Emily Booth, "Entry on: Guardian of the Dead by Karen Healey", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1356. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

Karen Healey

Guardian of the Dead

United States of America (2010)

TAGS: Circe Dryades Homer Naiad Orpheus Penelope Persephone Selene Underworld





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

General information	
Title of the work	Guardian of the Dead
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2010
First Edition Details	Karen Healey, *Guardian of the Dead*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010, 342 pp.
ISBN	9780316044301
Available Onllne	EBooks are available online for purchase: Australian publisher (accessed: October 7, 2021), US publisher (accessed: October 7, 2021).

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Awards	2010 – Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Novel; 2011 – Sir Julius Vogel Award Winner (Best New Talent); 2011 – NZ Post Children's Book Awards Finalist; 2011 – William C. Morris Award Finalist, American Library Association; 2011 – Best Books For Young Adults List, American Library Association; 2011 – Chronos Award Nominee; 2011 – Sir Julius Vogel Award Nominee (Best Young Adult Novel); 2010 – Australian Shadows Award Nominee (Long Fiction); 2010 – CYBILS Award Nominee (Young Adult Fantasy & Science Fiction); 2010 – The Inky Awards Shortlist (Gold Inky).
Genre	Fiction, Science fiction, Urban fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Emily Booth, University of Technology, Sydney, Emily.Booth@uts.edu.au
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

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Creators



Karen Healey by Donna Robertson. From the collection of Christchurch City Libraries, retrieved from flickr.com, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 (accessed: February 8, 2022).

Karen Healey , b. 1981
(Author)

Karen Healey is a New Zealand young adult fiction author of primarily science fiction. She studied at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, first completing a double major in English and Classics, followed by an honours year, and a Master of Arts. She taught English in Japan for two years through the international Japanese Exchange and Teaching program, before applying to do a PhD about superhero comics at the University of Melbourne. As she was most interested in teaching, she left the program and returned to New Zealand to retrain as a high school English, Classics and Media Studies teacher. Her novels have been nominated for and won numerous awards; most notably, *Guardian of the Dead* (accessed: October 7, 2021), which won the 2010 Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Novel. The Aurealis Award is Australia's premier speculative fiction award, and is awarded annually.

Sources:

The Author's website (accessed: October 7, 2021).

Profile on Goodreads (accessed: October 7, 2021).

Twitter (accessed: October 7, 2021).

Bio prepared by Emily Booth, University of Technology, Sydney, Emily.Booth@uts.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

Part One:

Guardian of the Dead is a young adult urban fantasy novel about a New Zealand high school student named Ellie Spencer, who is drawn into a mythological conflict that re-enacts key aspects of Maori spirituality, and that will determine the fate of the North Island.

After Ellie bumps into fellow student Mark Nolan, she begins to experience disorientation, fevers, and memory loss. She is disturbed by the serial killer on the North Island of New Zealand called The Eyelasher, who is removing victim's eyes. At the request of her best friend Kevin Waldgrave and acquaintance Iris Tsang, Ellie agrees to tutor local university students in fight choreography for their upcoming performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A new actress named Reka joins the cast and develops a fixation on Kevin, who in return shows interest in her (which Ellie finds unexpected because he is asexual). At a local market, Ellie purchases an unusual mask that seems to be calling her; she is also accosted by a raving elderly man who confronts her again outside her dormitory. Mark confesses the man is his father and that he meddled with Ellie's memories for her own protection. Ellie demands answers from Mark, but he is unable to give them due to a magic curse.

After a theatre rehearsal where Kevin is oddly over-protective of Reka, Ellie goes for coffee with the actor Blake. However, as Blake drives her home, he attempts to sexually assault her. Escaping from Blake, Ellie is attacked by a group of men from another car. She then flees into the nearby bushland, where she stumbles into the abode of Reka, who reveals she has supernatural powers. Reka tries to change Ellie into a tree, but Mark appears and saves her. The next day, Ellie researches Reka at the library and learns Reka is a non-human being known as a patupaiarehe (a being from Māori spirituality similar to the Fae). Once Ellie has learned what Reka is, Mark is freed from the curse and can speak. He reveals he is Reka's half-human son, and that his father is Kevin's missing great-uncle Robert Waldgrave. Reka wants to seduce Kevin to have another child who will be more loyal to her than Mark. Mark has tried to protect Kevin.

Ellie and Mark head to Iris' house, where she and Kevin were rehearsing for the play until Reka arrived. The three confront Reka,

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and despite sustaining injuries and damage to the house, force Reka to revoke her "claim" on Kevin as being "hers". Leaving Kevin asleep at Iris' house, the three travel to the Botanic Gardens where Mark tells several Māori tales about the creation of humankind, and of Māui and his failed attempt to claim immortality for humanity. Mark reveals the serial killer known as The Eyelasher is actually a group of patupaiarehe from the North Island who are killing humans with magic — magicians like Ellie — and stealing their eyes for their power. They will use the magician's power to cause a cataclysm and mass death of humans. When this occurs, they will aim to reverse the mortality of their species as Māui once tried to do: by climbing between the legs of Hine-nui-te-pō (the goddess of the night who receives souls in the afterlife) to reverse the birth process.

Mark introduces Ellie and Iris to his Grandfather, a serpent-like being called a taniwha who lives in the water. When Mark's Grandfather speaks Māori rather than making animal sounds, Ellie and Iris are so disconcerted that they run away. Mark enchants Iris to return to him, and Ellie follows out of concern. Mark explains that if the world still needs someone who dies, they can come back in another form as his Grandfather did. Ellie wants to leave and Iris wants to know more. However, at that moment, five murderous patupaiarehe from the North Island find them.

Part Two:

Ellie, Mark, and Iris flee the patupaiarehe, and Mark's Grandfather kills two by biting them. Ellie realises that her now-activate magic means she can literally see the figures of myth all around her in the world. Mark emphasises that her own personal history and stories will also influence what she sees. The three break into their theatre to rest. Reka arrives, battered from a battle with the rogue patupaiarehe who killed Mark's father despite Reka having "claimed" him decades ago. Reka eats the remains of a dead patupaiarehe to learn their plans and informs the trio: the patupaiarehe wish to use the power they collected to cause the entire North Island of New Zealand to sink. The trio agree that Mark and Ellie will go to the North Island to try and prevent this, and Iris will buy their plane tickets.

After crashing in Ellie's dorm room, Mark is discovered by a teacher who threatens punishment. Ellie uses the mask she bought to brainwash the teacher into forgetting and covering for Ellie's absence at school. Ellie swears to explain everything to Kevin later. Ellie and

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Mark kiss before heading to the airport, where Reka appears and gives Mark her eyes to increase his power. When they arrive at the North Island, they meet Mr Sand, a former tutor of Mark's. They decide the allies can plan for the pending patupaiarehe confrontation at Ellie's home. Mark warns Ellie that Mr Sand "ate" the patupaiarehe magic Mark should have inherited, and not to trust him.

At the ally meeting, Ellie is startled to discover her English teacher, Professor Gribaldi, is in attendance and is a well-respected magician. They formulate a battle plan to prevent the North Island being sunk. This includes agreeing that Mark will follow the patupaiarehe venturing to the underworld and kill them before they can crawl between the legs of Hine-nui-te-pō. The next day, Mr Sand reveals he "ate" Ellie's grandmother's magic, and orchestrates a fight between Ellie and Mark by revealing that Ellie's love for Mark will make him human but condemn her. Ellie runs away in distress, pursued by Mark, but they are unexpectedly surrounded by the patupaiarehe. Mark enchants Ellie to sleep for her safety and gives her Reka's eyes; when she wakes, she finds his corpse with his eyes removed.

Ellie finds Mr Sand who reveals he double-crossed the magician allies and hurls Ellie into the mists – the realm of the patupaiarehe. Determined to stop the patupaiarehe in the underworld, she pushes Reka's eyes into her enchanted mask and uses it to guide her through the magical realm to the cave of Hine-nui-te-pō. Hine-nui-te-pō briefly awakens, but the female patupaiarehe sings her back to sleep and starts to climb through her legs. Ellie uses her mask and Reka's eyes to enchant the patupaiarehe, and Hine-nui-te-pō awakens and crushes the patupaiarehe as she once did to Māui. Ellie tells her story to Hine-nui-te-pō, who offers to accelerate the death of the great fish Te Ika a Māui whose body is the North Island of New Zealand, thus averting the great cataclysm. Ellie agrees, and it is done.

Ellie encounter's Mark's spirit and guides it out of the underworld, but when she wakes on her parents' roof, he is gone. The North Island has experienced a terrible earthquake, but has not sunk. Ellie, Professor Gribaldi, and the others confront Mr Sand about his betrayal, and he departs. Ellie returns Reka's eyes and helps with rescue efforts on the North Island. She visits the beach and meets with Mark, who has returned as a taniwha. His Grandfather will teach him how to take a human form, and the pair declare their love for each other.

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Analysis

Guardian of the Dead features a complex plot that integrates a mythical adventure narrative with a young adult story of falling in love and coming of age. The novel predominantly explores Māori spirituality through the eyes of a Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealander) teenage girl, as illustrated in the novel's summary above. Mark explains many of the stories and creatures from Māori spirituality to Ellie, especially in the chapter "Together Alone" (pp. 161–182).

However, Ellie has been raised on "Greek and Roman myths" and "Christian iconography", which are prominent in the novel (p. 194). Parallels between Māori spirituality and Greek and Roman mythologies are often made, though they are not equated as being the same. Mark reminds her that "'…you carry your own mythologies with you…'" and that these will also inform her worldview (p. 194). These myths and fairytales are often linked with Māori spirituality in some manner, through direct references or parallels, revealing how characters experience their world through their own personal "mythologies". Thus, using the perspectives of different characters, Healey explores different traditions in New Zealand culture (Māori and European — i.e. Classical and Christian):

- Iris' restaging of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with some characters portrayed as Māori extends this idea of stories as something that can be reimagined or blended with other stories (p. 39).
- Ellie jokes that a box she is carrying contains "All the evils sent to plague mankind", later earning the nickname Pandora from the actor Blake (p. 41, 60). Later, Ellie is required to analyse "the thematic parallel in the presentation of Circe weaving" in *The Odyssey* by her English teacher, Professor Gribaldi (p. 47). Ellie argues with Mark that the Greek myths are sexist, punishing women for using magic and being powerful, and that, "Naiads and dryads are allowed to be sympathetic, because they're pretty and passive, but we're never allowed to like enchantresses or witches" (pp. 47–49). Mark argues that Penelope is acceptable because she is "selfless", but Circe is bad because she "just wants to control men", to take "what she wants from them" and then discard them (p. 48). This description foreshadows the revelations about Reka, a female Māori patupaiarehe who does just that to continue her race, as

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she did with Mark's father. Ellie herself connects Circe to Reka, losing sympathy for the former and fearing the latter (p. 93). However, Ellie also becomes a magic user with her enchanted mask that allows her to control people; but because of her selfless end goals, her actions are closer to Mark's characterisation of Penelope.

- Professor Gribaldi discusses what she calls the Roman myth of the moon goddess Selene and her immortal sleeping lover Endymion, although ordinarily Selene is a Greek Goddess. Upon learning this myth, Ellie is able to "see" Selene riding her chariot in the sky due to her magical powers having been awoken. Ellie reflects on the Māori story of Pania of the Reef, a "maiden of the sea, secretly wedded to a human man" who ultimately betrayed her, and she returned to the ocean because of it (p. 245); a tale that shares obvious parallels to Hans Christian Anderson's story *The Little Mermaid*. Mr Sand compares how Mark can become human if a human declares their love for him, to the story of Beauty and the Beast, first written by French author Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740. The story was popularised by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1756, and again by Disney's animated film in 1991. Mr Sand quotes the lyric "tale as old as time" from the Disney movie's theme song when manipulating Ellie.
- When Ellie meets Mark in the underworld, he states he was trying to prepare for his "first meal" in the afterlife, which Ellie relates to the myth of Persephone and presumably the pomegranate seeds which bound her to the underworld (p. 313). However, Ellie then shifts her focus from Persephone to the tale of Orpheus, and his journey out of the underworld (p. 314). Ellie navigates her way out of the underworld, following the rules of the Orpheus myth, with Mark following in the role of Eurydice (p. 315). Ellie's belief in the myth, and the possibility of returning one in the underworld to life, successfully allows Mark to return to the world of the living. However, his own Māori spirituality affects the outcome, and he returns as a taniwha as his Grandfather did before him (p. 331).
- Christian belief is most prominently represented in the novel through the figure of Robert Waldgrave, Mark's father and Kevin's great-uncle who mysteriously disappeared decades ago. Robert, a devout Christian, perceives Reka as a demon who he escaped from (p. 94). Robert quotes from the *Song of Solomon* 5:2 from the *Good News Bible* several times. The lines,

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> "While I slept, my heart was awake. I dreamed my lover knocked at the door." are usually narrated by a woman, and the subsequent lines, "Let me come in, my darling, my sweetheart, my dove. My head is wet with dew, and my hair is damp from the mist." are usually narrated by the male lover. However, Robert's account changes the gender of the speakers, and reframes the mist as a reference to the realm of the patupaiarehe known as the mists (pp. 68–69, 94).

Guardian of the Dead integrates multiple forms of myth and spirituality as the basis of an otherworldly adventure, demonstrating how different beliefs can co-exist and shape the lives of every individual differently. Despite the adventure plotline, the novel is predominantly guided by the love story between Ellie and Mark, and Ellie's friendships with Kevin and Iris. These themes, as well as Ellie's uncertainty about her own future beyond high school, make the novel relatable and relevant for teenage readers interested in a novel about the power of stories.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Circe Dryades Homer Naiad Orpheus Penelope Persephone Selene Underworld
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Death Fairy tale references Individuality LGBTQI Mental health* Morality

Further Reading

Healey, Karen, "Girls Going Underground: Navigating Mythologies in Aotearoa's Literary Landscape" in Diana Burton, Simon Perris and Jeff Tatum, eds., *Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017, 76–93.

Perris, Simon and Hannah Parry, "Classical Reception in New Zealand Literature: An Introduction (and Reading List)", *Journal of New*

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Zealand Literature 37 (2019): 159–186.

Perris, Simon, “What does Hine-nui-te-po look like? A case study of oral tradition, myth and literature in Aotearoa New Zealand”, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 4 (2018): 365–388.

Addenda

Edition used for the entry:

Karen Healey, *Guardian of the Dead*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010, 349 pp. ISBN 9781743368282.

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