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William F. Russell

Classic Myths to Read Aloud

United States (1989)

TAGS: Achilles Aeneas Agamemnon Anchises Athena Dido Dionysius of Syracuse Hector Helen Hera Jason Menelaus Odysseus / Ulysses Paris (Trojan Prince) Penelope Perseus Telemachus Theseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Classic Myths to Read Aloud
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	English speaking countries
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1989
First Edition Details	William F. Russell, *Classic Myths to Read Aloud*. New York, N.Y.: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989, 264 pp.
ISBN	0517588374
Genre	Instructional and educational works, Myths
Target Audience	Children (5 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 Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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



William F. Russell , b. 1945
(Author)

William Russell (b. Illinois 1945) is an American teacher, lecturer, editor and children's book author. Russell obtained a bachelor's degree from Ohio Wesleyan University and master's and doctoral degrees in Education from Northern Illinois University. He has taught English at high school level and has been an editor for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. He works for the Family Learning Exchange, an organisation promoting "home activities that help parents develop all the attributes that competent, principled, lifelong learners possess" (source here, accessed: January 29, 2019.) The Family Learning Exchange website, although seemingly down as of writing, promotes the exchange of video and written home learning activities.

Russell's profile on zoominfo states he "has been an advocate for family-centered, out-of-school learning for over 40 years, promoting the concept through his best-selling books and throughout his service as a teacher and administrator in both public and private schools." (source see here, accessed: January 29, 2019.) He also lectures and travels discussing language and the education of children. His page on Exodus Books talks about combating "the crises in education today" (source see here, accessed: January 29, 2019).

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

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Additional information

Summary

This book is divided into two sections by reader age: the first part contains stories meant for children of over five years and the second part is for children of eight and over. The "ages eight and over" section is primarily made up of stories from the epics of Homer and Virgil. Each story begins with a note from the author, an "approximate reading time" and a pronunciation guide to names and some of the more old-fashioned words. Each story ends with an “A Few Words More” section in which the author discusses key English words and sayings deriving from the story or names.

Introductory Material

- Reading Myths and the Myths of Reading: The author’s introduction where he argues for his views on education, myth and reading aloud.
- Using “A Few Words More”: How the adult reader is supposed to address this section to the child.
- Greek and Roman Gods: Discussion of the difference between Greek and Roman deity names and an assertion the adult is more confused by this than the child. A table of names.

Listening Level I (Ages 5 and up)

- The Gift of Athena – Athena and Poseidon’s contest for Athens.
- Icarus and Daedalus.
- The Origin of the Seasons – Demeter and Persephone.
- Echo and Narcissus.
- Damon and Pythias – The story of two friends whose affection for each other melts the wrath of Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse.
- The Battle of Marathon – How great Athens was, how mighty in war Sparta was and how Athens defeated Persia.
- Europa and Cadmus.
- The Sword of Damocles – How Dionysius of Syracuse showed up a flattering courtier and taught him that power is not to be envied.
- Pegasus, the Winged Horse – Bellerophon.
- Baucis and Philemon.
- The Spinning Contest – Arachne.
- Orpheus and Eurydice.

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- The Story of Io.
- Halcyone's Dream.
- Phaeton and the Chariot of the Sun.
- Cupid and Psyche.
- Pygmalion and Galatea.
- The Story of Theseus (Parts One and Two).
- Jason and the Golden Fleece (Parts One, Two and Three).

Listening Level II (Ages 8 and up)

- Perseus and the Gorgon's Head.
- The Riddle of the Sphinx – Oedipus.
- The Story of Helen of Troy – Author's introduction to the following stories of the Trojan War.
- The Judgement of Paris.
- The Stealing of Helen.
- The Quarrel – Achilles' feud with Agamemnon.
- The Gods Take Sides – Battles from the Iliad.
- The Wrath of Achilles – The deaths of Hector and Achilles.
- The Wooden Horse.
- The Return of Ulysses – Author's introduction to the following stories from the Odyssey.
- The Greeks Set Sail– The ill fate of the Greek conquerors sailing home.
- Circe's Palace.
- The Perilous Voyage Homeward – Ulysses' journey and encounters with various figures.
- What Had Happened in Ithaca – Telemachus and the suitors.
- Ulysses Returns to Ithaca.
- The Wanderings of Aeneas – Author's introduction to the following stories of Virgil.
- Aeneas's Escape from Troy.
- Aeneas Searches for a Home.
- Aeneas and Queen Dido.
- Aeneas Visits the Lower World.

End Material

- Index to "A Few Words More".

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Analysis

This work begins with a premise: that parents and teachers harm the development of children's reading ability by ceasing to read aloud to them after the child learns to read for themselves. In the introduction that follows, Russell invokes the idea of classics as "high" literature. Parents and teachers, he claims, should not merely read any literature; they must specifically "read good literature aloud" – "time honored masterpieces to which the label 'classic' can be properly applied" (p. 1). The reason for this is that "good literature" allows children to learn "standard English usage". This is explicitly contrasted to the lowbrow culture from which we are supposed to imagine children otherwise acquiring language. The "rock stars, athletes, and television characters children see as heroes" do not apparently employ "standard English usage". (Conversely, Russell actually compares the tale of Jason to the tale of Luke Skywalker at a later point, so not all modern popular culture is necessarily shown to be inappropriate for educational material.)

In the first few pages, therefore, Russell clearly establishes a worldview in which classical material is beloved due to its inherent literary greatness. There is no sense that what is considered good literature might be arbitrary or socially constructed. Stories originally written down in other languages become the guardians of pure English, whilst English language media produced in the modern day is understood to be substandard. *Reading classics aloud*, Russell asserts, "may be our best hope for re-creating a 'cultural literacy' among America's schoolchildren" (p. 1). A narrative of decline is posited and Greek myths are offered as potential salvation.

After complaining of changes in the American education system which he considers to have brought about this decline, Russell worries that children no longer understand classical references in culture or language, since the classics are no longer taught. (This connects the work to much earlier anthologies such as those of Kupfer 1897 and Hyde 1904, which spoke in their introductions about the importance of Greek myths in teaching children to understand cultural and literary references in adulthood. Presumably, Kupfer and Hyde were writing for a newly powerful middle class who did not wish to be shown up by the more educated old money, whilst Russell's concern is for children in general.) He positions myth as necessary to the stimulation of children's imaginations and even sees his anthology as

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challenging to the limited imaginings of a child raised in the current education system. His "stories require a more active use of their imagination than they are accustomed to providing, but although their creative powers may have been dulled by monster cartoons…these powers can be resuscitated by having to form a mental picture of someone extracting the teeth from a dragon, for example, or of the way the world would look to someone riding on the back of a flying horse" (p. 4).

Rather in the spirit of Nathaniel Hawthorne in his introductions to *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* and *Tanglewood Tales*, Russell also presents myth as to some extent understood naturally by children, with adults the ones confused by it. The mixing of Greek and Roman deity names, he believes, is more confusing to adults than children. Adults should therefore not worry greatly about muddling their children with them (Russell's anthology is unusual in that he uses Greek and Roma deity names interchangeably, seemingly based on whether the ancient source is Greek or Roman).

Unusually, Russell is also open about his use of older anthologies as source material. His sources are the retellings of Bulfinch, Hamilton Wright Mabie, Davidson and Church, texts apparently from his own childhood. He criticises some of the '"up-to-date" retellings' of his own time "that have deities speaking in 'hip' lingo, as though that were the only way to maintain a child's interest" (p. 5). This trend would, of course, only increase after the publication of this text (e.g. the works of Riordan, McMullan and Harris; as well as the anthologies of Deary 1998, Coats 2002, Townsend 2010, Alexander 2011 and Keith 2016.) He is also scornful of the attempts of children's TV to draw on mythology.

A significant time commitment is expected from the adult who reads these stories aloud – Russell emphasises that the adult should read over the book themselves prior to reading to the child, plan what time would be suitable for which stories and take time to master pronunciations (p. 10). The time rich parent would be the one most likely to benefit from such instruction – one wonders if Russell had in mind the middle class stay at home mother devoted to her child's education.

In some ways, the choices this anthology makes resemble those of Bob Blaisdell's *Favorite Greek Myths* of six years later. Both include darker stories not typically found in children's anthologies such as

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Oedipus and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. (In Blaisdell, Iphigenia is sacrificed, whilst in Russell she is more ambiguously "brought to the altar and taken away to the heavens in a cloud of mist" (p. 162).) Both also have Theseus and Jason genuinely care for Ariadne and Medea respectively and do not include either's abandonment of their love interests. (In Russell, Ariadne's abandonment is entirely omitted and the implication is that she and Theseus live happily ever after in Athens.) Both are in some ways adult in tone and include almost no illustrations (Blaisdell) or none at all (Russell). Whilst Blaisdell's anthology is dark, however, Russell's is subtly warm in tone without being condescending. Small touches are added in that soften the stories and make the characters more likeable. The writing is generally engaging and in places even charming. For example, after Echo receives her curse, her friends continue to talk to her so that she might repeat their words back and have the pleasure of still hearing her own voice. Daedalus sheds tears of anxiety and paternal love for Icarus as he instructs him in flight. Demeter starves the earth not as punishment but simply because she cannot bear to work without her daughter.

Russell's approach to Jupiter's adultery is somewhat inconsistent. In the Echo retelling it is stated that he likes to socialise and play with the nymphs and that Juno resents this because she is jealous of the nymphs' youth and beauty (pp. 26–27). In the story of Europa, Jupiter has watched Europa, admires her beauty and now wishes to make her a handmaiden. Yet Russell hints further at Jupiter's true intentions after he brings Europa to Crete, at which point he "showered her with love and with treasures" (p. 45). In the Io retelling, the essential narrative appears to be the same as that of Kupfer (1897): Jupiter befriends Io disguised as a shepherd boy and a jealous Juno comes to investigate. The nature of Jupiter and Io's relationship, however, is much less innocent than it was in Kupfer. Io is "as much attracted to him as he was to her" (p. 74) and when Juno comes upon them they are "in the midst of a long embrace". By the story of Perseus, Russell seems to have given up entirely on making Jupiter's relationships with other women non-sexual. Jupiter (now called Zeus) falls in love with Danae and she bears him a son. (The Perseus story, unlike the earlier three retellings, appears in the second part for older children, which perhaps explains this.)

Menelaus and Helen's relationship is presented as romantic, almost aspirational, as in the later Coats (2002) anthology. Unlike in Coats, however, where Helen chooses Menelaus herself, here the

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	relationship begins in more paternalistic terms. Menelaus is selected from the suitors by Helen's father because he honours and cares for Helen. A fairly mature idea of resisting lust is shown when Helen initially meets Paris; she desires him but has no interest in pursuing such desire until Aphrodite's intervention. Rather oddly, Ulysses seeks to avoid the war not because he wants to but because of Penelope's jealousy of Helen and wish for her husband not to be close to such a beautiful woman whom he previously courted.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Aeneas Agamemnon Anchises Athena Dido Dionysius of Syracuse Hector Helen Hera Jason Menelaus Odysseus / Ulysses Paris (Trojan Prince) Penelope Perseus Telemachus Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Death Heroism Historical figures Knowledge Learning Names Socialisation
Further Reading	Eric Adler, *Classics, the Culture Wars, and Beyond*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Murnaghan, Sheila and Roberts, Deborah H., *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

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