Anna Mik, "Entry on: Leo and the Red Machine [Leo i czerwony automat] by Marcin Szczygielski, Dorota Wojciechowska-Danek", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/764. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

Marcin Szczygielski , Dorota Wojciechowska-Danek

Leo and the Red Machine [Leo i czerwony automat]

Poland (2018)

TAGS: Aquilo Balius Cassandra Eurus / Euros Moirai Notus / Notos Prometheus Xanthus (Horse) Zephyrus



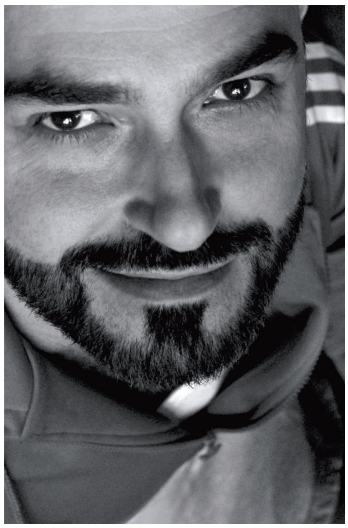


We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Leo and the Red Machine [Leo i czerwony automat]
Country of the First Edition	Poland
Country/countries of popularity	Poland
Original Language	Polish
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	Marcin Szczygielski, *Leo i czerwony automat*. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza “As”, Instytut Wydawniczy “Latarnik”, 2018, 261 pp.
ISBN	9788363841461
Genre	Action and adventure fiction, Fantasy fiction
Target Audience	Children (age circa 12)
Author of the Entry	Anna Mik, University of Warsaw, anna.m.mik@gmail.com
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Creators



Portrait, courtesy of the Author.

Marcin Szczygielski , b. 1972
(Author)

Writer, journalist, graphic and interior designer. Formerly artistic director of the Polish edition of *Playboy* magazine, creative director of Ahoj.pl, Gruner+Jahr Polska publishing house and Latarnik publishing house, Editor-in-Chief of *Moje Mieszkanie* (interior design magazine). A member of the Polish Writers Association. He debuted in 2003 with an adult novel *PL–BOY. Dziewięć i pół tygodnia z życia pewnej redakcji* [PL–BOY: Nine and a Half Weeks in the Life of a Certain Newsroom]. His career as an author for children and young adults begun in 2009 with *Omega*. Since the success of this book, he focused on writing for the juvenile audience. His later works for children and young adults are: *Za niebieskimi drzwiami* [Behind the Blue Door] (2010), *Czarny młyn* [The Black Mill] (2011), *Arka czasu* [Rafe and the Ark of Time] (2013), *Teatr Niewidzialnych Dzieci* [The Theatre of Invisible Children] (2016), *Serce Neftydy* [The Heart of Nephthys] (2017), and a fantasy novel cycle about Maja, which – by now – consists of: *Czarownica piętro niżej* [The Witch One Floor Down] (2013), *Tuczarnia motyli* [Butterfly Feedlot] (2014), *Klątwa dziewiątych urodzin* [The Curse of the Ninth Birthday] (2016), and *Bez piątej klepki* [With One Loose Screw] (2018). He is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed contemporary Polish children's authors. He received an outstanding number of awards in various literary competitions, such as: Halina Skrobiszewska Children's Literature Contest, Astrid Lindgren Literary Contest, the Polish Section of IBBY's Book of the Year competition, or Warsaw Literary Prize in Poland, and Jury of Young Readers contest in Germany. He was also longlisted for the Hans Christian Andersen Award 2018, one of the most prominent international prizes for children's authors.

Sources:

"Marcin Szczygielski: Author – Poland", *Bookbird* 55.4 (2017): 31.

"Marcin Szczygielski" [biography], in Marcin Szczygielski, *Omega,* Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Latarnik im. Zygmunta

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Kałużynskiego, 2009, 3.

Marcin Szczygielski, available online at latarnik.com (accessed: February 23, 2018).

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Dorota Wojciechowska-Danek (Illustrator)

Dorota Wojciechowska-Danek lives in Poznań, where she works as a graphic designer and illustrator. She drew and designed for (inter alia):

- Journals and publishers: Wysokie Obcasy Extra, Gaga, Charaktery,Twoje Dziecko, Wydawnictwo Poławiacze Pereł, Wydawnictwa Przygotowalnia, Wydawnictwo TADAM, Wydawnictwo Widnokrąg, ZUZUTOYS, Wydawnictwo Wilga, Wydawnictwo Agora, CZUCZU, Wydawnictwo Latarnik.
- Cultural institutions: National Opera in Warsaw (Opera Narodowa w Warszawie), Centrum Kultury Zamek w Poznaniu, Akademia Sztuki w Szczecinie, Galeria sztuki TRAFOSTACJA Szczecin, Księgarnia Fika.

You can find more about the illustrator on her website (accessed: May 14, 2019).

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Additional information

Summary

In this fantasy novel about the nature of humanity and creation, Leo is a twelve-year old boy living in the City (which stands for any contemporary generic city), where everyone is nice and they all help each other, smile and live a genuinely happy life. What makes the main character special is the fact that he was born in-vitro, which only few people find odd or "unnatural". That attitude changes when one day, with no particular reason, citizens of the City become hostile, mistrustful and secretive. They all start to put locks on their doors and alarms in their home: the City becomes an unconquerable fortress, and some places – unavailable to Leo. Also, every citizen engages in creating a mysterious machine – called the "Red Machine" – whose application is unknown to the main characters. Leo with his friend Ann follow the boy's father old paintings and drawings – a symbolic map of the City – to discover the truth behind the machine and ultimately – save their home town.

During the course of the story the children encountered six mythological characters: Xantos, Aquilo, Balios, Notos, Zephyros, and Euros, whom they later meet in real life. At some point, Leo and Anna also look into Cassandra's eye, which shows possible scenarios for the future and suggests how the red machine can affect the world. The children also visit the Cave of the Moirai, where all data about humans are kept safe. At some point, Leo and Anna hear the story of how different versions of mythology were influenced by people's needs and historical circumstances, and even though some characters of mythology are called by different names, they are still the same beings – only in different forms.

As it turns out, the City was once an actual ancient polis, where all creatures known from mythology once lived – and apparently, still live to this day. Classical mythology and its characters help Leo and Anna destroy the red machine and bring back harmony to the City. At the end of the book, they find out that the Prometheus' monument is about to be placed on Prometheus square. It becomes a celebration of antiquity, but also – of humanity, that should be celebrated in its diversity and wonderful otherness.

Analysis

The main theme discussed by Marcin Szczygielski is otherness. Leo,

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born due to the in-vitro method represents a fairly large group of people discriminated against in Poland (catholic church dominates the main discourse in Poland and do not consider this method to be appropriate), treated as "unnatural children", "created" in an unconventional way (Leo says that some call him "Frankenstein's child", p. 58; his teacher calls him "different", p. 120, etc.). It is visibly expressed in the moment where main characters wonder who is really different: they or the "cursed citizens" (p. 150). Leo is an object of hatred and mockery, not only for other children, but also – for adults afraid of him. Another topic of the story is the red machine itself, a symbol of hatred "produced" by the inhabitants of the City. The machine is contrasted with the creativity represented by Leo's father's paintings and the kindness within Leo and Anna – the two outcasts and the only hope for salvation of the world.

Even though seemingly antiquity is not the main subject of the book, it accompanies characters constantly along the way to solve the mystery of the red machine. The centre square of the City and a mall nearby which is called "Prometheus", considered to be the first scientist in human history, already places classical mythology at the centre of the story. This name might allude to a special gift to the people, without which humans would not survive, but also to the high price the hero had to pay for his generosity.

More classical characters appear in the story, as Leo and Anna discover the old monument to "Xantos Aquilo Balios," a man with two horses (p .160). Xantos (Xanthus) and Balios (Balius) were two immortal horses, the offspring of Zephyrus and Achilles' comrades; Aquilo was the Roman name for the god of wind, Boreas. All those characters seem to represent ideas about nature, and its guardians. On bas-reliefs the children also notice Zephyros's image next to the name "Insurance Company «Zephyrus»" (p. 164-165). A few steps further they also see the remains of a monument to Euros. All those characters, carrying their own meaning, enrich Szczygielski's book and represent antiquity in its finest. Thanks to them Leo and Anna saves the City, which only proves that classical heritage is, not only historical, but also moral, foundation of humanity.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and

Aquilo Balius Cassandra Eurus / Euros Moirai Notus / Notos Prometheus Xanthus (Horse) Zephyrus

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Concepts

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Childhood Coming of age Heroism Humanity Rejection Society

Further Reading

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