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Barbara Dee

# Halfway Normal

*United States of America (2017)*

TAGS: Artemis Demeter Echo Hades Hera Icarus Persephone Zeus






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

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | Halfway Normal |
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| *Country/countries of popularity* | United States, Worldwide |
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| *First Edition Date* | 2017 |
| *First Edition Details* | Barbara Dee, *Halfway Normal*. New York: Aladdin, 2017, 247 pp. |
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| *Peer-reviewer of the Entry* | Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com<br>Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com |



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## Creators



**Barbara Dee (Author)**

Barbara Dee grew up in Brooklyn, New York. She studied English at Yale University (BA) and Middlebury College (MA), and has a law degree from Chicago University. She worked for two years as a lawyer and several years as a high school English teacher, before raising a family. To date, she has written 11 novels for early teenage readers, often focusing on creative protagonists dealing with real life issues. She lives in Westchester County, New York, with her husband, three children, and their dog and cat.

Sources:

"Dee, Barbara 1958–", *Something About the Author*, edited by Lisa Kumar, vol. 220, Gale, 2011, 33–35. *Gale eBooks*;

Official website (accessed: April 13,2020).

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

**Questionnaire**

### 1. What drew you to working with Classical Mythology in *Halfway Normal?*

As I considered the "halfway" quality of life after cancer, when you're no longer ill but also not quite well, it led me to thinking about Persephone returning to earth. Even when she was back to her regular life, she couldn't (or wouldn't) let go of her experience in the Underworld--despite Demeter's best efforts. The myth just seemed like the perfect metaphor for the "halfway" nature of what doctors call "re-entry."



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**2. I was struck that *D'Aulaire's Greek Myths* is the collection that Norah refers to. What led you to focusing on that particular collection?**

It was the book I shared with my three kids when they were little. Beautiful retellings of the myths, ethereally illustrated.

**3. The parallels between Norah's journey into illness and out again and Persephone's journey into and out of the Underworld are very striking, and indeed moving. What challenges did you face in drawing on that myth, and how did you overcome them?**

The biggest challenge was accounting for Persephone eating the pomegranate seeds. If the myth is a way to account for life-threatening illness, how do you explain Persephone's willingness to eat the food of the dead, and return to the "underworld" of disease? It's not as if Persephone initially visited the Underworld by choice, so why would she choose to return after she was rescued? What I realized is that the myth is about wanting to validate all of one's experience – the good and the bad. Norah's parents, some adults at her school, and several friends and classmates keep trying to get Norah to move past her cancer, act like "it's all behind her." But that cruel and unfair descent into illness is part of who she is now, so she wants it to be present in her life on earth, even as she moves forward. As she says in her speech at the end: "The underworld is real. It's not like it goes away just because you're back on earth. It's always there, part of the whole big universe. And now I knew that." Through no fault of her own Norah, like Persephone, has had a brutal experience that stole her innocence, but also exposed her to darker truths others can't comprehend.

**4. Do you have a background in Classics (Latin or Greek at school, or classes at University?) What sources did you draw on? Are there any books (besides the D'Aulaires) that made an impact on you in this respect?**

I was an English literature major in college, but I also read Ancient Egyptian and Mesoamerican myths for pleasure.



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**5. We usually ask 'Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers,' but it seems to me that you handled this very carefully in presenting the myths through Norah's interest and Ms Farrell's classroom discussions. How did you strike the balance between inspiration and education?**

It's always tricky to present material for a young audience that may not have had prior exposure. You never want to be didactic, or you'll lose them, but you can't assume they'll follow along without some explanation or context-setting. I had a similar challenge with Star-Crossed (2017), which relied heavily on Romeo & Juliet. But working with D'Aulaires, I didn't have to explain (or translate) Shakespeare's language, as I needed to do with Star-Crossed. One of the pleasures of working with myths is that they're often written very simply.

**6. Many writers present the Persephone myth as expressing a teenager's desire to experience things her mother would rather she not think about just yet (love, sexuality, independence), and present Hades as an alluring shy-guy. I'm wondering what you think Norah would make of that interpretation? Did you think about the different aspects of the myth as you worked on presenting it to young readers?**

Once many years ago I heard a child psychologist describing a particular boy's journey into the remote, moody world of adolescence as a version of the Persephone myth, so I think I probably had that description percolating somewhere in my mind. It's such a resonant myth, isn't it? Every kid who grows up and separates from a parent is Persephone, and every anxious, loving parent desperate to reconnect is Demeter.

**7. Are you planning any further forays into Classical material?**

Not at the moment, but the myths are always there, waiting to be rediscovered.

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



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## Additional information

Summary

Norah Levy has spent the past two years in treatment for leukemia, and is now able to return to school. But many things have changed, especially her friendship structures. Norah is self-conscious about her status as 'Cancer Kid,' and struggles to navigate the emotional labyrinth of well-meaning and occasionally jealous friends and teachers. She becomes friends with Griffin, a slightly older boy in her advanced maths class, who likes her doodles of mythological monsters, and draws images for his guitar. In her English class, her teacher encourages her to write openly about herself, but Norah is resistant, feeling that she is being pushed to talk about her private experience when she is not ready. Norah also resents, but needs, her parents concern and rules.

As the novel progresses, Norah's friendships develop – her growing romance with Ryan, and her new friendships with the athletic Aria, who takes her earring-shopping, with shy Cait who teaches the class sign-language, and with her best friend, Harper. She continues drawing and doodling, and thinking about her world, often filtered through her favourite book, *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*. In English class, the students talk about the myths, and Norah is able to explain what they mean to her. An end-of-year assignment helps her open up: in this assignment, each child chooses a myth and explores the aspects of it that they can empathise with. Norah chooses the myth of Persephone, which has been a subtext throughout the novel.She shifts from a dependence on the idea of Demeter's powerful maternal love, to thinking about Persephone: in particular, why Persephone ate the pomegranate seeds. She comes to the conclusion that the pomegranate seeds recognise that "you can't have only good things". Like Persephone, forever changed by her experience in the underworld, Norah is transformed forever by her experiences with leukemia. The novel ends with Norah taking her book of mythology to the children's oncology unit, to share the stories that have helped her, with children.

Analysis

*Halfway Normal* blends the coming-of-age structure of the middle-grade chapter book with the emotional resonances of the Persephone myth, using the myth to reflect on the challenges of being ill and recovering from illness. As Norah reflects on her experiences with



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| | leukemia (a kind of journey into Hades), she gradually reintegrates into school, and finds a stronger sense of self, and also a stronger sense of how relationships work, both among friends and family. Barbara Dee presents the myths carefully, and with context, connecting Norah's love of the myths to the *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, a highly influential illustrated collection of myths in the United States. The classroom scenes in which the teacher, Ms Farrell, leads Norah and her classmates through a discussion of the myths are illuminating. One boy decides that "maybe, it's not about the gods acting better or worse than regular people. Just bigger." This leads into discussion of the assignment, in which the students are asked to write empathetic reflections on the myths, choosing a figure they identify with, and explaining their inner feelings to the class. As the reader has been waiting for the moment in which Norah finds a way to resolve her conflicted emotions and express herself to her friends and family, her retelling and thoughts about the Persephone myth are moving and powerful. |
| Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts | Artemis Demeter Echo Hades Hera Icarus Persephone Zeus |
| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Adolescence Adversity Appearances Coming of age Disability Divorce Emotions Family Friendship Gender expectations/construction Girls Identity Individuality Love Past Relationships School Storytelling Teachers |
| Addenda | In this interview with Bianca Turetsky, Dee explains the inspiration behind Norah's story: a conversation with a doctor who was treating her son for cancer.<br><br>"The Challenges of Returning to Middle School as a Cancer Survivor: An Interview with ***Halfway Normal*** Author Barbara Dee", by Bianca Turetsky, Feb. 22, 2018, online: barnesandnoble.com |



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