Jean Menzies, "Entry on: The Dark Wife by Sarah Diemer", 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/993. Entry version as of November 04, 2026.

Sarah Diemer

The Dark Wife

United States of America (2011)

TAGS: Athena Cerberus Charon Demeter Elysian Fields / Elysium Hades Hermes Persephone Underworld Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Dark Wife
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2011
First Edition Details	Sarah Diemer, *The Dark Wife*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011, 256 pp.
ISBN	9781461179931
Genre	Fiction, Romance fiction, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults ((as indicated by the author))
Author of the Entry	Jean Menzies, University of Roehampton, menziesj@roehampton.ac.uk
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Creators



Sarah Diemer (Author)

Sarah Diemer is the name under which the author now known as Bridget Essex previously wrote novels for young adults; Bridget Essex now focuses on writing literature for adults. Her young adult work focused on love stories between women, often with fantastical or paranormal elements. The fantastic elements of her stories draw on various folklores other than classical mythology, often retelling or taking inspiration from fairy tales. She was born and raised in the USA and now lives in Pittsburgh with her wife, Natalie Vivien, who is also a writer.

Sources:

sarahdiemerauthor.wordpress.com (accessed: March 25, 2020);

bridgetessex.wordpress.com(accessed: March 25, 2020).

Bio prepared by Jean Menzies, University of Roehampton, menziesj@roehampton.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

The Dark Wife is the first full length novel by Sarah Diemer who had previously self-published short stories under this name. It retells the myth of Hades and Persephone with a few twists; in Diemer's version Hades is a woman and the story follows the development of a consensual romantic relationship between her and Persephone.

The book itself focuses on Persephone who has lived her entire life thus far on earth with her mother Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Persephone's life thus far has been blissful, cut off from the rest of the gods and the cruelty they are capable of. Readers are intruded to her at a moment in her life when she is leaving childhood behind and coming of age. The novel begins when she falls in love with a nymph named Charis and experiences her first sexual relationship.

Persephone's peaceful life is interrupted, however, when she witnesses her father Zeus rape her lover and then proceed to turn her into a plant for reasons unknown. Persephone has had no relationship with her father up until this point in her life. She is informed by her mother, however, that Zeus has decided that she is to be sent to live amongst the other Olympians on Mount Olympus now that she is no longer what they consider a child. Given what she has just witnessed she is distraught by this plan, which she is given no choice in. Demeter, while she can observe her daughter's distress, dare not go against Zeus and tells her she must accept her father's will.

A chance meeting with Hades during an earthquake, however, offers Persephone an opportunity to escape and live instead in the underworld. From their first meeting there is an immediate attraction between the two women so instead of doing as Zeus has bid, she takes up residence in the underworld. Persephone is fully aware that her decision means leaving her mother forever, but she is willing to sacrifice this in order to escape Zeus. Life in the underworld at Hades' side is not as peaceful as Persephone had hoped, however, as masses of the dead are plotting a revolt against their ruler. The dead are furious that only a select few may enter the elysian fields, which they have idealised in their minds. This dissatisfaction as it turns out is the result of Zeus' meddling, who appears motivated purely by cruelty and an unfounded hatred for his sister Hades. Once she learns of Zeus' roll in this and defeats him battle, Persephone is able to quell the restless dead and finally bring peace to the underworld.

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Analysis

The Dark Wife is an interesting balancing act between commenting on ancient Greek mythology and adapting Greek myth and its characters to tell a new story; while in some respects it adheres to the versions of these stories available in the ancient sources in others it transforms the ancient narratives radically.

In terms of innovations the most obvious is perhaps Hades sex. In Diemer's version of the myth Hades is a woman and her title, Lord of the Underworld, is explained as an intended jibe by Zeus at her sexuality. Hades is attracted to women, as is Persephone, and the two build a romantic relationship during the course of the novel. While Zeus' disparaging attitude towards his sister could be construed as homophobic, it is in conflict with the seeming acceptance of queer relationships on Olympus involving other gods and goddesses; Athena, for example, is also depicted in the novel as having romantic relationships with other women but receives no negative reactions from Zeus or her fellow Olympians. The universe Diemer depicts does not therefore seem to feature a blanket rejection of queerness and the explanation given for Hades' title appears to be more of a convenient way to connect the ancient myths where Hades is a man to Diemer's alternative version. This especially, given the fact that the reader is not provided with a reason for the animosity between Hades and Zeus other than as part of Zeus' characterisation as the enemy.

On the other hand, the consensual nature of Hades and Persephone's relationship from the outset of the story is in contrast with on the ancient sources, but it is not an uncommon adaptation of the myth. The retelling of Hades and Persephone as a romance where Persephone has free will and choses a life with Hades of her own volition is a popular one in modern literature.* And as Aimee Hinds highlights in her article on *Rape or Romance?*, this transformation of the story is as much the result of translations and accessibility of the ancient evidence as it is a deliberate reworking of the consent in Hades and Persephone's tale by modern authors.** What is perhaps most striking about Diemer's use of this trope, however, is that the book itself is in large part an exploration of sexual violence and consent within the myths of ancient Greece.

Throughout *The Dark Wife* the villain is Zeus, king of the gods. His character is established in the very beginning with his rape of the nymph Charis, witnessed by Persephone. His treatment of

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Persephone's mother Demeter, both his sister and one of his sexual partners, is incredibly abusive and manipulative with Demeter constantly depicted as paralysed by fear of Zeus wrath and therefore unable to go against his will. Demeter herself acknowledges that Zeus has a history of sexual violence, which she fears, and is not entirely sure that this might not eventually extend to his own daughter, Persephone. Throughout the novel, in fact, there are hints of sexually insidious behaviour by Zeus towards Persephone. Then as the climax of the novel approaches the mystery of who is causing the distress amongst the dead is revealed to be Zeus – cementing him as the sole antagonist of the story.

Diemer deliberately draws on the frequency with which Zeus commits acts of sexual violence in Greek myth in order to explore themes of abuse and power. In focusing solely on Zeus, however, the nuances of other characters are sometimes left behind. In her attempt to explore themes of sexual violence Diemer erases Persephone's own experiences of abduction and sexual abuse in the ancient versions of the myth; her relationship with Hades is idealised in the novel in order to create a contrasting relationship with Zeus' abusive ones, and throughout the book she is one of the few female characters who does not in fact suffer domestic or sexual violence.

Demeter, in contrast with Persephone, loses much of the agency she originally possessed in the ancient sources. As the abused partner in her relationship with Zeus, in Diemer's version, all of her decisions are made for her. In the ancient sources she appears as a desperate but powerful mother who threatens to destroy crops in order to protect her daughter, while in *The Dark Wife,* in contrast, she only begins her assault on the earth at Zeus' bequest in order to bring Persephone back to earth and under Zeus' power, thus facilitating his abuse albeit unwillingly.

Myth serves as a vehicle for an important conversation surrounding sexual violence and power in *The Dark Wife*. The way in which convenient parts of the myths are chosen and discarded in order to create particular 'character types', however, sometimes leads to a lack of nuance in the exploration of the mythological characters and their experiences themselves. This may, therefore, undermine the novel's intention for some readers who are more familiar with the original mythology.

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* See for example: *Great Goddesses* by Nikita Gill; *Abandon* by Meg Cabot; *Persephone* by Kaitlin Bevis; *Persephone's Orchard* by Molly Ringle.

** eidolon.pub (accessed: February 20,2020).

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Athena Cerberus Charon Demeter Elysian Fields / Elysium Hades Hermes Persephone Underworld Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Death Family LGBTQI Love Queer Relationships Sexual abuse Sexuality Violence

Further Reading

Bevis, K., *Persephone*, ImaJinn Books, Memphis, 2015.

Cabot, M., *Abandon*, Macmillan, London, 2011.

Gill, N., *Great Goddesses: Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters*, Ebury, London, 2019.

Hinds, A., *Rape or Romance?: Bad Feminism in Mythical Retellings*, Eidolon, 2019 (accessed: March 25,2020).

Ringle, M., *Persephone's Orchard*, Central Avenue Publishing, Chicago, 2013.

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