Robin Diver, "Entry on: Treasury of Greek Mythology by Christina Balit, Donna Jo Napoli ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/554. Entry version as of July 12, 2026.

Christina Balit , Donna Jo Napoli

# Treasury of Greek Mythology

*United States (2011)*

TAGS: Aphrodite Apollo Ares Artemis Athena Cronus / Kronos Demeter Dionysus / Dionysos Gaia / Gaea Hades Helen Helios Hephaestus Hera Heracles Hermes Hestia Jason Medusa Orion Ouranos / Uranus Persephone Perseus Poseidon Selene Zeus

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

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | Treasury of Greek Mythology |
| *Country of the First Edition* | United States of America |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | Worldwide |
| *Original Language* | English |
| *First Edition Date* | 2011 |
| *First Edition Details* | Donna Jo Napoli and Christina Balit, *Treasury of Greek Mythology: Classic Stories of Gods, Goddesses, Heroes and Monsters*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2011, 192 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 1426308442 |
| *Awards* | Eureka! Silver Honor Book of the California Reading Association |
| *Genre* | Adaptations, Fiction, Illustrated works, Myths |
| *Target Audience* | Children (5 - 10 years) |
| *Author of the Entry* | Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, robin.diver@hotmail.com |
| *Peer-reviewer of the Entry* | Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk<br>Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il |



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## Creators

**Christina Balit , b. 1961**
**(Author, Illustrator)**

Christina Balit was born in the UK, but spent most of her childhood in the Middle East. She studied at the Chelsea School of Art and Royal College of Art. Her distinctive style of illustrations is founded on the use of watercolours. Balit's work covers a range of mythological traditions including Greek, Roman, Biblical, and Babylonian. Regarding classical myth specifically, Balit has written *The Scarab's Secret, Atlantis: The Legend of a Lost City*, introduction by Geoffrey Ashe, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2000 and *Escape from Pompeii*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2003. As well as illustrating James Riordan, *The Twelve Labors of Hercules*, Millbrook Press (Brookfield, CT), 1997. She has also illustrated books of fairy tale, the solar system and tales from the Bible. Christina is the winner of The English Association's 4–11 Award for the Best Children's Illustrated Book of 2001, Key Stage 2 Non Fiction Illustration Award in 2002 for *The Kingdom of the Sun* and UK Reading Association Award for *Ishtad & Tammuz* among other awards.

She says of her work "My need to make something from nothing is the reason my blood runs, and I need to keep it thick. I read somewhere that Jacques-Yves Cousteau said "If we didn't die, we would not appreciate life as we do. I don't fear dying, but I can't imagine how people live if they don't 'make' things." (Source here, accessed: August 7, 2018).

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 4, 2018).

barefootbooks.com (accessed: July 4, 2018).

biography.jrank.org (accessed: February 12, 2021).



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Bio prepared by Allison Rosenblum, Bar-Ilan University, allie.rose89@gmail.com and Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk and Ayelet Peer, Bar-Ilan University, ayelet.peer@gmail.com and Constantine Christoforou, University of Roehampton, christoc1@roehampton.ac.uk

**Donna Jo Napoli , b. 1948**
**(Author)**

Donna Jo Napoli (b. 1948) is an American children's author and professor of Linguistics. She has a BA in Mathematics and a PhD in Romance Languages and Literatures, both from Harvard, and spent a postdoctoral year in Linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has held visiting lectureships in a range of countries, including China, Australia, the UK, Russia and Switzerland, often using these stays in other countries to research her novels. She lives outside Philadelphia and is married to a professor of Health Law; she has five children and seven grandchildren (donnajonapoli.com, accessed: August 7, 2018). Of Italian descent, she was raised Catholic but now considers herself an atheist (Crew 2010). As well as writing *Treasury of Greek Mythology* for National Geographic, she also wrote *Treasury of Egyptian Mythology*, *Treasury of Norse Mythology* and *Tales from the Arabian Nights*, all with Christina Balit as illustrator.

She has run conferences on deaf issues and produced books intended for deaf children, in ASL/English, Fiji Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language, German Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, Italian Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, Korean Sign Language and Nepali Sign Language.

After one of her books was translated into Farsi, she spoke at an Iranian children's literature festival. Her body of work includes poetry, environmental writing and writing on how to write for children. She lists Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood on her website as two of her favourite authors (donnajonapoli.com, accessed: August 7, 2018).

In 2010, Napoli was the subject of a book by Hilary S. Crew – *Donna Jo Napoli: Writing with Passion.* Crew defines central themes of



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Napoli's work as 'an unmasking of bigotry and hypocrisy; a belief in family and friendships; and the conviction that whatever terrible things happen in one's life, there is a place from which to begin again'.

Napoli states she writes about mythology, fairy tales and religion because they 'deal with the very heart and soul of humanity' (cited in Crew, 2010). She says on her website "I find most historical fairy tales really disturbing to work on. But I do love them all."

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk

**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?**

I think it started with my high school Latin teacher, Mrs. Reynolds. She brought the old tales to life – all their passion and intrigue and misery. I got involved in the Latin club, and then in the Latin Forum of the State of Florida. I even ran a state forum one year. When I went to college, I didn't follow up on Latin. But in graduate school, I had to pass a test in reading Latin. I decided not to prepare for it, but just go in and see what happened. I passed – after four years away from Latin. And that's because Mrs. Reynolds was so terrific. The experience reminded me of how much I loved those stories. After that I went for years not doing anything with Latin. But in Spring 2013, a classics professor at Swarthmore, Rosaria Munson, and I co-taught a course on The Hero's Journey. We looked at Virgil's Aeneid, then Dante's Divina Commedia, then Eugenio Montale's poetry – all in the original Latin, then Old Italian, then modern Italian – talking about historical change in language as well as variations on the themes in the different works. It was thrilling reading the Aeneid again. And it was thrilling seeing the relevance of the old works to modern life. ///// In *FISH GIRL* I didn't think of any particular myth. Rather, I tried to use the ancient feeling that the seas are full of potential. Mysterious creatures live and rule there. Ordinary understandings of how life works don't necessarily hold. Though I didn't put in any snakes



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growing out of heads or talking animals, I allowed the octopus to grow to enormous size and then shrink again, where emotions were the key to the size changes. And I allowed the fish in Fish Girl's tank to recognize that she was somehow changing and to respond accordingly.

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

We know a great deal of facts about the world now, many more than the ancients did. But we still lack understanding of many things. For example, we don't even really know how it is that trees manage to pump water up from the ground to their crowns. We've rejected osmosis as the answer – but there is no presently agreed upon answer. And that is a rather mundane thing – something happening around us all the time, but we haven't a clue about what's going on. We are much more in the dark about the arcane things. And the more we learn about both life on earth and space way out there, the more we recognize how little we truly understand. ///// The ancients tried to give reasons for everything… for earthquakes and tsunamis and lightning. They sought to see a comprehensive picture. And within that picture, they tried to adjust to the vagaries of human behavior. I think young people today would like a comprehensive picture within which they could make some kind of sense of the natural world and human behavior within it. It is comforting to see characters in the ancient tales struggle with the same human foibles we struggle with. And it is comforting to see that they too were stupified by natural events around them… different natural events from the ones that stupify us today, perhaps... but no less enigmatic.

**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?**

Ah, I answered some of that in question 1. For most fiction work I do that is placed in classical times, I use translations into English of Homer, Hesiod, and Apollodorus. I stay away from Wikipedia on this – although I love Wikipedia for many other things (it is a great source of



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information about languages and linguistics, for example, because the Linguistic Society of America urges its members to add information to Wikipedia and correct anything that's dubious).

Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers? Absolutely. I did a book for National Geographic called *Treasury of Greek Mythology*. In there I chose to present the stories that I most love. They were written in Greek, of course, and I don't read Greek, so I had to look at translations. An interesting thing about translations is that the same story is quite differently translated by scholars in different points of history.... or that's what I concluded from my very small and limited study. Looking at translations from the 1700s through today, I found myself making choices based on my own sensibilities – which is what I'm sure those translators did. I also read many of the stories in Latin – in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I suspect that Ovid influenced me most. Certainly with respect to the creation tale. Ovid's words swirl and transform themselves, wonderfully evocative and still illusive. I aimed for that sense in my rendering of the creation tale.

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

Yes, this is a major concern I had, more so in *Treasury* than in *Fish Girl*, since *Fish Girl* was a character of my own creation in a more-nearly modern world. For *Treasury* I always used the details that were in the originals – I never changed them. But I added a modern psychology, which was a personal choice, but I expect that choice was unavoidable. That is, I cannot help but see the behaviors of characters as reflecting the way I, as a person of today, understand human behavior.

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

I don't plan far ahead. Whatever I'm working on at the moment is my world. Presently, I'm deep into the world of the Ancient Hebrews. But



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I'm nearly finished with this project. Where I will go next is unclear to me. I have a story in my head set in India in the late 1800s, and I'd like to work on that. But interruptions happen – and I am always open to happy serendipities. Will I ever return to the classical world of Greece? I can't know that – but the stories are eternal fonts of wisdom and pain – so I hope I do.

**6. Anything else you think we should know?**

Ha! what a funny question. But I will answer it. People often assume that I know more than I know. It's as though working with the classics gives you an aura of respectability and of nearly encyclopedic knowledge. The truth is, I bumble through things. I'm not afraid to deal with what I don't understand, because I understand so little that if I let that fear stop me, I wouldn't write anything. And, you know, if I fully understood things, I would have no motivation to write. For me, writing is a way of tackling problems, a way of trying to get a sense a peace. But rarely do I ever feel I "know" something or truly "understand" it.

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## Additional information

Summary

The book is divided into mini chapters in the form of character profiles. These are:

- Gaia – How creation took place and how Gaia chose Uranus as her husband.
- Uranus – How Uranus became angered at his children and imprisoned them all. How Gaia asked her children to attack Uranus.
- Cronus – How Cronus married Rhea and ate his own children. How Rhea tricked him.
- Zeus – How Zeus overthrew his father, recruited his siblings for the war against the Titans and fought the monster Typhon.
- Hestia – How Hestia hid for most of the Titan war, feared her brother Zeus and became goddess of hearth and home.
- Poseidon – How Poseidon loved the sea and married Medusa.
- Athena – How Zeus married Metis and swallowed her. How Athena was born from Zeus' head.
- Hades – How Hades obsessed over justice, defeated Cronus and declared himself god of the Underworld.
- Demeter – How Zeus married Demeter. How Hades fell in love with Persephone and obtained the help of Zeus and Gaia to abduct her. How Demeter searched for Persephone and how Persephone was returned for two-thirds of the year.
- Apollo – How Zeus married Leto and how Leto suffered in childbirth.
- Artemis – The childhood of Artemis and how Artemis and Apollo punished Niobe.
- Hera – How Hera obsessed over Zeus and won him. How Hera was angered at the birth of Athena and created Hephaestus from herself.
- Hephaestus – How Hera cast out Hephaestus and how Thetis reared him. How Hephaestus became a smith and fell in love with Athena but was spurned.
- Aphrodite – How Aphrodite sprung up from the foam. How Zeus married her to Hephaestus and how Hephaestus made her a magic belt.
- Hermes – How Zeus slept with Maia. How Hermes invented the lyre and stole Apollo's cattle. How the two brothers became friends.
- Ares – How Ares disappointed his parents and how he began an



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affair with Aphrodite.
- Helios – How Helios worked with Prometheus to create men.
- Selene – How Selene struggled with shyness, causing the phases of the moon. How she fell in love with Endymion.
- Dionysus – How Zeus fell in love with Semele. How Dionysus punished Pentheus.
- Perseus – How Zeus fathered Perseus and how Perseus and his mother were put out to sea. How Perseus slew Medusa and rescued Andromeda.
- Orion - How Orion was given the gift to walk on water by his father Poseidon. How Orion was blinded and healed and became friends with Artemis. How Apollo tricked Artemis into killing Orion.
- Heracles – The labours of Heracles and his death at the hands of his wife.
- Jason – How Jason searched for the golden fleece and how Medea helped him. How Jason deserted Medea and she took revenge.
- Theseus – How Theseus travelled to Athens to meet his father. How he set out to slay the Minotaur. How Theseus abandoned Ariadne and how he kidnapped Helen.
- Helen – How Eris caused strife between the goddesses. How Paris seduced Helen. The Trojan War.

Analysis

A great deal of the anthology is devoted to elements from Hesiod – creation, Gaia's union with Uranus, Cronus' rule and swallowing of his children and the war with the Titans. The later part of the anthology retells other well-known stories, such as those of Perseus, Heracles and the Trojan War.

To some extent, the focus on Hesiod is reflective of publishing trends of the twenty-first century. Whilst nineteenth and twentieth century anthologies of Greek myth often omitted Uranus and Cronus' overthrow by their sons entirely, this seems to have changed more recently. Lucy Coats' 2002 anthology is an early part of this trend, but Napoli's version is more reminiscent of Riordan's 2014 anthology *Percy Jackson's Greek Gods* or Stephen Fry's 2017 anthology aimed at adults. All three of these devote a great deal of space to Uranus and Cronus and their family relations. They also attempt to show how the children of these gods are shaped by their abusive upbringing. Indeed, recent YA and children's novelisations have followed this trend by



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making Cronus the villain come back to hurt his children and destroy what they have built. These include Riordan's Percy Jackson novels, Carter's YA romance series *The Goddess Test* and Solomon's *Zeus*. The popularity of these themes compared to the relative silence on Cronus in anthologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries probably relates to an increasing interest in abusive parents and dysfunctional families. There is also a likely link to more recent versions tending to portray the gods in general as cruel and weak.

The sections on Cronus' six children in this anthology explore how they were shaped by their childhood, abusive father and participation in the war against the Titans. For example, Hades as a baby in his father's stomach rails against the injustice of it all and wants to punish Cronus. He subsequently becomes god of the underworld, so that he might dispense justice as his job.

There is a very strong focus on motherhood. One example of this is Demeter who, before she is yet a mother, is described as having a shoulder that was 'a welcoming cushion for a baby's head' (p.60). We are told she is appealing to Zeus as a mate because she makes him feel 'cared for, safe – like his grandmother Gaia had made him feel' (p.60). We are also told that Gaia senses this and resents Demeter and this is why she helps Hades abduct Persephone. Gaia is therefore jealous that Demeter's maternal nature might be greater than hers; we see similar dynamics between Hera and Leto later on. In this version, Hera does not send Leto torment when she is trying to give birth. Instead, she tries to be Leto's friend during her labour out of envy that Leto is pregnant by Zeus when she herself is not yet. Leto is described as having 'lovely tresses' (p. 67) and this association of motherhood with beauty is continued when Napoli says of Helen that 'Motherhood only served to make her eyes appear deeper, her cheeks fuller – she was altogether more beautiful' (p. 174).

At times, this emphasis on great nurturing mother goddesses, with men as either their literal or spiritual sons perhaps borders on a biologically deterministic positioning of men and women as essentially very different. It seems possible that Napoli may have been inspired by the controversial theory of the great goddess, i.e. that a powerful Great Mother goddess was originally the most powerful deity, with a subordinate son/consort, but that she was overthrown by more aggressive patriarchal invaders and herself placed in a subordinate role to the violent and conquering male deities of these new invaders (popularised in various forms in the writing of Graves 1940, 1948;



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Gimbutas 1974; Stone 1976; Daly 1978 and Eisler 1995).

Whilst there are some hints of contemporary feminist criticism regarding elements of the ancient myths (e.g. Napoli's complaint that the sisters of Zeus were not included in his division of the world), overall most female characters' lives and desires revolve around having babies, being desired by men or participation in family generally. (Athena and Artemis are obvious exceptions.) This is portrayed as natural and normal. The desires of male characters seem less limited. The competition between female characters, not only in attracting men but also in bearing children and being regarded as motherly, is also notable. Overall, there does seem to be something of an idea being put forward that women's fulfilment comes from playing a nurturing, maternal role, both having babies and mothering others who are not their babies.

This anthology engages with contemporary trends regarding the sympathetic monster figure. The character of Medusa is particularly noteworthy. Like the authors of many other recent children's anthologies, Napoli rewrites rape scenes from myth to be consensual. Thus, rather than being raped by Poseidon, Medusa now forms a consensual relationship with and marries him. However, Napoli goes further than this, seemingly using Medusa's character to push a didactic message about appearance.

Here, Medusa is not transformed into a hideous gorgon as punishment. She has always been a gorgon, and Poseidon is attracted to her for her unusual features. Perseus' rash promise to bring Polydectes the gorgon's head and subsequent killing of Medusa are presented as acts of cruelty. The Grey Sisters are also presented sympathetically. The fact that Perseus is forcing them to betray the whereabouts of their sister in order to kill her is emphasised, something downplayed in other versions. In some ways, this resembles Kate McMullan's *Say Cheese, Medusa!* (2002). However, Napoli goes further than McMullan in her portrayal of unconventional appearance as attractive and her deconstruction of the idea of the 'ugly monster'. One might feel ambiguously about her choice to do this through the characters of a mythological rapist and his victim. However, it is notable the extent to which even recent anthologies of Greek myth implicitly equate beauty with goodness and ugliness with monstrosity, and imply that female beauty in particular is a measure of a woman's worth. Some attempt to rectify this trend, therefore, is welcome.



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| | Balit's colourful illustrations display a worldly style. The theme of motherhood is continued in the almost Madonna-like image of Leto with her twin babies after giving birth (p.68) and in Medusa and Selene's maternal poses with their lovers. On page 45, Medusa cradles Poseidon from behind; his eyes are closed and he leans against her, head beneath her chin. On pages 116-117, Selene spreads her arms around Endymion; his head is in her lap and he emerges from the folds of her cloak in a pose almost reminiscent of childbirth. |
| Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts | Aphrodite Apollo Ares Artemis Athena Cronus / Kronos Demeter Dionysus / Dionysos Gaia / Gaea Hades Helen Helios Hephaestus Hera Heracles Hermes Hestia Jason Medusa Orion Ouranos / Uranus Persephone Perseus Poseidon Selene Zeus |
| Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture | Appearances Conflict Family Gender Heroism Love Parents (and children) War |
| Further Reading | Crew, H.S., *Donna Jo Napoli: Writing with Passion*. Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, No. 39. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2010. |



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