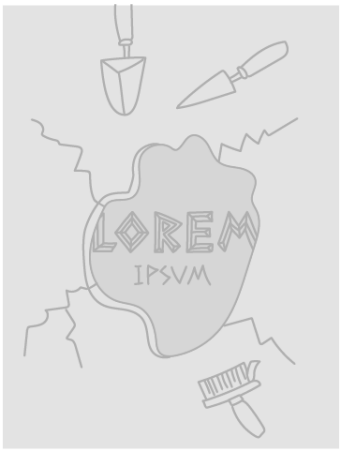
Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: Fish Girl by Donna Jo Napoli , David Wiesner ", peer-reviewed by Hanna Paulouskaya and Miriam Riverlea. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/640. Entry version as of January 17, 2026.

Donna Jo Napoli , David Wiesner

Fish Girl

United States (2017)

TAGS: Neptune



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

General information	
Title of the work	Fish Girl
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States, Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2017
First Edition Details	David Wiesner and Donna Jo Napoli, *Fish Girl*. New York: Clarion Books, 2017.
ISBN	9780547483931
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Graphic novels
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Hanna Paulouskaya, University of Warsaw, hannapa@al.uw.edu.pl Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Creators

Donna Jo Napoli , b. 1948
(Author)

Donna Jo Napoli (b. 1948) is an American children's author and professor of Linguistics. She has a BA in Mathematics and a PhD in Romance Languages and Literatures, both from Harvard, and spent a postdoctoral year in Linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has held visiting lectureships in a range of countries, including China, Australia, the UK, Russia and Switzerland, often using these stays in other countries to research her novels. She lives outside Philadelphia and is married to a professor of Health Law; she has five children and seven grandchildren (donnajonapoli.com, accessed: August 7, 2018). Of Italian descent, she was raised Catholic but now considers herself an atheist (Crew 2010). As well as writing *Treasury of Greek Mythology* for National Geographic, she also wrote *Treasury of Egyptian Mythology*, *Treasury of Norse Mythology* and *Tales from the Arabian Nights*, all with Christina Balit as illustrator.

She has run conferences on deaf issues and produced books intended for deaf children, in ASL/English, Fiji Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language, German Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, Italian Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, Korean Sign Language and Nepali Sign Language.

After one of her books was translated into Farsi, she spoke at an Iranian children's literature festival. Her body of work includes poetry, environmental writing and writing on how to write for children. She lists Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood on her website as two of her favourite authors (donnajonapoli.com, accessed: August 7, 2018).

In 2010, Napoli was the subject of a book by Hilary S. Crew – *Donna Jo Napoli: Writing with Passion.* Crew defines central themes of Napoli's work as 'an unmasking of bigotry and hypocrisy; a belief in family and friendships; and the conviction that whatever terrible things happen in one's life, there is a place from which to begin again'.

Napoli states she writes about mythology, fairy tales and religion because they 'deal with the very heart and soul of humanity' (cited in Crew, 2010). She says on her website "I find most historical fairy tales

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really disturbing to work on. But I do love them all."

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk

Questionnaire

1. What drew you to writing/working with Classical Antiquity and what challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular myths or stories?

I think it started with my high school Latin teacher, Mrs. Reynolds. She brought the old tales to life – all their passion and intrigue and misery. I got involved in the Latin club, and then in the Latin Forum of the State of Florida. I even ran a state forum one year. When I went to college, I didn't follow up on Latin. But in graduate school, I had to pass a test in reading Latin. I decided not to prepare for it, but just go in and see what happened. I passed – after four years away from Latin. And that's because Mrs. Reynolds was so terrific. The experience reminded me of how much I loved those stories. After that I went for years not doing anything with Latin. But in Spring 2013, a classics professor at Swarthmore, Rosaria Munson, and I co-taught a course on The Hero's Journey. We looked at Virgil's Aeneid, then Dante's Divina Commedia, then Eugenio Montale's poetry – all in the original Latin, then Old Italian, then modern Italian – talking about historical change in language as well as variations on the themes in the different works. It was thrilling reading the Aeneid again. And it was thrilling seeing the relevance of the old works to modern life. ///// In *FISH GIRL* I didn't think of any particular myth. Rather, I tried to use the ancient feeling that the seas are full of potential. Mysterious creatures live and rule there. Ordinary understandings of how life works don't necessarily hold. Though I didn't put in any snakes growing out of heads or talking animals, I allowed the octopus to grow to enormous size and then shrink again, where emotions were the key to the size changes. And I allowed the fish in Fish Girl's tank to recognize that she was somehow changing and to respond accordingly.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and

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literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

We know a great deal of facts about the world now, many more than the ancients did. But we still lack understanding of many things. For example, we don't even really know how it is that trees manage to pump water up from the ground to their crowns. We've rejected osmosis as the answer – but there is no presently agreed upon answer. And that is a rather mundane thing – something happening around us all the time, but we haven't a clue about what's going on. We are much more in the dark about the arcane things. And the more we learn about both life on earth and space way out there, the more we recognize how little we truly understand. ///// The ancients tried to give reasons for everything... for earthquakes and tsunamis and lightning. They sought to see a comprehensive picture. And within that picture, they tried to adjust to the vagaries of human behavior. I think young people today would like a comprehensive picture within which they could make some kind of sense of the natural world and human behavior within it. It is comforting to see characters in the ancient tales struggle with the same human foibles we struggle with. And it is comforting to see that they too were stupified by natural events around them... different natural events from the ones that stupify us today, perhaps... but no less enigmatic.

3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

Ah, I answered some of that in question 1. For most fiction work I do that is placed in classical times, I use translations into English of Homer, Hesiod, and Apollodorus. I stay away from Wikipedia on this – although I love Wikipedia for many other things (it is a great source of information about languages and linguistics, for example, because the Linguistic Society of America urges its members to add information to Wikipedia and correct anything that's dubious).

Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers? Absolutely. I did a book for National Geographic called *Treasury of Greek Mythology*. In there I chose to present the stories that I most love. They were written in Greek, of course, and I don't read Greek, so I had to look at translations. An interesting thing about

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translations is that the same story is quite differently translated by scholars in different points of history.... or that's what I concluded from my very small and limited study. Looking at translations from the 1700s through today, I found myself making choices based on my own sensibilities – which is what I'm sure those translators did. I also read many of the stories in Latin – in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I suspect that Ovid influenced me most. Certainly with respect to the creation tale. Ovid's words swirl and transform themselves, wonderfully evocative and still illusive. I aimed for that sense in my rendering of the creation tale.

4. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelity" to the original? (another way of saying that might be — that I think writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail — is this something you thought about?)

Yes, this is a major concern I had, more so in *Treasury* than in *Fish Girl*, since *Fish Girl* was a character of my own creation in a more-nearly modern world. For *Treasury* I always used the details that were in the originals – I never changed them. But I added a modern psychology, which was a personal choice, but I expect that choice was unavoidable. That is, I cannot help but see the behaviors of characters as reflecting the way I, as a person of today, understand human behavior.

5. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

I don't plan far ahead. Whatever I'm working on at the moment is my world. Presently, I'm deep into the world of the Ancient Hebrews. But I'm nearly finished with this project. Where I will go next is unclear to me. I have a story in my head set in India in the late 1800s, and I'd like to work on that. But interruptions happen – and I am always open to happy serendipities. Will I ever return to the classical world of Greece? I can't know that – but the stories are eternal fonts of wisdom and pain – so I hope I do.

6. Anything else you think we should know?

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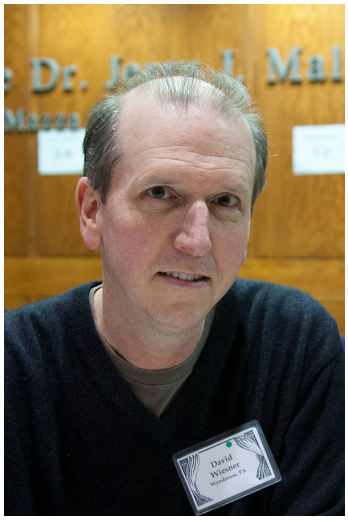
Ha! what a funny question. But I will answer it. People often assume that I know more than I know. It's as though working with the classics gives you an aura of respectability and of nearly encyclopedic knowledge. The truth is, I bumble through things. I'm not afraid to deal with what I don't understand, because I understand so little that if I let that fear stop me, I wouldn't write anything. And, you know, if I fully understood things, I would have no motivation to write. For me, writing is a way of tackling problems, a way of trying to get a sense a peace. But rarely do I ever feel I "know" something or truly "understand" it.

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



David Wiesner by Alvintrusty. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 (accessed: December 27, 2021).

David Wiesner , b. 1956
(Illustrator)

David Wiesner was born in New Jersey, and is an American illustrator and writer and children's books. His work is well known and well regarded, including Caldecott Medal-winners: *Tuesday* (1992), *The Three Pigs* (2002), and *Flotsam* (2007).Wiesner is known for his experimentation with form in visual storytelling (see *The Three Pigs*, in which the pigs of the well-known folk story burst out of the picture's frame, and into a new, surreal storyline). In developing *Flotsam*, he collaborated with leading scholar of transmedia storytelling, Henry Jenkins.

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

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Additional information

Translation

French: *Fish Girl*, adapt. Julia and Simon Segal, le Genévrier [La Garenne-Colombes], 2017.

Summary

Fish Girl is the story of a mermaid who was kidnapped as a baby by a fisherman who found her in his catch. Seeing financial opportunity, he set up a seaside attraction in an old house, calling it 'Ocean Wonders,' posing as Neptune, the 'god of seas and storms,' and charging visitors $2 to 'see the mysterious fish girl.' The mermaid is captive in a large tank, which she shares with fish and an octopus, and which is decorated like a girl's bedroom. The mermaid's job is to play hide-and-seek with visitors, who try to see her in her tank, and to collect the pennies they have thrown into the tank. She has reached adolescence, and her best friend is a red octopus. When the fisherman advertises a new T-shirt, the mermaid goes into the public tank to see it, and is spotted by a girl her own age, Livia. This is the encounter that precipitates the mermaid's curiosity about the world. She is lonely in her tank, at the mercy of the fisherman, who threatens her that if she is revealed, 'scientists will take you to a lab. You'll be a specimen. They'll cut you open.' (22), and who tells her a tale that humans had destroyed her mer-people family, and that he (posing as Neptune) had rescued her: 'I hid you.Baby you. I held you in my arms. Remember?' (25) Nevertheless, the mermaid wonders what it would be like to be human. At night, she sneaks out of the tank, and as she does so discovers that the touch of air turns her tail to legs. In the fisherman's office she discovers the truth, and her desire to escape grows. One evening she sneaks out to the funfair, and on her return discovers the fish in her tank no longer recognise her. Livia visits her and the two girls swim together in the tank. Livia names the mermaid, Mira. The fisherman comes upon them, bursts into a rage and makes Livia leave. Mira's octopus friend restrains him, and a suddenly stormy ocean spills into the building, breaking the windows, releasing the fish, and the mermaid and her friend. (Nature, or perhaps the real Neptune, have freed her?) The sea could keep Mira, but sends her 'home' to the beach, where she says goodbye to her octopus friend. In the aftermath of the storm, Mira walks on the beach. She sees the fisherman speaking to the authorities – he sees her and keeps silent (revealing her existence would get him in more trouble than it would her). Mira walks on, and finds Livia on the beach with her mother. There she

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speaks her first word: 'Livia.' The girls embrace, and Mira goes home with her friend.

Analysis

Fish Girl is a moving take on traditional mermaid narratives, drawing on themes from Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* story, and from ideas about the role of Neptune as powerful king of the ocean. It is also a reflection on power, identity, coming of age, and friendship. Mira's story has much in common with contemporary novels about abduction and entrapment (see for instance, Emma Donoghue's *Room*). Mira's silence, like the traditional voice-less mermaid of Andersen's story, emphasizes her powerlessness and entrapment – the moment at the end when Mira speaks offers a release of pent-up emotion, and her transition from isolated entrapment to agency in a loving family. The fisherman uses the myth of Neptune to emphasize his power, to play to an audience used to attending fantasy-oriented sea-side and fun-fair attractions.

Fish Girl is somewhat experimental for Wiesner and Napoli: for both it is a first foray into graphic novel storytelling. Wiesner's use of colour is evocative – the blues, and greens of Mira's world, and the bright contrast of the orange octopus who is for a long time Mira's only friend make for a lush reading experience, and emphasize both the beauty and the loneliness and pain of Mira's predicament. (The colour scheme is also reminiscent of Hayao Miyazaki's adaptation of the Little Mermaid myth, *Ponyo*). The storytelling is a little stilted in places, perhaps because so much of it is filtered through Mira's thoughts; however the emotional effect is to highlight her loneliness further.

While mermaids are not exclusively classical, and Mira is not presented as a classical siren, the fisherman's self-titled role as Neptune offers an insight into the ways that mermaid lore is classicised, sometimes in tawdry fashion. *Fish Girl* has an optimistic ending in that Mira is free to join Livia's family, though perhaps it is sad that Mira gives up her mermaid identity in order to join a human family; overall it is a sad reflection on the trauma located within many a mermaid myth.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and

Neptune

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Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Child's view Coming of age Desires Emotions Freedom Friendship Humanism Isolation/loneliness Maturity Resilience Truth and lies
Further Reading	Evelyn Arizpe and McAdam, Julie, "Crossing Visual Borders and Connecting Cultures: Children's Responses to the Photographic Theme in David Wiesner's Flotsam", *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 17:2 (2011): 227–243.

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