

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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CONTENTS

Katarzyna Marciniak, *What Is Mythical Hope in Children's and Young Adults' Culture? – or: Sharing the Light* 11

Notes on Contributors 47

List of Figures 59

Part I: Playing with the Past

Véronique Dasen, *Playing with Life Uncertainties in Antiquity* 71

Rachel Bryant Davies, "This Is the Modern Horse of Troy": *The Trojan Horse as Nineteenth-Century Children's Entertainment and Educational Analogy* 89

Part II: The Roots of Hope

Katarzyna Jerzak, *Myth and Suffering in Modern Culture: The Discursive Role of Myth from Oscar Wilde to Woodkid* 131

Marguerite Johnson, "For the Children": *Children's Columns in Australian Newspapers during the Great War – Mythic Hope, or Mythic Indoctrination?* 145

Jan Kieniewicz, *Bandar-Log in Action: The Polish Children's Experience of Disaster in Literature and Mythology* 159

Simon J.G. Burton and Marilyn E. Burton, *Mythical Delight and Hope in C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces and Chronicles of Narnia* 179

Part III: Holding Out for a Hero... and a Heroine

N.J. Lowe, *How to Become a Hero* 193

Robert A. Sucharski, *Joe Alex (Maciej Słomczyński) and His Czarne okręty [Black Ships]: A History of a Trojan Boy in Times of the Minoan Thalassocracy* 211

Michael Stierstorfer, *From an Adolescent Freak to a Hope-Spreading Messianic Demigod: The Curious Transformations of Modern Teenagers in Contemporary Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature* (Percy Jackson, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Syrena Legacy) 219

Markus Janka, *Heraclēs/Hercules as the Hero of a Hopeful Culture in Ancient Poetry and Contemporary Literature and Media for Children and Young Adults* 231

Susan Deacy, *Hercules: Bearer of Hope for Autistic Children?* 251

Edoardo Pecchini, *Promoting Mental Health through the Classics: Hercules as Trainer in Today's Labours of Children and Young People* 275

Krishni Burns, *La Fontaine's Reeds: Adapting Greek Mythical Heroines to Model Resilience* 327

Part IV: Hope after Tragedy

- Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *New Hope for Old Stories: Yiyun Li's Gilgamesh and Ali Smith's Antigone* **345**
- Edith Hall, *Our Greek Tragic Hope: Young Adults Overcoming Family Trauma in New Novels by Natalie Haynes and Colm Tóibín* **371**
- Hanna Paulouskaya, *Turning to Myth: The Soviet School Film Growing Up* **387**
- Divine Che Neba and Daniel A. Nkemleke, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons and Osiris Rising as Pan-African Epics* **413**

Part V: Brand New Hope

- Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, *The Utopia of an Ideal Community: Reconsidering the Myth of Atlantis in James Gurney's Dinotopia: The World Beneath* **433**
- Elizabeth Hale, *Mystery, Childhood, and Meaning in Ursula Dubosarsky's The Golden Day* **451**
- Babette Puetz, *When Is a Robot a Human? Hope, Myth, and Humanity in Bernard Beckett's Genesis* **471**
- Helen Lovatt, *Hungry and Hopeful: Greek Myths and Children of the Future in Mike Carey's Melanie Stories* **491**
- Lisa Maurice, *Percy Jackson and Israeli Fan Fiction: A Case Study* **511**
- Katerina Volioti, *Images of Hope: The Gods in Greek Books for Young Children* **531**
- Ayelet Peer, *Growing Up Manga Style: Mythological Reception in Yoshikazu Yasuhiko's Arion Manga* **555**
- Anna Mik, Et in (Disney) Arcadia ego: *In Search of Hope in the 1940 Fantasia* **577**
- Elżbieta Olechowska, *Between Hope and Destiny in the Young Adult Television Series Once Upon a Time, Season 5, Episodes 12–21 (2016)* **593**

Part VI: Behold Hope All Ye Who Enter Here...

- Jerzy Axer, *Kotick the Saviour: From Inferno to Paradise with Animals* **613**
- Krzysztof Rybak, *All Is (Not) Lost: Myth in the Shadow of the Holocaust in Bezsenność Jutki [Jutka's Insomnia] by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala* **629**
- Owen Hodgkinson, *Orphic Resonances of Love and Loss in David Almond's A Song for Ella Grey* **645**
- Katarzyna Marciniak, *"I Found Hope Again That Night...": The Orphean Quest of Beauty and the Beast* **669**
- Bibliography **721**
- Index of Names **807**
- Index of the Main Concepts and Mythological Figures **819**

PART IV

Hope after Tragedy



OUR GREEK TRAGIC HOPE: YOUNG ADULTS
OVERCOMING FAMILY TRAUMA
IN NEW NOVELS BY NATALIE HAYNES
AND COLM TÓIBÍN

In 2017 Natalie Haynes published an excellent novel based on the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* of Sophocles, told from the perspectives of Jocasta and Ismene. The accounts of both women begin when they are adolescents. This means that the novel would make suitable reading for teenagers or young adults, even though it is not marketed as such. But what makes Haynes's *The Children of Jocasta*¹ so suitable for discussion in this particular volume is that it turns the story of one of Classical Antiquity's most horrifically traumatized legendary families into a parable of hope. Despite the most acute domestic and political challenges, a very young person's loyalty, calm, resilience, spiritedness, and most of all the exercise of her critical intelligence, allow her to end her own story, and even that of the house of Labdacus, on a note of open-minded optimism.

I.

Any teenager who has experienced or is soon to experience bereavement would find much to relate to in *The Children of Jocasta*; members of modern families trying to process such taboo issues as incest, suicide, teen pregnancy, perinatal death of an infant, adoption, fostering, or domestic violence would find helpful and emotionally frank explorations of them here, but set at a comforting cultural

¹ Natalie Haynes, *The Children of Jocasta*, London: Mantle, 2017. For the book's cover, see Fig. 2.

distance in the royal palace of Bronze Age Thebes. As it has been put by Erik Christian Haugaard, the author of acclaimed historical fiction for children and young adults:

When you write a story that takes place in times long past, you are more free. Your readers have less prejudice and will accept your tale with open minds. You and your reader have less at stake, and thus you might get nearer to the truth, possibly even to reality.²

In generic terms, Haynes's novel traces its ancestry on the stemma of historical fiction based on ancient mythological narratives via Adèle Geras's female-centred *Troy* (2000) and *Ithaka* (2005), told by an orphaned granddaughter of Eurycleia, and *The Penelopiad* (2005) by Margaret Atwood. These in turn look back to Christa Wolf's 1983 *Kassandra* and Inge Merkel's 1987 *Eine ganz gewöhnliche Ehe. Odysseus und Penelope*.³ Merkel's novel constituted a rewriting of the *Odyssey* from the largely realist perspective of the women Odysseus left behind – above all Penelope, with Eurycleia's role also enjoying an upgrade. But retellings of the stories enacted in Greek tragedies have been thinner on the ground. The trend, if it can be called that yet, has coincided with the rediscovery, since the 1980s, of Greek tragedy in the performance repertoires of mainstream professional theatres.⁴ It has accelerated over the last two decades, since Wolf's influential novel *Medea* (1996).⁵ Her rewriting of Euripides' evergreen tragedy by the same name tackled, in the voices of Medea and other characters in Bronze Age Corinth, the history of Wolf's tense relationship with the communist party of the German Democratic Republic. By giving voice to multiple witnesses of the action, this novel showed how the version of the myth staged by Euripides, in which Medea, notoriously, murders her own young sons, might have arisen from rumours that palace spin doctors had spread maliciously, in order to frame her as a perceived "enemy of the people".⁶

² Erik Christian Haugaard, "Only a Lampholder: Writing Historical Fiction", in Barbara Harrison and Gregory Maguire, eds., *Innocence & Experience: Essays & Conversations on Children's Literature*, New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1987, 270.

³ Published in Salzburg by Residenz Verlag. See Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2008, 124–126.

⁴ See Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley, eds., *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁵ See Edith Hall, "Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Subjectivity in Recent Fiction", *Classical Receptions Journal* 1.1 (2009), 23–42.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

Until recently, the most successful English-language novel recasting a Greek tragedy was Barry Unsworth's dazzling *Songs of the Kings* (2002). Unsworth skilfully retold the terrible story of the human sacrifice of a princess in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, implying that myths may have been doctored in Antiquity by bards and royal propagandists. Since he uses Iphigenia and her teenage slave woman as two of his key narrators, it, too, is inviting to younger adult readers. I recently recommended it to a school where students of both Classics and drama were performing Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* in English, and was told that discussing the novel had proved extremely useful in getting these teenaged actors to think about their roles.

But Haynes (of whom more later) was not the only significant writer to throw down the gauntlet to Unsworth with her 2017 novel. So did Colm Tóibín, a world literary superstar and giant amongst storytellers, with his *House of Names*.⁷

2.

Like Unsworth's novel, *House of Names* (see Fig. 1) is based on the myth of the house of Atreus, but this time it uses the version told in Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*. It is a masterpiece and also ends on a reasonably positive note, if not as hopeful a one as Haynes's novel. But it could be beneficial to younger readers, especially those who have seen civil war or family trauma, especially abusive or violent mother-figures, or who are gay or have gay friends. Young people appreciate frankness on issues which are part of their experience of puberty and its aftermath. Two young adult novels set in Classical Antiquity which were condemned by adults as too sexually honest for teenagers are demonstrably much enjoyed by their intended readership, namely *Sirena* (1998) and *The Great God Pan* (2003) by Donna Jo Napoli, who studied Classics.⁸

In hindsight it seems inevitable that Tóibín would one day rewrite a Greek tragedy, since it is a genre obsessed with intergenerational strife. From Tóibín's pen we have come accustomed to rites-of-passage novels about young adults asserting their independence while acknowledging their ancestral roots, as in *Brooklyn* (2009). He is a searing evoker of familial relationships, especially in be-reaved Irish families, as in *The Heather Blazing* (1992) and *Nora Webster* (2014).

⁷ First published in 2017 by Viking, in London.

⁸ See the remarks of Bernice E. Cullinan, Bonnie L. Kunzel, and Deborah A. Wooten, eds., *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Young Adult Literature*, New York, NY, and London: Continuum, 2005, 529.

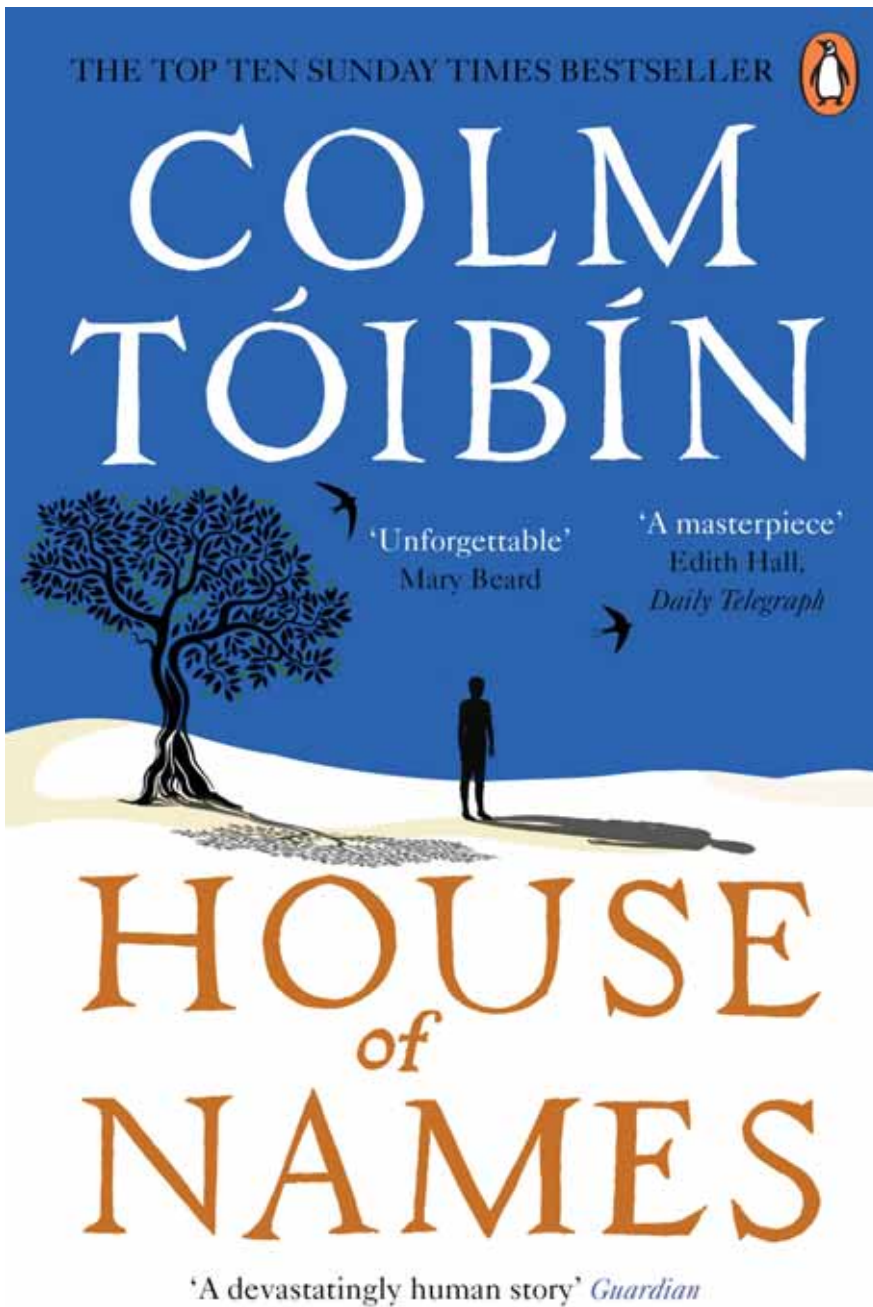


Figure 1: Cover of Colm Tóibín, *House of Names*, London: Penguin, 2018 (ed. pr. 2017), cover design: gray318. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

His painful dissection of relationships between female parents and male offspring came under the microscope in his short-story collection *Mothers and Sons* (2006). He has already written a novel set in an ancient Mediterranean context, *The Testament of Mary* (2012), in which Jesus' mourning mother rails against her plight in a style Tóibín has acknowledged was inspired by the rhetoric of the angriest heroines of Greek tragedy, especially Medea.⁹ In *House of Names* Tóibín finally moves us directly to Archaic Greece, but the novel fuses all these hallmarks of his previous work in a magnificent evocation of a troubled community undergoing two decades of reciprocal atrocity. The period is co-extensive with the maturation of the central character, Orestes, from early childhood. He experiences his sister Iphigenia being sacrificed by his father, Agamemnon, and eventually responds to his mother's, Clytemnestra's, retributive killing of Agamemnon by murdering her himself.

Tóibín's Ancient Greece, riven by brutal feuds, owes much to his background in Ireland during the Troubles and his grandfather's involvement with the IRA.¹⁰ Knowledge that the Troubles came to their historical ending with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 functions to offer the reader hope. The grim catalogue of reciprocal violence in *House of Names* does seem at its close to have been stopped in its tracks, with the central political problems in ancient Argos at least partially resolved. The promise of hope in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* may be one reason why the vendetta-rich trilogy had previously attracted several of Tóibín's compatriots: it was used to address the Irish situation in Tom Murphy's play *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's drama *In the Border Country* for Channel 4 television (1991), Seamus Heaney's poetry collection *The Spirit Level* (1996), and Marina Carr's tragedy *Ariel* (2002).¹¹ But Tóibín's ancient Argos under Clytemnestra's rule is more sinister still.

Children disappear without trace, guards are found murdered in palace corridors, and entire families massacred in local farmhouses. Surreptitious sexual encounters and whispered interchanges take place continuously. Prisoners languish in secret underground cells built into the citadel's foundations; chain-gangs of slaves

⁹ See Colm Tóibín, "The Inspiration for *The Testament of Mary*", *The Guardian*, 19 October 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/19/inspiration-testament-mary-colm-toibin> (accessed 24 April 2020).

¹⁰ Edith Hall, "House of Names", *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 May 2017.

¹¹ See Marianne McDonald, "Thomas Murphy's Interview", in Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992, 187–200, and Edith Hall, "Iphigenia and Her Mother at Aulis: A Study in the Revival of a Euripidean Classic", in John M. Dillon and S.E. Wilmer, eds., *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today*, London: Methuen, 2005, 3–41.

are suddenly transported from one part of the Peloponnese to another. Although fleeting alliances are formed in order to wreak revenge or secure temporary power, nobody can trust anyone else for long, and a raised eyebrow or a downward glance can indicate that an outrage has been perpetrated, as it were, "offstage". For Tóibín has found fruitful ways to exploit the theatrical nature of the text he is recasting. The metaphor of role-playing underpins much of his psychological portrait-painting. Spies and messengers arrive with grim news from far away. Like the ancient trilogy on which it is based, the action takes place in a small number of identifiable locations – the royal palace, the coastal sanctuary where Iphigenia died, a remote prison camp, and the old woman's farmhouse where Orestes grew up after being kidnapped. The potential hazard of a sprawling time frame is avoided by deft condensation of the story into a handful of key sequences; carefully insinuated flashbacks and memories remind us that these vengeance killings, which it is imperative must cease, are rooted in a tradition of fratricide now generations old.

At the heart of the novel, Orestes is in hiding in the farmhouse. With an accidentally acquired "family" consisting of the old woman and two other boys, he is enjoying the nearest approximation to a happy household he will ever experience. In this episode of temporary felicity and calm, twin narratives are embedded side by side. They both feature swans and represent what Tóibín suggests is an affinity between Greek and Irish legend. The first is the story of Helen of Troy. There are no proper names provided, but the identities, imprinted on Irish consciousness forever by William Butler Yeats's exquisite poem "Leda and the Swan" (1923), are unmistakable: it is the tale of the most beautiful girl that anyone had ever seen, the product of the mating between a god disguised as a swan and a mortal woman. She had two doomed brothers (which readers recognize as Castor and Pollux) and a sister (Clytemnestra); her beauty caused the Trojan War, which has left Greece in its current miserable state, bereft of a generation of its men. The second tale, told by Orestes' sickly friend Mitros, is the old Irish legend *The Children of Lir*, in which the wicked stepmother of Lir's four youngsters turns them into swans. They must undergo 900 years of exile before they can escape her spell. The fusion of the Greek and Irish traditions is crystallized in the figure of Clytemnestra, who returns in the penultimate chapter to haunt Orestes, her murderer: in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* Clytemnestra's ghost does briefly appear, but Tóibín's disembodied, restless dead matriarch takes just as much inspiration from Aoife, the callous stepmother in the Irish saga, punished by being transformed into an air demon for eternity.

Yet, where the Greek myth ends in misery, the Irish story holds out certain hope that redemption will become possible for the cygnets in remote posterity.

Tóibín ends his novel with Orestes and Electra, although scarred by all that has befallen them and all that they have done, facing a new future with some promise of moderate stability and at least modest happiness. Another element of tragic theatre which Tóibín retains is the use of direct speech for Clytemnestra and Electra, who tell their bleak tales of alienation, hatred, and revenge in bald first-person sentences which sometimes sound like transcripts of police interviews. The sequences focusing on Orestes, on the other hand, are in the third person; yet, paradoxically, we become much more intimate with him than with his womenfolk, and far more sympathetic towards him. In common with several of Tóibín's leading men, he grows up sensing that he is what we now call "gay"; he is too gentle, hesitant, and naive to live up to the expectations others have of him in terms of reprisals for his father's death and seizure of the Argive throne. He is consistently outmanoeuvred by his mother and her lover Aegisthus, and subsequently struggles to decode the motives of his quicker-witted sister and his best friend, the commoner but alpha-male Leander, for whom he harbours an unrequited romantic passion. But the reader is deeply engaged with Orestes' consciousness, and the finale of the novel, which departs decisively from the conclusion of the Aeschylean trilogy, is a cliffhanger. Orestes does survive, and he survives equipped with some reasonably successful relationships and a new baby (not his, but he is delighted with the prospect of fathering it). He intends to bring the infant up in a way we are all quite clear will be far more humane and positive than the brutal childhood he and Electra endured themselves.

3.

If Tóibín's female characters are less congenial than his brilliantly drawn child, adolescent, and young adult Orestes, Haynes puts innocent women's perspectives on family trauma at the centre of her radar. What interests Haynes, like Geras,¹² is the subjectivity of very young women (indeed, teenagers scarcely of childbearing age) in the type of society in which Greek tragedy was set. She is fascinated by the physical restrictions placed on young, unmarried women in aristocratic families, who were virtually prisoners in their own homes and not allowed to enjoy the same physical exercises and sporting interests as young men – a restriction which has made the figure of the peerless female athlete

¹² See Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair, *Reflections on Young Adult Historical Fiction*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006, 164–166.

Atalanta attractive to several writers of young adult fiction.¹³ Ancient Greece was not just patriarchal, but emphatically *patri/ocal*, in that women moved households on marriage while men remained, more emotionally secure, in the homes where they had been born. Haynes's excellent previous novel, *The Amber Fury* (2014), also used Greek tragedy to explore the psychology of a damaged adolescent girl, but as a foil in a thriller set in contemporary Britain; here she asks how Bronze Age maidens would cope with the shocking deprivations to which they were routinely subject. Jocasta was married off to an ageing tyrant with no interest in her, and left to fend for herself in a royal court blighted by feuds between rival factions. Jocasta's daughter Ismene discovered that she was the offspring of incest, lost both her parents and both her brothers, feared losing her one remaining sister, and was the victim of barbarous assault. Haynes interweaves their stories, Jocasta's told in the third person and Ismene's in the first, building up to an exciting climax and a surprising, decidedly feminist conclusion. She is tremendous at handling a detective-style plot stretching six decades across the history of Thebes.

Haynes also uses humour to handle the differences between the presentation of characters in Sophocles' texts and her own. Here she contrasts sharply with Ali Smith's procedure in *The Story of Antigone* (2013), written for a rather younger audience. Smith is a straightforward admirer of Antigone. She makes Ismene rather older than Antigone, who is only "about twelve years old",¹⁴ and her moral conviction partly stems from her childlike innocence and clarity of vision in the face of complicated adult evil. This interpretation seems underlined by Smith's own remark in the "interview" between Crow and "Ali" – that is, the author Ali Smith stepping into the dialogue which is appended at end of the story:

It's the easiest thing in the world, to decide that someone else or something else isn't the same as us, or can be dismissed or decided about or made less than us, or made not to belong, or be excluded. It's the basis of all power struggles. It's the basis, in fact, of the story of Antigone, and all its questions about nature and human nature.¹⁵

¹³ See Cullinan, Kunzel, and Wooten, eds., *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Young Adult Literature*, 264–265, on Priscilla Galloway, who has rewritten Grimm's stories for young adults, but has also retold several from Greek mythology, including her feminist *Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World* (1995). Atalanta is likewise the star of *Quiver* by Stephanie Spinner (2002).

¹⁴ Ali Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, ill. Laura Paoletti, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2013 (ed. pr. in Italian 2011), 13. For an analysis of this novel, see Deborah H. Roberts and Sheila Murnaghan's chapter in this volume: "New Hope for Old Stories: Yiyun Li's *Gilgamesh* and Ali Smith's *Antigone*", 345–370.

¹⁵ Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, 98.

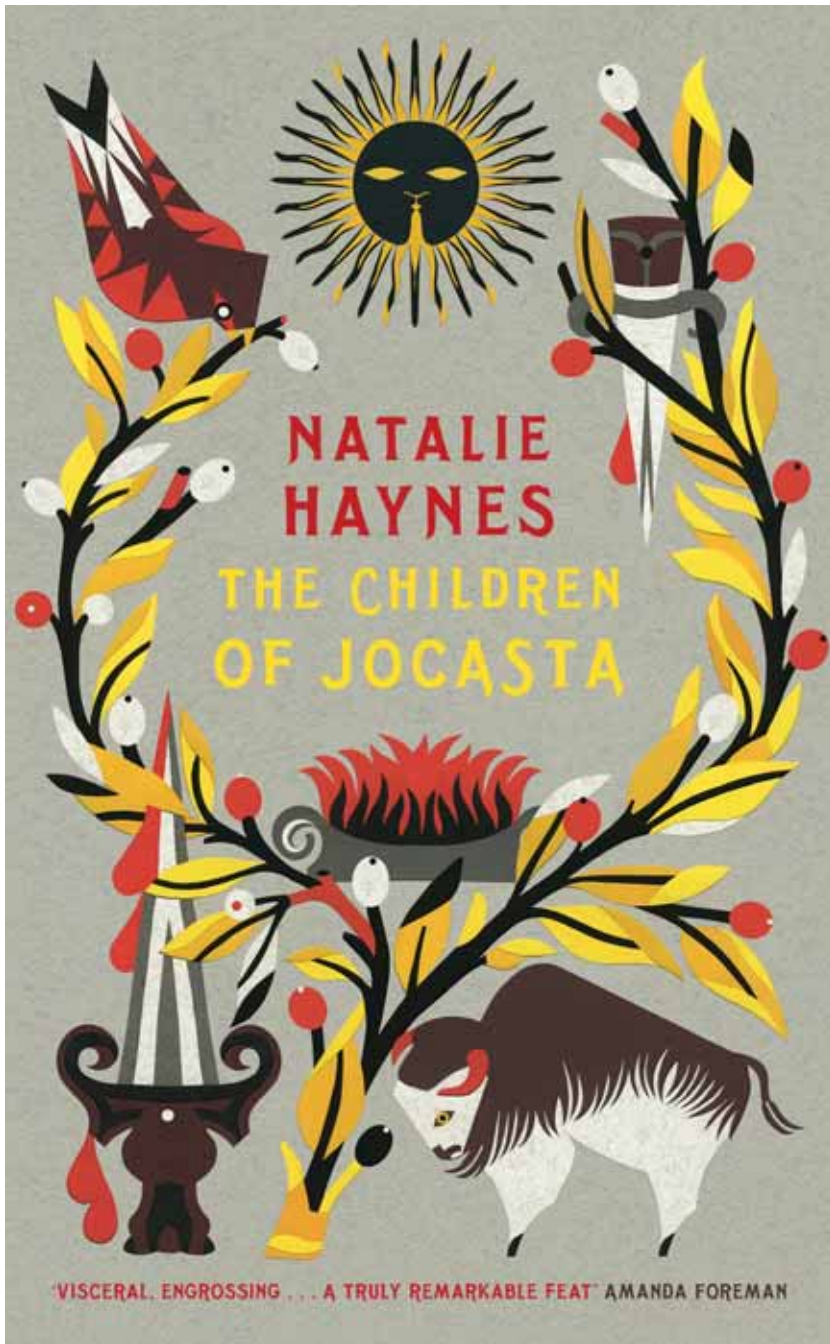


Figure 2: Cover of Natalie Haynes, *The Children of Jocasta*, London: Mantle, 2017. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

Haynes, on the other hand, makes Ismene the younger sister (Sophocles never specifies their ages nor who is senior). This Ismene, a bookish, reclusive child, is the one who buries her brother. She is also ruefully aware that Antigone, whom she loves dearly but whose beauty she envies, has a penchant for histrionics; Haynes rewrites some of the most important details of *Antigone* in line with this understanding and a perceptible twinkle. Here her writing is reminiscent of Elsie V. Aidinoff's *The Garden* (2004), which uses Eve's capacity for humour and critical thinking to deconstruct Genesis, the ultimate canonical text, especially where she meditates on evolutionary theory.

Atwood, also a deft user of wit to unpick a monumental work of literature from a woman's viewpoint in her *Penelopiad*, has insisted on the importance of accumulating quotidian detail in persuasive historical fiction:

History may pretend to provide us grand patterns and overall schemes, but without its brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations it would collapse.¹⁶

Renowned historical novelist Thomas Mallon puts it differently:

Only through tiny, literal accuracies can the historical novelist achieve the larger truth to which he aspires – namely, an overall feeling of authenticity. It is just like Marianne Moore's famous prescription for the ideal poet. He must stock his imaginary garden with real toads.¹⁷

Haynes went to Thebes to research the setting of her novel, the remains of the ancient palace in the landlocked Boeotian plain and the mountain pathways where Oedipus has crossed over from Corinth and where the action culminates. She has visited the local museums, and various beautifully described objects in the text derive from her observations on these visits: looms, jewellery, musical instruments, eating utensils. Like several other women writing young adult fiction set in Classical Antiquity,¹⁸ she is a highly trained classicist. In her cinematic evocations of Thebes there is plenty of well-researched, authentic colour, reminiscent of the exquisite novels set in Ancient Greece by Mary Renault: readers from their teens onwards

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction", *American Historical Review* 103.5 (1998), 1505.

¹⁷ Thomas Mallon, "Writing Historical Fiction", *American Scholar* 61.4 (1992), 604.

¹⁸ E.g., Gillian Bradshaw, who studied Ancient Greek at Michigan and Classics at Newnham College, Cambridge, writes novels set in medieval times but also in Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome: *The Beacon at Alexandria* (1986) and *Cleopatra's Heir* (2003).

interested in classical civilization will find fascinating accounts of rituals, cult names of the gods, furniture, clothing, food, writing materials, and architecture. Her descriptions of an athletics contest at the palace and of the symptoms of the plague could only have been written by an author intimate with Book 23 of the *Iliad* and Book 2 of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

This is highly suggestive in terms of exciting teenagers about Classical Antiquity, especially in a period when access to the Latin and Greek languages at secondary-school level, in the UK, at least, is becoming ever rarer. Haynes is a wonderful advocate for the teaching of classical civilization in school, and serves as a patron of my new campaign to support the introduction of Classics subjects in translation, a policy which is both practicable and affordable, across the state education sector in Britain.¹⁹ And in the Advanced Level syllabus, taken when students are between fifteen and eighteen, Sophocles' Theban tragedies are regular fixtures.

Haynes's novel could therefore have direct pedagogical as well as therapeutic uses. Historical fiction for teens is beginning to become recognized, mainly in the United States, as a way to encourage youngsters in secondary-level education to absorb and engage both with Classics of literature which they may otherwise find indigestible and with history. Sarah K. Herz and Donald R. Gallo in 1996 published *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*; this advocates the use of young adult literature for helping teenagers respond to a series of casebook masterpieces, including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Homer's *Odyssey*.²⁰

4.

Unfortunately, when it comes to using historical fiction for teaching teens history, despite a wide acknowledgement that historical fiction was an invention of Classical Antiquity, notably in the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch,²¹ there has been less scholarly investigation. Most of the case studies available concern books

¹⁹ See further Advocating Classics Education, <http://aceclassics.org.uk/> (accessed 24 April 2020).

²⁰ See Sarah K. Herz with Donald R. Gallo, *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1996, 49–51 (on the *Odyssey* and their discussion) and 83–92 (on how young adult literature can also be used in other disciplines, e.g., to teach history).

²¹ Brown and St. Clair, *Reflections on Young Adult Historical Fiction*, 99.

fictionalizing twentieth-century historical experience in the United States in ways that young adults would find appealing.²² But so much more could be done with historical fiction set further back in time. There are abundant examples of excellent young adult writing of this kind set in earlier myth and history, even Mesopotamian and biblical times, such as Kim Echlin's *Innana: From the Myths of Ancient Sumer* (2003) – the story of Gilgamesh's sister, Donna Jo Napoli's *Song of the Magdalene* (1996), Beatrice Gormley's *Miriam* (1999), and Elsie V. Aidinoff's *The Garden* (2004), based – as mentioned above – on the biblical Genesis.²³ The *Continuum Encyclopedia of Young Adult Literature* reveals plentiful works of young adult fiction set in Ancient Greek and Roman times.²⁴ The author of many historical novels centred on adolescents growing up in America, Kristiana Gregory, for example, has also written a valuable novel entitled *Cleopatra VII: Daughter of the Nile* (1999), telling the story of the adolescent Cleopatra.

Charlotte Yonge is traditionally named foremother of young adult historical fiction – for example, in Marion Lochhead's much-cited 1961 article "Clio Junior: Historical Novels for Children".²⁵ Yet Yonge was certainly anticipated by Susanna Strickland, whose *Spartacus: A Roman Story*, an abolitionist narrative explicitly aimed at older children and young adults, based on Plutarch's "Life of Crassus", was published as early as 1822.²⁶ She was followed by a large number of twentieth-century writers, for example, Naomi Mitchison in her tale featuring a young

²² Linda J. Rice, *What Was It Like? Teaching History and Culture through Young Adult Literature*, New York, NY, and London: Teachers' College, Columbia University, 2006, is an excellent polemic and handbook on how to do "active learning" through using young adult historical fiction, but all the case studies are to do with twentieth-century historical experiences in the United States.

²³ Brown and St. Clair, *Reflections on Young Adult Historical Fiction*, 99.

²⁴ See Cullinan, Kunzel, and Wooten, eds., *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Young Adult Literature*, 324 (on Frances Mary Hendry's young adult novels about a young female gladiator, *Gladiator*, 2004–2012); 379 (on Norma Johnston's myth-based trilogy set in Ancient Greece and Rome: *Strangers Dark and Gold*, 1975; *Pride of Lions*, 1979; *The Days of Dragon's Seed*, 1982); 466–467 (on Clemence McLaren's novels using the women of Homer: *Inside the Walls of Troy: A Novel of the Women Who Lived the Trojan War*, 1996; *Waiting for Odysseus*, 2004); 523 (on Caroline B. Cooney's *Goddess of Yesterday*, 2002, the story of Helen's unwilling companion at Troy, Anaxandra); and 560 (on Jill Paton Walsh's *The Emperor's Winding Sheet*, 1974, which tells the story of Vrethiki, Constantine's companion).

²⁵ Marion Lochhead, "Clio Junior: Historical Novels for Children", in Sheila Egoff, G.T. Stubbs, and L.F. Ashley, eds., *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, Toronto and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980 (ed. pr. 1969), 17–27 (text originally published in 1961 in *Quarterly Review*).

²⁶ See Leanne Hunnings, "Spartacus in Nineteenth-Century England: Proletarian, Pole and Christ", in Christopher Stray, ed., *Remaking the Classics: Literature, Genre and Media in Britain 1800–2000*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007, 1–19.

Graeco-Scythian heroine in Hellenistic times in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931)²⁷ and Elizabeth George Speare, whose *The Bronze Bow* (1961) concerns a teenager named Daniel whose family is killed by the Romans.²⁸

Haynes, however, seems to me to have a mission which is more explicitly therapeutic than in most of these examples of historical fiction about and/or for young adults. Her novels, although far more elegant, have this in common, rather, with the genre called the “problem novel”, thought to have been invented in the 1960s in America. Problem novels are consciously written for teachers, social workers, and probation officers, and put on a list of books recommended for giving to deprived or traumatized children and young adults. They often have self-explanatory titles which actually mention alcoholism or describe the plight of the narrator, such as Peggy Mann’s *My Dad Lives in a Downtown Hotel* (1974), implying (truthfully) that the writer began not with the character but with the societal problem. But these novels have basic features which are shared by the type of historical novels which retell ancient literature: the protagonist tells her or his own emotional story of victimhood, resistance, and ultimately cure, survival, escape, or redemption in an intimate first-person singular.²⁹ As Joanne Brown put it:

In historical fiction for young adults, the protagonists are usually fictional adolescents. These adolescent characters are often rendered powerless, not only by their youth, but by gender, race, or class; they are frequently victimized by greed, hatred, or persecution. Nonetheless, they manage to triumph in the face of overwhelming odds.³⁰

Such storylines, well told, can be instrumental in changing lives and ultimately society. Denise Levertov believes that “books influence individuals; and individuals, although they are part of large economic and social processes, influence history”.³¹

²⁷ See Edith Hall, *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides’ Black Sea Tragedy*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013, 253–254.

²⁸ See Cullinan, Kunzel, and Wooten, eds., *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Young Adult Literature*, 658.

²⁹ Sheila Egoff, “The Problem Novel”, in Sheila Egoff, G.T. Stubbs, and L.F. Ashley, eds., *Only Connect: Readings on Children’s Literature*, Toronto and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980 (ed. pr. 1969), 356–369.

³⁰ Joanne Brown, “Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History? Problems for Writers of Historical Novels for Young Adults”, *Alan Review: Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English* 26.1 (1998), 7.

³¹ Quoted in Brown and St. Clair, *Reflections on Young Adult Historical Fiction*, 197.

Haynes's Jocasta, whose story is told in the third person, suffers almost unimaginable emotional deprivation. Her mother undermines her self-confidence, her venal father sells her in indecent haste when King Laius offers a bride-price, and she is packed off to the palace on her own when she has hardly achieved menarche. Terrified of sexual contact with the ageing, gynaikophobic Laius, she is relieved that he leaves her entirely alone. But she is horribly isolated and bored. She has an affair with a slave and a horrifically protracted, painful labour which she scarcely survives alive. She produces a baby who, she is told, died at birth, and enters many years of acute depression, a captive queen in a childless, sexless, miserable marriage. The joy with which she finds love with the handsome, young Corinthian who turns up after accidentally killing Laius knows no bounds, and she is an attentive, loving mother.

She dies miserable, but there are surprises here, too; Haynes alters the motivation of her principal characters in subtle but important ways. Ismene only discovers very late just how much her mother and father loved her, and one of the important messages of the book is that new information can often transform for the better one's understanding of even the bleakest situation. Ismene learns that being a product of incest may be more possible to live with than being a child of a defeatist or emotionally cowardly mother. But more important than anything, if any victim of trauma is to move on, is to discover the factual truth. Ismene is brutally attacked at the beginning of the novel, for reasons to do with the political struggle between Creon and her two brothers over control of Thebes, and she never ceases from her quest to unravel exactly why and who is responsible. As her tutor made her understand:

[W]hen you have grown up as I have, there is no security in not knowing things, in avoiding ugliest truths because they can't be faced. There is only an oppressive, creeping dread that the thing no one has told you is too terrible to imagine, and that it will haunt the rest of your life when you find out. Because *that* is what happened the last time, and *that* is why my siblings and I have grown up in a cursed house, children of cursed parents.³²

The curse has come from ignorance, lies, and fear of what true knowledge might reveal, rather than from the true facts in and of themselves.

As a result of this conviction, Haynes's Ismene escapes to freedom. She is equipped to do so by her brain and her decision to start writing down everything

³² Haynes, *The Children of Jocasta*, 49.

that happens to her so she can reflect on it and find solutions to seemingly impossible problems. She leaves the confines of the Theban palace where she has been virtually imprisoned all her life, succeeds in discovering that her parents and one of her brothers really did love her, and preserves her one important friendship (with her old tutor, Sophon) and her integrity.

* * *

I must not conclude this article by detailing how this hopeful conclusion is achieved, because that would spoil the effect of the final few chapters of *The Children of Jocasta*, which are real page-turners, as are those in Tóibín's *Orestes* novel. These two writers have rewritten Greek tragedy in fundamentally *hopeful* narrative fictions. They do not provide facile solutions nor suggest that traumatized young people can completely escape their pasts, but they do suggest that they can come to terms with their previous suffering and look forward to better lives in the future. They put front and centre not only the specific traumas faced by Ismene and Orestes but the misery faced by *all* teenagers in terms of loneliness, boredom, anger with controlling authority figures, and fear for the future. We are greatly enriched by the pair of them.

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

