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Joseph Coelho

Overheard in a Tower Block

United Kingdom (2017)

TAGS: Aeschylus Aethon / Ethon (Eagle) Heracles Prometheus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Overheard in a Tower Block
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2017
First Edition Details	Joseph Coelho, *Overheard in a Tower Block*, ill. Kate Milner. Burley Gate Herefordshire: Otter Barry Books, 2017, 112 pp.
ISBN	9781910959589
Awards	2018 – Longlisted for the Carnegie Award; 2018 – Shortlisted for the CLIPPA CLPE Poetry Award; 2019 – Longlisted for the UKLA Book Award.
Genre	Poetry
Target Audience	Children (8+ (according to the publisher's website))
Author of the Entry	Jean Menzies, University of Roehampton, menziesj@roehampton.ac.uk
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Creators



Joseph Coelho (Author)

Joseph Coelho is a British poet and children's author who grew up in Roehampton in South West London. He originally studied archaeology at university, acquiring an insight into different historical periods which has influenced some of his writing. Alongside publishing various collections of children's poetry including Overheard in the Tower Block, illustrated by Kate Milner, he has written a number of picture books in collaboration with illustrator Allison Colpoys, which explore themes such as grief as well as encourage children to use their libraries. He has also toured the UK performing his poetry live.

Source:

Official website (accessed: January 22, 2020).

Bio prepared by Jean Menzies, University of Roehampton, menziesj@roehampton.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

Overheard in a Tower Block is a collection of forty-nine children's poems. Most of the poems are told from the perspective of a young boy growing up in a London tower block. They explore various aspects of the boy's life such as playing with other children, listening to his parents arguing, exploring the school library, and wondering why his father has left. It is a contemporary collection about modern childhood but on occasion it draws on mythological or fairy-tale stories and characters. In particular, there is a trilogy of poems inspired by the myth of Prometheus which are placed separately at regular intervals throughout the collection:

- *Light-Bringer – Prometheus 1* (poem six)
- *Prometheus Bound – 2* (poem nineteen)
- *Prometheus Unbound – 3* (poem thirty-seven)

These poems follow three different stages in the story of Prometheus from his theft of fire, to his imprisonment by Zeus, and his eventual rescue by Herakles. Each poem picks up from where the previous one in the trilogy left off. The poems themselves are interspersed by images of modern life ensuring a fit within the rest of the collection.

Analysis

Light Bringer – Prometheus 1

The first poem in the trilogy tells the story of Prometheus breaking into the 'vault of the gods' to steal fire. Those familiar with the myth might know that Prometheus' intention is to gift fire to humanity but there is no explicit mention of this in the poem. Coehlo does, however, compare Prometheus' thievery to 'Einstein nicking the atom', 'Crick and Watson poaching genes', and 'Hawking pilfering space-time'. In this context, the various synonyms used for 'theft' allude to discovery. Thus they paint Prometheus' actions as comparable to a scientific breakthrough. In this sense the impact such a discovery/theft would have on humanity's understanding of the world is alluded to, if indirectly.

The penultimate line of the poem reads: '[Prometheus] forgets the naked skin protecting his hands'. This image alludes to the potential danger Prometheus faces in his punishment by Zeus. Although this individual poem does not tackle this part of the myth, it is the main

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theme of the second poem in the trilogy and thus this line sets the reader up for what will come next. More generally, however, the line and themes of the myth itself can be read as an allegory for risk and the potential dangers or successes involved.

In addition to the examples of scientific discovery/theft by Einstein and others, the poem also references the Higgs boson. These numerous references serve to create a timeless landscape for the myth of Prometheus and ensure its relevance to a modern audience. This is continued throughout the trilogy.

Prometheus Bound – 2

The second poem in the trilogy takes its name from the extant tragic play of the same name by Aeschylus, first performed in the 5th century BCE. Like Aeschylus' play this poem focuses on Prometheus' time spent chained to a rock where he is visited each day by an eagle who pecks out his liver as punishment for his theft of fire from the gods. There is no mention of Zeus specifically as his punisher, however. It opens with the line 'light-fingered Prometheus, chained to a rock', following on directly from the events of first poem in the trilogy despite the numerous poems in between.

From his perch, Prometheus is described as witnessing the history of violence on earth, from 'atom bombs' to 'fire-fuelled missiles'. His reaction is one of great sadness at what he sees. Prometheus' distress is presumably in part due to his close connection with humanity. Much like the first poem in this trilogy, the events mentioned create a timeless atmosphere. As opposed to playing his own part in the passage of time as in *Light Bringer*, however, Prometheus serves as an omniscient observer who has been prevented from interceding in the events that take place below him. Coelho concludes the poem by describing him as 'a hopeful Prometheus too quickly chained to a rock. A glowing god, tied to a rock, heart burning as destruction takes off, lowers his head into the chilled night.' These lines invite readers to consider the world around them head on, without shying away from the very real dangers around them. The poet's words may even go as far as to suggest to readers that they are not as constrained as Prometheus, who can do nothing but watch.

Prometheus Unbound – 3

The third poem takes its name from the fragmentary tragic play by

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Aeschylus, which followed *Prometheus Bound* in the tragedian's own 5th century BCE trilogy. It is also the title of a lyric drama by Percy Bysshe Shelley published in 1820, which, itself, was inspired by Aeschylus. Coelho's poem picks up from where Prometheus was left at the end of his second poem. As in both Aeschylus and Shelley's works, Coelho's version tells the story Prometheus' discovery by Herakles.

This poem was originally published separately in the anthology *Falling out of the Sky: Poems about myths and monsters* published by The Emma Press in 2015. This means that it predates the previous two poems in Coelho's trilogy. The author presumably worked back from this poem to write the events explored in *Light Bringer* and *Prometheus Bound*. Throughout the poem, clear references to the earlier two poems can be seen in descriptions of Prometheus as a thief.

The poem picks up where *Prometheus Bound* left off, with Prometheus chained to his rock now weary of his punishment. He is described with: 'face tanned by global warming, skin sore from acid rain, a film of pollutants dust him.' Once again, Coelho's Prometheus experiences modern concerns with a particular focus on issues that present an imminent threat to humanity's future. All is not lost for Prometheus, however, as Herakles comes to his rescue. Herakles, described as cloaked in his recognisable lion hide from Greek mythology, kills the eagle that attacks Prometheus each day and begins to set Prometheus free. We do not actually observe his freedom, however, as the poem ends here.

The final stanza of the poem reads: 'Prometheus hears: the god-whisper of a city, the electric thrum of buildings, the digital hiss of a new world.' The reader has come full circle despite the passage of time and Prometheus appears set to explore a new world of discovery and invention.

The Trilogy

Throughout Coelho's trilogy, Prometheus becomes a witness to the passage of time and the contemporary world. Prometheus is perhaps a particularly apt mythological figure to fulfil this role given his typical depiction in myth as a figure who is sympathy to humanity.

The 'eight years plus' recommended age range of the book that suggests the book is intended for independent readers who will be

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	able to form their own interpretations of the poems, although they may want to discuss the themes with an older reader. The choice of issues such as global warming are apt for the intended age of the readers, who are at an age where they might be starting to engage with the world in a more considered way.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aeschylus Aethon / Ethon (Eagle) Heracles Prometheus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Environment Future Historical figures Humanity Learning Science Violence War
Further Reading	Primary sources Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*. Shelley, P., *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*, 1820. Scholarly discussion Dougherty, C., *Prometheus (Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World),* Routledge, 2005.

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