Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: The Beautiful Stories of Life: Six Greek Myths, Retold by Carson Ellis, Cynthia Rylant", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1109. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Carson Ellis , Cynthia Rylant

The Beautiful Stories of Life: Six Greek Myths, Retold

United Kingdom (2009)

TAGS: Aphrodite Apuleius Cerberus Demeter Echo Epimetheus Eros Eurydice Golden Ass Hades Metamorphosis Narcissus Ovid Pandora Pandora's Box Persephone Prometheus Psyche Pygmalion Underworld Zeus

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

General information	
Title of the work	The Beautiful Stories of Life: Six Greek Myths, Retold
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2009
First Edition Details	Cynthia Rylant, *The Beautiful Stories of Life: Six Greek Myths, Retold*. Illustrated by Carson Ellis, Orlando: Harcourt/Houghton Mifflin, 2009, 71 pp.
ISBN	9780152061845
Genre	Chapter book*, Illustrated works, Retelling of myths*
Target Audience	Children (recommended for ages 10+)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators

Carson Ellis by Autumn de Wilde. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: January 26, 2022).

Carson Ellis , b. 1975
(Illustrator)

Carson Ellis is an American author and illustrator, with a quirky, distinctive style influenced by tradition of folk art. She has illustrated books for a number of children's writers, including Trenton Lee's *The Mysterious Benedict Society* (2007) and Lemony Snicket's *The Composer is Dead* (2009). Her own books, *Home* (2015) and *Du Iz Tak* (2016) are both bestsellers, with the latter celebrated as a Caldecott Honor Book.

Ellis is married to Colin Meloy, the singer-songwriter from The Decemberists. Ellis is the band's illustrator-in-residence, and received Grammy nominations for album design in 2016 and 2018. The couple have collaborated on the children's fantasy series *The Wildwood Chronicles*. They live with their two sons on a farm in Oregon.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: September 16, 2020).

Erin Feher, *The Bookshelf: Inside the Dreamy Portland Studio of Carson Ellis*, mothermag.com, published June 18, 2019 (accessed: September 16, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Cynthia Rylant , b. 1954
(Author)

Cynthia Rylant is an American author of more than 100 picture books, short stories, poetry, and non-fiction for children and young adults. Her parents separated when she was four, and she was raised by her mother's parents in West Virginia while her mother studied to become a nurse. Her extended family lived a rustic, impoverished life, without electricity, running water, or a car. Many of Rylant's stories are set in the Appalachian region, and her characters are often misfits. Her books showcase intergenerational relationships and explore confronting themes, including aging and death.

In 1975, Rylant graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Morris Harvey College, now known as the University of Charleston, and the following year received a Master of Arts from Marshall University. Unable to find job teaching English, she instead became the children's librarian at Cabell County Public Library in Huffington, West Virginia. Having had such limited exposure to children's literature as a child, her position as a librarian was instrumental in prompting her to begin writing children's stories.

Several of her books have received literary prizes, including her first book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982), and *The Relatives Came* (1985) which both received Caldecott Honors. *A Fine White Dust* (1987), won a Newbery Honor, and the novel *Missing May* (1993) received a Newbery Medal. Rylant now lives in Portland, Oregon.

Sources:

Bio at biography.jrank.org (accessed: September 16, 2020).

Bio at cliffsnotes.com (accessed: September 16, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

Attractively presented as a small, square hardback book, *The Beautiful Stories of Life* is a compendium of six well known classical myths: the stories of Pandora, Persephone, Orpheus, Pygmalion, Narcissus, and Psyche. The stories are lyrically told, with an alternating pattern of longer descriptive passages followed by single sentences that underscore the important messages of each story. Aphorisms feature throughout the book, presented as "the stories of life" in the book's title. In the retelling of the myth of Persephone, she reminds us that "it is one of the stories of life that that which is most light attracts that which is most dark" (p. 12). And in the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, Rylant writes that "there has never been a truer story of life than this: No mortal can change the course of destiny" (p. 27). These profound messages underscore the power of the myths to explain human experiences and emotions.

Rylant's retellings are fairly traditional, drawing on classical sources – Ovid and Apuleius in particular. There are also subtle references to seminal children's versions of myth including Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls*. When Pandora opens the box, a swarm of tiny winged creatures fly out, each one with "the face of a demon" (p. 9). This detail features in numerous children's versions of the Pandora story, though Rylant creates her own prelude. When her Pandora opens the box she at first thinks that it contains beautiful butterflies, and her horror when she tries to reach for them compounds her mistake in opening the box at all. Throughout the book, the famous figures of myth are depicted naturally, experiencing a range of emotions – love, grief, longing, regret – familiar to a modern reader.

Carson Ellis' pencil illustrations are soft and shadowy. The cover of the book features the title and creators' names encircled by a ring of leaves and flowers in muted shades of green, brown, red and yellow. Nestled in the foliage are important objects from each of the stories, including Pandora's box, Pygmalion's hammer and chisel, and Orpheus' lyre. Botanical elements also figure prominently in the illustrations within the book, which are executed in black and white. Each chapter includes a full page illustration of an important scene within the story, as well as smaller sketches on the title and other pages.

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Analysis

Rather than focusing on the moral lessons that children can learn from classical mythology, as is so common in traditional retellings, Cynthia Rylant's *The Beautiful Stories of Life* instead highlights the emotions experienced by the characters of myth, and uses their stories to convey important truths about the world – and in particular the power of love – to her young audience. The closing paragraph of the story of Psyche, the sixth and final chapter in the book, emphasises the fairy tale tropes of the narrative and gives Psyche a happy ending:

> "Psyche lived in joy ever after. She had earned this happiness through many trials and much suffering. But through it all, she never wavered in her belief that the most beautiful story of life is love." (p. 71)

This collection of myths shows love in many forms – romantic, parental, and love of the arts and the natural world. While these feelings are positive, the book also contains more negative examples of love as obsession in the stories of Narcissus, Echo and Pygmalion. The goddess of love, Aphrodite, is also cast as an ambiguous figure in the retelling of the love affair of Eros and Psyche. She is jealous of her son's beautiful lover, and only ceases to torment her when Zeus intervenes. Rylant presents the gods as fallible and flawed, each with their own complex range of emotions that mirror those of the mortals they rule over.

Carson Ellis' full page illustrations focus on the female form. The full page illustration in the retelling of Pygmalion's story is dominated by the naked statue, with the desperate craftsman curled up at her feet. (p. 37) Eurydice is depicted in the moment she is bitten by the snake (p. 26), and Orpheus does not figure at all. Many of these full page illustrations have a surreal and disturbing quality. In the picture of Hades driving his chariot down to the underworld, the head of Persephone, eyes closed, long hair trailing behind her, is visible at his feet (p. 15). Another sleeping maiden, Psyche, floats through the air on "a gentle wind" (p. 55) above a rocky landscape of mountains, trees and city towers (p. 56). Echo's cave is rendered less clearly than the other illustrations, in smudged black charcoal, and the absence of human figures adds to the strangeness of this image in contrast to her other drawings.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aphrodite Apuleius Cerberus Demeter Echo Epimetheus Eros Eurydice Golden Ass Hades Metamorphosis Narcissus Ovid Pandora Pandora's Box Persephone Prometheus Psyche Pygmalion Underworld Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Death Desires Emotions Environment Femininity Gender Humanity Life Love Nature Psychology Relationships Romance Storytelling Subjectivity Tradition Transformation Travel Truth and lies
Further Reading	Review at kirkusreviews.com, published May 1, 2009 (accessed: September 16, 2020).

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