Robin Diver, "Entry on: The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth by Philip Craig Russell, Charles Smith", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1495. Entry version as of July 12, 2026.

Philip Craig Russell , Charles Smith

The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth

United States (2008)

TAGS: Aphrodite Apollo Ares Artemis Athena Cerberus Dionysus / Dionysos Hades Hephaestus Hera Hermes Hestia Medusa Persephone Poseidon Thetis

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

General information	
Title of the work	The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	English speaking countries
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	Charles R. Smith Jr. and P. Craig Russell, *The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth*. New York: Little Brown, Hatchette, 2008, 48 pp.
ISBN	0316073660, 9780316073660
Genre	Anthology of myths*, Comics (Graphic works), Fiction, Illustrated works, Picture books, Poetry
Target Audience	Children (boys, comic fans and reluctant readers)
Author of the Entry	Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators

Philip Craig Russell , b. 1951
(Illustrator)

Philip Craig Russell (b. 30th October 1951 in Ohio) is an American illustrator of comics and graphic novels who has worked on Marvel and DC Comics, as well as comic book adaptations of popular novels, operas and fairy tales.

Russell graduated from the University of Cincinnati with a degree in painting. In 1972, he began work on horror comics as the assistant of Dan Adkins. He built his reputation in the comic world working for Marvel on Killraven and Dr. Strange.

He has created many comic book adaptations of operas, including Wagner's *Parsifal*, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and *Pelias*, *Mellisande* and *Salome*. He considers his greatest achievement to be his adaptation of Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. He has also done work for Neil Gaiman, including adapting *Coraline* to comic form and creating comics on Norse Mythology. He has created comic book adaptations of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*.

Sources:

The Art of P. Craig Russell at artofpcraigrussell (accessed: April 26, 2021).

Philip Craig Russell at Lambiek Comicyclopedia (accessed: August 2, 2022).

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com

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Charles Smith , b. 1969
(Author)

Charles R. Smith is an African American poet, artist, photographer, magazine and book cover photographer and children's author. His works include *My People*, a picture book based on the poem by Langston Hughes, the photography book *I Am the World* and a photographic version of Rudyard Kipling's *If*. He also created the superhero-comic inspired children's poetry anthology of Greek gods, *The Mighty 12: Superheroes of Greek Myth*.

Smith grew up in California and attended the Brooks Institute of Photography. He now lives with his wife Gillian and three children in Poughkeepsie, New York. He has won the Coretta Scott King Award more than once for his books, as well as the Audie Award for Young Listeners. He has also won awards for creating good books for reluctant readers.

His works look at a range of themes: *The Mighty 12* draws on his childhood interest in Greek myth, whilst *Rimshots, Hoop Kings, Hoop Queens, Let's Play Basketball!* and *Let's Play Baseball!* are inspired by his lifelong love of sports. *28 Days* and *Brick by Brick* are about black history. He says about his variety of work: "I want to show students, particularly boys, that there are many ways to pursue their interests, no matter what they may be."

He has also provided the Story and Libretto for a basketball opera, *Bounce*.

Sources:

Charles R. Smith Jr. at Ssimon and Schuster (accessed: August 2, 2022).

Charles R. Smith Jr. at Harper Collins (accessed: August 2, 2022).

Aalbc (accessed: August 2, 2022).

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Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

This is a poetry anthology and superhero style comic book, with poems about Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Cerberus, Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Athena, Medusa, Hera and Dionysus. *The Mighty 12* refers to the twelve Olympian gods. The illustrations typically occupy a double spread for each god, with the main illustration appearing on one page, and the poem on the other page set over a colourful background with further illustrations.

The lines of poetry are written in all caps, with certain words in bold and italics. There are also several pages of illustrations without poetry that appear between the poems, with a comic style caption box explaining the action taking place in the illustration.

The book ends with a Who's Who, featuring a cartoon drawing of each god in a square box, and Top Trumps style listing of facts about them such as their parents, symbols and tools. This is followed by a bibliography that lists a number of written sources consulted for this, including other children's anthologies of myth.

Analysis

The introduction, *Welcome to Olympus*, depicts a cartoon palace in yellow with influence of global architecture, at the top of a series of tall, round green hills, at the bottom of which is an idyllic cove leading to a forest. The accompanying poem presents the gods as exciting, powerful and cruel rulers, 'Playing people like pawns / in a grand game of chess' (p. 5).

Most of the Zeus poem is about his punishment of mortals. He is also presented as smiling on mortals who humble themselves before him; he 'dishes out blessings/to those who are meek/to those who give thanks/to the gods when they speak.' (p. 9). His illustration has obvious influence from Judeo-Christian art: Zeus has a long flowing curly white beard and hair, is naked (with his modesty protected by a convenient eagle wing) and stands in a stormy raincloud.

Apollo, meanwhile, is depicted as a muscle-bound hulk with white blond curls and a yellow tunic that barely covers his body. The bodies of male gods are therefore quite sexualised, although it is perhaps their strongman muscular masculinity that is being displayed for consumption rather than sexuality. The Apollo poem adds the detail to

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Apollo's character that as the god of truth he cannot tell lies.

For a twenty-first century Greek myth illustrated retelling, the depiction of beautiful goddesses is in some ways atypical. Artemis, Aphrodite and the beautiful pre-transformation Medusa have at times almost pudgy facial features, and Aphrodite's arms are muscular. This marks a departure from the extremely thin goddesses of typical contemporary illustrations.

This text presents a fairly patriarchal pantheon; the three sons of Kronos are implied to be the central powers, whilst Hera's ruling status is less emphasised. She is mostly characterised as a frighteningly vicious jealous wife. This can be compared to other receptions that attempt to position goddesses as powerful rulers with serious duties. Persephone is ruler of the underworld who enjoys and is good at her work in Brack, Sweeney and Thomas' 2014 *Brick Greek Myths*. In Robert Graves' 1960 children's anthology, one of the sources used by Smith, Hera does much of the real work of ruling the real world due to her husband's laziness. *The Mighty 12* begins with the male god poems, relegating goddess poems to the end. The only exceptions are Artemis, whose poem follows Apollo's, and Dionysus, who is the last poem in the anthology. *The Mighty 12* presumably focuses on male characters because it is aimed primarily at boys who are reluctant readers.

The Hades illustration depicts him with grey skin, sitting on a throne above a blonde woman who lies unmoving on the floor beneath him, green slime growing seemingly from her body and surrounding the floor. Presumably, this is Persephone, who is mentioned in the poem as his kidnapped wife.

The Medusa poem is an adaptation of Apollodorus' story in which Athena transforms Medusa for boasting of her beauty, rather than the Ovid story in which Athena punishes Medusa for her own rape. In this text, however, Medusa does not seem to be directly insulting Athena. Athena appears to be angry and jealous simply because Medusa is beautiful and generally arrogant.*

The blurb on the back of this book quotes a review from Library Media Connection, which states that this is a good book for 'Reluctant readers and comic book fans alike', as well as 'young readers'. The Amazon UK reviews, meanwhile, raising questions about audience and approach, suggest some parents find the anthology disturbing at times

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with its scenes of such things as cannibalism.

Demeter is curiously absent from this book; the 'who's who' at the end acknowledges Hestia and Persephone as the missing Olympians whose poems do not feature in this anthology. Demeter is therefore neither the subject of a poem, nor credited as an Olympian in the back section, which seems to have replaced her with her daughter.

The bibliography at the back of the book lists a number of other children's books of Greek myth as Smith's sources, including McCaughrean's 1992 *Orchard Book of Greek Myths*, the D'Aulaires' 1962 *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, Hamilton's 1942 *Mythology*, Evslin's 1967 myth anthology *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths* and Graves' 1960 children's text *Greek Gods and Heroes*. Given Smith was born in 1969, many of these were probably the anthologies of his childhood.

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* For an analysis of *The Mighty 12*'s Medusa poem, see Robin Diver, "Tomboyish Wisdom Gods and Sexy Gorgons: The Evolution of Ovid's Medusa Rape Narrative in Contemporary Children's Literature", *New Voices in Classical Reception* 13 (2020): 66–77.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aphrodite Apollo Ares Artemis Athena Cerberus Dionysus / Dionysos Hades Hephaestus Hera Hermes Hestia Medusa Persephone Poseidon Thetis
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Authority Masculinity Punishment Superheroes Truth and lies
Further Reading	Diver, Robin, "Tomboyish Wisdom Gods and Sexy Gorgons: The Evolution of Ovid's Medusa Rape Narrative in Contemporary Children's Literature", *New Voices in Classical Reception* 13 (2020):

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66–77.

Graves, Robert, *Greek Gods and Heroes*, New York: Laurel-Leaf Books, 2001 (reprint, ed. pr. 1960).

Addenda

Page numbers given here refer to 2009 paperback edition.

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