Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: The Great Deeds of Superheroes by Robert Ingpen, Maurice Saxby ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/127. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Robert Ingpen , Maurice Saxby

The Great Deeds of Superheroes

Australia (1989)

TAGS: Archetype Heracles Hercules Jason Perseus Theseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Great Deeds of Superheroes
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1989
First Edition Details	Maurice Saxby, Robert Ingpen (ill.),*The Great Deeds of Superheroes*. Newtown, NSW: Millennium Books, 1989, 184 pp.
ISBN	0855748842
Genre	Instructional and educational works, Myths, Short stories
Target Audience	Children
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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Creators



Robert Ingpen , b. 1936
(Author, Illustrator)

Robert Ingpen is an internationally renowned illustrator, graphic designer and writer, publishing over 100 books. Born in Geelong, Victoria, in 1936, he studied art at RMIT. He worked as a graphic designer at the CSIRO before becoming a freelance illustrator and designer in 1968. In 1986 he received the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the highest accolade in the field of children's literature. Patricia Wrightson also received the award that year, and they remain the only Australians recipients. In 2000 Walker Books commissioned Ingpen to illustrate a series of children's classics, most recently *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (2010), *The Secret Garden* (2010) and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (2011).

He has contributed to numerous public projects, including designing postage stamps for the Captain Cook Bicentenary and the 50th anniversary of the CSIRO, the Northern Territory flag and coat of arms, and the Dromkeen Medal. His style is imaginative and dreamlike, reflecting his interest in both fantasy and the natural environment. He was also a founding member of the Australian Conservation Foundation.

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



Maurice Saxby , 1924 - 2014
(Author)

Maurice Saxby (born Henry Maurice Saxby, also known as H.M. Saxby) was an author, educator and academic recognised as an international authority on children's literature, specialising in writing by Australian authors. He was a passionate advocate for providing

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children with quality literature, and his multi-volume *A History of Australian Children's Literature* remains a seminal resource on the subject. He published several anthologies of traditional folktales, including *The Great Deeds of the Superheroes* (1989) and *The Great Deeds of Heroic Women* (1990), and *The Millennium Book of Myth and Story* (1997).

In 1958 he was named the first national president of the Children's Book Council of Australia, and later became a life member of the organisation. He also served as a member of the judging panel for several Australian and international literary awards, including the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Children's Book Council of Australia. He was awarded an Order of Australia medal in 1995.

He died on November 30, 2014. His legacy has been memorialised in several ways. The School Library Association of New South Wales presents the Maurice Saxby Award, recognising an individual, team or organisation who displays excellence and passion in promoting reading and writing for young people in NSW. The Children's Book Council of Australia hosts the Maurice Saxby Lecture biannually. And the Maurice Saxby Mentorship Program supports emerging writers of children's fiction.

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

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Additional information

Summary

Five hero tales from Greek myth are included in this collection. In addition to being listed first, the size of the Greek section overshadows that of the other cultures, which feature at most two stories (or in the case of the Old English section, three tales). Each of the five heroes from Ancient Greece is endowed with a descriptive title. Perseus is "the Fearless," Heracles "the Strong One," Theseus "the Daring and the Bold," Jason "the Voyager," and Odysseus described as "Agile of Body and Mind." The text is illustrated with Robert Ingpen's watercolour sketches, depicting the heroes attired in minimal clothing, rippling with muscles, and equipped with lots of weapons.

Saxby's versions are traditional and conservative, drawing on ancient sources. Referring to Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries at the site of Troy, he states that they may contain "some faint element of truth" (p. 15). He balances their historicity with the role of the oral tradition in their development, writing that "each poet selected from the many versions those details which stirred his own imagination." (p. 15).

The text seems to revel in moments of retributive justice. Theseus kills the Minotaur by wrenching off its horn and driving it into the monster's own throat (p. 43). While the acts of violence are graphically portrayed, sex is described euphemistically. When Zeus visits Danae "he loved her by moonlight" and "[i]n time they had a child whom Danae called Perseus." (p. 17)

Saxby notes the tradition of retelling Greek myths to children, listing Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Kingsley, Andrew Lang and Roger Lancelyn Green as key "modern retellings meant for younger readers." (p. 15) Green's *Tales of Greece and Troy retold from Ancient Authors* (1975) is also listed in the Bibliography among ancient and modern reference works.

Analysis

In his Introduction, Saxby writes that "[a]lthough each hero is typical of his time in history and his culture there are, in these stories, recurring themes and patterns of behaviour which belong to all ages and all cultures." (p. 7) He identifies archetypal stages in the life of a hero, from their birth and initiation to their quest and journey, and

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finally their death. In addition, he recognises other common elements that appear in many of the stories, including the support of a mentor figure and the use of a special weapon or talisman. This information is presented in a table highlighting the cross-cultural parallels between the heroes featured in the text. The level of detail recalls the work of Otto Rank (1909) and Lord Raglan (1936) in compiling the archetypal features of the heroic journey, as well as Joseph Campbell's monomyth pattern popularised in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (1949). Saxby reveals an awareness of the contemporary currency of these patterns, pointing out that "even today the heroes of book and screen are descended from these archetypes." (p. 15) Although not alluded to directly, his words bring to mind the influence of Joseph Campbell upon the invention and development of George Lucas' *Star Wars*.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Archetype Heracles Hercules Jason Perseus Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Death Heroism Initiation Parents (and children)

Further Reading

Adams, Cindy; Schulze, Patricia, "What work of literature do you recommend for its use of a strong oral tradition?", *English Journal* 93.1 (2003): 19–20.

Gough, John, "The Development of the Hero" [review], *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children* 8.3 (1993): 5–11.

McCann, Hugo, "The Great Deeds of Super Heroes" [review], *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children* 4.5 (1989): 37.

Morrow, Robin, "Tall Tales and True of the Magical Past" [review], *The Weekend Australian* 6–7 (1990): 5.

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Stodart, Eleanor, “Seeing the Lives of Superheroes in Useful Contexts” [review], *The Canberra Times* 21 (1989).

Zahnleiter, Joan, “Ancient Heroes as Fresh as Tomorrow” [review], *The Australian Magazine* 14 (1989): 8.

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