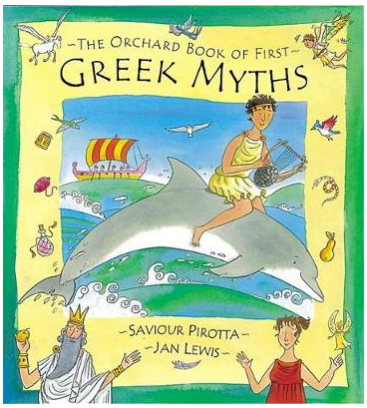
Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths by Jan Lewis, Saviour Pirotta", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Hanna Paulouskaya. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/422. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Jan Lewis , Saviour Pirotta

The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths

United Kingdom (2003)



Courtesy of Hachette Children's Books.

TAGS: Arachne Architecture Argo Argonauts Ariadne Athena Athens Bellerophon Chimera / Chimaera Crete Daedalus Dionysus / Dionysos Epimetheus Gods Golden Fleece Graeae / Graiai Helen Homer Icarus Jason Labyrinth Maze Medea Medusa Menelaus Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Midas Minerva Minos Minotaur Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Ovid Pan Pandora Pandora's Box Paris (Trojan Prince) Pegasus Perseus Theseus Trojan Horse Trojan War Troy



General information	
Title of the work	The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Europe
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2003
First Edition Details	Saviour Pirotta, Jan Lewis ill., *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths*. London: Orchard Books (a division of Hachette Children's Books), 2003, 96 pp.
ISBN	9781841217758
Awards	Ultimate First Book Guide choice in 2002.
Genre	Myths, Picture books, Short stories
Target Audience	Children (c. 4–10)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@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.

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Creators



Jan Lewis (Illustrator)

Jan Lewis has been a children's books illustrator since 1978. She has a first class honours degree from Bath Academy of Art, and a Masters from Falmouth University. She illustrates books for various publishers.

Source:

Personal website (accessed: March 11, 2019).

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



Photo courtesy of the Author.

Saviour Pirotta , b. 1958 (Author)

Saviour Pirotta is a Maltese-born children's author based in Britain. Before turning to writing he was a professional story-teller. He has a preference for retelling traditional myths and legends. Also he writes in English various kinds of books, both fiction and non-fiction, including educational books and story collections. His publications include *The Orchard Book of Grimm's Fairy Tales* (Orchard, 2001), the *Ancient Greek Mystery* series (Bloomsbury), and *My Cousin the Minotaur* (Fiction Express/ ReadZone Books, 2016). Among his awards are The Guardian's Children's Books of the Month, October 2018 for *The Unicorn Prince*; English Association Award, Best Non-Fiction Picture Book 1998 for *A Seed In Need* Winner; The Guardian, Best Children's Books 2016 for *Perseus and Medea* (QED Publishing).

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Source:

Official website (accessed: June 1, 2022).

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

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Additional information

Adaptations

Each chapter from this book was re-released as a stand-alone book within a First Greek Myths series:

- Saviour Pirotta. T*he Secret of Pandora's Box (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2005.
- Saviour Pirotta. *King Midas's Goldfingers (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2005.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Arachne, The Spider Woman (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2005.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Theseus and the Man-Eating Monster (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2007.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Odysseus and the Wooden Horse (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2005.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Icarus, The Boy Who Could Fly (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2005.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Perseus and the Monstrous Medusa (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2005.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Pegasus, The Flying Horse (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2008.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Arion, Dolphin Boy (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2008.
- Saviour Pirotta. *Jason and The Fabulous Golden Fleece (First Greek Myths)*. ill. by Jan Lewis, London: Orchard Books, 2008.

Translation

Italian;

Greek;

Korean;

Brazilian;

Portuguese.

Summary

This is a very popular collection of ten retellings of ancient myths, attractively laid-out and well-written for a young audience. There is an illustrated Table of Contents at the start, which enables pre-literate

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children to participate in choosing the story that will be read, as well as teaching them how to use a ToC.

Each story begins with an elaborate fronts-piece full of details from the story, and each story concludes with a small image that contains a key element of the myth. Both elements work well for anticipating and reviewing what has happened within the story. Each double-page spread has at least one picture, and each story has one complete double-page image.

Analysis

The illustrations place the stories in antiquity, with details such as tunics, sandals, and ancient-style ships, armaments, and architecture signalling ancient Greece. Characters are fair-skinned and ruddy-cheeked throughout, typically combined with dark eyes and brown hair. Several of the stories draw out moral lessons that can be learned from them, but this is done with a light touch, never feeling overly forced. Although gods and goddesses occasionally appear in the stories, wise-men frequently take the place that super-naturals might more commonly have in these myths.

Chapters:

1) *The Secret Chest. The Story of Pandora*: The story begins just before the arrival of Pandora. Although only men are referred to as living at time, there is no mention of Pandora being the first woman, as she is in e.g. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, or *Theogony*), in fact Epimetheus already "longed for a wife." There is emphasis on Pandora being curious, wanting to know things, and ignoring Epimetheus' instruction to avoid opening the box he has been commanded to leave sealed. That the container is a box, rather than a jar, and the emphasis on Pandora's curiosity come from the Lilius Giraldus of Ferrara tradition rather than the Hesiodic (i.e. from the 16th century CE *Historiarum Deorum Syntagma* rather than Hesiod's 8th century BCE *Theogony* and *Works and Days*). Epimetheus' unnamed brother warns him that these gifts from the gods may be a trick to punish humans for something, but as there is no backdrop to the story (as there is in Hesiod), the reader never finds out what humans are being punished for. The main double-page image is the evils being released from the box. They are depicted as dark blue or dark green devils, winged, with pointed tails, horns, and cruel faces. These evils are explained as being "curses", but there is no explanation of what that

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might mean; because Epimetheus was depicted farming at the opening of the story, there is no sense of going from idyllic pre-farming to the need to work for a living. Hope is depicted as a fair, rosy-cheeked winged women. She tells Pandora that she "sneaked into the box when the Gods weren't looking"; this is a change from ancient traditions in which Hope is deliberately provided as a consolation, creating a harsher impression of the gods than Hesiod's version (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 96–99). The story is told as an encouragement to be obedient and as a warning that things can easily get out of control with unintended consequences.

2) *Goldfingers. The Story of King Midas*: King Midas' child daughter takes a prominent role in the telling of this myth, following a tradition established in Nathanial Hawthorne's *The Golden Touch* (1851). Much of it is told from her perspective, for example, wishing that he would not spend so much time counting his gold so that they could play together more. The king is explicitly said to be greedy, and the kind act that initiates the wish-gift is prompted more by distraction than active goodness, yet for all that, Midas is represented as a well-intentioned, affectionate father. The turning point comes when Midas allows a satyr to share some of his fruit; it is the satyr who grants the wish (loosely following the tradition in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11.90–193, in which the wish is given by Dionysus following the release of a captured satyr). Midas realises his mistake when he is unable to eat, but he realises in time to stop his daughter from hugging him and being transformed. An illustration shows that a servant and several animals are less fortunate. Midas' daughter works out how he can be freed from what is now called a "curse"; the satyr relents when he sees that Midas has learned his lesson; Midas visits the river to wash himself free and the story concludes with him able to hug his daughter and communicate to her the moral lesson that he has learned. This retelling helps children to understand the significance of Midas' choice by suggesting some more altruistic things that he could have chosen (such as peace or a good harvest). The main image is Midas surrounded by gold, warning his daughter to stay away from him. It concludes with Midas' observation that "Some things are much more precious than gold!", offering an explicit moral lesson.

3) *Spider Woman. The Story of Arachne*: This is a retelling of the myth of Arachne, known from antiquity now only through Ovid's version (and perhaps invented by Ovid himself) (*Metamorphoses*, 6.5–145). This retelling largely follows Ovid's account, but with the overall removal of elements of sex and violence. Ovid emphasises the

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brilliance of the obscene scene that Arachne weaves into her tapestry, which is superior to Athena's. In this version, Arachne's tapestry is superior to Athena's depiction of a nature scene, but there is no detail of what Arachne's showed. Ovid has Athena transform Arachne into a spider after the young woman has hanged herself. Here Athena transforms her straightaway. The story ends with Arachne's father unwittingly ordering Arachne's web work brushed away, and the moral, "How she wished she hadn't been so rude to the great goddess Athena!" The main image depicts Athena and two women looking on as Arachne transforms (at this stage a spider with a human face).

4) *The Man-Eating Monster. The Story of Theseus and the Minotaur*: This retelling begins by introducing Minos, the most evil king, and his Minotaur monster, without mentioning the monster's origins (on which see Diodorus of Sicily, *Library*, 4.77). It is explained that th Athenians must send people to be eaten by the Minotaur in order to prevent invasion; the backstory to this is omitted (see Plutarch, *Theseus*, 15–17). Theseus steps up to protect his father's people from the Minotaur (a change from the Plutarchan version in which he comes forward to silence complaints from the Athenians, or is picked by Minos, Plutarch, *Theseus*, 17; more in keeping with Apollodorus, *Epitome*, 1.7–11). Theseus is described as "brave but foolhardy." This coupling recurs later; he knows that he is brave but not clever, so he wonders how he will escape. Aegeus makes his famous request about the sails. Theseus is stripped of his sword as he enters the maze (apparently alone; the other companions do not feature in the story). Ariadne provides a ball of wool and, in an addition to most traditional versions, a sword. Theseus questions why she wishes to help him, and she answers that she does not like living on Crete and wishes to accompany him to Athens, adding "We could get married". A fairly detailed account of the fight follows. Theseus "had no intention of marrying Ariadne" now the Minotaur is dead, so he "tricked" her and left her on an island (Plutarch, *Theseus*, 20, notes that there are many version of what happened). *En route* home, Theseus forgets to change the sail; his father "mad with grief, threw himself into the deep sea." Theseus is "heartbroken", but story finishes with Theseus becoming king and promising never to do anything so "foolhardy" again. This retelling of the myth is unambiguous about Theseus being at fault in his dealings with Ariadne and Aegeus, but the story does not connect the two outcomes (i.e. the forgetfulness about the sail is not related to Ariadne, whose fate is not investigated). Instead, the story places its moral on Theseus resolving not to take such risks in future, a contrast

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to the glory that Theseus more typically accrues through his daring adventure. In antiquity, the treatment of Ariadne was not always related to Aegeus' death; Plutarch (Plutarch, *Theseus*, 22) has Theseus forget to change the sail simply because he is so delighted to be home.

The main illustration depicts a worried Theseus holding up a sword to the Minotaur within a set of dark corridors, with a human skull at his feet. The Minotaur is depicted as a blue humanoid with great claws on its fingers and toes, gold wrist cuffs, a white loin cloth, and a long tail. It has a heavy, horned bull's head, with a ring through its nose, pointed teeth, and red eyes.

5) *The Wooden Horse. The Story of Odysseus in Troy*: This is more of an original story than most of the retellings in this collection, as the author has created an original focal point around those inside the Trojan Horse. The story begins by explaining the origin of the Trojan War in Helen's elopement with Paris, and ends with Helen returning to Greece and Odysseus remembered as a hero. Odysseus convinces the generals to follow his plan and the main section of the story focuses on the perilous moment in which the horse may be thrown off the cliff instead of taken into the city and the Greeks' difficult journey through Troy to open the gates without waking any Trojans.

The structure of the Greek army is simplified from that in Homer's *Odyssey*. Helen's husband, "the King", stays in Greece, and the army is led by Odysseus. Odysseus is the protagonist of the story and the reader is encouraged to admire his cleverness and leadership – particularly his ability to keep his soldiers calm in a difficult situation. While the main excitement of the story revolves around whether or not the Greeks will be caught, the moral of the story is arguably more focused on Helen. At the opening of the story the reader is told that Helen "should have been happy and content" but is not, and she is presented as being fortunate at the end when, "In time, the King forgave her". So although Helen does not feature heavily in most of the story, the story nonetheless communicates a message about women's conduct.

The main illustration depicts the Trojans pulling along the Trojan Horse on its wheels. The horse is depicted without windows, with a hatch in its belly.

6) *The Boy Who Flew Too Close to the Sun. The Story of Icarus*: This retelling follows traditional versions of the myth (see Apollodorus,

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Epitome, 1.12–13; with Strabo, 14.1.19; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8.183–259). One exception is that here they decide to escape once Minos demands Daedalus build war machines, while in Apollodorus they leave once they are locked up in the labyrinth after taking a hand in Theseus' escape. The story is told largely from Icarus' perspective; he has nothing to do in the palace and is understandably excited to be flying free. This creation of sympathy for Icarus' situation means that the story's outcome carries more feeling of pathos than censure. The concluding paragraph notes that Daedalus is very sad, but does not explore the irony of him creating the wings that led to the accident. The narrator does not explicitly say that Icarus died, but that he fell into the sea with a splash and that his father was a long way away before he realised what had happened.

7) *Bring Me the Head of Medusa. The Story of Perseus*: This retelling begins by introducing Perseus and his beautiful mother. The reader is told that Perseus' father died when he was a baby, which glosses neatly over the adult-appropriate story of Zeus and Danae (for which see Homer, *Iliad* 14.139ff ; Apollodorus, *Library*, 2.26; 2.34; Herodotus, *Histories*, 6.53; 7.61; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 63; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.610–612). Perseus is brave but "not foolish", (a contrast to Theseus, see above) so he seeks help. Help comes not from deities, but from "a wise man" and from the Graiai (here "witches"). The wise man gives Perseus a sword and shield and directions to the witches. The witches give winged sandals, a helmet of invisibility, and a silver bag. In antiquity, it was more usual to relate that the Graiai directed Perseus to the Gorgons lair, and that his equipment came from gods: Hermes, the sickle (rather than sword); Athena, the mirror; nymphs, the winged sandals, bag, and cap of Hades (see e.g. Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles*, lines 216–236; Euripides, *Electra*, line 460; Apollodorus, *Library*, 2.36– 42; Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 3.17.3, and numerous vase depictions). Perseus proceeds bravely, swiftly chops off Medusa's head, and returns to the "cruel king" who is turned to stone. There is no discussion of the offspring of Medusa who spring from her decapitated neck (see e.g. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 280–283, Strabo, *Geography*, 8.6.20; with vase depictions). These alterations simplify the story and its cast of characters, making it easier for a very young audience or reader to follow.

The witches are depicted with green skin, holding their one eyeball between them. The main illustration is a concerned Perseus reflecting Medusa's face back at her; her sisters stand beside her; around them are several people who have been turned to stone; the setting is inside

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a light airy building – perhaps a stoa – open to green meadow outside. This is a contrast to the "cave" mentioned in the story, perhaps in an attempt to distinguish the scene from the already-featured labyrinth. Medusa and her sisters are depicted with green skin, long claws on their hands and feet, long purple dresses, and snakes all over their heads and in place of their tongues.

8) *The Magic Flying Horse. The Story of Pegasus*: This retelling begins with a king concerned about the Chimera and calling on Bellerophon to help. Bellerophon visits a "wise magician" for assistance, who advises him to capture Pegasus to aid his mission. This represents some alterations from the traditions of antiquity in which Bellerophon was typically said to gain Pegasus with the help of a god before the quest against the Chimera, and in which the Chimera quest is prompted by lies told about Bellerophon (see e.g. Homer, *Iliad*, 6.144–221; Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*, 7; Pindar, *Olympian* 13.60 ff; Apollodorus, *Library*, 2.30–33).

Bellerophon goes on to take advice from two young children about where to find Pegasus. Once the horse is captured, Bellerophon uses guile to poison the Chimera with lead extracted from a lead mine and thrust down the Chimera's throat. The story finishes with Bellerophon and Pegasus flying away and the people of the land free from fear. The ancient tradition in which Bellerophon was punished after this episode for his colossal arrogance is avoided (see Pindar, *Isthmian*, 7.44), making the story's narrative arc simpler and likely more pleasing to a young audience. The Chimera is depicted as a two-headed beast, its tail a snake, its main head a lion with goat horns, and its body and legs a goat. This is a change from ancient depictions which more typically rendered the Chimera three-headed (e.g. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 319ff, with vase depictions). The main message of this story is that a hero should take advice and use intelligence as well as bravery in order to succeed. The main illustration is a beautiful image of Pegasus landing to drink, reflected in the moon-lit lake and watched by Bellerophon who hides behind a bush.

9) *Dolphin Boy. The Story of Arion*: This retelling of the myth of Arion establishes a firm contrast between Arion's innocence and the sailors' wicked greed. This theme is strengthened by the ending, in which Arion allows the sailors to keep his treasure, although it is no use to them now they have been punished by marooning. There is reference to Arion's "harp", while the illustration depicts a tortoise-shell lyre. The rescue dolphin's transformation into a constellation is included.

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The main illustration depicts Arion riding the dolphin through the waves.

10) *The Fabulous Golden Fleece. The Story of Jason and Medea*: This retelling is set-up in a relatively unusual way, told with Medea as the focus. The story begins with an account of Medea's unusual abilities and notes that she longs to leave Colchis. When Jason arrives, this is represented as an opportunity for Medea. She helps him on the agreement that he will "take [her] away with you to Greece." This focus prevents the story from being overly similar to the recently told story of Theseus and places focus on Medea, who is significantly different from most of the characters in the book.

Medea gives Jason a warning about the dragon's teeth, and advice about how to deal with what emerges from the ground. The main illustration shows Jason surrounded by a skeleton army, a scene likely to have been influenced by the *Clash of the Titans* film (dir. Desmond Davis, 1981), although these soldiers wear helmets, unlike those in the film. Medea also provides Jason with a flower to send the great serpent to sleep. The story concludes with a happy Jason and happier Medea sailing away, with Medea using her magic to create a fog and dispel her father's ships. "At last the powerful princess was free", is the striking closing line, which confirms the emphasis on Medea's experience and achievement.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Arachne Architecture Argo Argonauts Ariadne Athena Athens Bellerophon Chimera / Chimaera Crete Daedalus Dionysus / Dionysos Epimetheus Gods Golden Fleece Graeae / Graiai Helen Homer Icarus Jason Labyrinth Maze Medea Medusa Menelaus Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Midas Minerva Minos Minotaur Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Ovid Pan Pandora Pandora's Box Paris (Trojan Prince) Pegasus Perseus Theseus Trojan Horse Trojan War Troy
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Coming of age Death Family Gaining understanding Gender expectations/construction Heroism Identity Knowledge Learning Love Morality Orphans Parents (and children) Suicide

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Further Reading

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Addenda

Practitioner Experience:

The current reviewer has found these stories extremely popular in reading sessions with four-year olds, with the children asking to hear them again and again. Most popular of the stories is *Bring me the Head of Medusa*, followed by *The Man-Eating Monster* (Theseus and the Minotaur), with the others following about equally a long way behind. The attraction of the two most popular seems to be fascination with the monstrous nature of the monsters. The children enjoy hearing their descriptions and analysing the depictions of them in great detail.

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The children seem to be aware that there are more adult themes in some of these stories than they encounter in most of their other books, but this is a point of attraction rather than concern for them. A young child selecting the Icarus myth, for example, once did so with the observation that "this is the sad one."

The stories are sensitively written so that they can be understood even if some of the vocabulary is unknown, and repeat reading of the stories has therefore offered an opportunity for vocabulary-building (examples include: goblet; cursed; footprints; footsteps; weave; loom; foolhardy; hollow; heartbroken; bridle; lead; rubies; handsome). The pictures frequently aid comprehension of unfamiliar terms (e.g. when a "bridle" is mentioned in *The Magic Flying Horse*, an image of a bridle on its own is quickly followed by an image of a bridle and reins on a donkey, preparing the reader for the key moment in which a bridle is placed on Pegasus.

The stories frequently refer to the physical symptoms of the characters' fear or excitement and to their attempts to calm themselves down. This has proved an excellent prompt for conversations about what certain emotions feel like physically and non-physically, and for introducing ideas about how one can control them. Children may then repeat back to you phrases such as, "If we feel scared we can take a deep breath."

Constructive questions for discussions include:

- *Why doesn't Midas want to hug his daughter?*
- *Why can't King Midas eat gold fruit? What would happen?*
- *If you could ask for anything, what would you ask for?* The text prompts children to think about the difference between selfish and altruistic choices, although they may need help to extend this area of reasoning.
- *What nicer things could Arachne have said when people complimented her?*
- *If you could be half human half another animal, what other animal would you like to be mixed with?*
- *How do you think Ariadne felt about being left behind? How could Theseus have been kinder to her?*
- *What would you do if you had sandals with wings?*
- *What is "lead"? What happens to metal when it gets very hot?*

Questions that the children have asked include:

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- *Why does Midas kneel in front of the satyr?* (This led to some interesting conversations about good ways and bad ways of asking for things – polite ways/rude ways; about different behaviours in different circumstances; and how behaviours that were practiced 'long ago' might not be done now or done differently).
- *Why does Athena turn* [Arachne] *into a spider?*
- *Why does the Minotaur have a ring through its nose?*
- *Why is Icarus a prisoner? Has he been naughty?*
- *Can people really fly?*
- *Are Minotaurs real?*

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