

Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Wings by Dennis Nolan, Jane Hyatt Yolen", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/308>. Entry version as of July 09, 2026.

Dennis Nolan , Jane Hyatt Yolen

Wings

United States (1990)

TAGS: [Ariadne](#) [Athens](#) [Crete](#) [Daedalus](#) [Gods](#) [Icarus](#) [Labyrinth](#) [Maze](#) [Minos](#) [Minotaur](#) [Theseus](#)



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

General information	
<i>Title of the work</i>	Wings
<i>Country of the First Edition</i>	United States of America
<i>Country/countries of popularity</i>	United States; Portugal
<i>Original Language</i>	English
<i>First Edition Date</i>	1990
<i>First Edition Details</i>	Jane Yolen, illustrated by Dennis Nolan, <i>Wings</i> . Carmel, California: Hampton-Brown, 1990, 32 pp. (unpaginated).
<i>ISBN</i>	0736212450
<i>Genre</i>	Illustrated works, Myths, Picture books
<i>Target Audience</i>	Children (Older children, suggested reader age 6-10 years)
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Creators



Dennis Nolan , b. 1945 (Illustrator)

Dennis Nolan (1945) is an American illustrator and author. Born in California, he now lives in Massachusetts and is a Professor of Illustration at Hartford Art School. Working predominantly in acrylics, he is known for the highly detailed, realistic quality of his paintings. He has illustrated retellings of several classic fantasy stories including *The Sword in the Stone* (1993) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996). His work has received numerous awards. *Dinosaur Dream* (1990) is a Golden Kite Honor Book and in 2011 *Sea of Dreams* was recognised by Publishers Weekly as a Best Children's Book title.

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England,
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Jane Hyatt Yolen , b. 1939 (Author)

Jane Hyatt Yolen is a celebrated and prolific writer of children's stories, as well as fantasy, science fiction and poetry for adult readers. She was born in New York to intellectual parents. Her family lived in various parts of the east coast of the USA during her childhood. Yolen was a conscientious student and wrote poetry, stories and journalism throughout her youth. Her enduring association with the Society of Friends was established at Indianbrook, a Quaker summer camp in Vermont. After completing college, she returned to New York and began work as an editor in the children's book division of Alfred A. Knopf and for the *Saturday Review* before turning to writing. Her first children's book, *Pirates in Petticoats* (1963) was released on her 22nd birthday, and she has since published over 300 books. Her work has won numerous awards and she has received six honorary doctorates in literature, and called 'the Hans Christian Andersen of America and

the Aesop of the twentieth century' (Author's website).

In addition to *Wings*, Yolen has published a number of other retellings of Greek myth, including *Pegasus, the Flying Horse* (1998). The *Young Heroes* series, written in collaboration with Robert J. Harris, features *Odysseus in the Serpent Maze* (2001), *Hippolyta and the Curse of the Amazons* (2002) *Atalanta and the Arcadian Beast* (2003), and *Jason and the Gorgon's Blood* (2004).

Source:

An Introduction to Jane Yolen (1939-), *Children's Literature Review*, edited by Dana Ferguson, vol. 149, Gale, 2010. [Children's Literature Review Online](#) (accessed January 19, 2018).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England,
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Additional information

Translation

Portuguese: *Asas!*, trans. Marcos Bagno, Attica, 1991.

Braille: *Wings*, Carmel, California: Hampton-Brown, 1990.

Summary

Wings can be classified as a picture book, in that Yolen's written story is accompanied by Nolan's full page watercolour paintings. But the sophistication of both textual and visual messages makes the work suitable for a mature readership. It tells the story of the craftsman Daedalus. It opens with him living as a celebrated inventor in Athens, before his role in the death of his nephew Talos forces him to go into exile. Making his way to Crete, he is welcomed by the unscrupulous King Minos, who commands that Daedalus design a maze in which to conceal his wife Pasiphae's monstrous offspring, the Minotaur. Daedalus finds happiness on Crete. He designs many marvellous creations, marries a local woman, and has a child, Icarus.

When Theseus comes to the island he is horrified to learn of the forced sacrifice of Athenian youths and vows to help his kinsman combat the Minotaur. In this version, Daedalus arranges for Ariadne to accompany Theseus into the maze with the thread tied at her waist.

When Minos learns that Daedalus has betrayed him, the King imprisons the craftsman and his son in an impenetrable tower. From its only window, Icarus watches the sea birds in flight. Daedalus gathers their feathers, and constructs two pairs of wings with which they can escape. He instructs his son not to fly too high nor too low, and father and son flee from Crete. But Icarus forgets his father's warnings, the sun melts the wax, and he falls into the sea. Desolate, Daedalus flies on alone to Sicily, where he is made welcome by King Cocalus. He constructs a temple to Apollo and mounts his beautiful wings on its wall. The story's epigraph recounts Minos' attempt to find his enemy by challenging him to pass a thread through the spiral of a seashell. After Daedalus accomplishes this task using an ant to guide the silk through a tiny hole, Minos wages war on Cocalus but is defeated. The text makes clear that like Daedalus himself, the gods punish the Cretan King for his crimes.



Analysis

In traditional retellings of this myth, the moral centres on the figure of Icarus. The act of flying too close to the sun serves as a metaphor for excess. Instead, Icarus should have plotted a middle course - neither too high nor too low - and as a number of children's versions highlight, he should also have listened to his father's instructions. These dual messages promoting a moderate lifestyle and obedience to one's parents are present in Yolen's version, but the primary focus is on Daedalus' hubris. The text's epigraph introduces him as a man who

never understood the labyrinth of his own heart. He was clever but he was not always kind. He was full of pride but he did not give others praise. He was a maker - but he was a taker, too. The gods always punish such a man.

Word play, alliteration and assonance serve to orient this text within the storytelling tradition, and the use of the labyrinth as both a literal space and a psychological symbol highlights the sophistication of Yolen's rendering of the Daedalus myth. Language and its power is an important theme within the narrative. Daedalus remembers his Athenian homeland by teaching Icarus his native tongue, and when Theseus comes to Crete they are able to communicate in Athenian Greek.

Just as almost every page of written text finishes with an italicised statement revealing the gods' response to the action, each of Nolan's lavish, painterly illustrations features the Olympians as anthropomorphic figures in the clouds above the Greek landscape. (On her website Yolen reveals that Nolan used his own family as models for the gods, not out of hubris, he insisted, but because they were cheap). From on high the gods observe Daedalus and the scenes of mortal life, reacting with a variety of emotions, from joy at the happiness of Daedalus' young family, to horror at Icarus' fatal fall. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum have suggested that they act as a kind of theatrical chorus, but also argued that they remind the reader that gods are 'metaphorical projections of human thought and emotion' (71). Their elevated position recalls Homer's *Iliad*, in which the gods watch the battle from atop the surrounding mountains. In the final image, in which Daedalus flies on alone, the sky is grey and empty.

From the death of Talos to the epilogue on Sicily, Yolen and Nolan's



retelling of the myth is comprehensive, though it is interesting that there is no mention of Theseus' abandonment of Ariadne on Naxos on his return home to Athens. It is clear that this is the story of Daedalus, and the other mythic characters who figure, even Icarus, are subsumed within his narrative. In concentrating on the fatal flaws of the craftsman's character, from excessive pride in his work to his failure to keep his son safe, *Wings* is a unique rendering of a story so often retold to children.

Classical, Mythological,
Traditional Motifs,
Characters, and
Concepts

[Ariadne](#) [Athens](#) [Crete](#) [Daedalus](#) [Gods](#) [Icarus](#) [Labyrinth](#) [Maze](#) [Minos](#)
[Minotaur](#) [Theseus](#)

Other Motifs, Figures,
and Concepts Relevant
for Children and Youth
Culture

[Child, children](#) [Death](#) [Diaspora](#) [Disobedience](#) [Family](#) [Gaining](#)
[understanding](#) [Morality](#) [Parents \(and children\)](#)

Further Reading

Stephens, John and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1998, 71-72.

Addenda

There is a short film on YouTube called [Jane Yolen's Wings](#) in which a group of teenagers dramatise Daedalus' story (accessed: July 27, 2018).

