Ayelet Peer, "Entry on: Medusa the Mean (Goddess Girls, 8) by Joan Holub, Suzanne Williams ", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/392. Entry version as of November 04, 2026.

Joan Holub , Suzanne Williams

Medusa the Mean (Goddess Girls, 8)

United States (2012)

TAGS: Andromeda Aphrodite Apollo Artemis Athena Ceto Cetus Dionysus / Dionysos Hera Heracles Hercules Medusa Pandora Pegasus Persephone Perseus Pheme Phorcys Poseidon Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Medusa the Mean (Goddess Girls, 8)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2012
First Edition Details	Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams, *Medusa the Mean* (Goddess Girls, 8). New York: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division, Aladdin Press, 2012, 256 pp.
ISBN	9781442433793 (paperback) / 9781442433809 (ebook)
Genre	Alternative histories (Fiction), Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Fiction, Humor, Mythological fiction, Novels, School story*
Target Audience	Children (Older children, 8–12 years.)
Author of the Entry	Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk

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



Photo courtesy of Joan Holub.

Joan Holub , b. 1956
(Author)

Joan Holub is a prolific children's author from the USA. Graduated from college in Texas with a fine arts degree. Worked as an art director at Scholastic trade books in New York. She has written and/or illustrated over 150 children's books. She has developed a range of series for teenagers on mythological themes: *Goddess Girls*, set in Mount Olympus Academy, *Grimmtastic Tales* series, set in Grimm Academy, *Thunder Girls*, about Norse gods set in Asgard Academy, and *Heroes in Training*, in which the male Greek gods, as very young men, set out on a range of adventures. For pre-school children, Jan Holub has written on a range of topics including several works with religious and historical themes. These include: *This Little President*; *This Little Trailblazer*, *Hooray for St. Patrick's Day!*, and *Light the Candles: A Hanukkah Lift-the-Flap Book*. Joan Holub trained in fine art and worked as an art director at a graphic design company before becoming a children's illustrator and then author.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 2, 2018).

Profile at the penguinrandomhouse.com (accessed: July 2, 2018).

Profile at the simonandschuster.com (accessed: July 2, 2018).

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk and Allison Rosenblum, Bar-Ilan University, allie.rose89@gmail.com and Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Questionnaire

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1. What drew you to writing / working with Classical Antiquity and what challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular myths or stories?

I learned to love Greek and Norse mythology in elementary school. I'm very comfortable adapting the framework of an existing myth or fairy tale by pushing it into a different setting, adding humor, and/or building in a nonfiction component. Staying true to the essential core of each myth along the way is important to me. A young *Goddess Girls* reader once told me she enjoyed the series because she "learned something". In other words, while she liked being entertained, she appreciated that her familiarity and factual understanding of the original myths was broadened at the same time.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

Kids have questions about their world. So it's interesting to them to learn how ancient Greeks and other cultures answered questions about how their world worked in exciting tales of heroes and beasts. How did the sun cross the sky? In a chariot drawn by the god Helios. What caused night? The goddess Nyx's starry cape covered the sky. Thrilling stories of courage and danger, such as Heracles' twelve labors, the Trojan Horse, and the Argonauts never go out of style.

3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

I have an entire shelf of mythology resource books. Some of my favorite go-to sources are the *Scholastic Mythlopedia* series, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology, Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, and www.theoi.com (accessed: May 28, 2018).

4. How concerned were you with "accuracy" or "fidelity" to the original? (another way of saying that might be – that I think writers are often more "faithful" to originals in adapting its

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spirit rather than being tied down at the level of detail – is this something you thought about?)

Each book in the *Goddess Girls* series (ages 8–12, Simon and Schuster) and *Heroes in Training* series (ages 7–10, Simon and Schuster) is a retelling of one or two Greek myths, with a twist. We stay as true as possible to the core bones of an original myth in order to give young readers a good understanding, but we include kid situations and humor to entertain. As an example, in *Goddess Girls #1: Athena the Brain*, Athena is summoned to attend Mount Olympus Academy, where Zeus is the principal. MOA teachers include Mr. Cyclops, who teaches Hero-ology, a class where students are graded on their abilities to maneuver small hero figures such as Odysseus, around a gameboard to enact the Trojan War, etc. Meanwhile, Athena, who is the goddess of invention among other things, inadvertently turns mean-girl Medusa's hair to snakes and gives her the power to turn mortals to stone by means of a shampoo-like invention called Snakeypoo at the MOA invention fair.

5. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

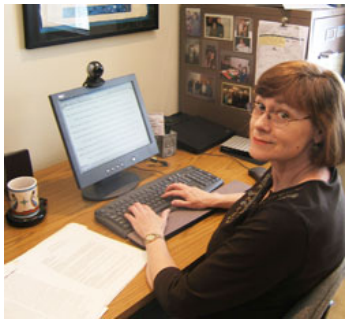
Suzanne Williams and I have written a new middle grade series called *Thunder Girls* (accessed: May 28, 2018), which is a twist on Norse mythology featuring strong girl characters. The first book Freya and the Magic Jewel releases May 2018 for ages 8–12, published by Simon and Schuster.

Prepared by Allison Rosenblum, Bar-Ilan University, allie.rose89@gmail.com and Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Suzanne Williams , b. 1953
(Author)

Suzanne Williams is an American prolific children's author and former

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Courtesy of the Author from her personal website.

elementary school librarian. She has written over 60 books for children.

She grew up in Oregon and graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's in library science from the University of Oregon. She currently lives in Reno, Washington.

Source:

Official website (accessed: May 29, 2018).

Bio prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

Questionnaire

1. What drew you to writing / working with Classical Antiquity and what challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular myths or stories?

Writing about Greek mythology was my co-author, Joan Holub's idea. She's loved mythology since childhood. Her enthusiasm for the subject got me excited about it too. *Goddess Girls* (ages 8–12) was our very first collaboration. Soon there will be 26 books in that series. One of the challenges we've faced in writing our (soon to be four) myth-based series for young readers is how to handle the sexual and violent content of many of the myths.

To downplay the violence, we often make it cartoonish and lighten it with humor. Since most of our gods and goddesses are pre-teens (as are our readers!), we deal with inappropriate sexual content by making changes that still allow us to keep to the spirit of the myth. For example: in introducing the Adonis myth, in which Aphrodite and Persephone fight over a beautiful youth they both desire, we decided to make Adonis a kitten, rather than a young man.

Another challenge has involved familial relationships among the

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various gods and goddesses. In *Goddess Girls*, Zeus is an adult, the principal of Mount Olympus Academy, the school attended by our "goddessgirls" and "godboys". In mythology he would likely have fathered a good portion of the student body! So we made a decision that only Athena would call him "Dad". (Until Hebe popped forth from a lettuce in Book 21, that is.) We do acknowledge many other family relationships. For example: Apollo and Artemis as brother and sister. Medusa and her sisters Euryale and Stheno. Persephone and her mother, Demeter.

2. Why do you think classical / ancient myths, history, and literature continue to resonate with young audiences?

Myths have got all the elements that draw us to stories: action, conflict, drama, humor, etc. What's not to like?

3. Do you have a background in classical education (Latin or Greek at school or classes at the University?) What sources are you using? Scholarly work? Wikipedia? Are there any books that made an impact on you in this respect?

Neither Joan nor I have a classical education. I did take an online Greek and Roman mythology class a few years ago, however. (Taught by Peter Struck, University of Pennsylvania.) Terrific class!

For our Greek mythology-based series, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* is the reference we rely on the most. My co-author and I do consult Wikipedia and other online resources, especially for lists of monsters and maps and general information about ancient Greece. References for *Thunder Girls*, our soon-to-be-published Norse mythology-based series include: *The Norse Myths* by Kevin Crossley-Holland, D'Aulaires' *Book of Norse Myths*, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* by John Lindow, *The Poetic Edda* (translated and edited by Jackson Crawford), and *The Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson (Penguin Classics).

4. Are you planning any further forays into classical material?

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In addition to *Goddess Girls*, my co-author and I have also collaborated on a second Greek mythology-based series called *Heroes in Training* (ages 6–9). It's a humorous quest/adventure series with Zeus, Poseidon, Hades and other Olympians as ten-year-olds on the run from King Cronus and the Titans. *Freya and the Magic Jewel*, the first book in *Thunder Girls*, our Norse mythology-based series, publishes May 1, 2018. I travel to Norway frequently to visit my daughter, granddaughter, and Norwegian son-in-law, so I am very excited to be doing a Norse-myth series. Aladdin (Simon & Schuster) publishes all three of Joan's and my mythology-based series. We will be doing a fourth myth-based series with them soon – for ages 5–8. Tentative title is *Little Goddess Girls*, and it will be another Greek myth-based series.

Prepared by Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

General summary for the series see under Athena the Brain.

In this installment, Medusa, the mean girl of previous volumes, is the unlikely heroine. As the only mortal in school, she feels insecure and is desperate to fit in, and we are shown that, despite her spiteful behaviour, she has feelings too. Medusa hates her mortality and wishes to be like the other immortal students "How she longed to be like them!" (p. 7). All she really wants to is to truly feel like she fits in, as Athena did and the other girls. Each of them wanted to feel like they belong – a very common feeling of teenagers, gods or not. Medusa wished to be popular, yet "she didn't trust anyone enough to let down her guard with them and become friends." (p. 14). She is aware of her problems but does not seem interested in solving them. She is sure Aphrodite befriends her only because she pities her; she is not open to the realization that people really want to be her friends.

Thus far the series closely followed a typical American high school, with jocks and popular girls, and also a place for the mean girl. Yet here we find out the Medusa was a victim of bullying herself in her youth (kids naming her "Gorgonzola Head." (p. 1). Her mean behaviour was her way of protecting herself from these bullies, a kind of armor – to keep people away so they don't hurt her: "for I am the Queen of Mean! […] And nobody messes with me and gets away with it." (p. 2). Furthermore, we understand that her home-life is not happy and loving, and she feels that her parents prefer her sisters. So little Medusa should be pitied rather than scorned.

In a story-within a story, the students also get a kindergarten buddy to babysit. Dionysus gets Perseus while Medusa gets young Andromeda. Then they play a "save the princess" game. Thus a nice retelling of the Andromeda myth is presented, while at the same time bringing Medusa and Dionysus (who has a secret crush on her) closer.

Analysis

In this book Medusa is a victim of bullying, and the theme of the story here is how to defend yourself against bullying without turning into one, and how to could break the cycle of violence and gain true friends. This shows that being a victim of bullying could also make one become a bully herself, unless she is aided by friends. This also

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teaches girls to be patient and see the goodness in others, if it is not so easily apparent.

The story also focuses on finding happiness, as Hera says, “Whether you’re a goddess or a shopkeeper, being happy is all about finding your personal strengths and using them to do what you enjoy – be it work or not.” (p. 16). Medusa thought “[s]tirring up trouble and making others uncomfortable were abilities that came naturally to her. They were her ‘strengths.’” (p. 17). “Stirring up trouble didn’t exactly make her happy, but it did give her a feeling of power.” (p. 117).

Throughout the book she discovers other strength she never knew she possessed. Hera continues to be a model of a modern, independent woman. The theme of working women is brought up in class discussion and she demands to continue working even after her wedding to Zeus. Thus themes raised up by the kids in school are given another angle when they are treated by the elders.

Medusa feels sorry for herself, thinking the goddess girls have everything going in for them. Of course the readers know this is hardly the case. This is a clever way for the authors to make the young readers relate to their message. It is at the time close and remote from the audience’s world. The setting is fantastical yet the feelings are all too real. Medusa is also an empowering figure, despite her spiteful behaviour. Although constantly discouraged at home, she strives to get a proper education and a better future for herself. She does not give up. “She had aspirations for herself. Nobody was going to keep her down!” (p. 28). Another powerful message, not to let people get you down and tell you are worthless; the real power is within.

Interestingly, although Medusa’s hair turned to snakes due to her stealing Athena’s potion in *Athena the Brain* book, they appear here to have been close friends for a long time. In another rather strange twist, Medusa has a crush on Poseidon; if we recall that he raped her in the original myth and brought about her ruin this might be considered to be in poor taste, yet the stories here deliberately ignore the tougher angles of the mythological stories in exchange for an alternate mythological universe. We also get a novel explanation of how Medusa’s scary face appears on shields – by her own mistake.

Through the children Medusa discovers her softer side. Medusa is also

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	trying to show the little girl they can save themselves and not wait for the boys – another empowering message. Medusa thinks she is helping little Andromeda face a harsh reality of her being mortal, yet her conduct appears cruel to others. Being hurt herself, she tries to save the girl form feeling the same sadness. In the end, Medusa does not get her wish to become immortal, but she gains more important things – confidence, friendship and even love!
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Andromeda Aphrodite Apollo Artemis Athena Ceto Cetus Dionysus / Dionysos Hera Heracles Hercules Medusa Pandora Pegasus Persephone Perseus Pheme Phorcys Poseidon Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Character traits Friendship Rejection Relationships Respect School Self Values Violence
Addenda	The review refers to the Kindle edition.

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