Giacomo Savani, "Entry on: Horrible Histories. The Groovy Greeks by Martin Brown , William Terence Deary", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/866. Entry version as of November 02, 2026.

Martin Brown , William Terence Deary

Horrible Histories. The Groovy Greeks

United Kingdom (1995)

TAGS: Alexander the Great Archimedes Charidemus Clytemnestra Greek History Greek Medicine Pericles Themistocles Xerxes





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General information	
Title of the work	Horrible Histories. The Groovy Greeks
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1995
First Edition Details	Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories: The Groovy Greeks*. New York: Scholastic, 1995, 128 pp.
ISBN	9780590132473
Official Website	horrible-histories.co.uk (accessed: August 2, 2019)
Genre	Humor, Instructional and educational works
Target Audience	Crossover (children (7+), young teens)
Author of the Entry	Giacomo Savani, University College Dublin, giacomo.savani@gmail.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



Drawing with Martin Brown, photo uploaded by Ben Terrett. Retrieved from flickr.com, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 (accessed: January 5, 2022).

Martin Brown , b. 1959
(Illustrator)

Martin Brown was born in Melbourne, Australia. After moving to the UK, he started to collaborate with magazines and design greetings cards, before becoming a book illustrator for Scholastics. He is the main illustrator of the H*orrible Histories* series.

Source:

An interview with Deary and Brown available at *The Times* (accessed: August 2, 2019).

Bio prepared by Giacomo Savani, University College Dublin, giacomo.savani@gmail.com

William Terence Deary , b. 1946
(Author)

Terry Deary is a bestselling British children's author. He is also a professional actor and singer, and has written for the stage, television, radio and film. He was born in Sunderland, England, UK. His father was a butcher and he worked in the shop as a boy. He attended Monkwearmouth Grammar School, which he hated. In his mid-twenties, he worked as head of drama in a comprehensive school, an experience that shaped his way to engage with children: 'I wrote my own curriculum – I was able to tell my students things that were relevant to them. I was able to explore their thoughts, their feelings and way of communicating, and I learnt a hell of a lot from them'

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(Preston 2013). Now he is a prolific British author, also known as an actor and a writer of popular non-fiction and TV, theatre, radio, audio and new media scripts. Terry Deary is the creator of the hugely popular *Horrible Histories* book series, which includes Groovy Greeks and Rotten Romans. In 2009 CBBC Television launched a Horrible Histories TV series. A set of Horrible Histories theatre plays have also been created in collaboration with Birmingham Stage Company, and a film is planned. Terry Deary's other fiction incudes the The Fire Thief trilogy, a comedic retelling of the myth of Prometheus, and True Time Tales; both have been adapted and will be televised – True Time Tales as a children's animation created by Canada's Eggplant Media. His 2010 novel Put Out the Light (published by A&C Black) won the 2012 Sheffield Children's Books Award. Deary has published over 300 books, spanning the genres of fiction and non-fiction and both child and adult audiences. His books have sold over 30 million copies worldwide and have been translated into 40 languages, and in 2012 he was listed as the tenth most borrowed author in British children's libraries.

Terry Deary's Best Ever Greek Legends develops the concept in his Greek Legends (Twisted Tales series, 2004), and Best Greek Legends Ever (2009).

Sources:

Preston, Richard, "Horrible Histories: 20 years of entertaining children", *The Telegraph* (February 21, 2013), available at telegraph.co.uk. (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Official website (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Sample of relevant interviews:

telegraph.co.uk (accessed: August 15, 2019)

theguardian.com (accessed: August 15, 2019)

timeoutdubai.com (accessed: August 15, 2019)

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Additional information

Adaptations	Horrible Histories have been turned into a motion picture, three TV series, videogames, and board games among others. *Groovy Greeks* was adapted into a play in 2015 by The Birmingham Stage Company.
Translation	*Groovy Greeks* has been translated in several languages, including: Dutch: *Die gave Grieken*, Waanzinnig om te weten, Alkmaar: Kluitman, 1998. Italian: *I Ganzi Greci*, Brutte Storie, Milano: Salani, 1997. Polish: *Ci rewelacyjni Grecy*, Strrraszna historia, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Egmont Polska, 1998. Portuguese: *Os Gregos Baris*, Os Horríveis, 2001. Spanish: *Esos Supergeniales Griegos*, Esa Horrible Historia, Barcelona: Molino, 1996.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	The play *Horrible Histories: Groovy Greeks* expands on some of the themes of the book.
Summary	A humorous overview of the mythology and history of Ancient Greece. After an introduction to Greek "gruesome gods" and "petrifying plays and electrifying epics", Deary zooms in on the "savage Spartans" and the "odd Athenians". He then summarises the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, before giving an entertaining account of the life and deeds of "Alexander the Great-er". The following chapters describe how Ancient Greeks thought, lived, and died, with sections about their food, their games, and the Olympics. The book concludes with the arrival of the Romans and the story of Archimedes' death, "a good example of what the world lost when the rotten Romans took over from the groovy Greeks..." (p. 127).

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Analysis

Groovy Greeks is *Horrible Histories* at their best: funny, engrossing, and (mostly) accurate. Deary knows how to skilfully balance entertainment and dissemination, squeezing more than a thousand years of Greek history into 128 pages of quizzes, jokes, and fun facts. His cheeky humour brightens up the retellings of myths (for example, we get to read Clytemnestra's diary at pp. 26–34, inspired by Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*) as well as less-known historical episodes (e.g. Charidemus' capture of Troy at pp. 18–23, based on a passage in Aeneas Tacticus' treatise on sieges [24.3–14]).

Deary's notorious intolerance of teachers and their presumption of "know[ing] everything" (e.g. Crace 2003) emerges in a series of caustic vignettes, where teachers are tested (pp. 86–8), ridiculed (pp. 44, 92), and even throw spears and arrows at (p. 84). Historians are presented in a more positive light (pp. 35–6, 61–3), although Deary has recently defined them "nearly as seedy and devious as politicians" (Anonymous 2010; see also De Groot 2009, 39–42). In line with the anti-establishment views of the author (see Henley 2012), religion is mocked as "just a con trick created to make money for the priests" (p. 37).

While the historical narrative is generally accurate, some of the anecdotes presented as facts are well-established faux myths (e.g. Archimedes' burning mirrors at p. 127, which would have been utterly ineffective; see Mills & Clift 1992 and Jaeger 2010, 159–160, n. 19). Other inaccuracies are more surprising and rather problematic. In the timeline, Deary states that in 730 BC the Greeks "produce the first works of written poetry in the world" (p. 7), erasing about 1400 years of Eastern literary tradition (the *Epic of Gilgamesh* dates to c. 2100 BC). The same goes for the western-centric claim that the Greeks "invented" drama (p. 24).

Despite these issues, the volume, aimed at children and young teenagers, offers an engaging, irreverent alternative to traditional history books. Because of their popularity, several school libraries own at least some of the *Horrible Histories* titles and teachers use them profusely, to Deary's dismay: "[t]hey are used by teachers to enliven their boring history lessons. Do they realise how subversive *Horrible Histories* are? Do they realise they're undermining their own authority? If they did, they wouldn't use them" (Preston 2013). However, it is precisely this subversiveness, combined with silly jokes

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	and a stimulating interplay of visual and verbal elements (Kostuli 2005, 131), that make *Groovy Greeks* (like the other volumes in the series) such an outstanding teaching material. During his own experience as a teacher, Deary used to tell stories to the children before starting his classes, discovering the impact that narrative and storytelling can have on learning (Preston 2013). This intuition is brilliantly developed in his books, where individuals become the focus of the narrative and the past a powerful tool to understand the present: "All the time I want the reader to look at the people, the individuals that make up history. History in never boring when you look at it on the individual level. In *Horrible Histories* I'm asking, 'Why do people do what they do?' And, ultimately, 'Why do I behave the way I do?'" (Deary, quoted in Carter 2001, 170).
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alexander the Great Archimedes Charidemus Clytemnestra Greek History Greek Medicine Pericles Themistocles Xerxes
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Humanity Knowledge Religious beliefs Science Students Teachers
Further Reading	Anonymous, "Historians are seedy and horrible, says Terry Deary, children's author", *The Times* (May 31, 2010), available at thetimes.co.uk (accessed: August 15, 2019). Carter, James, *Creating Writers: A Creative Writing Manual for Schools*, Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2002. Crace, John, "Writing History", *The Guardian* (August 12, 2003), available at theguardian.com (accessed: August 15, 2019). De Groot, Jerome, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2009.

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Henley, Jon, "Terry Deary: The man behind the *Horrible Histories* Books", *The Guardian* (July 4, 2012), available at theguardian.com (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Jaeger, Mary, *Archimedes and the Roman Imagination*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Kostuli, Triantafillia, *Writing in Context(s): Textual Practices and Learning Processes in Sociocultural Settings*, Berlin: Springer Science+Business Media, 2005.

McKay, Sinclair, "Sinclair McKay meets Terry Deary, the creator of the Horrible Histories", *The Telegraph* (September 1, 2009), available at telegraph.co.uk (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Mills, Allan A. and Clift, Robert, "Reflections of the 'Burning mirrors of Archimedes'. With a consideration of the geometry and intensity of sunlight reflected from plane mirrors", *European Journal of Physics* 13, 6 (1992): 268–279.

Preston, Richard, "Horrible Histories: 20 years of entertaining children", *The Telegraph* (February 21, 2013), available at telegraph.co.uk (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Addenda

Genre: 'A fact book with jokes', as defined by Deary himself (McKay 2009).

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