Philippe Béha , Glen Huser

# Time for Flowers, Time for Snow. A Retelling of the Legend of Demeter and Persephone

*United Kingdom (2013)*

TAGS: Afterlife Architecture Cerberus Charon Crete Daedalus Demeter Eleusinian Mysteries Gods Greek Music Hades Hermes Immortality Katabasis Olympus Persephone Pluto / Plouton Proserpina Underworld Zeus


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| General information | |
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| *Title of the work* | Time for Flowers, Time for Snow. A Retelling of the Legend of Demeter and Persephone |
| *Country of the First Edition* | Canada, United Kingdom |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | Canada; United Kingdom |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 2013 |
| *First Edition Details* | Glen Huser, *Time for Flowers, Time for Snow. A Retelling of the legend of Demeter and Persephone.* Vancouver, London: Tradewind Books, 2013, 38 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 9781896580265 |
| *Genre* | Musicals , Picture books |
| *Target Audience* | Children (8+) |
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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

### Philippe Béha (Illustrator)

Philippe Béha is a Canadian artist who has been a two-time recipient of the Governor General's Award. His work focuses on the illustration of children's books and has illustrated over 175 books, including *The Golden Touch*, a story of King Midas (2015, Tradewind, see entry in this database).

Bio prepered by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

### Glen Huser , b. 1943 (Author)

Glen Huser is a Canadian author who writes for children and young adults. He has received awards for his work, including the Governor General's Award and the Mr Christie's Silver Award. For much of his career he was a teacher-librarian before turning to professional writing.

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk



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## Additional information

Summary

*Time for Flowers, Time for Snow* is a book and CD version of an opera staged in Canada in which 180+ school children performed accompanied by The Orchestre Symphonique Pop Montréal with narration from UK comedian Terry Jones. The opera was composed by Greek national Giannis Georgantelis, and was run as a community project under the auspices of the Government of Canada, the Government of Quebec, the cities of Montreal and Laval, the Embassy of Greece to Canada, and the Embassy of Canada to Greece. The book version was published with financial support from the Government of Canada and Canadian Heritage via the Canada Council for the Arts, the Canada Book Fund and Livres Canada Books.

This book is heavily illustrated with images rendered in a highly stylised colourful manner emphasising large eyes and noses. The gods wear classical-style clothing while human characters are depicted in modern attire. The depiction of sex-difference between the characters is effected for the most part expressed through the use of long eye-lashes on female characters and no eyelashes on male characters, the exception being Hermes who is depicted with long eye-lashes and curly blonde hair. Sections of musical score feature within the illustrations of characters connecting the book to the audio. The lyrics of the songs feature in the book and can be experienced in coordination with the CD or read as poems.

The work opens with a song which is written out as a poem and available set to music on the CD. The song introduces the theme of the work, asking if you ever wondered why the seasons change. The story begins with the background information that humans and Zeus used "Hades' stones" to build their homes, but that Demeter did not like the stony environment and "fled" with her daughter, Persephone, to live in the greenery of earth's countryside. Demeter and Persephone sing about flowers. Persephone leaves school early one day and goes off to play hide-and-seek with her friends. As she picks a narcissus flower, a team of horses appeared "driven by a tall, dark-haired man in shining armour" who declares that anyone who picks the narcissus belongs to him. He grabs her and drives the chariot back down into the earth. Hermes witnesses everything.

Demeter is distressed that her daughter is missing. She goes out searching for her, singing a grief-filled song. Hades, meanwhile, is



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failing to please Persephone despite all the foods he is offering her. Persephone knows that to eat Underworld food is to be bound to stay forever. Zeus hears discontent from the humans. He summons Hermes to explain. Hermes sings that Demeter is unfit to be a goddess as she is not observing her obligations. She is "annoyingly perverse". Zeus asks why this is so, and Hermes adds that Persephone is missing. Zeus is enraged to hear that Hades has her and sends Hermes to fetch her. Hades continues to tempt Persephone with food and humorous anachronisms fill a song with examples of modern food offered. Hermes passes Charon and Cerberus, refuses an offer to share Hades' pizza lest he become bound to the Underworld, and informs Hades that he must release Persephone. Hermes adds that both Persephone and Demeter are of the same "stubborn breed" and Hades replies that "that witch" Demeter should feel honoured. Hermes tentatively suggests that Hades could have done better by not kidnapping Persephone. Hades eventually concedes. Persephone overhears Hades singing to his horse about how much he loves Persephone and she decides that she is actually in love with him too. Demeter is overjoyed to hear that her daughter will return from the land of the dead and the fields begin to spring green again. Meanwhile, Persephone has eaten several pomegranate seeds with the intention of returning to Hades following a temporary reunion with her mother. Demeter greets her daughter joyfully, but is distressed to hear that she has eaten and will be leaving again. Demeter declares that the greenery will fade again when Persephone departs and Zeus mutters, "Women – all they bring is woe." When Persephone next meets Hades she asks him if he would consent to her leaving during some months of the year and he answers that she may, so long as his "mother-in-law will stay behind!" when she returns.

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The sections of the audio-book opera:

- Seasons
- Leaving Mount Olympus (narration)
- You Can Never Have Too Many Flowers
- Out to Play (narration)
- Hide and Seek
- Persephone Kidnapped! (narration)
- Too Late
- Demeter's Search (narration)



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- I Call Your Name
- Desolate
- No Pleasing Persephone (narration)
- Courtship Dialogue
- Hermes Summoned (narration)
- Hermes' Lament
- Hermes Visits the Underworld (narration)
- Too Many Cooks
- Convincing Hades (narration)
- Stable Serenades
- Underworld Goodbyes (narration)
- Pomegranate Song
- Back Home (narration)
- Demeter's Rage
- The Betrothal (narration)
- Lover's Pledge
- Time for Flowers, Time for Snow

Analysis

This project was a well-supported means of involving large numbers of people – particularly young people – in learning about and re-creating ancient mythology. The book extends the project by offering a version that can be enjoyed at home or elsewhere following the completion of the main project. It was also a positive form of collaboration between Greek and Canadian artists and the Greek and Canadian governments. The retelling places emphasis on the myth's relationship with the seasons; the images stress the natural world, while the songs dwell on flowers and beauty. The relations between Hades and Persephone are represented as a love story. In the interests of cast simplification, Demeter holds two-torches as she searches, taking on part of Hecate's role, while Hermes acts as witness as well as messenger, conflating the roles of Helios and Hecate with his character.

The essential structure of the narrative reflects the myth known from ancient traditions (esp. *Homeric Hymn 2. To Demeter*, with Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 5.338–569), yet divergences and omissions create a new effect. It is, for example, unusual for the story to begin with focus on Hades' sharing rocks with gods and humans so that they can build their homes (which seems to be an extension of the ancient perception of Hades as a giver of wealth and the valuables that come from the earth, such as metals and gemstones). When Demeter rejects this rocky home (she "fled" with her daughter), she is set-up as an



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outsider to gods and humans, focused on her own preferences. This modern addition also establishes the idea that Demeter does not appreciate what Hades has to offer. While a more positive interpretation of this would stress that this detail emphasises Demeter's love of nature, it might be answered that Demeter could easily be established as a nature-lover without the negative implications associated with her apparent ingratitude. This attitude towards Demeter continues throughout the work. Hermes' song to Zeus is actually rather shocking in the vehemence with which he criticises Demeter ("unfit" to be goddess; Demeter "annoyingly perverse", repeated twice; Demeter "causing everyone to cry"). This is Hermes' position despite the fact that only he knows that Persephone has been kidnapped and despite him knowing that Demeter is neglecting fertility through distress. This castigation of Demeter is not a feature of the ancient tradition, and nor is the scene that follows. Traditionally Zeus allowed Hades to abduct Persephone (see e.g. Hesiod, *Theog*. 912–914), whereas here Zeus is innocently ignorant and instantly steps in to rescue her. Later Demeter (and Persephone) will be called "a stubborn breed", a "witch", a moaner, her voice is a "shriek" (a repeated term), she anger "rage". The end of the story features a mother-in-law joke at Demeter's expense, which follows in a well-established sexist tradition.

The recasting this myth as a love story has been common since the mid-twentieth century, when young people became more able to pursue relationships against the wishes of their parents. This recasting is typically done at the expense of Demeter, as here. Demeter's distress is overlooked in favour of complaints about her while the tradition in which she stops at Eleusis, attempts to help a human family, and establishes the Eleusinian Mysteries for the benefit of humanity is nowhere to be seen. The omission of the Eleusis section of the myth is particularly influential in how Demeter (or female characters more broadly) are represented. The establishing of the Eleusinian Mysteries is associated with Demeter teaching humans about agriculture, as well as about improving conditions after death. Teaching humans about agriculture is Demeter's solution to the newly created cycle of seasons; as there will be winter, humans must learn about growing and storing grain to get them through the difficult times. Omitting this element creates a far harsher impression of Demeter and her relations with humans. Modern representations of Demeter frequently imply that Demeter is being selfish in withholding fertility during her search for Persephone. From a different point-of-view,



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Demeter has no duty to humans. She does not work for them, anything that she gives to them is a blessing, not something owed, and her response to newly created winter is to teach humans how to cope during her period of mourning. This is why the myth of Persephone appears in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Far from being unfit to be a goddess, humans hymn Demeter in appreciation of her bounty to them.

The relationship between Persephone and Hades is presented in a decidedly modern way. The retelling attempts to recast the myth as a story of Persephone's empowerment; she falls in love with Hades and chooses to stay with him. This was presumably intended to rehabilitate a difficult story involving abduction, with Persephone's acceptance of the situation making the myth seem positive. There *is* something positive for young readers about the idea that Persephone is content to be with Hades in the Underworld. There are, however, a number of factors which render this retelling a sexist narrative which potentially reinforces harmful social behaviours. Not least amongst these aspects is the retention of the abduction element in a story cast as a romantic one. The first hint of this is the modern addition that on the day she was abducted Persephone left school early to go and play. There is an implied victim-blaming here; if Persephone had been at school where she was supposed to be, it is implied, perhaps she would never have been taken at all. Hades comes to accept that abducting Persephone was not likely to win her affection (as noted by Hermes). Nonetheless, Hades expresses no regret for his actions, least of all to Persephone, and his only interactions with her are attempts to trick her into eating. Despite this, Persephone is represented as falling in love with Hades the moment she hears him tell his horses that he loves her. Ultimately the narrative suggests to boys (n.b. children are the target audience) that if they can just isolate a young woman then that young woman will soon fall for them – a message which encourages abusive behaviour. Girls, meanwhile, are discouraged from recognising abusive, coercive behaviour for what it is, with attachment to an abusive character privileged over that of a concerned (and, here, disparaged) parent. The trope in which an abducted woman falls for her abductor is well-established in mythology and literature, ancient and modern. While the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* does not present Persephone adjusting to Hades' desire, this theme can be seen in, for example, the ancient myth of the Rape of the Sabine Women (Livy, 1.9–13), retold in film as *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954); also in *Beauty and the Beast* (a French fairy-tale first published in 1740 and retold in many forms;



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and more recently in successful films such as *The Running Man* (1987), *V for Vendetta* (graphic novel 1983–1985, film 2006), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), or *Passengers* (2016). Aspects of it can be seen in *Jane Eyre* (albeit subverted, 1849 with numerus adaptations), in *Dracula* (1897, numerus adaptations), and in Edward Cullen's character in the *Twilight Saga* (2005–2008, films 2008–2012). Ultimately, these narratives are distinctive for the way in which men, "violate women's rights and autonomy and are then rewarded with a romantic relationship" (Jonathan McIntosh, see bibliography). That Hades graciously allows Persephone to return to the surface, when this is more typically determined by how many seeds she has eaten, is another detail that rehabilitates him at the expense of other characters. When Zeus declares, "Women – all they bring is woe", this is out of tune with ancient retellings of this female-centric myth and may well lead readers to wonder what agenda is at work.

The story concludes on a positive note about time for all things, flowers and snow. This brings the story back to the aetiology of the seasons. It is a creative and colourful retelling that explores an ancient way of understanding the natural world. Nonetheless, its modern take on admittedly challenging ancient sexual and familial dynamics will not please everyone.

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| Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts | Afterlife Architecture Cerberus Charon Crete Daedalus Demeter Eleusinian Mysteries Gods Greek Music Hades Hermes Immortality Katabasis Olympus Persephone Pluto / Plouton Proserpina Underworld Zeus |
| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Character traits Child, children Coming of age Death Family Gender Heroism Identity Justice Love Morality Parents (and children) Sexuality Storytelling |
| Further Reading | Fant, Maureen B. and Mary R. Lefkowitz, trans., "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in* |



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