theguardian.com (accessed: February 25, 2020);

shakespearesglobe.com (accessed: February 25, 2020).

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

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Additional information

Summary

The Black Flamingo tells the story of Michael, from the moment of his birth in London in 1999 up until his debut drag performance as the Black Flamingo whilst at university. Written in verse, the novel traces key moments in Michael's coming-of-age: his wish for a Barbie for his sixth birthday, forming friendships, exploring his Greek-Cypriot and Jamaican heritage, coming out as gay, and fighting for self-definition and freedom under the weight of other people's perceptions and expectations.

Analysis

A few of the poem-chapters in *The Black Flamingo* contain overt references to classical mythology, highlighting themes relating to beauty, masculinity, violence and social exclusion.

Playing Barbies with his friend Emily, Michael is struck by one doll, the Goddess of Beauty: Emily tells him, "She's meant to be\ the Greek goddess, Aphrodite\ but she looks like your mummy." (p. 19). While the doll physically resembles Michael's mother, she also represents Emily's wealthier family and unattainable possessions, reflecting social class and inequality.

In a later episode, Michael names constellations whilst star-gazing with his beloved Uncle B, including Orion, the hunter, and Pegasus, the winged horse. Uncle B talks about Medusa and Pegasus's origin story, leading Michael to reflect on the fact that Medusa does not have her own constellation but appears solely as a decapitated head in the Perseus constellation (pp. 57–58). Michael's star-gazing session comes after a group of older boys have made him fight with one of his peers, Alistair; Michael describes himself and Alistair as "Unlikely gladiators" (p. 55), calling into question classical ideals of masculinity represented by characters like Perseus. Alistair's long hair aligns him with Medusa, positioned here as a victim of violence. Medusa's lack of her own constellation also picks up on the novel's core themes of identity, self-definition and the importance of being able to tell one's own story.

Perseus and Medusa are both referenced again later in the novel, during Michael's first year at university. After having sex for the first time with a man called Jack, Michael looks at him sleeping and

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	describes him as "so\ classically attractive, it's unreal,\ like a statue of Perseus\ or Michelangelo's David" (p. 226). Jack then leaves without any way for Michael to contact him. Subsequently, Michael cuts his dreadlocked hair after being approached by two white men who assume he is a drug dealer; he perceives his locks on the floor as being "like Medusa's serpents" (p. 268). The pairing of Jack with Perseus and Michael with Medusa could be taken as suggesting that Jack has won while Michael has lost. However, the addition of "Michelangelo's David" evokes Michael's full name – Michael Angelis – and repositions him as the more powerful of the two: the image of Jack as beautiful and desirable is Michael's own creation, a construction he is empowered to deconstruct when Jack confronts him at the novel's close. A less overt classical allusion comes in the form of a trio of mean girls who bully Michael at high school, including leaving anonymous homophobic notes in his bag. The names of the three girls – Grace, Faith and Destiny – recall the three Graces of Greek and Roman mythology. However, given the novel's references to Medusa, it is also possible to read the three girls as Gorgons, with Grace's later expulsion from school mirroring Medusa's own mortal fate.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aphrodite Charites Gladiators Gorgon(s) Graces Medusa Orion Pegasus Perseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Adversity Appearances Coming of age Conflict Diversity Family Freedom Friendship Gender expectations/construction Heritage Identity Integrity LGBTQI Masculinity Parents (and children) Peers Pop culture references Queer Race Relationships Religious beliefs Resilience School Sexuality Siblings Society Transformation Youth
Further Reading	Williams, Imogen Russell, "Children's and teens roundup: the best new picture books and novels", theguardian.com (accessed: Septembert 27, 2019).

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