

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

# OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths  
as Medicine for the Hardships  
of Life in Children's  
and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by  
Katarzyna Marciniak



# OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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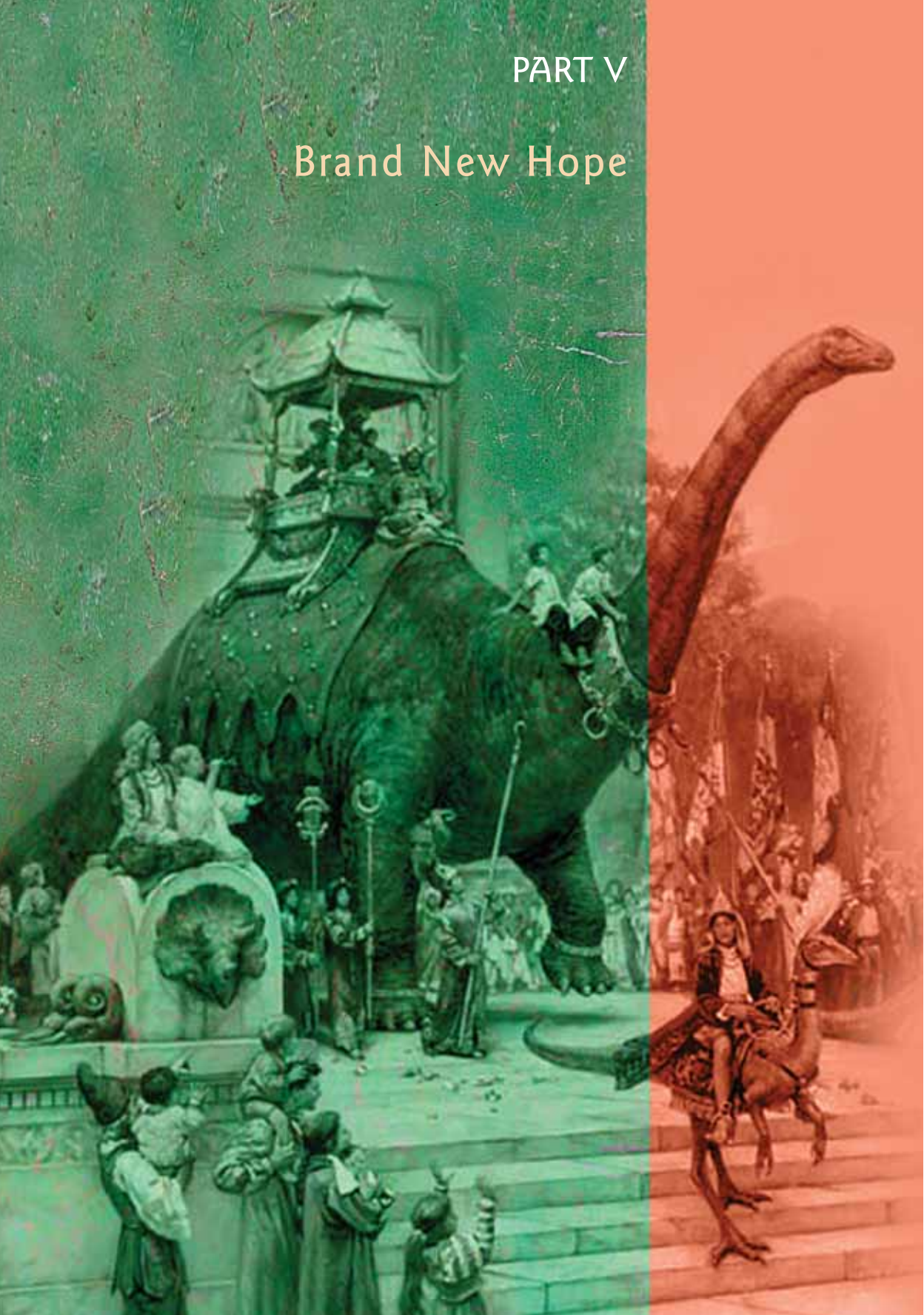
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PART V

# Brand New Hope



## HUNGRY AND HOPEFUL: GREEK MYTHS AND CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE IN MIKE CAREY'S MELANIE STORIES

A girl holds the key to the future of mankind: she has to choose between sacrificing herself and creating a new human race. In one version she is Iphigenia, in another Pandora. Mike Carey (or M.R. Carey) has now produced three versions of this story, all of which follow the central child character, Melanie, through horrific trauma, which she navigates with the help of Greek myth. The first was a short story called "Iphigenia in Aulis" which appeared in an anthology of dark fantasy called *An Apple for the Creature*.<sup>1</sup> This anthology played with the genre of school stories. In his piece, Carey introduced the character of Melanie, who goes to a very strange school. She feels very passionately about learning and about her teacher, Miss Mailer, who introduces her to Greek myths. It is told from the perspective of a child, but it is not a children's story. The story was nominated for two awards (Derringer and Edgar Allan Poe), and Carey felt that he had more to say about this character and her world, so he pitched the idea for both a novel and a screenplay, and ended up writing both.<sup>2</sup> They became *The Girl with All the Gifts*, a novel which was a word-of-mouth bestseller, and a film starring Glenn Close, Paddy Considine, and Gemma Arterton (dir. Colm McCarthy, 2016), which was nominated for a BAFTA. Both novel and film are hard-hitting, yet both were particularly popular among teen audiences. This chapter then operates on the borders of young adult fiction with a series of texts that play with conventions associated with children's literature. The chapter

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<sup>1</sup> M.R. Carey, "Iphigenia in Aulis", in Charlaina Harris and Toni L.P. Kelner, eds., *An Apple for the Creature: Tales of Unnatural Education*, London: Quercus, 2012, 161–186.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Dr Lynn Fotheringham, at the conference *Sacrificing Iphigenia through the Ages*, University of Nottingham, 30 January 2016; further details in M.R. Carey, *The Girl with All the Gifts*, London: Orbit Books, 2014 (novel with extras: interview on p. 470). All the subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers are given in brackets.

explores how Greek myth and the theme of hope interact with ideas about what it means to be human.<sup>3</sup>

## Melanie and Children's Literature

Let us begin at the beginning: with the opening paragraphs of the original short story, "Iphigenia in Aulis", which I heard Carey read at a conference on the reception of Iphigenia in Nottingham in January 2016:

Her name is Melanie. It means "the black girl," from an ancient Greek word, but her skin is mostly very fair so she thinks maybe it's not such a good name for her. Miss Justineau assigns names from a big list: new children get the top name on the boys' list or the top name on the girls' list, and that, Miss Justineau says, is that.

Melanie is ten years old, and she has skin like a princess in a fairy tale: skin as white as snow. So she knows that when she grows up she'll be beautiful, with princes falling over themselves to climb her tower and rescue her.

Assuming, of course, that she has a tower.

In the meantime she has the cell, the corridor, the classroom and the shower room. (2662)<sup>4</sup>

The initial sleight of hand where Carey begins with an etymology from Ancient Greek makes us feel we are in the hands of a knowledgeable narrator. In fact, this opening is already focalized through the central child character, as is clear from "so she thinks" onwards. Melanie herself is the knowledgeable,

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<sup>3</sup> *Girl with All the Gifts* has drawn some scholarly attention in children's studies, science-fiction, and utopian studies. On Melanie as monster, see M. Isabel Santaulària i Capdevila, "Monstrous Final Girls: The Posthuman Body in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* and M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*", in Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak, eds., *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 173–188. On Melanie in the context of the posthuman, see Kimberly Hurd Hale and Erin A. Dolgoy, "Humanity in a Posthuman World: M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*", *Utopian Studies* 29.3 (2018), 343–361. On hope and dystopian fiction, see Alexa Weik von Mossner, "Hope in Dark Times: Climate Change and the World Risk Society in Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015 and 2017*", in Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz, eds., *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, London: Routledge, 2013, 69–84. On ecocriticism and psychoanalysis, see Ruzbeh Babaei, Sue Yen Lee, and Siamak Babaei, "Ecocritical Survival through Psychological Defense Mechanisms in M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*", *Journal of Science Fiction* 1.2 (2016), 47–55.

<sup>4</sup> The short story was read in electronic format (Kindle), which does not have pages, and so for quotations I give Kindle location numbers instead (in brackets).

classically educated narrator-focalizer.<sup>5</sup> The short sentences and simple words mimic writing for young children. The importance of the teacher figure is demonstrated by the mention of Miss Justineau, who is slipped into the third sentence, showing her authority and importance in Melanie's world. Although it is Miss Mailer with whom she is obsessed in the short story, Miss Justineau is the name given to the desired teacher/parent figure in the novel and film. The theme of identity is central in the idea of names assigned from a list: the clash between Melanie's apparent innocence and her darker name is also important, not just for her dislocation from human society. It also comes into its own in the film version, where she is played by the black actress Sennia Nanua. Carey builds a contrast between our expectations of childhood (little girls should fantasize about being princesses) and the story's reality of a childhood constrained, imprisoned, objectified. He makes it clear at this early stage in the reference to Rapunzel's tower and the contrast between its relative benignity and the horror of Melanie's actual setting: a nightmarishly dark prison building, where her bedroom is a cell with unpainted concrete walls, and the classroom features breeze blocks, green floor evoking a hangar, and fluorescent lighting. All she has to understand her reality is childhood myth and storytelling.

Melanie is in fact a zombie, or, as Carey calls them in this series, a "hungry". Along with other high-functioning child hungries, she has been imprisoned at a military base camp. The explanatory strategies are different in the short story and the novel, but the situation and characters remain the same. In the short story "Iphigenia in Aulis" (further referenced as "Iphigenia"), which is set in America, the anti-abortion movement insisted on keeping the babies of dead hungries alive. In *Girl with All the Gifts* (further as *Girl*), set in the UK, they were trapped in the wild and used as material for Dr Caroline Caldwell's research project in which she tries to find out how the child-hungries continue to function, in the hope of creating some sort of cure. In "Iphigenia", the hungries are created by a virus; in *Girl* – by a fungus. In both versions, Melanie becomes hope for the future: our mythical hope. The tag line of the film, featured on the posters, is "Our greatest threat is our only hope". In "Iphigenia", Melanie sacrifices herself to allow Miss Mailer and the others to escape to the settlement, where a cure has been discovered. In *Girl*, she represents the continuity of human culture in a new biological species, now in symbiosis with the fungus.

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<sup>5</sup> On Melanie's education and its importance to her construction as a character, see Lauren Ellis Christie, "The Monstrous Voice: M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*", in David W. Kupferman and Andrew Gibbons, eds., *Childhood, Science Fiction, and Pedagogy: Children Ex Machina*, Singapore: Springer, 2019, 41–56.

Both the novel and the film take the characters and plot, which begin in the short story, and develop them further. Melanie survives the attack on the base and the main characters escape, and undertake a road trip, which displays the decaying human material world. Gradually they come to realize that there is little, if not nothing, of ordered human society left. The novel and film, while broadly similar in plot, character, and motivations, have subtly different endings. In the film, Melanie must make a stark and dramatic choice between allowing Dr Caldwell to cut her up in order to extract her brain and provide a cure for the remaining humans, against setting the spore sacs of the fungus on fire to spread its spores throughout the remainder of the human world, turning all remaining humans into hungries. In the novel, her choice is whether to take the side of her human friends (despite her hatred of Dr Caldwell, who already knows she cannot cure the human race) or to fight on behalf of the pack of feral hungry children, as the two groups threaten to kill each other. In both cases, she is both agent of destruction and of continuity and the final scene is the same in both: beloved Miss Justineau, the only human left alive, is stored in an airtight mobile laboratory, teaching Melanie's pack of "new humans", the high-functioning hungry children, of whom Melanie has taken control, through the airlock. Melanie releases the "evil" of the end of humanity as we know it, but she herself is "hope", insisting on passing on knowledge and culture. Similarly, Iphigenia both rescues her father and enables the start of a hideously destructive war (both death and glory). As in Hesiod's myth of Pandora (Greek for 'all gifts'), Melanie both has all the gifts (her extraordinary intelligence, endurance, resilience, reaction speed, and strength) and is herself the gift (a new way for humanity to survive in the universe).

This chapter explores the themes of myth, trauma, and identity in these three cultural products, looking at how the short story breaks away from children's literature mode, how the novel and the film were received, how myth functions in all three, how Melanie responds to traumatic situations, and how myth interacts with trauma in defining identity. I begin with the Iphigenia myth in the short story and move on to the Pandora myth in the novel and film.

## **Iphigenia and the Noble Sacrifice**

The short story begins with Melanie's description of her surroundings and her life, in bare, matter-of-fact language, with the occasional child-like touch: "The door at the classroom end is red. It leads to the classroom (duh!)" (2676). She is both acculturated in human children's culture, frozen at the moment of rupture, and

innocent of conventions and expectations. When Sergeant (the man in charge of the base) spots her looking at the other side of the door to outside which had been accidentally left open, his: "Little bitch has got way too many eyes on her" (2677), is not as shocking to Melanie as it is to the audience. At the Iphigenia conference, there was an audible gasp the first time a character used the word "fuck" (Miss Mailer is reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* to the children and Sergeant breaks in: "What the fuck is this?" [2776]). The carefully focalized description of the death of one of the other children, through Melanie's lack of understanding and innocence, which precedes this moment, was not as shocking. This short story is all about what we expect of children, what is appropriate for children, and how children's literature is understood to work. Melanie is not an ordinary child: she has superhuman abilities, memory, intelligence, strength, resilience. She also has a massive lack of context and knowledge about the key elements of her situation that matter, and about what it means to be a child and how children are supposed to act: her learning through books has alienated her from her own real world.

Melanie's sense of wonder nevertheless marks her as both child and human being. The first mention of Iphigenia comes in a catalogue of the wonders Miss Mailer makes available to them:

[She would] show the children pictures out of a book and tell them stories about the people in the pictures. That was how Melanie got to find out about Agamemnon and the Trojan War, because one of the paintings showed Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, looking really mad and scary. "Why is she so mad?" Anne asked Miss Mailer.

"Because Agamemnon killed their daughter," Miss Mailer said. "The Greek fleet was stuck in the harbour on the island of Aulis. So Agamemnon put his daughter on an altar, and he killed her so that the goddess Artemis would give the Greek fleet fair winds and help them to get to the war on time."

The kids in the class were mostly both scared and delighted with this, like it was a ghost story or something, but Melanie was troubled by it. How could killing a little girl change the way the wind blew? "You're right, Melanie, it couldn't," Miss Mailer said. "But the Ancient Greeks had a lot of gods, and all kinds of weird ideas about what would make the gods happy. So Agamemnon gave Iphigenia's death to the goddess as a present, and his wife decided he had to pay for that."

Melanie, who already knew by this time that her own name was Greek, decided she was on Clytemnestra's side. Maybe it was important to get to the war on time, but you shouldn't kill kids to do it. You should just row harder, or put more sails up. Or maybe you should go in a boat that had an outboard motor. (2759–2770)

Melanie's engagement with the myth starts from Clytemnestra, with whom she identifies. Her practicality dismisses a religious or magical understanding of the world, and she already has strong personal morality. The reaction of the other children, "both scared and delighted, like it was a ghost story or something", emphasizes the power and distance of myth. Their right to hear stories is at the heart of their definition as human beings and children:

"They're children," Miss Mailer points out.

"No, they're not," Sergeant says, very loudly. "And that, right there, that's why you don't want to read them *Winnie-the-Pooh*. You do that, you start thinking of them as real kids."

[He removes the chemical blocker and lets one child, Kenny, smell him and involuntarily try to eat him.]

[...] Miss Mailer is looking at him like Clytemnestra looked in the painting, and Sergeant let his arm fall to his side and shrugs like none of this was ever important to him anyway.

"Not everyone who looks human is human," he says.

"No," Miss Mailer agrees. "I'm with you on that one." (2783–2797)

Here the connection is clearly made in Melanie's mind between the Iphigenia myth and her own situation, casting Miss Mailer as Clytemnestra and Sergeant as Agamemnon: or so we think. Later, as Melanie processes the events, readers find out that she identifies Sergeant with Artemis:

Sergeant has been more like the goddess Artemis to Melanie up until now; now she knows that he's just like everyone else, even if he is scary. (2812–2813)

The identification of authority/parent figures with the Greek gods fits with the way stories like the *Percy Jackson* series present gods as teachers or summer-camp organizers.<sup>6</sup> The gulf between the realities of limited adult power and children's assumptions of adult omnipotence is explored with particular strength in the apocalyptic context of Carey's Melanie stories. Melanie takes this knowledge of Sergeant's compromised power, and translates it into a desire to rescue

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<sup>6</sup> Dionysus is Director of Camp Half Blood (the Greek demigod camp); Chiron posed as Percy Jackson's Latin teacher, Mr. Brunner. On Percy Jackson and the reception of myth, see Joanna Paul, "The Half-Blood Hero: Percy Jackson and Mythmaking in the Twenty-First Century", in Vanda Zajko and Helena Hoyle, eds., *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, 231–240.



Miss Mailer. She expresses this through the image of being a “Greek warrior with a sword and a shield” (2816) from the *Iliad*, fighting off Heffalumps and Wozzles. Note the eclectic weaving together of different traditions, tones, and stories, which is often a characteristic of children’s culture and its engagement with myth (for instance, Pokemon or Harry Potter).<sup>7</sup> This fantasy becomes the main aspect of the scene that is transferred into the film.

As Melanie tries to figure out her position in the world, she continually comes back to the myth of Iphigenia and how she is or is not like it. The children are trying to persuade Miss Mailer to explain their situation fully to them, and Melanie asks who their parents are. The climax of this scene returns to the myth:

But Melanie wants to know one more thing, and she wants it badly enough that she even takes the chance of upsetting Miss Mailer some more. It’s because of her name being Greek, and what the Greeks sometimes used to do to their kids, at least in the ancient times when they were fighting a war against Troy. At the end of the lesson, she waits until Miss Mailer is close to her and she asks her question really quietly.

“Miss Mailer, were our moms and dads going to sacrifice us to the goddess Artemis? Is that why we’re here?” (2847–2850)

It is this question that drives Miss Mailer to explain their situation, and most powerfully, transgressively, to touch Melanie’s hair. Throughout, the story evokes Greek myth: Melanie thinks of the war between humans and hungries as “a big war like Greeks fighting Trojans” (2872); Sergeant describes her expression on hearing the explanation as “[f]ucking face all screwed up like a tragedy mask”; Melanie attacks him in turn with “You won’t get fair winds, whatever you may do. [...] No matter how many children you kill, the goddess Artemis won’t help you” (2897). The books Miss Mailer gives Melanie are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Her experience of hunger hurts “like a Trojan spear in Melanie’s heart” (2954). Their substitute teacher “looks like being in a room with all the children at the same time is like lying on an altar, at Aulis, with the priest of Artemis holding a knife to his throat” (2965). These continued reminders of Melanie’s fascination with Greek myth make sure that the story as a whole is interpreted with the Greeks in mind.

When the base is compromised by a hungry attack, we see how Melanie responds to traumatic change:

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<sup>7</sup> Other genres also use myth in an eclectic way – e.g., heavy-metal music; see K.F.B. Fletcher and Osman Umurhan, eds., *Classical Antiquity in Heavy Metal Music*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

She's confused and excited and very, very scared. Something new is happening. She senses it: something completely outside of her experience. (2985)

Left on her own after refusing to be put in her restraints without an explanation, she turns to the myth:

She remembers her book and gets it out. She reads about Hector and Achilles and Priam and Hecuba and Odysseus and Menelaus and Agamemnon and Helen. (3009)

The litany of exotic names represents comfort and escape, but the myth does not help Melanie suppress her hunger when Miss Mailer finally comes to rescue her: "[T]he hunger is bending Melanie's spine like Achilles bending his bow" (3030). Melanie's superhuman powers are assimilated to the power of the greatest Greek hero, and her suffering to the sufferings of Greek tragedy.<sup>8</sup> The trauma for Melanie is not the fighting and destruction around her as they hit the outside world, trying to get to the helicopters and the cure in Texas, but the desperate battle between her desire for human connections, particularly with Miss Mailer, and her physiological compulsion to bite, kill, and eat. When she realizes that she can use that to rescue Miss Mailer, to allow her helicopter to lift off, this bleak destruction becomes "a day of wishes coming true" (3107). She rescues Miss Mailer with her heroic powers, her superhuman violence, and the final sentence returns to the Iphigenia myth: "The goddess Artemis is appeased. The ships are gone on the fair wind" (3110). Melanie has sacrificed her innocence, childhood, and humanity to become a hero.

In the short story, the myth stays centre stage, gives hope and helps Melanie process her revelation about who she is, and decide what actions she will take. Iphigenia gives her a redemptive role to play, even though the story also implies that her choice leads to her own destruction. She cannot be a human with a normal life and normal relationships. Melanie's "childness" is central to the story and very closely connected to her obsession with Greek mythology. Although this is not a story for children, it is a story about the ways children's literature uses and responds to Greek myth.

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<sup>8</sup> It is odd that the reference is not to Odysseus here, since the idea of him taking vengeance suddenly from a position of hidden strength is eerily appropriate for Melanie. However, the intensity of Achilles' love for Patroclus and desire for revenge perhaps appropriately conveys Melanie's obsession with Miss Mailer. Achilles' bow is also the powerful weapon that will eventually cause the fall of Troy.

## Pandora and Choosing Hope

The novel, *Girl with All the Gifts* (2014), contains an interview with Carey, in which he addresses the questions of why he feels myth is important and what he is doing with it. He identifies "mythic archetypes" as a source of inspiration, suggesting that "stories that last [...] are the ones that touch on something really powerful or at least really universal" (473). He identifies the central myth of the short story as the *Iliad* and says:

When I came to write the novel, I took Melanie's story in a different direction and that myth didn't seem particularly relevant any more. What did, suddenly, seem almost scarily right and appropriate was the myth of Pandora's box. So I kept in all the scenes where Miss Justineau is reading to the kids from a book of Greek myths, but I changed out the myths we got to hear about. (473–474)

The novel, and the screenplay, represent a more populist form than the short story. Often in a transition from novel to film, for instance, classical references are cut as alienating.<sup>9</sup> Lynn Fotheringham has shown that the density of classical reference is much reduced in both novel and film.<sup>10</sup> However, Carey chose to retain the Greek mythological framework, even with a different myth, and the title of both products, along with the tag line of the film, offer the Pandora myth as the interpretative key to the story. Melanie is a new type of creature, an almost supernatural creation, a god-like, perhaps even immortal, symbiosis of fungus and human, who does not need to eat or drink much, is supernaturally intelligent, strong, and fast. Like Achilles, she resides outside the normal category of human, but like Pandora she is as much threat as gift. Carey says:

The beauty of the Pandora myth is that it's relevant in a lot of different ways. We keep on returning to it, and it means something different each time. And of course, when you reach the end of the book, you realise exactly how Melanie's choice mirrors Pandora's. (474)

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<sup>9</sup> This downgrading of classical references during the shift from book to film can be seen with J.K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts* series, as I discuss in Helen Lovatt, "Fantastic Beasts and Where They Come From: How Greek Are Harry Potter's Mythical Animals?", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 449–470.

<sup>10</sup> Paper presented by Dr Lynn Fotheringham at the Classical Association Annual Conference, in Edinburgh in April 2016.

Carey also discusses the significance of post-apocalyptic fiction as a genre, reflecting on its affinity with myth:

The apocalypse starts as a wiping of the slate. A rebirth. [...] [P]ost-apocalyptic fiction uses the sweeping away of the here-and-now to explore the question of what endures. What defines us. (472)<sup>11</sup>

What endures is the story: we are human through the telling of stories.

We can see how Carey swaps Iphigenia for Pandora by comparing the novel with the short story: the second sentence is now: "She likes the name Pandora a whole lot, but you don't get to choose" (1). Instead of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, she finds out about the Pandora story, which becomes her favourite, and she asks Miss Justineau to read it again and again. Miss Justineau even uses the book's title in the initial explanation of the story: "She was a really amazing woman. All the gods had blessed her and given her gifts. That's what her name means – 'the girl with all the gifts'" (12). Nevertheless, Carey maintains themes and characterization: where before Melanie questioned the treatment of Clytemnestra, here she questions the blaming of Pandora:

Melanie said she didn't think it was right to blame Pandora for what happened, because it was a trap that Zeus had set for mortals and he made her be the way she was on purpose, just so the trap would get sprung. (13)

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<sup>11</sup> On the twenty-first century interest in post-apocalyptic fiction, see Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz, eds., *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, London: Routledge, 2013; Heather J. Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity beyond Salvage*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, esp. 105–136 on zombie kitsch. On one particular post-apocalyptic subgenre (environmental apocalypse), with a focus on the young adult audience and ecofeminism, see Alice Curry, *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Sarah K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Bartlett, and Amy L. Montz, eds., *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, New York, NY: Farnham, 2014, show the importance of rebellious female characters in recent young adult fiction. Claudia Nelson and Anne Morey, *Topologies of the Classical World in Children's Fiction: Palimpsests, Maps and Fractals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, in ch. 6, address conflict and narrative space in contemporary young adult fantasies, exploring the use of the classical world in dystopian young adult fiction. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, eds., *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2003, 196–199, include an interview with Lois Lowry, author of *The Giver* (1993), in which Lowry emphasizes the importance of a hopeful ending for young adult audiences: "Yes, I think they need to see some hope for such a world. I can't imagine writing a book that doesn't have a hopeful ending" (199).

Melanie here sets the stage for readers to view her as a new type of being, while Miss Justineau, in contrast, links the story to gender politics:

“Say it loud, sister,” Miss Justineau said. “Men get the pleasure, women get the rap.” (13)

In the novel and the film, Melanie is given greater agency: she writes her own myth, which makes public the fantasy of saving the teacher figure, kept internal in the short story. A beautiful woman is being attacked by a monster:

But then a little girl came along. She was a special little girl, made by all the gods, like Pandora. And she was like Achilles too, because her mother (the beautiful, amazing woman) had dipped her in the water of the River Styx. (19)

The other teacher, the authority figure rather than the object of desire, questions her intensively about it, which makes Melanie feel that the story becomes real:

Like she saved Miss Justineau from a monster, and Miss Justineau hugged her. Which is better than a million Greek myths. (20)

It seems that Carey is outdoing his former self: in the short story, the emotional climax comes when Miss Mailer hugs Melanie. Melanie's own story in the novel takes on some of this material from Carey's short story. But this Melanie, the Melanie of the novel, will go beyond that story and its climactic emotional moment, while remaining dependent on her attachment to the teacher figure: she will refuse to sacrifice herself and will move into the wider world and create an entirely new narrative and a new world to go with it.

The conversation about death and parents, too, is changed to bring in Pandora and bring out Melanie's independence:

And by this time, Melanie has thought of the big exception to that rule about kids having mothers and fathers – Pandora, who didn't have a mother or a father because Zeus just made her out of gloopy clay. Melanie thinks that would be better, in some ways, than having a mother and a father who you never even got to meet. The ghost of her parents' absence hovers around her, makes her uneasy. (24)

The word “gloopy” emphasizes her still child-like interest in texture and play. But her rejection of the idea of parents foreshadows her rejection of the human past. In this version, she will not discover the truth about her nature and birth until much later on, and will largely deduce it for herself. She self-defines, self-creates, using myth to build her own image of herself.

The novel is not wholly narrated from Melanie’s viewpoint: Helen Justineau, Caroline Caldwell, Kieran Gallagher, and Sergeant Parks all have sections told from their perspectives. But Melanie is the only character who thinks about the world through Greek myth. Each character has their own traumas: Miss Justineau had run over a child before the apocalypse; Dr Caldwell had narrowly missed out in joining the original scientific team; Gallagher was abused as a boy by his alcoholic family; and Parks lost his wife and child. Occasionally other characters show an interest or are affected by Melanie’s investment in Greek myth: when Miss Justineau is in conflict with Dr Caldwell about dissecting the children, Melanie’s requests for Greek myth restore calm and resolve for her (90). Melanie thinks of Miss Justineau as Prometheus fighting Dr Caldwell as Zeus (114). Miss Justineau instead tends to think of Melanie as a character in a fairy tale, for instance:

Melanie is wandering around, somewhere outside, like Red Riding Hood in the deep, dark, woods, surrounded by men who are firing automatic weapons. (124)

Until, that is, Melanie rescues her from those very men, and Miss Justineau realizes that Melanie herself is a powerful weapon (127).

Pandora is not always an efficacious point of reference, though: as in the short story, Melanie is given a book. The book is now *Tales the Muses Told* by Roger Lancelyn Green, but it still smells of Miss Justineau, and creates hunger so powerful it equates to myth:

It’s still scary – a rebellion of her body against her mind, as though she’s Pandora wanting to open the box and it doesn’t matter how many times she’s been told not to, she’s just been built so she *has* to, and she can’t make herself stop. But finally Melanie gets used to the smell [...]. The hunger gets less and less, and when it’s all gone, Melanie is still there. (92–93)

Melanie herself, here, is both the box and its contents, both evils and hope: when she learns to control herself, she herself is the hope that remains. It turns

out that Melanie is not just built that way; she does have agency and self-control. She can decide whether or not to open the box. The stories in the book of Greek myth in this version are less important than the book's manifestation as a physical object and its human connection to Miss Justineau, but Melanie's interaction with it is still framed by her reference to the myth of Pandora.

In the process of escaping from the base, Melanie rescues Miss Justineau by eating some of the attackers (rogue survivors called "Junkers"). She struggles with two major traumas: the shock of being outside and losing her entire world, the existence, boundaries, and routine that she has had up to this point, and coming to terms with what she is capable of and who she is. At this point, the story comes back to myth. Melanie has a choice between continuing with the humans or striking out on her own. As she thinks back, she

knows that home is just an idea now to be visited in memories [...]. All she has to describe to herself how she feels now – is stories she's been told, about Moses not getting to see that land where there was all the milk, and Aeneas running away after Troy fell down. (154)

Here Carey equates Bible stories and ancient myth as similarly powerful and resonant: both Moses and Aeneas are images of refugees who escape from horror and destruction with the aim of creating a new future. As she processes the trauma of her own ability to kill, Melanie does not understand why Miss Justineau has told her she is not to blame for killing the men:

The question is hanging over her like a weight, and she can't be content until it's answered. Finally, uncertainly, she nods. Because she's found a way of looking at it that makes it not so bad at all – a thought that's lying at the bottom of the sadness and the worry like hope lying underneath all the terrible things in Pandora's box.

From now on, every day will be a Miss Justineau day. (155)

Here the myth helps her to process loss – and love. Biblical stories and the *Aeneid* are explicit analogies for her situation, but the Pandora story allows her to reflect on her emotional state. But does it also normalize ruthless brutality and destruction? She sees her own nature as terrifying and destructive, but the hope at the base of her feelings is partly about her human relationship with Miss Justineau, but equally about her control of her situation and fundamentally getting what she wants. The hope, as in the Pandora myth, is double-edged:

it is not clear whether hope represents the compensation for the evils Pandora released, or the final evil, the one that compounds the others by making humans endure them again and again.<sup>12</sup>

A further encounter puts another spin on the myth's significance for Melanie and for the novel. During the road trip taken by the main characters, they come across, on the edge of a zone deliberately cleared by explosions, the outlines of two instantly destroyed humans against the wall of an ordinary house, adult and child, like finding the empty shells formed by bodies in Pompeii.<sup>13</sup> Melanie measures herself against the child's shadow and reflects on how she could have been normal, could have enacted all the stories she has heard:

What she thinks is: *this could have been me*. [...] Growing up and growing old. Playing. Exploring. Like Pooh and Piglet. And then like the Famous Five. And then like Heidi and Anne of Green Gables. And then like Pandora, opening the great big box of the world and not being afraid, not even caring whether what's inside is good or bad. Because it's both. Everything is always both.

But you have to open it to find out. (242)

Here we have the rationale for Melanie's ultimate decision, which could be a motto from a change-management handbook. Her longing to impersonate the characters of children's literature is disrupted by the idea of Pandora's box. The end of the world is not inherently a bad thing: there were bad and good things in that world as there are in this one. Pandora's box simply represents life, and curiosity is the act of living. This is the "slate wiped clean" which Carey mentions as an important aspect of post-apocalyptic fiction. Pandora's box also represents the transition to adulthood which is central to much young adult fiction: by leaving behind the innocence of childhood, children take responsibility for the world around them and gain agency and the ability to take control.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of early ancient versions of the Pandora myth, see Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 155–165. The most important early source is Hesiod (*Op.* 69–105), but scholars have long argued over whether the Greek *elpis* (the last remaining thing in Pandora's jar after all the evils have escaped) should be translated as 'hope' or 'expectation'. See Liz Warman, "Hope in a Jar", *Mouseion* 4.2 (2004), 107–119, for a summary of the debate.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Roberts, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, London: British Museum Press, 2013, for an exhibition catalogue that introduces this material.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of one example of the *Bildungsroman* in young adult fiction, see Michael M. Levy, "Lois Lowry's *The Giver*: Interrupted Bildungsroman or Ambiguous Dystopia?", *Foundation* 70 (1997), 50–57.



Pandora equally functions as a useful image for moral thinking in Melanie's mind: as she comes to understand her place in the world, Miss Justineau explains why Dr Caldwell wanted to cut her up. Melanie links this evil action towards a greater end with the failed attempt to control the infection by the "important-decision people":

It's not just Pandora who had that inescapable flaw. It seems like everyone has been built in a way that sometimes makes them do wrong and stupid things. Or *almost* everyone. Not Miss Justineau, of course. (245)

In the film, the only reference to Greek myth is in the title, poster, and the first classroom scene, where Melanie hears the Pandora story for the first time, and it becomes a voice-over. In the novel, all the references to Greek myth come through the free indirect discourse of Melanie: they determine her identity and she takes ownership of them. Her curiosity is associated with her childness, as is her openness to stories, her reliance on stories. At the very end of the film, she repeats a moment from the beginning, where she asks Miss Justineau for a story, and Miss Justineau replies: "If we have time". But now Melanie is in control and says quietly to herself and the audience: "Oh we will have plenty of time". In the novel the last thought comes from Miss Justineau, outside but in a sealed suit, engaging with the children. Here she controls the agenda and herself refers back to the beginnings of her relationship with Melanie: "Greek myth and quadratic equations will come later" (460).

## Medium and Reception

The short story is much more engaged with both myth and children's literature than either novel or film. When myth is retained in the novel, it is the property of the child character. It helps her to process trauma, come to a new understanding of the world, develop moral thinking, and take control of her situation. It can also be used to justify cruelty and brutality. In the film, the storytelling is much more economical: in Melanie's story about saving Miss Justineau, for instance, she mentions Achilles but not Pandora, probably because Pandora has only just been used as an example and it would be heavy-handed to mention it again so soon. In any case, Pandora frames the whole film: the title, the tag line, the main introductory thematic moment. But myth is used carefully so as not to exclude audience members: it can give another level of meaning if you

want to refer back to it, but you do not in fact have to in order to understand and respond emotionally to the characters.

Nearly all cultural products, not just children's products, operate to create openness to multiple audiences.<sup>15</sup> The score for the film, with its eerie drumbeats and aulos-like modes, further evokes music often associated with productions of Greek tragedy.<sup>16</sup> Another possible reference to Greek culture and myth comes in the mask restraint that Melanie wears throughout much of the road journey: although it is transparent, the shape and holes for eyes and mouth evoke Greek theatrical masks, as well as serial killers, such as Hannibal Lecter.<sup>17</sup>

The structure of the plot in the film is also tragic, with the confrontation between Dr Caldwell and Melanie forming both ἀναγνώρισις (*anagnōrisis*; recognition) and περιπέτεια (*peripeteia*; turning point): at the same moment Melanie realizes that Dr Caldwell accepts her humanity, she decides to open the box for a new type of human future. Dr Caldwell tries to persuade her to sacrifice herself for Miss Justineau, as she had done in the short story, but Melanie chooses the other children like her, as she does in the novel. So she consciously refuses to be Iphigenia, and instead makes her own version of Pandora. The flames that set spore sacs alight and signal the end of humanity are both beacon and funeral pyre. "Beacon" is the name of the surviving enclave of human civilization, which at this point in the film has been revealed to have fallen: the fire symbolizes hope, just as earlier in the film Beacon symbolized hope and a goal to aim for. The essential metamorphosis in the end is like an apotheosis: Melanie has changed from sacrifice to god, from deer to Artemis. Her effectiveness as hunter reinforces this connection: she watches, she sniffs, she follows; she scouts out routes and catches food. She uses these hunting skills to take control over the other hungry children. She transcends gender, ethnicity, age, and, apparently, by the end of the film, mortality.

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<sup>15</sup> See Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, on the hidden audiences that are a defining feature of children's literature.

<sup>16</sup> The score by Cristobal Tapia de Veer was well received: e.g., J. Hubner, in a blog post from 6 April 2020, "What's the Score? Volume One: Cristobal Tapia de Veer's 'The Girl with All the Gifts'", on the blog *Complex Distractions*, <https://complexdistractions.blog/2020/04/06/whats-the-score-volume-one-cristobal-tapia-de-veers-the-girl-with-all-the-gifts/> (accessed 19 May 2020), calls it "something quite unique and one-of-a-kind" and compares it to the score by Johann Johannsson for *Arrival* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2016). He talks of "[m]ournful, alien melodies appear[ing] like sad choruses from the past or future", emphasizing the sense of otherness and equating that otherness with both the future depicted in the film and the far past evoked by Greek myth.

<sup>17</sup> In *Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991).

Both novel and film have been popular with young audiences. The generally unfavourable review in *Variety* by Jay Weissberg associates the film negatively with young audiences:

Maybe the premise seemed marginally original at one time, but few outside teen audiences will think Mike Carey's adaptation of his own novel is anything more than another tired attempt to board the zombie bandwagon. [...] A few curse words together with some zombie gobbles take the film outside the children's market, making it hard to guess the target audience.<sup>18</sup>

Another to make the connection is Katie Rife at *AV Club*:

And by blending it with the common YA trope of a young female protagonist who leads the world into a new revolutionary era, they almost get there [...] but the real draw here is the young people. Who, probably not coincidentally, are the ones who will enjoy *The Girl With All The Gifts* the most.<sup>19</sup>

Quite a number of reviewers also mention the Pandora references – for instance, James Marsh in the *South China Morning Post*:

As Melanie grows increasingly aware of the dark powers she wields, the film becomes her rite of passage, making frequent reference to the Greek myth of Pandora, as she decides how best to use her "gifts".<sup>20</sup>

This reviewer also resists the link with young adult audiences: "*The Girl with all the Gifts* resists the temptation to become a young adult reimagining of *28 Days Later*". And Mark Kermode in the *Observer* notes: "[W]e sympathise with Melanie's Pandora-esque plight even as her presence brings chaos and

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<sup>18</sup> Jay Weissberg, "Film Review: 'The Girl with All the Gifts'", *Variety*, 3 August 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/the-girl-with-all-the-gifts-review-1201829687/> (accessed 19 May 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Katie Rife, "*The Girl with All The Gifts* Tries to Put a Fresh Spin on Overripe Zombie Clichés", *AV Club*, 23 February 2017, <http://www.avclub.com/review/girl-all-gifts-tries-put-fresh-spin-over-ripe-zombi-250838> (accessed 19 May 2020).

<sup>20</sup> James Marsh, "Film Review: *The Girl with All the Gifts* – Inventive British Thriller Keeps the Zombie Trend Alive", *South China Morning Post*, 27 February 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/culture/film-tv/article/2074293/film-review-girl-all-gifts-inventive-british-thriller-keeps-zombie-mUMCvBxKtffMg3vf.99> (accessed 19 May 2020).

confusion".<sup>21</sup> It is clear that the film is perceived as closely connected with both Greek myth and younger audiences, and its use of young adult modes and themes, along with its generic status as "not-quite-zombie movie", are both a source of power and a temptation to react dismissively.

## Generational Conflict and Capturing the Past

It has been a feature of much recent popular culture to relate to classical gods by fighting against them.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in the remake of *Clash of the Titans* (dir. Louis Leterrier, 2010), Perseus fights against the gods rather than fulfilling his narrative destiny;<sup>23</sup> Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (2005–2009) is continually pulled between conflict and allegiance to the demigods' divine parents. In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (dir. James Gunn, 2017), Peter Quill/Starlord must choose between his divine father and his friends, by killing his father.

In fact, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* is a particularly apt comparison to *Girl with All the Gifts* because the divine father, like the fungus, has the ambition of converting the universe into himself by planting his essence on every planet and literally consuming them.<sup>24</sup> In a sense, this intergenerational conflict is already drawing on the myth of Zeus and Kronos as the father who consumes his own children. But it also validates a radical rejection of the past and structures of authority.<sup>25</sup> In terms of narrative archetypes, the hero ends up killing the mentor figure that has the power to help him through his narrative difficulties, almost assaulting the story pattern itself.

*Girl with All the Gifts* takes this even further: Melanie not only rejects human society and science in the figure of Dr Caldwell; she preserves but also imprisons and controls the past in the shape of Miss Justineau. She is not in the

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Kermode, "The *Girl with All the Gifts* Review: Provocative and Imaginative", *The Observer*, 25 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/25/the-girl-with-all-the-gifts-review-glenn-close-gemma-arterton> (accessed 19 May 2020).

<sup>22</sup> On ancient theomachy and its reception, see Pramit Chaudhuri, *The War with God: Theomachy in Roman Imperial Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> On the 2010 *Clash of the Titans*, see Steven J. Green, "Perseus on the Psychiatrist's Couch in Leterrier's *Clash of the Titans* (2010): Harryhausen Reloaded for 21st Century", *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies: Conference Proceedings* 1 (2013), 75–85.

<sup>24</sup> The dangerous fantasy of divine parentage, which can lead to destruction (of the world? of the character?), is also central to the Phaethon myth.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Osmond, "Time to Die: Zombie as Educational Evolution in *The Girl with All the Gifts*", *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 34.5 (2019), 66–74, reflects on the film's portrayal of teachers and its resonances for hope in education systems, particularly public education in the United States.

end Pandora, but Zeus. She makes her own world that has no room for adults except as a carefully curated and mediated source of cultural continuity, consolidating her own power over her peers. *Girl with All the Gifts* is then a fantasy of complete rupture, of the power of young people, but also a horror at the loss of continuity with the past. Classical myth is not, then, a bolt-on to this story, but central to its thematic significance. The contemporary world, in the shape of London, has become a reworking of ancient societies destroyed and only partially understood. The survival of ideas and stories in an entirely alien environment, where they are completely repurposed and barely comprehensible, is a profoundly pessimistic reading of our relationship with the past. The power and resilience of the young is ultimately destructive in this reading. The storytelling leaves us in the end with two perspectives, that of Melanie and of Miss Justineau, which between them embody hope for the future and loss of the past. We must look on the likelihood of the destruction of human civilization from the point of view of the flowers in the fields that now come into their own.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Leah Heim, "On Fungi, Future, and Feminism: An Ecofeminist Analysis of M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*", *Digital Literature Review* 5 (2018), 84–98, performs an ecofeminist reading of Carey's novel. She sees the end of the novel as ultimately reproducing patriarchal modes of power, in Melanie's violent seizing of control and her use of the fungus to destroy the remaining humans. There is certainly a sense in which the final scene replicates the opening scenes, in a repressive schoolroom controlled by violence. However, control has passed from Sergeant Parks to Melanie, herself a product of the marriage of human and fungus, and from a situation where education is used as a tool of subjugation and objectification (their test scores are objects of study) to a situation where education itself is the point. It is not clear, in fact, whether Melanie will reproduce patriarchy or find a new way. Her continued obsession with Greek myths and her use of Greek myths as inspiration for agency suggests that she will repurpose the culture of humanity in a way that will completely reshape it as artists throughout the generations have reshaped and reappropriated Greek myths. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths*, London: Wildfire, 2020, has made a strong case for Greek myth as a force for subversive reimagining.

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana  
From the editorial review

*Our Mythical Hope* is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College  
From the editorial review



Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" [...]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. [...] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw  
From the introductory chapter

