Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Mission to Marathon by Roy Knipe, Geoffrey Trease", 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/872. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Roy Knipe , Geoffrey Trease

Mission to Marathon

United Kingdom (1997)

TAGS: Ancient Slavery Athens Divination Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Pan





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

General information	
Title of the work	Mission to Marathon
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1997
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ISBN	10: 0713646713; 13: 9780713646719
Genre	Fiction, Historical fiction
Target Audience	Children (8+)
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Creators



Roy Knipe (Illustrator)



Geoffrey Trease (Author)

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Additional information

Summary

Mission to Marathon immerses the young reader in the tense events of the Battle of Marathon campaign in 490BCE. The story follows a fictional protagonist, Philip, the young son of an Athenian sculptor. When Philip's father hears in the Assembly that the Persians have reached Euboea he anticipates that they will land at Marathon to make their invasion. Philip is tasked with hurrying to the village of Marathon to warn their extended family and urge them to seek safety. Philip's elder brothers are called up to serve in the army. He knows that Pheidippides has been dispatched to Sparta for assistance but is anxious that they may not arrive in time to prevent Athens being defeated and its people (Philip included) being enslaved.

Philip's family take his warning seriously. They determine to leave, but as the grandmother is frail they will not make it to Athens. Philip's cousin, Nycilla, suggests that they hide in the nearby Cave of Pan, which they do. Philip and Nycilla go back and forth between the cave and the hill-tops where they keep watch for the Persian fleet. They see them arrive and they see the Greek army arrive. The next day, Philip and Nycilla visit the Greek camp in the woods at Marathon and find his brothers. The brothers share news of what has happened at Athens since Philip left: some wished to prepare for siege on the acropolis; 'the famous soldier Miltiades' wished to march out and fight (p.51); Miltiades' view carried the vote. Five of the ten generals gave Miltiades their command days to promote coherent leadership. The Greeks remain in the trees keen to avoid being routed by the Persian cavalry and hoping for the Spartans' arrival. News arrives that Pheidippides has returned: the Spartans will not march until their festival for Apollo has finished; some are saying that Pan helped Pheidippides and Pan became more popular in Athens from that time. 1,000 Plataeans arrive to bolster the Athenians, as do Nycilla's elder brothers and a few others from the surrounding communities, but the situation still looks bleak.

While keeping watch on the hills, Nycilla notices that the Persian cavalry have disappeared. She has not been paying attention to the soldiers' tactical talk, but Philip explains the significance of their departure. They return to the Greek army to warn them that the Persian cavalry have left and may be on their way to Athens, but they are surprised on arrival to find the Greeks already mustering. They watch with baited breath as the Greek army approaches the enemy

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and the battle unfolds. Nycilla agrees to run away if things go badly and Philip adds that he will too. With surprise and relief they see the Persian army break and run for the ships. Philip and Nycilla go down to the body-strewn battlefield to look for their brothers. They find one of Philip's brothers binding the wounds of the other; they find most of Nycilla's brothers and after an anxious search find Nycilla's last brother trapped under the corpse of a Persian. The brothers' return with the army to defend Athens, while Philip, Nycilla and the wounded brother make their way to the Cave of Pan. There is great relief and rejoicing. The Spartans arrive soon after, give their compliments, and leave. Philip's father's statue of Pan is a great success and the following year he makes one of Nycilla as a nymph which is widely regarded as very beautiful.

The main narrative is followed by a two-page glossary and a map of the Aegean. A five-page Historical Note provides a dense context, explaining matters such as the political divisions of Greece, the political structures at Athens and Sparta, and the development of the Persian Empire. There is further detail about the events of the Marathon campaign: Pheidippides' mission to Sparta, the likelihood of the Athenians being surrounded, the importance of Miltiades' tactical knowledge of Persian military matters – gleaned from his time as 'a soldier in the Persian army'. It is then explained that 'supposedly' Pheidippides ran to Athens from Marathon and died, a story which gave its name to the modern marathon race. The fame and importance of the battle is then discussed – the Athenians avoiding corporation into the Persian Empire and becoming thought of as 'the centre of Greek culture and Greek power' (p.75).

Analysis

This short and lively story places a child on centre stage in the story of Marathon. This instantly makes the situation more relatable for a young reader, with the potential to identify with the protagonist and his cousin and to recognise aspects of the boy's world – his interaction with his family, his participation in education, his interest in events that his age marginalises him from, and the pleasure he takes in being given responsibility. These sorts of elements make the ancient Greek world familiar, which in turn makes it more possible to approach aspects that may by different from the reader's experience of the modern world, such as slavery, fear of physical harm, military invasion, and acute concern for family. The presence of Nycillia

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ensures that the reader is aware that there were girls as well as boys in antiquity. Although not the protagonist, she participates in the adventure and is shown to have good judgement. There is something unnecessarily sexist about the way that the work concludes with news that everyone in Athens 'thought Nycilla quite remarkably beautiful' (p.68) but this is not the tone of the work as a whole.

Slavery is primarily explored via the family's save, Davus. There is a romantic interpretation of slavery although it does suggest some of its harsher aspects. Davus, Philip tells us, is more of a 'friend' than a slave (p. 21). All of Philip's friends have house-hold slaves and Davus is grateful to belong to the family. He credits Philip's father with having saved his life by choosing to buy his house slave from the Laurion mines (pp. 21–22). There is an attempt here to give Davus' perspective as well as Philip's, but it comes entirely through Philip and does not explore whether Davus would rather be freed and it is entirely implausible that an Athenian would have chosen a mining slave to work in their house. Nonetheless, it is useful to introduce the idea that some forms of slavery (mining or 'galley slave', a stray Roman reference) were worse than others even though this skates over the misery of domestic enslavement. It is also mentioned that Spartans taunt Athenians that slaves and free are indistinguishable in Athens, while Spartans are 'harsh masters' (p. 22). This comes from an ancient tradition (Old Oligarch, 1.10–11) and furthers the idea of varied experiences of slavery as well as establishing a contrast between Athens and Sparta. Philip 'shudders' in horror at the thought of being enslaved by Persians and his own confrontation with the possibility forces him and the young reader to personalise and humanise the experience of enslavement and to collapse the difference between slave and free. The young reader is therefore presented with a romantic view of enslavement within the household of the protagonist while informed of some of slavery's uncomfortable truths.

As well as learning about the Marathon campaign, the reader will hear about further aspects of ancient Greek life. Philip recites Homer on his journey. It is his favourite thing to learn at school 'after the games and gymnastics ('Much better than the geometry and the arithmetic', p. 26, – a personalising detail that arguably reflects modern distinctions between the sciences and the arts, and the author's own preference). There is a strong impression of Athens as a city where discussion and debate are important and the reader becomes aware of the functioning of a citizen assembly. Sculpture and poetry are part of

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the Athenian way of life. The connection between city and countryside is also brought out through the connection to the extended family in rural Attica. This section also provides insights into the agricultural sphere in antiquity, as Philip's uncle and his friends are concerned about the prospect of damage to their crops.

Religion, so important within ancient culture, is explored throughout. Early on we learnt that Philip is modelling for a statue of Pan (p. 11). When Philip must make his journey through the countryside he is concerned about his exposure to supernatural beings such as Pan; he knows that while Pan can be fun and playful, he can also cause people to feel 'panic' (p. 28). The family hide in the local Cave of Pan (p. 38). A rumour that Pan helped Pheidippides leads to the god's increased popularity (p. 53). This focus on Pan is in keeping with ancient traditions about the battle (Herodotus, 6.105–106) and may either introduce the reader to that god or extend their sense of the god's reputation. Other gods are included. Philip thanks Athena when he sees the Greeks arrive (p. 48). There is reference to the Athenians camping in the woods at a Sanctuary of Heracles (p. 50; Herodotus, 6.116 with 6.108). A festival of Apollo delays the Spartans (Herodotus, 6.106). Philip's brother, Lucius, acknowledges that the Spartans are very religious but sounds 'bitter, almost disgusted' when he talks about their decision (p. 53). This encourages a sceptical reading of the Spartans response, but the issue remains nonetheless open to interpretation by the reader. As is typical of the novel, Roman influence can be seen in the name ' Lucius', (a rare name, 'Loukianos', in Greek).

Readers will get a good sense of the campaign itself. The Persian attack on Euboea, including the burning of the temples and enslavement of the islanders opens the invasion narrative (p. 13; Herodotus, 6.99–101). The campaign is presented as a matter of Persian expansion rather than as expansion plus retribution for the Ionian Revolt, but there is no attempt to vilify the Persians beyond that and this perspective is plausible from an Athenian family. A desire to simplify the narrative may also be behind the decision to exclude reference to Greeks fighting in the Persian army. Philip's family are quick to realise that the Persians are likely to land at Marathon. There is an indirect account of the debates held about the response to invasion. The army is mustered from the citizen body, and that is personalised by having Philip's brothers and cousins included. Pheidippides' run to Sparta features but is not the focus of the story and the narrative does not include the Browning tradition of him

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	running to on to Athens and dying. Miltiades is included as a named character. There is emphasis on two key issues of the battle: the wait for the Spartans and the hazard of Persian cavalry. It is clear that the Greeks are massively outnumbered, and 'the Greeks' includes the Plataean contingent as well as the Athenians. The army command structure of ten generals and the decision to bestow command days on Miltiades features in the narrative (pp. 51–52; Herodotus, 6.109). The account of the battle itself includes the Persian use of archery, the Greeks' response of running to engage, the use of massed soldiers, the Persian flight to the ships, and the contrast in weapons and armour between the two sides (pp. 61–65; esp. Herodotus, 6.111–115). The children's concern for their brothers intensifies the peril of the moment, especially when one of the brothers cannot initially be found. The children also recognise the danger to themselves and agree to run away if they have to. This conveys the danger of the situation to the reader and communicates the importance of finding safety when necessary. The danger passes, however, and the story finishes on an upbeat note. This ancient Greece is a place of adventure, but also one of familiar warmth and enjoyment. The five page Historical Note gives readers plenty of further information and reminds them that the story is based on real events.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Ancient Slavery Athens Divination Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Pan
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Child, children Childhood Child's view Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Freedom Heroism Historical figures History Nation Parents (and children) Teenagers Violence War
Further Reading	Bridges, E., Hall, E. and Rhodes, P.J., eds., *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford

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