Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: The Game by Diana Wynne Jones ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/908. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Diana Wynne Jones

The Game

United Kingdom (2008)

TAGS: Atlas Harmonia Hermes Jupiter Maenads Merope Pleiades Sisyphus Titans Trojan War Troy



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

General information	
Title of the work	The Game
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	Diana Wynne Jones, *The Game*. London: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2008, 198 pp.
ISBN	9780007267132
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Novellas
Target Audience	Children (Early teens)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
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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



Diana Wynne Jones , 1934 - 2011
(Author)

An acclaimed and influential writer of fantasy fiction, Diana Wynne Jones was born in London in 1934. Her parents were both teachers, and both of her sisters also went on to literary careers, one as a writer, the other as an academic and critic. Jones studied at Oxford University in the 1950s, attending lectures by CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien. She began writing stories in the mid-1960s while her three sons were still very young. Her first book, *Changeover* (1970), was intended for adult readers, but she soon began writing for children. Over the next four decades she published more than forty books, including *The Chrestomanci* series (1977- 2006) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), which was adapted into an animated film in 2004 and has a cult following. Jones' work typically features elements of magic, science fiction and time travel, and is speculative and self-conscious. *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996) is a parody of the tropes and standard elements of the fantasy genre. Her books have received numerous awards and prizes, and Jones was recognised for the significance of her contribution to fantasy literature. Many other leading fantasy writers, including Neil Gaiman, Terry Prachett and JK Rowling, have acknowledged the influence of her work.

Sources:

Profile at Brittanica (accessed: September 13, 2019).

Profile at independent.co.uk (accessed: September 13, 2019).

Profile at theguardian.com (accessed: September 13, 2019).

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Additional information

Summary

Orphan Hayley Foss lives with her grandparents on the outskirts of London. Homeschooled under the strict control of her grandmother, she lives a lonely and isolated existence. She is not allowed to play with other children, and is only permitted to leave the house to accompany the maid on errands. When he is at home, her grandfather shows her amazing things in his study; from computers and televisions that monitor the daily news, to maps of the world and the solar system. He tells her about the mythosphere, the realm of stories, beliefs and myths that encircles the world. Hayley is fascinated, and in spite of her grandmother's admonishments, finds it hard to stop thinking about this incredible idea.

On a shopping trip with the maid, Martya, Hayley meets twin buskers, who stand on opposite sides of the street. She names them Flute and Fiddle, and, mixing up the terms musician and magician, speaks to them about magic. In a moment of rebellion, Hayley encourages Martya to purchase a pair of frivolous pink shoes. Later, Flute appears in her backyard and takes her on a journey through the mythosphere.When her grandmother finds out she is furious, accusing Hayley of "romancing" (p. 17) and bringing the strands of the mythosphere back into the real world, and of attempting to destroy her grandfather's important work "keeping up with the whole world" (p. 22). Bewildered as to why she is in disgrace, Hayley is sent to stay with her extended family in Ireland. She is overwhelmed by the multitude of aunties and cousins, and her formal dress and polished shoes make her feel out of place. With the exception of an impudent tattletale boy called Tollie, she receives a warm welcome, and is celebrated for her courage in fixing a blocked drain up on the roof.

Hayley's cousins invite her to join them in playing The Game. Organised by the oldest cousin, Harmonia, it is a scavenger hunt through the mythosphere. Each player must retrieve a special object – a golden apple, a roc's egg, or a magic spindle – from the mythic realm. Tollie habitually tries to cheat, while the others discover that the objects that they believed to be special are in fact nothing but fakes. Hayley is warned that their severe Uncle Jolyon must not find out about The Game or he will be very angry. Guided by her cousin Troy, Hayley discovers that the mythosphere is full of places both incredible and sinister, and that her family are endowed with special powers. Her aunts are the Pleidades, the seven daughters of the Titan

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Atlas, and other relatives are divine and renowned figures from Greek mythology. She herself has the ability to move at impossible speeds, like a comet.

Tollie, angry at being called out for dishonesty, alerts his father Mercer about The Game, and Uncle Jolyon comes to Ireland to punish the children. He pursues them through the real world and the mythosphere, where Hayley is reunited with her parents, whom Jolyon has imprisoned. Hayley learns of a prophesy that she will be the one to bring Jolyon's rule to an end. With the help of her family, Flute and Fiddle, and Martya, the maid, who turns out to be the Russian witch Baba Yaga, she transforms him into the planet Jupiter, pinning him into the sky.

The text ends happily, with the characters making plans for their future. Hayley's parents, Merope and Sisyphus, plan to return to Greece. Her cousin Troy intends to return to the city to redesign its walls, while his sister, Harmonia, will continue to explore the mythosphere.

Analysis

The Game is an absorbing and inventive story about the common elements of world mythology. It plays with the ideas of the power of the gods and the power of stories, hiding mythic tropes and identities within a story about an eccentric family. At its core is the enigmatic and enchanting notion of the mythosphere, which Hayley's grandfather, Atlas, introduces to her:

"This is the mythosphere.It's made up of all the stories, theories and beliefs, legends, myths and hopes, that are generated here on Earth. As you can see, it's constantly growing and moving as people invent new tales to tell or find new things to believe. The older strands move out to become these spirals, where things tend to become quite crude and dangerous. They've hardened off, you see." (p. 30).

The game of the book's title is a kind of scavenger hunt in this mythic space. Hayley and her cousins travel along the strands of story in search of special objects to bring back to the real world. But the book is playing a game of its own. Its storyline is an imaginative and lively response to the mythic tradition; revelling in reversals and surprises. It is unusual in casting Uncle Jolyon, who is Jupiter, in the role of villain, who clashes with Atlas as he works to maintain and understand

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the cosmos, and controls, subdues and even tortures his Titan family. His son Troy is enraged by his hypocrisy in punishing Merope for wanting to marry a mortal, when he "has love affairs all over the place, mortals, immortals, you name them!" (p. 149). Wynne Jones cleverly references the other mythic heritage of characters in their names (Mercer is Mercury, and his son Tollie is Autolycus), without making the connections overly laborious. Hayley's many aunties are the Pleiades, the seven sisters, and the text draws upon the connection between their mythology and their astronomical significance. Hayley herself is a comet (Jones highlights the reference to Halley's comet in an Author's Note at the end of the text), and her discovery of her talent for remarkable speed is presented as a symbol of her growth towards mature selfhood. She escapes from her grandmother's rigid control, and is free to dress how she likes, in jeans and sneakers. The revelation that her family are divinities with unique powers and diverse personalities provides a context in which Hayley's more ordinary struggle for belonging and acceptance, a common theme within children's literature, can takes place. Many of the characters experience a form of liberation as Jolyon's rule comes to an end, including Hayley's father, Sisyphus. His interminable punishment is a perennial favourite in children's retellings, and Wynne Jones cleverly reimagines it in a bureaucratic context, with Hayley's father forced to file pointless documents for all eternity.

Like the mythosphere, in which the common motifs from diverse cultural and literary traditions are intertwined, *The Game* explores territory beyond the realm of classical mythology. At one point, the children enter a science fiction strand and use a time machine to travel into the future and evade Jolyon.

One of the aunts, Aster, falls in love with a Scottish giant and longs to share her life with him. The text also makes a foray into Russian folklore, with Martya the Maid revealed as the witch Baba Yaga. She tells Jolyon "There is nothing you can do to me" (p. 193), reminding him, and the reader, that she belongs to another tradition. Ultimately, the text emphasises that different strands of myth and story are tied together. The HarperCollins edition is accompanied by supplementary material, including an illustration of a tree hanging with golden apples from diverse story traditions across the globe, including India, Mediterranean, Sweden, Norway and Britain. Early in the novel, Atlas muses "Golden apples all over. They cause death and eternal life and danger and choices.They *must* be important. But none of them combine. None of them spiral and harden. I don't know why." (p. 31).

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	The complexity of the allusions to myth are hard to untangle, and *The Game* provokes more questions than it supplies answers for. But it is clear in its intention to encourage readers to begin on their own journeys through the mythic realm.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Atlas Harmonia Hermes Jupiter Maenads Merope Pleiades Sisyphus Titans Trojan War Troy
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Authority Character traits Child's view Disobedience Fairy tale references Family Freedom Gaining understanding Isolation/loneliness Love Magic Names Parents (and children) Punishment Storytelling Transformation Travel Treasure-hunting Witch
Further Reading	Jones, Diana Wynne, "Birthing a Book", *The Horn Book Magazine* 80.4 (2004): 379–393. Mendlesohn, Farah, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. Rosenberg, Teya, *Diana Wynne Jones: An Exciting and Exacting Wisdom*, Studies in Children's Literature, v. 1, New York: P. Lang, 2002. Steinke, Gabriela, "The Games People Play" in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 22.2 (2011): 187.

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