Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Willow Tree and Olive by Irini Savvides", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/503. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Irini Savvides

Willow Tree and Olive

Australia (2001)

TAGS: Acropolis Athens Delphi Greek Theatre Lesbos Mytilene Sappho Sounion Tragedy (Ancient)



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

General information	
Title of the work	Willow Tree and Olive
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Country/countries of popularity	Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2001
First Edition Details	Irini Savvides, *Willow Tree and Olive*. Sydney: Hodder, 2001, 260 pp.
ISBN	9780733613067
Awards	2002 – White Raven Award from the International Youth Library
Genre	Fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults (14+)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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Creators



Irini Savvides , b. 1967
(Author)

Irini Savvides grew up in Sydney as part of a Greek-Cypriot family. She teaches English and drama in addition to writing for young adults. She holds a Master of Arts from Macquarie University and a Master of Education from the University of Sydney, and in 2013 received her PhD from the University of Western Sydney. Published in 2001, her first novel, *Willow Tree and Olive*, was based on work undertaken as part of her Masters degree, and won a White Raven Award from the International Youth Library. Her second novel, *Sky Legs* (2004), received a Children's Literature Peace Prize. Her other works include *Aliki Says* (2006), and a verse novel, *Against the Tide* (2008). Her picture book, *Hide and Seek* (2008), illustrated by Owen Swan, was translated into Japanese and sent to survivors of the tsunami. Since 2016 she has been a judge for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Children's and Young Adult Fiction. She lives in the Blue Mountains, near Sydney.

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Additional information

Adaptations	Audiobooks produced on cassette in 2001 and CD in 2002, read by Melissa Eccleston, published by Louis Braille Audio.

Summary

Olive Alexandropoulos is in her final year of high school at prestigious Clare College in Sydney. In spite of the support of her teachers and her best friend Kerry, she is feeling the pressure, and her ambivalence about her Greek heritage doesn't help. When a lecture on the sexual abuse of children triggers repressed memories of being raped as a five year old by an old man in her family's village back in Greece, Olive falls apart. Although she tries to keep her revelation hidden, an eating disorder and increasingly erratic behaviour alerts Kerry, her family, and her English teacher Ms Cavanough to the fact that she is in trouble. Suffering depression, anxiety, and a form of regression brought on by the trauma, Olive leaves school half way through the year. Though her initial meetings with a psychologist are unproductive, her therapy sessions start to help and after a few months Olive is well enough to travel to Greece to stay with her father's friend Xeno and his wife Paras. The couple supports Olive in her recovery, as she walks the hills outside Athens, reconnects with her extended family, and visits the sacred sites of the Acropolis and Delphi. Kerry joins her after she has finished her exams, and they travel to Sounion and Mytilene together, where Olive searches for traces of Sappho, whose poetry inspires her. Finally, Olive's parents come to Greece, and together they return to the house where Olive was raped. After planting an olive tree near the site as a symbol of her healing, Olive returns to Australia to resume her studies.

Analysis

Its exploration of the cross-cultural experience of a Greek-Australian teenager makes *Willow Tree and Olive* comparable with Nadia Wheatley's short story 'Melting Point' from *The Night Tolkien Died* (1994). But where 'Melting Point' frames its reflection on the endurance of the classical past within the setting of a Sydney classroom, this text promotes Greek culture, ancient and modern, as a living force. Early in the text Olive considers drawing upon the Greek myths for her drama solo (p.53), but it is not until she goes to Greece that she feels the true impact of the culture of her ancestors, and no

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longer experiences the self-conscious 'sausage feeling' (p.15) of not quite fitting in.

Her personal journey towards healing is guided by a series of supernatural encounters with figures from the ancient past. At Delphi, the Pythia instructs her to climb the mountain to the Stadium above, where she is told that she must travel to Sappho's island. Later, from the heights of the Athenian Acropolis, she sees her five year old self standing below in the theatre of Herodes Atticus, calling out for help. When she visits Cape Sounion with Kerry, cold and wet and 'in awe of the power of the place' (p.232) they see a face in a wave which assures Olive that crimes against children will be avenged. On Mytilene, Olive meets a Monk who gives her the seed of an olive tree, instructing her to plant it, and tells her 'the fragments of our past are not all we are. We all rise above them.' (p. 249). Finally, at the house in which she was raped, Olive has a vision in which she is gently swaddled in white cloths by a female figure 'dark skinned and round bodied' (p. 257), who soothes and nurtures her, inside and out. These moments remain mysterious, but it seems that Greece's classical past, and its contemporary legacy, plays a crucial part in Olive's return to physical and psychological health.

In her review of *Willow Tree and Olive*, Leanne Bensely draws attention to the text's use of fragments as both a literal and figurative symbol. From the smashed plates at the extravagant Greek wedding in the opening scene, to the way in which Olive is moved and inspired by the surviving scraps of Sappho's poetry, this theme recurs throughout the narrative. The text itself is comprised of a variety of different forms of communication, with Olive's voice rendered in first and third person speech, diary entries, letters, dialogue, and poetry. She is a compelling character, flawed, self aware and brutally honest. The text explores her relationships with a wide circle of friends and family members, but particularly with the women in her life: her artistic Irish friend Kerry, the older Greek woman Paras, who acts as a surrogate mother during Olive's time in Greece, and her English teacher Mrs Cavanagh, who is on her own journey towards healing after being diagnosed with breast cancer. 'Sometimes friendship spans decades, countries and cultures' (p. 153) Olive reflects.

Savvides' novel is a study of a young woman who feels a combination of pride and embarrassment about her cultural heritage, which is both the source of her trauma and the catalyst for her healing.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Acropolis Athens Delphi Greek Theatre Lesbos Mytilene Sappho Sounion Tragedy (Ancient)
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Coming of age Depression Emotions Family Friendship Gender Gender, female Identity Learning Memory Multiculturalism Rape Resilience Sexual abuse Survival Teachers Teenagers Tradition Travel Violence
Further Reading	Bensley, Leanne, "*Willow Tree and Olive* (Book Review)", *Australian Screen Education* 29 (2002): 205.

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