Naomi Rebis, "Entry on: The Storyteller (Series): Greek Myths by Jim Henson's Creature Shop , Jim Henson , Duncan Kenworthy, OBE, Anthony Minghella, Nigel Williams ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/326. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

Jim Henson's Creature Shop , Jim Henson , Duncan Kenworthy, OBE , Anthony Minghella , Nigel Williams

# The Storyteller (Series): Greek Myths

*United Kingdom (1991)*

TAGS: Ariadne Daedalus Eurydice Graeae / Graiai Hades Icarus Labyrinth Medusa Minos Minotaur Orpheus Persephone Perseus Talos (Perdix) Theseus






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

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | The Storyteller (Series): Greek Myths |
| *Studio/Production Company* | The Jim Henson Company; TVS Television |
| *Country of the First Edition* | United Kingdom |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | United Kingdom; Netherlands; United States; Japan |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 1991 |
| *Running time* | 95 min |
| *Date of the First DVD or VHS* | 1999 (VHS – United States); 2005 (DVD released in the United Kingdom) |
| *Genre* | Didactic fiction, Live-action animation films , Live-action puppet films*, Myths, Short films, Television series |
| *Target Audience* | Crossover |
| *Author of the Entry* | Naomi Rebis, University College London, n.rebis.17@ucl.ac.uk |
| *Peer-reviewer of the Entry* | Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk<br>Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com |



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## Creators



### Jim Henson's Creature Shop (Company)

This company was created in 1979 by a partnership between Jim Henson and British illustrator Brian Froud. Pushing the boundaries of effects innovation, the Hampstead-based shop worked on famous projects such as *Labyrinth* and *The Storyteller*, creating immensely lifelike creatures for the screen. Today, the Creature Shop still leads in animatronic and digital technologies.

Prepared by Naomi Rebis, University College London, n.rebis.17@ucl.ac.uk



### Jim Henson , 1936 - 1990 (Producer)

Jim Henson was an American puppeteer and film-maker, most famous for the characters he created for shows like *Sesame Street* (which he worked on for 20 years) and *The Muppets*. He founded the Jim Henson Company, the Jim Henson Foundation, and Jim Henson's Creature Shop to promote research into puppetry and animatronics.

Bio prepared by Naomi Rebis, University College London, n.rebis.17@ucl.ac.uk



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**Duncan Kenworthy, OBE , b. 1949**
**(Producer)**

Duncan Kenworthy is a British film director and producer. *The Storyteller: Greek Myths* is not the only time he worked with Jim Henson, since he was also co-creator of the series *Fraggle Rock*.

Bio prepared by Naomi Rebis, University College London, n.rebis.17@ucl.ac.uk



**Anthony Minghella , 1954 - 2008**
**(Director)**

Anthony Minghella was a British film director, playwright and screenwriter who won over 30 awards during his career. In the 1980s, he script-edited children's drama series *Grange Hill* before writing the original Storyteller series, which preceded *Greek Myths*.

Bio prepared by Naomi Rebis, University College London, n.rebis.17@ucl.ac.uk



**Nigel Williams , b. 1948**
**(Screenwriter)**

Nigel Williams is an English novelist and screen-writer, who was Emmy-nominated for his 2005 tv mini-series *Elizabeth I.*



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## Additional information

Casting

Michael Gambon (The Storyteller);

Brian Henson (voice: The Dog);

David Morrissey (Theseus);

Art Malik (Orpheus);

Derek Jacobi (Daedalus).

Summary

Hiding in Minos' labyrinth, the Storyteller and his dog come across four different objects that inspire him to relate their myths. First, he recounts the tale of **Theseus and the Minotaur**, recalling the beast once housed in the very maze they're hiding in.

Upon learning that his father is Aegeus, King of Athens, Theseus hurries to that city, slaying many bandits on the way. The king's wife Medea, fearful of what threat this stranger poses to her own sons, attempts to poison him, but the king recognises Theseus' sword as his own and foils the plot.

Every seven years, Athens must send seven youths and seven maidens as tribute to the Minotaur, but Prince Theseus is determined to end that. Taking the place of one of the sacrifices, he promises to kill the Minotaur and end this tribute. His father urges him to sail back under a white sail if he succeeds, and the prince vows that he will.

When the intended victims arrive at Crete, Minos' daughter Ariadne falls instantly in love with Theseus. She gives him the key to the labyrinth, and a ball of thread so he can find his way back out, and he sets out to fight the Minotaur. With the monster dead, he flees with Ariadne to Naxos, but sets sail without her the next morning. She curses him for abandoning her, and he subsequently forgets to hoist the victorious, white sail. Seeing the black sail, and thinking his son is dead, Aegeus throws himself from a cliff into the sea.

Next, the Storyteller and his dog find a room of stone soldiers, along with the petrified head of Medusa. The myth of **Perseus and the**



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**Gorgon** unfolds from there: how King Acrisius, learning from an oracle that his grandson would one day kill him, locked his daughter Danae in a room of bronze so no men could find her. However, Zeus, King of the Gods, infiltrates her prison as a shower of gold, and Danae bears a son, Perseus.

Alerted to this by the sound of the child playing, Acrisius locks them both in a chest and throws them out to sea. Miraculously, the chest floats, and the pair wash up on the island of Seriphos. There Perseus grows into a young man, and his mother catches the eye of Polydectes, the king. He threatens to marry her in six days, and Perseus retorts that he will bring the head of Medusa as a bride-gift to stop the wedding.

His divine siblings, Athena and Hermes, provide what he needs for this quest; a sword, and a bright, bronze shield so he can watch Medusa without looking directly at her, since that would turn him to stone. On their advice, he also borrows the Cap of Invisibility, and a pair of winged sandals, from the Stygian nymphs.

Having learnt Medusa's location from her sisters, the Graeae, Perseus flies to her distant island and successfully decapitates her. He brings the head back to Seriphos, as promised, and turns cruel Polydectes to stone. The oracle's prophecy is later fulfilled when Perseus takes part in an athletic competition, and accidentally strikes his grandfather Acrisius with a discus-throw.

A broken lyre summons up the spirit of its master, and the Storyteller recounts the romance of **Orpheus and Eurydice**. Not only King of Thrace, but also son of a Muse, Orpheus has the power to charm animals and bring rain with his music. One day, his playing calls the dryad Eurydice from an alder tree, and the two fall instantly in love. However, the satyr Aristaeus also desires Eurydice, and while fleeing from him she is bitten by a poisonous snake.

A grief-stricken Orpheus journeys to the Underworld, with nothing but his lyre, determined to win her shade back from Hades, King of the Dead. The god is unmoved by his music, but when Queen Persephone intervenes on Orpheus' behalf he agrees to release Eurydice back to life. There is a catch, however: Orpheus must lead his wife from the Underworld without once looking back at her. Since shades neither speak, nor make noise as they walk, Orpheus begins to doubt that



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Eurydice is following him. Eventually he can't bear it any longer, and looks back, only to watch her soul flee back to Hades because he broke his word. Then he must live without her, until death finally reunites them forever.

A bust of Daedalus reminds the Storyteller who actually designed the labyrinth they're hiding in, and he proceeds to tell the tale of **Daedalus and Icarus**. After the death of his nephew, Talos, the craftsman and his son flee to Crete, where the king tasks Daedalus with building a 'cage' for the monstrous Minotaur. The result is the labyrinth, but even though they've fulfilled his request, King Minos will not let the pair leave Crete – they know too many of his secrets.

Inspired by the birds around them, Daedalus creates wings for himself and his son, but warns Icarus to follow him closely. If he flies too low the ocean spray will weight down the wings, and if he flies too high the sun will melt the wax holding the feathers in place. The boy promises, but once they've fled their prison the lure of flight becomes too much for him, and he soars up to the sun. His wings break apart, and he tumbles to his death.

A heartbroken Daedalus settles in Sicily, but his old enemy Minos is still searching for him. When the king arrives at Sicily he offers a reward to anyone who can guide a thread through the spirals of a conch shell, reasoning, correctly, that only Daedalus could complete such a task. The craftsman ties the thread to an ant, tempts it through the shell with honey, and is thus given up to Minos. In an effort to avoid execution, he boils the king in his bath, and spends the rest of his days mourning for Icarus.

## Analysis

*The Storyteller: Greek Myths* is worth commending not only for its child-friendly adaptations of these myths, but also the amount of detail put into each episode.

The **Perseus** episode is the one which reflects the complexities of mythology most consciously, because when the Dog asks the Storyteller to say more about Medusa's sisters he replies: "If I told the whole story your head would burst. There is no one story. There are branches, rooms, like this place [the labyrinth]. Rooms, corridors, dead-ends."* Thus, it's appropriate that he not only focuses on



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Perseus' battle with Medusa, but nods to other aspects of the myth as well.

The story begins with Acrisius learning from the Oracle that his grandson will murder him, but rather than use that purely as impetus for the plot (throwing Danae and Perseus out to sea in a chest), the script-writers make a point of including the tale where Perseus accidentally hits Acrisius with a discus, and thus fulfils the prophecy.

Although the gods themselves do not feature, it is noted that Athena and Hermes are the ones who provide Perseus with his divine apparel, and the advice that keeps him safe. Of especial interest is the fact that Athena is described by the Storyteller as "weaver, maker of spiders,"** in a nod to her transformation of Arachne. The vignette of Perseus turning Atlas to stone is also included, though in this case it is to help Atlas bear the weight of the sky, rather than because the Titan refuses Perseus shelter.

The story of **Daedalus and Icarus** is similarly well fleshed-out. In this episode, it becomes more than just a cautionary tale of 'the boy who flew too close to the sun,' covering, as it does, events both before and after Icarus' death. The contrast between Icarus and his talented cousin is drawn early on, setting the scene for Talos' death at Daedalus' hands, which is here presented as an accident. From there the tale progresses as expected, but after Icarus falls from the sky there is a further 7 minutes before the episode finishes. This allows plenty of time to explore other aspects of the myth, chiefly how Minos tricks Daedalus into revealing himself by challenging someone to pass a thread through a conch-shell.

Again, the well-known part of **Theseus**' legend (the slaying of the Minotaur) is bracketed by allusions to the wider myth. The tale begins with Theseus moving the great rock to find his father's sword, and when he subsequently sets out to Athens it's mentioned in passing that he killed Procrustes, Skiron, and Sinus. Medea's attempted poisoning of Theseus is also recounted, before he sails to kill the Minotaur, and afterwards they include his abandonment of Ariadne on Naxos.

Where the **Orpheus** storyline excels, is its inclusion of Underworld deities and politics. Hades, Persephone, and Charon all feature as characters, and other chthonic deities like Styx and Lethe are



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mentioned in passing. Lethe is even described as "the water that makes you forget,"*** so the reincarnation of souls is also alluded to. Though the DVD follows Ovid's version in having Persephone be the one who persuades Hades to give up Eurydice's shade, it bases the nymph's death on Virgil's *Georgics*, where the snake bites her while she's fleeing from the satyr Aristaeus.

Costume and decoration create an impressive backdrop to all four tales, visually conveying antiquity to the primary school audience. For example, Ariadne wears a flounced skirt, as seen on Minoan statuettes, and at Polydectes' palace there is an octopus mosaic identical to that shown on a Mycenaean krater from 1300-1400BC (found at Ialysos, Rhodes, and currently at the British Museum). Furthermore, some of the stories are narrated via vase-painting, recalling Athenian black- and red-figure ware. When the Storyteller describes the divine gifts Perseus is given, he uses their ancient names, calling the bag for Medusa's head a *kibisis* and the Cap of Invisibility, *Kune*. This point is further enhanced by a comic exchange when the Dog is horrified to learn that the Cap is actually made of dog-skin. Thus, mythical details and phrases are slipped into the narrative quite naturally through the use of props.

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* *The Storyteller: Greek Myths [DVD]* – Episode 2: Perseus and the Gorgon (18:05–18:19).

** *The Storyteller: Greek Myths [DVD]* – Episode 2: Perseus and the Gorgon (22:54–57).

*** *The Storyteller: Greek Myths* – Episode 3: Orpheus and Eurydice (12:29–30).

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Ariadne Daedalus Eurydice Graeae / Graiai Hades Icarus Labyrinth Medusa Minos Minotaur Orpheus Persephone Perseus Talos (Perdix) Theseus

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Heroism Intellect Morality Parents (and children) Prediction/prophecy



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| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Storytelling Truth and lies Values |
| Addenda | It is this DVD that the entry is based on, since the VHS, and original broadcast, are no longer readily accessible. |



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