

Anthea Davies , Errol le Cain

Sir Orfeo

United Kingdom (1970)

TAGS: [Eurydice](#) [Hades](#) [Orpheus](#)



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General information	
Title of the work	Sir Orfeo
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1970
First Edition Details	Anthea Davis, Errol Le Cain, <i>Sir Orfeo</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1970, 32 pp.
ISBN	0571103274
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Children (8-12)
Author of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

Creators



Anthea Davies (Author)

Anthea Davies wrote the texts of *Sir Orfeo* and *A White Horse with Wings*.

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England,
ehale@une.edu.au



Errol le Cain , 1941 - 1989 (Illustrator)

Errol Le Cain was born in Singapore, spent his childhood and youth in South East Asia including India, then immigrated to the United Kingdom, where he lived and worked as an animator and illustrator. He illustrated over 40 books for young readers, including *Sir Orfeo* and *Cupid and Psyche* (1977). His work is known for its blend of influences from around the world.

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England,
ehale@une.edu.au

Additional information

Adaptations A [radio version](#), with music and sound added was produced by the BBC in 1974 (accessed: April 7, 2020).

Summary *Sir Orfeo* retells a medieval English poem, based on the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. Sir Orfeo is a harper-king, whose wife, Herodys, is carried off by a "grim king" of the underworld by magical means. Sir Orfeo leaves his kingdom in charge of his oldest counsellor, and sets out barefoot, wearing ragged clothes and carrying his harp. He lives in the wilderness (the "bare heath") with only small animals for company. One day, a train of ladies in white goes by, riding white horses, and each with a white hawk on her wrist. Orfeo follows them to a huge door in the side of the hill, which closes after they pass through. Sir Orfeo bangs on the door, "Let me in! I am a minstrel. Let me play my harp before the grim king." The door opens, and Sir Orfeo finds himself in the grim kingdom – a place as flat as a chessboard, a golden sky, and no shadows. The castle is full of people in an enchanted sleep. The king wears a crown made of a single jewel, and a sad Herodys sits beside him at his throne. Sir Orfeo plays his harp, and the king asks what he can give him for his beautiful music. "Give me Herodys," says Sir Orfeo, and the king reluctantly agrees. Orfeo leads Herodys home, uncertain whether their kingdom will be happy to see them again. They go in disguise as beggars to the castle, where the old counsellor brings them food. He sees Orfeo's harp, and asks him, "Beggars, where did you find that harp?" Orfeo says "Where a man lay who had been torn apart by wild beasts." The counsellors are grief stricken, until Orfeo says "But he has come to life again," and plays his harp once more. There is joy in the kingdom as the counsellors recognise him and Herodys.

Analysis This picture book for children retells a medieval version of the Orpheus and Eurydice legend: the anonymous Middle English Breton Lai, dating from the late 13th or early 14th century. A simplified text shares the lai's happy ending (Herodys returns to the upper world, the kingdom gladly receives them back), is accompanied by elaborate drawings, based on medieval illustrations and artwork. Le Cain draws on

influences such as manuscript illuminations, and other works such as the [Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry](#) (accessed: September 3, 2022). This is an example of reception filtered through more than one tradition – the original Orpheus myth reworked in the fairy-tale tradition, then retold for children. The "grim king" has similarities to Hades in his association with underground riches (his crown made of a single jewel, the golden sky of his kingdom), but is reimagined as a fairy-king rather than a deity. Le Cain's rich illustrations nicely balance the simplicity of the text, inviting repeated reading and looking.

Classical, Mythological,
Traditional Motifs,
Characters, and
Concepts

[Eurydice Hades Orpheus](#)

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

[Adventure Death Fairy tale references Love Music*](#)

