Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Dirty Wings (The Metamorphoses Trilogy, 2) by Sarah McCarry", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/976. Entry version as of September 14, 2026.

Sarah McCarry

Dirty Wings (The Metamorphoses Trilogy, 2)

United States of America (2014)

TAGS: Cassandra Cerberus Demeter Hades Jason Katabasis Maia Orpheus Persephone Sirens Underworld

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

General information	
Title of the work	Dirty Wings (The Metamorphoses Trilogy, 2)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2014
First Edition Details	Sarah McCarry, *Dirty Wings*. New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2014, 288 pp.
ISBN	9781250049384
Awards	2014 – Kirkus' Best Teen Books of 2014; 2015 – Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy Nominee.
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Mythological fiction, Novels, Urban fiction
Target Audience	Crossover (Young adult: 14–18 years)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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Creators

Sarah McCarry (Author)

Sarah McCarry was born in Seattle and now lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is a writer, essayist and editor, in addition to diverse employment as a domestic violence advocate, a circus performer, a clearcut surveyor, an archivist, and a letterpress printer. She has published essays in *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995) and *Voices of a New Generation: A Feminist Anthology* (2004). She has produced the zine Glossolalia and the chapbook series *Guillotine*. As well as the *Metamorphoses Trilogy*, she is the author of *Blue is a Darkness Weakened by Light* (2016).

Sources:

Official website (accessed: March 12, 2020).

Profile at us.macmillan.com (accessed: March 12, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

The second instalment in McCarry's *Metamorphoses Trilogy*, *Dirty Wings* is the prequel to *All Our Pretty Songs* (2013), the story of the powerful friendship between the beautiful, charismatic Aurora, and the unnamed narrator, and the drama ensues when a mysterious, brilliant musician comes between them. *Dirty Wings* reveals the origins of the friendship between the girls' mothers, Maia and Cass. In this book, Maia is a naïve, beautiful teenager with a prodigious musical talent for the piano. Adopted as a baby from Vietnam, she lives a sheltered, privileged life in Seattle under the strict control of her fastidious, manipulative mother, a Professor of Classics. Her alcoholic father remains shut up in his study, supposedly working on his first novel. Cass' life is very different. A worldly punk, she lives in a squat after surviving a childhood of abuse and neglect. She has dabbled in witchcraft, sees ancient ghosts out of the corner of her eyes, and is plagued by disturbing dreams of a sinister man in a black coat.

The narrative is divided between Cass and Maia's perspectives, and between "Then" and "Now", detailing different stages of their intense relationship in a non-linear chronology. The pair meet as Maia is walking home from a lesson with her piano teacher, Oscar, who has set her a challenging piece by Ravel for her upcoming audition at a prestigious music college in New York. Cass introduces Maia to a world of shoplifting, drink and drugs, punk clothes and music. Maia revels in her newfound freedom, cutting off her long black hair and dyeing it bright red. Her mother is outraged, but Maia continues to rebel, unsure what she wants to do with her life. High on speed, she gives an outstanding performance at her audition, but afterwards abuses the chief assessor, who turns out to be an old enemy of her teacher Oscar, who is consumed by grief that his own musical career was ruined by scandal.

As summer begins, the girls steal Maia's dad's car and head along the west coast on a drug fuelled road trip, funded by Maia's savings. They meet a trio of punk rockers, and Maia falls in love with Jason, the wounded, whiny lead singer. Cass is jealous of their connection and finds Jason unbearable, but nevertheless accompanies the couple across to the border to Mexico, while the other band members return home to Seattle. On the beach, Cass meets the black-coated skeleton man from her dreams, and agrees to give him Jason. He presents Cass

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with a pomegranate, which she feeds to Jason, and the three of them all consume the blood red fruit.

Jason and Maia get married in a seedy roadside chapel in LA., with Cass as an unwilling witness. Jason's bandmates call with the news that they have been offered a lucrative record deal, and they return to Seattle. Maia moves in to the band's seedy share house. She is invited to play piano on their album, but finds herself unable to improvise. The record producer is the white faced skeleton man, who offers her the riches of this world and the world below. She discovers that she is pregnant, and also that she has been accepted into the college in New York. She contacts Oscar and her parents, but refuses to return to their former regime. Cass and Maia accompany the band to a penthouse party to celebrate the launch of their album. The skeleton man, the producer, is there, and Cass discovers that it is Maia he has been seeking all along.

Analysis

Dark Wings is loosely based on the myth of Persephone, with Maia representing the quintessential young maiden who is drawn to the underworld. The story charts her coming of age, in which the song lyric *I've been waiting for my life to start* (p. 69) encapsulates her longing for freedom and fun. While her overbearing mother represents some aspects of Demeter, Cass also fulfills a maternal role, offering a genuine form of love that contrasts with her mother's cold ambition for her daughter. Maia's mother's choice of profession is harshly critiqued, with her severity linked to her knowledge of the ancient world:

> "It's no coincidence she chose the cruel, long-dead world of the ancients, with their quests and wars and bloody-minded people stabbing husbands in their baths, baking children into pies and feeding them to their fathers, putting out their eyes. Maia's mother herself is something out of another century, ruthless and scoured bare of any weakness, like some Amazonian queen." (p. 37)

These references to the brutal stories of Agamemnon, Procne and Philomela, and Oedipus are part of the wider allusions to classical

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myth that colour the narrative, and at times present a contradictory picture. Mythology is both remote and immediate, obsolete and yet vital. The leading characters' names are weighted with significance. When they first meet, Cassandra introduces herself as "the bitch who knew everything and no one would listen to" (p. 16), though she has excised the "fey and prissy andra for the brevity of Cass, one syllable, sharp and short" (p. 100). Maia borrows her name from a nymph, and Jason from a hero with anti-heroic traits, though he is also cast as an Orpheus figure.

The skeleton man, who appears to both young women in their dreams before manifesting in real life, is an embodiment of Hades, but his appearance also seems to draw on the iconography of the Central American celebration of the Day of the Dead. It seems fitting that Cass makes her bargain with him on a Mexican beach. His underworld kingdom, with its terrifying "black palace on the white plain" (p. 2), is hauntingly described at several moments in the story. The world of classical music provides another portal into the realm of myth. Maia's mother explains the intertextual layers of the Ravel suite *Gaspard de la nuit* and Aloysius Bertrand's poem upon which it is based, but her academic lecture is less of a guide for a Maia than her adventures with Cass, which give her real world insight into the allure of seduction and the promise of real love. Maia's proficiency within the world of classical piano is contrasted with her inability to improvise her own music, though the harsh rhythms of punk music resonate with her, as if a symbol of her proximity to darkness and death.

The final chapter of *Dark Wings* ends on an ambiguous note, with Maia and Cass about to embark on their road trip. At this point in the story, they are full of excitement, but the reader is privy to a sense of doom at what the future holds. Like the book as a whole, which stands alone while also looking forward and backwards to the companion volumes in the trilogy, there is a conflicting sense that Maia's escape with Cass was necessary, yet ultimately tragic. The plotline is melodramatic, centring on the good girl-bad girl dynamic that is a pervasive trope within young adult literature. At the same time, McCarry's prose is full of evocative imagery of light and darkness, the themes of temptation and danger, and lyrical descriptions that appeal to her audience. Reader reviews posted on Amazon repeatedly comment on the romance and resonance of McCarry's language and narrative.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Cassandra Cerberus Demeter Hades Jason Katabasis Maia Orpheus Persephone Sirens Underworld
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adolescence Coming of age Conflict Desires Disobedience Family Freedom Friendship Girls Journeys Knowledge Love Names Parents (and children) Queer Race Relationships Sexuality Subjectivity Teachers Teenagers Travel Water Witch Youth
Further Reading	Blackford, Holly, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, New York: Routledge, 2012. Bourke, Liz, *Sleeps With Monsters: Sarah McCarry's Orphic Metamorphoses*, tor.com, published November 3, 2015 (accessed: March 12, 2020).

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