Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Dionysos. The New God (Olympians, 12) by George O'Connor", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Hanna Paulouskaya. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1506. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

George O'Connor

Dionysos. The New God (Olympians, 12)

United States (2022)

TAGS: Afterlife Aphrodite Architecture Ares Ariadne Bacchus Centaur(s) Cerberus Crete Cronus / Kronos Dionysus / Dionysos Egypt Eleusinian Mysteries Fate Faun Gaia / Gaea Gods Greek Art Greek Music Greek Theatre Hades Hecate Hephaestus Hera Hermes Hestia Immortality Katabasis Laurel Wreath Mercury Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Metis Midas Olympus Pan Persephone Styx Theseus Underworld Zeus





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

General information	
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Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Warsaw, sn239@cam.ac.uk
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Creators



George O'Connor, photo uploaded by Nxswift. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: January 5, 2022).

George O'Connor , b. 1973
(Author, Illustrator)

George O'Connor (1973) is an author, illustrator, cartoonist, and graphic novelist from the USA, based in Brooklyn, New York. His work is predominantly aimed at young people and frequently contains historical subjects and themes. O'Connor has cited Walt Simonson's mythology-rich editions of Marvel's *Mighty Thor* as a significant early influence on his own work. His first graphic novel, *Journey into Mohawk Country*, was based on the journal of a 17th century trader. He illustrated Adam Rapp's adult graphic novel *Ball Peen Hammer* (2009). He contributed to First Series' *Fable Comics* (2015, ed. Chris Duffy), a collection of myths retold by cartoonists. Between 2010–2022 O'Connor published the *Olympians* graphic novel series.

In an interview (see here, accessed: April 17, 2015), George O'Connor has said that he wanted the series to be educational. He also said that he spent a long time researching for each title by reading ancient literature to access different versions of myths, and that he consciously tried to avoid reading modern "people's retellings because everybody puts a spin on it. I purposely put spins on the stories too, but I don't want to accidentally steal somebody else's spin".

Sources:

Official website (accessed: October 24, 2018).

Former Author blog (blog no longer updated; accessed: October 24, 20018).

Twitter (accessed: October 24, 2018).

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Additional information

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs

Olympians (Series, Book 1): *Zeus. King of the Gods*,

Olympians (Series, Book 2): *Athena. Grey-Eyed Goddess*,

Olympians (Series, Book 3): *Hera. The Goddess and her Glory*,

Olympians (Series, Book 4): *Hades: Lord of the Dead*,

Olympians (Series, Book 5): *Poseidon. Earth Shaker*,

Olympians (Series, Book 6): *Aphrodite. Goddess of Love*,

Olympians (Series, Book 7): *Ares. Bringer of War*,

Olympians (Series, Book 8): *Apollo. The Brilliant One*,

Olympians (Series, Book 9): *Artemis. Wild Goddess of the Hunt*,

Olympians (Series, Book 10): *Hermes: Tales of the Trickster*,

Olympians (Series, Book 11): *Hephaistos. God of Fire*.

Summary

Dionysos opens not with “the new god”, but with the quieter, lesser-known deity, Hestia. The reader is returned to the beginning of the series (Vol. 1 *Zeus. King of the Gods*), which introduced the creation of the universe and the Olympians. Hestia tells this story, and that of the war with the Titans, this time from her own perspective. She then explains a little about herself; her disinterest in temples and the usual offerings and her content to be found in the hearths of people’s homes. There she hears stories; the reference to stories provides the bridge into the next myth.

The myth of Semele unfolds, with the implication that Hera has appeared in disguise and compelled Semele to persuade Zeus to appear in his real form. At first Zeus tries to dissuade Semele, but he gives way and transforms into a blinding light, a miniature sun; in a series of striking panels Semele is reduced from human, to skull, to shade. Once she is a shade, Hermes appears in his role as psychopomp and leads her to the Styx. Moments later he appears to comfort Zeus, who stands mournfully beside a pile of ash. Zeus plucks

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a divine spark from the ash and encloses it in his thigh. The visual style then shifts to a representation of an ancient vase sherd depicting the birth of Dionysus from Zeus' leg. Hermes calls it "easily the weirdest thing I've ever seen" (p. 22).

To avoid Hera's wrath, Hermes takes the baby Dionysus, disguised as a human girl, to be raised by his human aunt. Madness descends upon the aunt's husband, who murders his family; Hermes rescues Dionysus. The young god is disguised as a young ram and taken to be reared by Silenos the satyr. Dionysus grows up amongst the satyrs falling in love with a satyr youth, inventing wine, and partying with the satyrs who have become wine enthusiasts. Tragedy strikes again when Dionysus' young lover, Ampelos, is killed in an accident whilst harvesting grapes. Hermes appears instantly to console Dionysus, but it is observed darkly that once again "people were dying around Dionysus." (p. 30)

The scene moves to Olympus and Hestia. Hera knows of Dionysus' existence. Some of the gods debate his nature; is he a god of madness? Dionysus, now bearded, appears from the desert; no one knows where he has been wandering. He knows he attracts madness. He is determined to become a full Olympian. More myths follow. Dionysus introduces wine to humans; is chased out of Thrace; encounters King Midas – whose myth is told briskly and wryly in sixteen panels.

The Olympians continue to debate Dionysus' nature. The myth of Dionysus and the pirates follows, full of metamorphoses and mirages. While the story of the pirates is related in Thebes, the women of the city begin to go mad. The gods continue to be concerned, but the scene switches to Naxos. Ariadne now takes narratorial control. She no longer grieves for Theseus (their story told Vol. 5. *Poseidon. Earth Shaker*), but she is mournful for home. She hears music, and the myth of her marriage to Dionysus follows, told with them both a little shy and tentative. Dionysus resolves to conquer death. The gods remain concerned. Dionysus is involved in more trouble in Thrace; a box depicting Ares tastefully covers the horrors of Dionysus' enemy – now mad – hacking his own legs off.

Dionysus descends into the Underworld, meaning to return with his loved ones and destroy death. He struggles amidst the psyches. Hades and Persephone come to meet him. They explain that the Lethe washes away the memories of the dead; they cannot be restored.

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Hermes appears to a distraught Dionysus and consoles him by introducing him to his mother; she is still on the bank of the Styx having received no death rites.

Hestia narrates again, commenting on the nature of the gods, and that Dionysus is different, the most human, "a new kind of god" (p. 60). Dionysus arrives on Olympus and appears before the Olympians, who are assembled on their thrones. Zeus acknowledges him with a hug. Hera welcomes him as a son of Zeus, but notes that there is no throne for him. Hestia rises from the throne she is seated on and tells Dionysus that she has been keeping it warm for him. The other gods are dismayed, but she tells them blithely that she will be more at home in the floor as a hearth fire. Dionysus introduces the gods to wine. Hestia notes that old stories and new continue to be told around her.

The end of the story is followed by an Author's Note, looking back on the writing of the series. There are character summary pages for Dionysus and Hestia. There are G(r)eek Notes, notes explaining details in the text, nine questions for discussion, and a short bibliography and recommended reading.

Analysis

Dionysos, the final volume in the *Olympians* series, continues the series' fun tone and informed content as it delves into the traditions of Hestia and Dionysus. Hestia was integral to ancient Greek culture and an Olympian deity. The scarcity of myths around her has, however, made her a rarely-seen figure in modern mythological collections. By framing the story of Dionysus through Hestia's lens, she is effectively incorporated into the series and her importance and nature are explored without leaning heavily on invented traditions. The interweaving of narrators is characteristic of the *Olympians* series, and reflects the complex patterns found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

All volumes in the Olympians series explore the nature of the gods; this last volume, like the first, *Zeus. King of the Gods*, does so more than most, with the question of the nature of Dionysus' godhood coming up again and again. Dionysus' attempts to understand himself and his power also reflect the strong coming-of-age theme which is prevalent throughout the series, yet his quest to understand himself asks the reader to understand the Greek gods better too. Readers are prompted to consider what it is that determines whether Dionysus is a

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god; an Olympian. Is it his birth? Is it his power? Is his power benign or malign? Is his acceptance by the other Olympians what determines whether he is a god or not? This offers the reader plenty to think about, forming a satisfying theme for the final volume.

The nature of the gods receives an imaginative treatment when Zeus reveals his true self to Semele (p. 19). His difference from her was already apparent; he is able to appear and disappear at will, and he arrives via a bolt of lightning. When he greets Semele, the reader sees that Zeus towers above her (p. 17). Yet we learn that this is still not Zeus' true form, only his human guise. His divine form is a brilliant blue-white light that blazes all around, filling the room and erupting from the building. This depiction of the god's true form is directly influenced by superhero culture. As O'Connor notes (p. 72, note to p. 19) "as a superhero nerd, it makes all kinds of sense to me in a comic book sort of way that the true form of an Olympian is essentially a miniature sun. Jack Kirby would approve."

As in previous volumes, numerous famous artworks are reworked as panels in the graphic novel. Pheidias' statue of Zeus at Olympia features as an example of the kind of offerings that gods receive (p. 13). Hermes holding the baby Dionysus is represented by a reworking of Praxiteles' statue of Hermes and Dionysus (p. 22). And when Hermes carries Dionysus disguised as a ram, he does so in the style of a *kriophoros*, ram-bearer, statue (p. 23). These details enrich the work and they are discussed explicitly in the G(r)eek Notes so that readers who are not familiar with the artworks can be helped to recognise the connection and are encouraged to seek the originals.

Ancient artworks appear in other forms. When Dionysus is born from Zeus' thigh, the usual rectangular or square shape of the panel is replaced by an irregular shape representing a broken sherd of pottery with the scene upon it (p. 21). O'Connor explains in the notes that some scenes are too strange to represent "without looking ridiculous." The use of the ancient style, rather than the more comic-book style of the rest of the work creates the kind of distance that allows the inexplicable and miraculous to play out without over-burdening the limits of plausibility. We are not asked to look upon a "realistic" version of the impossible. At the same time, the pottery imitation connects to the ancient culture that the story derives from and thus keeps "in universe", as it were. We also see a version of the famous bull-jumping fresco from Knossos when a myth related to Crete is told (p. 45), connecting to the original artwork, and to the depictions of

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that artwork that would be familiar to readers of Poseidon. Earth Shaker. There are also two scenes depicting bacchanals in a form that reflects ancient and post-antiquity depictions of those revels, with processions of satyrs, maenads, donkeys, and panthers (p. 33 and pp. 58–59). Again, this would enable a reader to recognise a bacchanal scene if they saw one outside the context of the graphic novel. The double-page image in particular shows how important these revels are to Dionysus' character.

The theme of Dionysus godhood, madness and wine occupies the volume, leaving little space to explore Dionysus' role in theatre and drama. This is addressed by the character summary instead, where Dionysus is depicted holding theatrical masks, while "Theater" is listed as one of his areas of influence, and the mask and Theatre of Dionysus at Athens are listed as things special to Dionysus. Nonetheless, nothing is made of the theatrical element in the "Modern Legacy" feature in the character summary – rather, that lists the persistence of the term "bacchanal" and the fact that "Some elements of the worship of Dionysus can still be found in the major religions of today." This is a fair observation and was perhaps regarded as more significant than the persistence of drama, or perhaps as more niche information and therefore more valuable to offer to a reader new to the subject.

There are hints of Dionysus' danger. There are the murders, and the gods' concern draws the readers' attention to the pattern of destruction around Dionysus. The violent myth of Pentheus is not told in full, however it is hinted at in the second story set in Thrace, in which a soldier is shown being ripped limb from limb by the maenads, amid a whole page of violent images that culminate in the following page's scene of the Thracian king hacking off his own legs (pp. 51–52). As in many James Bond films, the extremity of the violence is mitigated by a joke, namely Ares' disappointed reaction, and Dionysus telling the king to drink wine to help with the pain. Nonetheless, this mitigation of the horror does not entirely distract from the more prominent theme of Dionysus' destructive influence; the god's laughter in the face of the carnage is somewhat monstrous. The reader is encouraged to feel that Dionysus' wild influence is deeply ambiguous.

That said, Dionysus is, overall, depicted in a profoundly sympathetic way. All of the volumes deal with the gods 'finding themselves', yet this is particularly pronounced in Dionysos, and he is depicted for the

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most part as a likeable, well-intentioned, yet troubled teenager. The scene of his disturbing laughter at the battle in Thrace is balanced by the following sequence featuring his descent into Hades to save his friends. His distress is palpable in this sequence and the reader is made conscious of Dionysus' sense of loss and isolation (pp. 53–56). The scenes of his romance with Ariadne depict him as an innocent and gentle figure. His suffering over the death of his companions is another sympathetic and humanising element. These aspects culminate in Hestia's observation that Dionysus understands humans better than the other gods having spent more time with them (pp. 58–59). She calls him a "new type of god" (p. 60), hinting at, but not being explicit here or in the character summary later, at how much of Dionysus' character informed the perception of Jesus Christ.

There is a great deal of struggle and violence in the world of the Olympians and in the *Olympians* series. *Dionysos* has its violent moments but, on the whole, this volume closes the series with rather a gentle depiction of the Olympian universe. The satyrs are cheerful and likeable, never aggressive or dangerous. Moreover, the gods themselves appear more empathetic than they sometimes do in the series. These gentle touches include Zeus's sorrow when Semele dies and Hermes' corresponding concern for his father (p. 20). Likewise, we see Hermes' tenderness towards Dionysus – when Ampelos dies (p. 30) and again when Dionysus realises that he cannot save those he has lost (p. 56). We see Persephone's anguish when she cannot help Dionysus, and even Hades is rather kindly to him (p. 55). Zeus – a largely ambiguous figure in the series – offers poignant consolation to Demeter when she is mourning Persephone's absence (p. 44): "I miss Persephone too, Demeter. Spring is nearly upon us. She'll be back soon", he says, with a gentle look that makes the listening Hestia beam. These elements reinforce the perception of the Olympians as a family, and make the world of Greek mythology less bleak than it can appear when the power of the gods is stressed over their concern for humans and one another.

This sense of the gods as a family is emphasised in the final panel of the series. The gods stand informally on Olympus, their thrones left behind them. Their groupings reflect familiar patterns that have been established elsewhere in the series. Zeus has his arm around Hera's shoulders and they are sharing an affectionate look, observed by their daughter Hebe, who is having a cheeky sip of the drink she is serving. Dionysus is reunited with Hermes, and Pan is arriving to join them. Ares stands with Hephaestus with Aphrodite, the latter two looking

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	towards the arriving Muses. Poseidon stands with Artemis and Apollo; they are greeting the arrival of Leto. Iris is arriving. Persephone has returned. She is accompanied by Hades, and they are warmly welcomed by Demeter, as Athena smiles on. The broadest smile belongs to Hestia, around whom they are all gathered. The gods are drinking wine in this image – something gods do not traditionally do in Greek mythology (in which they drink nectar). This element indicates Dionysus' true integration amongst them, bringing together different threads of the story. This final image of the gods recalls the many myths that have been recounted in the course of the series and indicates a warm and loving family, however varied, and however powerful. It leaves an upbeat and positive sense of Greek gods and their mythology.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Afterlife Aphrodite Architecture Ares Ariadne Bacchus Centaur(s) Cerberus Crete Cronus / Kronos Dionysus / Dionysos Egypt Eleusinian Mysteries Fate Faun Gaia / Gaea Gods Greek Art Greek Music Greek Theatre Hades Hecate Hephaestus Hera Hermes Hestia Immortality Katabasis Laurel Wreath Mercury Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Metis Midas Olympus Pan Persephone Styx Theseus Underworld Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Child, children Coming of age Death Family Gender expectations/construction Identity Love Mental health* Parents (and children) Storytelling Teenagers
Further Reading	Kovacs, George, and C. W. Marshall, eds., *Classics and Comics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Kovacs, George, and C. W. Marshall, eds., *Son of Classics and Comics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
Addenda	Olympiansrule.blogspot (Series blog, accessed: August 15, 2022). Georgeoconnorbooks.com (Author website, accessed: March 1, 2017).

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Parent.co/george-oconnor (Author interview, accessed: March 1, 2017).

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