Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: Hercules by Bernard Evslin", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/243. Entry version as of April 19, 2024.

Bernard Evslin

Hercules

United States (1984)

TAGS: Alcmene Amphitryon Atlas Augean Stables Chiron / Cheiron Deianeira Echidna Eurystheus Geryon Hades Hera Heracles Hercules Hestia Hydra Iole Iphicles Nemean Lion Nereus Nessus Thebes Tiresias Typhon / Typhoeus / Typhaon Zeus

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

General information	
Title of the work	Hercules
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1984
First Edition Details	Bernard Evslin, *Hercules.* William Morrow & Company, 1984, 144 pp.
ISBN	9780688027483
Genre	Myths, Novels
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan Univrsity, mauril68@gmail.com Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators

Bernard Evslin , 1922 - 1993
(Author)

North American author, playwright, screenwriter who is best known for adapting Greek mythology. He studied at Rutgers University and won many awards for his works. Evslin published more than seventy books and over thirty of which were for young adults. His book *Hercules* won the Washington Irving Children's Book Choice Award of the Westchester Library Association (from the NY times obituary). His books were widely read at schools and colleges. His most renowned books was *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths* dating 1984, which was translated into numerous languages and sold over ten millions copies worldwide. Bernard was married to the author and teacher Dorothy (the two had four children), who co-written with him (among other books) *The Greek Gods* and *Heroes and Monsters of Greek Myth*.

Sources:

Obituary at the nytimes.com (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Profile at the goodreads.com (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com and Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Additional information

Summary

This is a retelling of the myth of Hercules, aimed at young adults in novel format. The book starts with a list of characters of humans/ non humans and a short explanation of each.

Analysis

The entire book tries to obscure the more unpleasant elements of the Hercules myth, keeping the young readership in mind. We have a loving mortal family with Amphitryon and Alamene and there is a sense of innocence to Hercules' character, probably aimed to make him more accessible to the young innocent readers.

The story begins with an ominous sign which sets the tone for the book, the births of twins, Iphicles and Hercules; the people are afraid of the double-birth since it could mean a future civil war for the throne. Amphitryon is portrayed as a gentle and carrying man, a good king. Alcmene asks him to think of a grand name for the second baby, "No ordinary name will do." They thought and thought, and finally named the larger twin Hercules, which means "earth's glory." (pp. 53–55). It is a nice addition to have an explanation of Hercules' names. If it was pronounced the original Greek way, Heracles, it would have been better. Although it is more "glory of Hera" than earth. Unknowingly, the loving parents sealed the young boy's fate: "They meant to praise their new prince, but, as it happened, this was the worst thing they could have said. These words were to plunge young Hercules into dangers that no one had ever faced before" (pp. 57–59). It is nice that Hercules' mortal parents receive a more dominant role in his life; although they were certainly not to blame for his fate. While the world is described as magical and ancient, it still resembles our own, "THE ANCIENT WORLD WAS LIKE OURS in some ways; there were always plenty of busybodies ready to pass on gossip, especially if it might cause trouble." (pp. 60–61). This is how the author brings this mythological world closer to the modern world of his readers and help them feel more connected to the story. The author notes that Zeus could take as many wives as he wished (p. 60); this is of course a euphemistic way to describe Zeus' behaviour and it is mindful of the young readership of the book.

The motif of innocence is emphasized in Hercules' encounter with the serpent; it is told from the viewpoint of the infant hero who "does not understand that evil had come into his life, that someone’s jealous

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw.

hatred had taken the form of a serpent that was trying to kill him." (pp. 81–84). Not often we see Hercules imagined as an innocent and pure soul. The encounter changes Hercules as he realises the existence of evil. This realization is manifested in the fact that Hercules seldom smiles. It does feel a bit coerced that all the characters are so loving and clueless, yet the author wishes to impart a sense of normal family life that is suddenly interrupted by great evil. In fact, Hercules, although he is supposed to be a beacon of humanity, hardly exhibits any human emotions; he is too heroic and perfect and does not really understand anything. The female characters do not fare better; Hera is manipulative, Deianeira is quite useless, she is jealous of a little girl (Iole) and keeps crying and Iole seems to be the only mature person around since Hercules is again forcibly portrayed as innocent, even in his dealings with women- another complete change from the myth.

While Zeus is portrayed as benevolent, Hera is manipulating and conniving evil. In an original addition to the myth, the author makes Hera meet Hercules, show him a vision and tell him that he would kill his own sons in a fit of madness. In order to avoid such fate, Hera tells him to go to King Eurystheus and purify himself so he would be unable to commit the murders. The author has taken considerably liberty here with the myth. It actually removes the sting from Hercules' troubled and agonizing character and it changes him completely. The author presents a blameless, innocent and naive Hercules who never hurt a soul. This is a far cry from the mythological hero, as we know him. Using the labours as a pre-emptive means to purify Hercules so he does not commit the murders is twisting the ancient myth entirely.

In another unique addition to the myth, the god Hades is portrayed as complaining that Hercules is killing too many monsters and people are no dying in suitable numbers due to his heroic acts. Therefore the gods devise a scheme (the poisonous garments Deianeira gives to Hercules which causes his death) to bring Hercules to Olympus so that he may share with them an detach them the ways of humanity.

As Athena explains to Zeus: "Behold the man," said Athena. “He, lying there, was the best and strongest, the bravest and most gentle of humankind. Let him join us here on Olympus and teach us to be human, too, before man, learning cruelty from us, destroys himself." (pp. 1471–3). It seems that Zeus was quite oblivious to Hercules' existence. It is also interesting that human war-mongering is connected to people's desire to copy the gods who are acting cruelly:

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw.

"war. O Father, if we really want to know why humankind is bloodthirsty, we should look at ourselves." "What do you suggest, O wise maiden?" "We gods are very mighty; our faults are mighty, too. We're all related and share the same bad habits. We have known absolute power, and that rots our sense of pity. We should enlarge our councils." (pp. 1292–5). The human way is peaceful (the gods need to learn that). Thus the author removes from the story any trace of useless violence; even Hera, the manipulative and the evil of the story, in fact, saves Hercules from causing the murders. The Greek gods are described, by their own admission as lacking piety. It is hard to tell if a Christian message is hidden here, but certainly, we have here an interesting view on divinity.

In the end, Hestia threw the poisoned shirt into the fire, and the embroidery on the shirt of Hercules' deeds spreads and infiltrates the dreams of boys and girls; "And these boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, promise themselves that they will be brave when they grow up and always fight those shapes of evil called monsters and always dare to be gentle, too." (pp. 1487–9). The story ends as it began, on a gentle note; no real hatred, or drama. Only the suffering of dying Hercules. In a way, Hercules suffered and sacrificed himself for the sake of humankind (although ironically he dies in order to stop him from saving human lives).

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alcmene Amphitryon Atlas Augean Stables Chiron / Cheiron Deianeira Echidna Eurystheus Geryon Hades Hera Heracles Hercules Hestia Hydra Iole Iphicles Nemean Lion Nereus Nessus Thebes Tiresias Typhon / Typhoeus / Typhaon Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Coming of age Conflict Emotions Heroism Love Tricksters
Addenda	This entry refers to the Kindle edition.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.