

Robin Diver, "Entry on: The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends by Anthony Horowitz , Tim Stevens ", 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/968>. Entry version as of July 09, 2026.

Anthony Horowitz , Tim Stevens

The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends

United Kingdom (1985)

TAGS: [Achilles](#) [Actaeon](#) [Arachne](#) [Ariadne](#) [Athena](#) [Demeter](#) [Hades](#) [Heracles](#) [Medusa](#) [Narcissus](#) [Odysseus / Ulysses](#) [Oedipus](#) [Orpheus](#) [Pan](#) [Pandora](#) [Persephone](#) [Perseus](#) [Pyramus](#) [Syrinx](#) [Theseus](#)



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

General information	
<i>Title of the work</i>	The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends
<i>Country of the First Edition</i>	United Kingdom
<i>Country/countries of popularity</i>	Worldwide
<i>Original Language</i>	English
<i>First Edition Date</i>	1985
<i>First Edition Details</i>	Anthony Horowitz, <i>The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends</i> . London: Kingfisher, 1985, 273 pp.
<i>ISBN</i>	0753408899
<i>Genre</i>	Fiction, Myths
<i>Target Audience</i>	Children (Older children and teenagers)
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Creators



Anthony Horowitz , b. 1955 (Author)

Anthony Horowitz is a British author, screenwriter, playwright and journalist, known particularly for his teen spy series *Alex Rider*. He has written over forty books for a variety of ages and over a range of themes and genres. His work for adults includes Sherlock Holmes novels commissioned by the Conan Doyle Estate and a James Bond novel, *Trigger Mortis* (2015), which was commissioned by the Ian Fleming Estate. His work for younger children includes the comic horror novel *Granny* (2009) and *The Diamond Brothers Detective Agency* series. As a children's author, he is especially associated with getting boys to read and speaking to boys in general. He also produced the first seven episodes of *Midsomer Murders* and wrote and created the series *Foyle's War*. He is a travel writer for *The Telegraph* and a regular politics (he calls himself 'vaguely conservative') and education contributor to other British newspapers. He is also a patron to *Kidscape*, an anti-bullying charity, and the East Anglia Children's Hospice.

Horowitz is from a Jewish family in Middlesex. He was educated in a strict boarding school environment where he talks of being regularly beaten by the headmaster, and then in a public school in Rugby. He studied English literature and art history at University of York in 1977. He is married to Jill Green, producer of *Foyle's War*, and has two sons. Horowitz has claimed he always wanted to be a writer, since writing is the only time he is completely happy.

Sources:

Author's [website](#) (accessed: January 16, 2020);

[Wikipedia](#) (accessed: January 16, 2020).

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham,
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Tim Stevens (Illustrator)

Tim Stevens is an illustrator with a particularly large body of work involving books of myth and fairy tale. He illustrated, for example, a 2012 edition of Andrew Lang's *The Crimson Fairy Book*. He has drawn versions of the Snow Queen, the Selfish Giant and Dick Whittington. He also appears to be responsible for the cover art of many Dianna Wynne Jones novels, and to have produced art for a number of other Kingfisher anthology books, including *Haunted Stories* (2005), *Riding Stories* (2005) and *Favourite Ghost Stories* (2002).

Sources:

[The Association of Illustrators](#) (accessed: January 17, 2020);

[JacketFlap](#) (accessed: January 17, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

This is a collection of myths and legends from around the world, with a large Greek section near the beginning, told with a heavy dose of cynical humour. The Greek myths in particular seem to be aimed at an audience which has probably encountered the basics of the myth already at a younger age. Their focus is generally on human characters, with enough introductory information about the gods to understand their presence in the earlier chapters. The chapters are lightly illustrated with line drawings. Each myth in the contents is attributed to a particular culture, but this culture sometimes seems to refer to a setting rather than where the story is actually derived from; for example Pyramus and Thisbe is referred to as a story from Babylon in the contents.

- Isis and Osiris.
- Pyramus and Thisbe.
- The Judgement of Paris.
- The Seven Pomegranate Seeds.
- The Spinning Contest (Arachne).
- The Story of the Pan-Pipes.
- Glaucus and Scylla.
- The Achilles Heel.
- The Mares of Diomedes (Labours of Heracles).
- Pandora's Box.
- The Gorgon's Head (Story of Perseus).
- Orpheus in the Underworld.
- The Riddle of the Sphinx.
- Procrustes and His Magic Bed.
- The Eye of the Cyclops (Odysseus).
- Narcissus.
- The Minotaur.
- The Hounds of Actaeon.
- Romulus and Remus.
- The Dragon and Saint George.
- The Grendel (Beowulf).
- The Ugly Wife (Gawain and Ragnell).
- Nidud the Cruel (Volund).
- The Death of Nornagest.
- The Stolen Hammer of Thor.
- The Wishes of Savitri.
- The Great Bell of Peking (Ko-ai).



- The Monkey Who Would be King (Sun Hou-tzu).
 - The First Eclipse (Amaterasu).
 - The Fabulous Spotted Egg.
 - Geriguaguiatugo.
 - The Ten Fingers of Sedna.
 - Given to the Sun (Manco Capac and Occllo Huaco).
 - Catching the Sun (Maui).
 - Death and the Boy.
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Analysis

This is a humorous retelling of familiar and unfamiliar mythology for an audience which likely already has some concept of myth and the kind of things that happen in it. In this way, Horowitz predicated the trend of the twenty-first century towards irreverent and comic retellings of familiar myth (e.g. the serial work of McMullan and Riordan, and Mike Townsend's 2010 *Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and Blunders*). Light jabs are made at adults; for example on page 16, the narrator tells us 'Both Pyramus and Thisbe tried to reason with them [their parents] but, parents being what they are, this provided impossible.' Likewise, on page 20, the reason Pyramus is fatally delayed in meeting Thisbe is that his parents take out their bad day on him, complaining about his lack of ambition and poor results at school.

Another indication of the older, more irreverent demographic this book is aimed at is the fact that sexual content is not concealed. Minos is described trying to pick out Athenian tribute girls to lead off to his bed. It is made extremely obvious that Ariadne is helping Theseus because she sexually desires him not because she loves him, and when she comes into his room at night she will not stop running her hands over his body. When Pyramus talks about how he wants to finally see Thisbe face to face he says "I am seventeen years old - no longer a child. I want to hold you in my arms, close to me. I want to..." before Thisbe cuts him off, leaving the reader to extrapolate what he wants (p. 17). This is also a rare children's version in which Leda is actually raped by Zeus. Yet in some ways, the anthology still implicitly supports conservative family values. In a list of the good work Isis and Osiris did as rulers for Egypt, Horowitz includes that Isis "introduced the whole idea of marriage to the people. Before that, everyone had just lived together as they pleased." (p.10).

Mocking the ugly and monstrous is a prominent part of the humour



here. Horowitz's anthology, whilst feeling like an anthology of the twenty-first century in many ways, did not anticipate the more recent trend towards sympathetic monsters. Ugliness is usually shown to be a sign of bad character, and to a lesser extent beauty is an indication of goodness. Polydectes in the Perseus story is a fat villain described as having breath so foul it would stop a cyclops, with his ugliness seemingly connected to his aggressive sexual harassment of Danae. Eurystheus is a sickly wimp with hayfever whose antagonism to Heracles is based on the latter's good health. When Hermes tells Argus the story of Pan and Syrinx, he explicitly establishes Pan as an exception to this rule, talking about his ugliness and then adding, "Whatever his appearance, though, you couldn't help liking him" (p. 52). Horowitz also makes a point, however, of establishing dark skin as attractive. Osiris is "Tall, dark-skinned and remarkably handsome" (p. 9), whilst Set is ugly with "chalk-white skin" (p. 10), and his accomplices who he uses to murder Osiris are all fat. Memnon is dark skinned and the most handsome man in the world.

Giants are portrayed as stupid in a way that reflects their appearance. When Hermes begins to tell Argus the story of Syrinx so that he might lure him to sleep and kill him, Argus asks if the panpipes have something to do with frying pans. Hermes replies that they're named after his son, "wondering why so many monsters were quite so stupid" (p. 52). Argus is eventually tricked into sleep by Hermes because, "Like so many monsters, he just didn't have the time for stories..." (p. 54). Argus' lack of intellectual literary appreciation is therefore what kills him. Meanwhile, Prometheus refrains from siding with the Titans in the Titan war because he realises that since the Titans are so stupid, they are doomed to lose: "They just weren't very bright. A Titan might tear up a mountain instead of going round it, but he would probably find out later that he was going the wrong way anyway." (p. 83). Finally, cyclopes are "probably one of the most stupid monsters that ever lived." (p. 120) .

Other monsters are evil in a way that reflects their monstrosity. The Minotaur is straightforwardly evil, depicted in the artwork on the blurb with a cruel smirk and a cudgel in hand. Medusa is portrayed as explicitly seeking and pursuing victims to turn to stone. Whilst in Ovid and most children's anthologies, Perseus kills Medusa in her sleep, here she pursues Perseus and tries to get him to look at her before she has any indication he intends to harm her. Yet her more sympathetic human backstory is still included: Medusa is punished with transformation for having consensual sex with Poseidon in



Athena's temple (as opposed to the Ovidian version where she was raped).

Generally, Horowitz retells classical myth fairly loosely, but there are other points in which he refers specifically to details from Ovid. In his Arachne retelling, Arachne actually depicts the mythical rapes of the gods in her tapestry. In other versions (e.g. Lucy Coats 2002, *Atticus the Storyteller's 100 Greek Myths*), Arachne tends to portray the gods engaging in more child friendly embarrassing activities. Horowitz also makes Arachne's work undeniably better than Athena's, something even Athena herself is forced to admit. Most children's anthologies (e.g. Coats) declare both tapestries amazing without indicating a winner, whilst a few (e.g. Emilie Baker 1913, [Stories of Old Greece and Rome](#)) make Athena clearly the superior weaver. Arachne being the best in Horowitz reflects the generally critical and irreverent stance he takes towards authority throughout this anthology. To add to the cynical, grim tone, Arachne, although poor and victimised, is not a marginalised character it is possible to sympathize with. Her arrogance and cruelty are so overbearing even her own mother admits "she's a nasty piece of work" (p. 49).

The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends was published three years before the UK government passed the law that local authorities and state schools could not 'intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality', a law ambiguously phrased enough that schools had to err on the side of caution in interpreting it so as not to get into trouble. Horowitz's anthology falls into the category of texts that could probably have been accused of 'promoting' homosexuality under such vague legislation. He is very clear that Narcissus' love for himself is aimed at a fictitious boy, not a girl as in other anthologies (see Deborah Roberts *The Metamorphosis of Ovid in Retellings of Myth for Children* 2015 for further discussion of this trend in Narcissus retellings). Narcissus' love for a boy is something he freely confides to his parents: "The boy....He is so beautiful....when I reach out to touch him or try to kiss him he runs away" (p. 129). It is not clear in the narrative that Narcissus' parents are bothered by their son desiring a boy. Instead, their concern is for his autophilic delusion concerning the water and the fact he will not eat. This kind of free parental dialogue would probably have been an atypical experience for a gay British teenager in 1985.

Horowitz does, however, change Narcissus' lover who kills himself



into a girl, possibly because in the short amount of words in which she is mentioned, being heterosexual and female allows more sympathy for this lover's scorned affections and plight. In fact, this girl is arguably genuinely more sympathetic than her male counterpart in Ovid. Whilst Ovid's scorned boy threatened (and carried out) suicide unless he was given Narcissus' love, a dynamic that would be considered abusive and sexually coercive today, Horowitz's scorned girl threatens to kill herself "if Narcissus wasn't a little kinder to her" (p. 127), absolving her at least of directly trying to force him into sex or a relationship. Horowitz's Narcissus responds by mailing her a sword, making him directly complicit in her suicide.

However, in this version, it is his treatment of Echo for which Narcissus is punished, and here he seems rather less in the wrong. Narcissus tells Echo not to come near him and she repeats 'Come near me!' He responds "Are you deaf or something? I just told you I wouldn't. Now go away!" (p. 128). Aphrodite overhears this and decides Narcissus must be punished for scorning love. But whilst Narcissus' delivery is cruel, his inherent act of asserting *again* that he does not wish for an unwanted lover close to him is not unreasonable, and this is the act for which he is punished with a slow, drawn out death. Elsewhere in the anthology, Aphrodite is not portrayed favourably, but here we are not told that what she has done is wrong or excessive.

There is a strong anti-hunting theme in Horowitz's Actaeon retelling, with Actaeon portrayed at grotesque length as obsessed with blood and revelling in killing for the sake of killing. The hunter-hunted theme in his interactions with Artemis is perhaps even more explicit than in Ovid. Actaeon cannot tear his eyes away from Artemis because she "personified everything he held most dear" (p. 149), and he thinks that "She looked gentle and kind". He also delights in seeing what no one else has been permitted to see. This perhaps indicates the delusions Actaeon's hunting obsession has caused; he views himself as at the top of the food chain, the most powerful of creatures, but in the world of classical mythology, humans necessarily cannot be at the top of the species power chain. Actaeon's experience as a prey animal as he flees his own hounds is explicitly contrasted to his love of inflicting such an experience on other animals, and when Horowitz says: "For the first and the last time in his life he experienced the "thrill" of the hunt from the quarry's point of view" (pp. 151-152), "thrill" is placed in quotation marks.



The book's illustrations take the form of a small black and white line drawing above each chapter heading, and one or two larger line drawings in the chapter showing key scenes from the book. Some contain a dramatic, gothic look, such as Thisbe in the woods. They frequently focus on scenes of gore or distress.

Classical, Mythological,
Traditional Motifs,
Characters, and
Concepts

[Achilles](#) [Actaeon](#) [Arachne](#) [Ariadne](#) [Athena](#) [Demeter](#) [Hades](#) [Heracles](#)
[Medusa](#) [Narcissus](#) [Odysseus / Ulysses](#) [Oedipus](#) [Orpheus](#) [Pan](#) [Pandora](#)
[Persephone](#) [Perseus](#) [Pyramus](#) [Syrinx](#) [Theseus](#)

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

[Authority](#) [Boys](#) [Hierarchy](#) [Humour](#) [Parents \(and children\)](#) [Violence](#)

