Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Harry and Hortense at Hormone High by Paul Zindel", 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/133. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Paul Zindel

Harry and Hortense at Hormone High

United States (1984)

TAGS: Daedalus Hero(es) Icarus



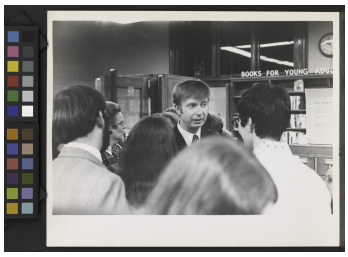


We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Harry and Hortense at Hormone High
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1984
First Edition Details	Paul Zindel, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984, 151 pp.
ISBN	9780060268640
Genre	Novels, School story*, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults
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Creators



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Paul Zindel , 1936 - 2003
(Author)

Paul Zindel was an American teacher, playwright and prolific writer of young adult fiction, publishing more than fifty novels and short stories. He and his sister were raised on Staten Island, New York by their mother after his father left the family for another woman when Zindel was two years old. Dysfunctional families, neglectful or abusive parents, and alienated teenagers feature throughout his writing, and many of his stories are set on Staten Island where he grew up, including *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*. His first novel, *The Pigman* (1968) is frequently taught in American schools. The text was widely banned during the 1990s on account of its depiction of sexual themes and use of offensive language. Zindel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1971, and in 2002 he received the Margaret A. Edwards Award from the American Library Association, in recognition of his significant contribution to the field of young adult literature.

Source:

Official website (accessed: February 19, 2017).

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

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Additional information

Translation

French: *Signé Icare*, trans. Annick Le Goyat, Edmond Baudoin, Paris: Hachette jeunesse, 1992.

Braille: *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*, Enfield, N.S.W.: Royal Blind Society, 1988.

Summary

Harry and Hortense at Hormone High is the story of Jason Rohr, a teenage schizophrenic who believes that he is the reincarnation of the Greek "god" Icarus. He is convinced he can save the world from apathy and decadence, beginning with the students and staff at his new high school. Jason's charisma and evangelical enthusiasm impress Harry Hickey, an aspiring writer and the story's narrator, and his girlfriend Hortense McCoy, who has a passion for psychology. They too long for a modern-day hero and the friends try to support Jason's quest even while his behaviour becomes increasingly erratic, and his identification with Icarus more intense. Harry and Hortense discover that Jason's madness is the result of severe childhood trauma. When he was six, his father murdered his mother before killing himself. When the school arranges for Jason to be committed to a sanitarium, they help him to escape. Jason remains in hiding as he finishes building his hang glider, constructed out of junk and, like the wings of Icarus, arrayed in white feathers. After blowing up the school office, Jason launches the glider off the school roof. He takes to the air, but the glider gets tangled in the cables of the Staten Island Bridge and Jason drowns in the river below. Harry and Hortense are left struggling to make sense of the death of their friend, but they are comforted by the thought that his actions have invigorated the school community and that they themselves are better off for having known him.

Analysis

Harry and Hortense references various elements of the legend of Daedalus and Icarus. The climax of the story is the moment in which Jason's hang-glider takes to the air, like a "huge white bird, its colossal feathered wings dazzling against the sky" (p. 140). The school kids, who have teased and tormented Jason, are awestruck by the beauty of this spectacle.

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The influence of classical mythology on the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, and in popular culture more generally, is strongly emphasised. Hortense diagnoses Jason's identification with Icarus as a result of the trauma of witnessing his mother's murder. The myth, centred on the figure of a loving father, provides him with an alternative narrative to the dynamics of his own family. Though he has a first-person vision of Icarus' fall (p. 111), it is not clear whether he himself intends to take his own life.

Although the text is not referenced explicitly, Harry employs Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) as a frame for retelling the story of Jason's life and death. He describes their first meeting with Jason as a "Call to Adventure" (p. 17) and casts Jason's Aunt Mo as a "little old crone" who brings "supernatural aid" when Jason is institutionalised (p. 86). They interpret the final element of Campbell's monomyth pattern, in which the hero returns to his community with a boon, as Jason's gift of enlightenment.

The text is full of other classical allusions. Jason's own name is borrowed from a Greek hero. In one of his printed manifestos, he declares that the teachers at Hormone High should be more like Aristotle, who "taught his students things they needed to know" (p. 73). When Jason takes them to the Staten Island Brighton Museum, they are horrified by the monstrous hybrid creatures of mythology and the violence of many of the ancient tales (p. 46). And Jason becomes convinced that Harry is the reincarnation of Euripides 'the great Greek writer', and Hortense the Delphic Oracle (p. 92). While much of Jason's philosophy is confused, his key message seems to be that the Ancient Greeks, with their hero figures, powerful stories, and love of children, had a more cohesive, successful society than that of today.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Daedalus Hero(es) Icarus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth	Disability Family Friendship Murder Parents (and children) School Society Storytelling Suicide Teachers

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Culture

Further Reading

Kaplan, Jeffrey S., *Using Literature to Help Troubled Teenagers Cope with Identity Issues*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Riverlea, Miriam, "'Icarus is seventeen, like me': Reworking Myth in Young Adult Fiction", *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 40.2 (2012): 26.

Sheidy, Marian, "YA Books in the Classroom: From Odyssey to Dickens to Salinger to Zindel", *ALAN Review*, 15.3 (1998): 43–44.

Stephens, John, Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.

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