Zoia Barzakh, "Entry on: The Twelve Labors of Hercules by Robert Newman", 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/457. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Robert Newman

The Twelve Labors of Hercules

United States (1972)

TAGS: Alcmene Amphitryon Antaeus / Antaios Atlas Augean Stables Chiron / Cheiron Copreus Deianeira Delphi Dodona Eleusinian Mysteries Eurystheus Fate Geryon Gorgon(s) Hades Hera Heracles Hercules Hermes Hestia Hydra Iole Iphicles Medusa Megara Meleager Nemean Lion Nereus Nessus Omphale Oracles Prophecy Pythia Thebes Typhon / Typhoeus / Typhaon Underworld Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Twelve Labors of Hercules
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1972
First Edition Details	Robert Newman, *The Twelve Labors of Hercules*. New York: Crowell, 1972, 150 pp.
ISBN	9780690839203
Genre	Myths, Novels
Target Audience	Children (10–15)
Author of the Entry	Zoia Barzakh, Bar-Ilan University, zoia_barzakh@mail.ru
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



Robert Newman , 1909 - 1988
(Author)

Robert Newman was an American writer for children and radio scriptwriter, one of the pioneers of early American radio. He was born June 3, 1909, in New York. In 1927–1938 he attended Brown University.

During the World War II, in 1942–1944, Newman was chief of Radio Output Division of the Office of War Information. In 1944 he was put in charge of the radio campaign to re-elect Franklin Roosevelt. He wrote scripts for several radio series. The most famous radio series linked to Newman include *Hawks Sky Patrol* (1936), *Inner Sanctum* (1941–1946), *News from Home* (1942), *Murder at Midnight* (1946–1947), and *Theatre Five* (1964–1965). Newman's scripts were also used during the 1970s revival of dramatic radio (CBS Radio Mystery theater, CBS Radio Adventure theatre).

In 1973 Newman began writing books for children. He wrote detective series and fantasy books. His most popular detective series is the *Andrew Tillet, Sara Wiggins & Inspector Wyatt Book Series*, whose teenage characters are "Baker Street Irregulars" – street boys who were employed by Holmes as intelligence agents in Sherlock Holmes stories by Conan Doyle. The most famous fantasy books by Newman are *Merlin's Mistake and The Testing of Tertius*, with the scenery taking place in medieval England. In his book based on Icelandic saga, *Grettir the Strong*, as well as in *The Twelve Labors of Hercules*, Newman, refines and humanizes the image of the ancient hero: his Grettir, far from being as rebellious and ill-tempered as the title character of the Grettir saga, is almost blameless hero cursed with misfortune but determined to make his own destiny.

Bio prepared by Zoia Barzakh, Bar-Ilan University,
zoia_barzakh@mail.ru

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.

Additional information

Summary

This is a retelling of the myth of Hercules, aimed at teenage children, in novel format. At the end of the book there is an alphabetic list of characters of humans/non-humans and a short explanation of each.

The story begins with Hercules' birth and Hera tricking Zeus to bless Eurystheus instead of Hercules with the reign over Mycenae. Having realized that he was trapped, Zeus promises that nevertheless "Hercules will perform deeds so glorious that his name will be remembered forever. And when his work on earth is done, he shall join us here on Olympus and become a god like us." "Zeus has spoken," said Hermes. "Hear him, O white-robed Fates, spinners of the lives of men. Hear and obey!"

The book includes the major events of Hercules' life, including the twelve labors, slavery to Omphale, marriages and death.

Analysis

The entire book tries to refine and mitigate the cruel and ethically ambiguous elements of the Hercules myth, keeping the young readership in mind. The hero is presented as a totally admirable personality, the devoted bridegroom of Megara and loving and loyal husband of Deianeira, not only brave and strong, but also tender, sagacious and sometimes quippish.

The motive of Fate and prophecy frequently reappears throughout the book. Later, after the death of Megara, Zeus says to his son: "Man has his time on earth and his work. But what happens to him during his allotted days is not up to the gods, but up to the Fates, whom even the gods must obey… Since she was destined to die, there was naught I could do to change her fate. Now take this blow – this reminder that no one can have his will in all things – like the man you are."

Details of Greek divinatory practice are also reflected in the book. The fact that in the myth Twelve Labors are imposed by Pythian Oracle as an atonement for Hercules' involuntary murder committed in the state of insanity gives the author an opportunity to explain for his young readers, what the Delphian oracle is, and to describe the rites surrounding the prophesy. The crime itself, however, is presented differently than in the myth: instead of killing his own children (and in some versions – his wife Megara as well) Hercules in his madness kills

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.

the guests gathered for his wedding with Megara. So, the Pythoness tells him that to be purged of his guilt he must "go to the man he dislikes most in the world" and perform twelve labors for him. Such transformation of the myth gives the author an opportunity both to avoid retelling the most cruel and tragic episode of the myth and to provide the motivation for the following events which is both plausible and close to the original story.

Other departures from the myth are also aimed to purify the image of Hercules from what can seem inappropriate to the blameless hero. He is equally devoted bridegroom of Megara and loyal husband of Deianeira. These two romantic lines are elaborated in rather sentimental way. The motive of constantly delayed and eventually failed marriage with Megara is very important to the plot. Of course, the hero can't marry his betrothed until he is purged from his guilt, and this makes them both suffer. The most dramatic moment comes when Hercules goes for his last labor. Here one more idea which has its roots in the original Greek thought comes in, namely that of the jealousy of gods. "Now I must go," said Hercules to Megara. "For the sooner I do, the sooner I will return." Then: "My dear, why do you cling to me so?" "Because I am afraid," she said. "More afraid than ever." "Do you doubt that I will come back to you?" "I do not know what I am afraid of," she said. "But I am. I told you I feared the gods might be jealous of us."

Foreboding had not deceived Megara, since she didn't survive to see her bridegroom again: in Newman's version, she died of fever just before his return from Hades. Here we have one more departure from the myth of Hercules as it is told by the ancient authors: after the death of his beloved, Hercules, in his blind rage against gods, desecrated the temple of Zeus, and the slavery to Omphale was the punishment for this deed rather than for killing Iphitus (either in madness, as in Apollodorus, or out of greed or anger, as in other versions). The desecration of Zeus' temple is an innovation of Newman, evidently based on the famous motive of Heracles' desecration of Apollo's shrine in Delphi and fight with the Delphian god himself. But Newman's Hercules can neither fight with a god nor kill an innocent man – he is hot-tempered, but noble and pious.

Newman underlines the most admirable features of Heracles' personality by elaborate contrast with his antagonist. The words of the Pythonness "the man he dislikes most in the world" foreshadows the clash of characters between Hercules and Eurystheus. The visual

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.

contrast between two characters is stressed already in the description of their first encounter: “Hercules strode into the hall, and the two men looked at one another: Hercules, taller by a head than any other in the hall, his hair a reddish gold, with mighty muscles rippling under the sunburned skin of his powerful arms and an olivewood club over his shoulder; and Eurystheus, pale, with a short black beard and dark eyes, and little that was royal about him except his rich dress.” The mutual feelings of the men are also all too clear from the beginning: “Hercules disliked Eurystheus, but Eurystheus hated Hercules with a deep and abiding hatred – hated him because he knew that it was merely through an accident of birth that he was king, while Hercules had become a hero through his own strength and courage.” Throughout the following chapters Eurystheus, with the aid of his evil and inventive herald Copreus, invent more and more difficult labors for Hercules, trying to annihilate or at least to humiliate him – but all these efforts only increase the glory of the hero. In his interactions with Eurystheus Hercules behaves with dignity and irony. Here is a typical example of their dialogue’: ““Well, the sooner I begin, the sooner I will be finished. What’s the first?” “I thought we might begin with something truly simple,” said Eurystheus. “Your first task will be to kill and flay the Nemean lion.” “It appears I have misjudged you,” said Hercules. “I feared you might be making game of me and would ask me to do something really difficult.” And raising his club in a salute, he left the great hall. Though Hercules spoke lightly, he knew that this first labor of his would not be as easy as he pretended”. The hero behaves with exemplary self-restraint and self-respect, addressing the king whom he despises and who nevertheless has power over his life and death with remarkable irony, showing his contempt of danger.

Of course, this noble hero couldn’t have caused his own death by an act of adultery (as was the case in the myth): Hercules was loyal to his wife Deianeira, it was Deianeira who became convicted that her husband had fallen in love with beautiful Iola and decided to use the fatal gift of Nessus. When Hydra’s venom penetrates his body, the recognition and acceptance of his fate comes to Heracles together with the pain, without any hint from Hyllus or from elsewhere: “Now, though he was in agony, a great calm came over Hercules. Calling Hyllus to him, and several of his oldest companions, he led them to the peak of a nearby mountain and told them to build him a funeral pyre of oak and wild olive. “You cannot die, father,” said Hyllus, weeping. “All men must die,” said Hercules. “Even I who have been to the

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.

Underworld and returned from it. Now I can reveal to you a prophecy that was made to me many years ago by the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona. I was told that no man alive would ever kill me, but that a dead enemy would be my undoing. And so it has come to pass." In this Stoic calmness and readiness to accept his fate, whatever it can be, Hercules resembles late Roman wise rather than Archaic Greek hero. But this is just the form of heroism the author aims to represent.

The same solemn and placating tone is preserved until the end: "True to the promise he had made before Hercules was born, Zeus brought him up to Olympus, where he became one with the other gods. As a god, he was accepted even by Hera; she adopted him as her son and came to love him as much as if he had been born to her and not to Alcmene." All this creates sense of finality and, eventually, divine justice and reward for human heroism and suffering.

Such kind of moral censure of the myth as we see in this book can strike us as an unnecessary prudishness. However, in the 1970th, in the midst of "sexual revolution" in the US, the author, who seems to have rather traditional values, could have fell himself especially obliged to insert them in the children book. Thus, he decided not to depict an ideal hero as an adulterer. It is even less clear why did he decide to spare the myth of the episode of Hercules' killing of his own children, well-established in the tradition. He could have thought it to be too cruel for the juvenile audience. All in all, the book seems to present rather optimistic worldview typical for popular culture of the 1970th in general and for children literature of the period in particular.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alcmene Amphitryon Antaeus / Antaios Atlas Augean Stables Chiron / Cheiron Copreus Deianeira Delphi Dodona Eleusinian Mysteries Eurystheus Fate Geryon Gorgon(s) Hades Hera Heracles Hercules Hermes Hestia Hydra Iole Iphicles Medusa Megara Meleager Nemean Lion Nereus Nessus Omphale Oracles Prophecy Pythia Thebes Typhon / Typhoeus / Typhaon Underworld Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Friendship Gaining understanding Heroism Justice Love Tricksters Violence

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.

Further Reading	Ellett, Ryan, *Radio Drama and Comedy Writers, 1928–1962,* Jefferson: McFarland and Company Publishers, 2017.
Addenda	This review refers to the Kindle edition.

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.