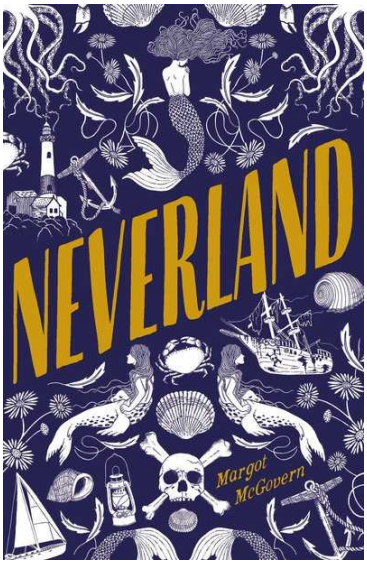
Margot McGovern

Neverland

Australia (2018)

TAGS: Andromache Celtic Mythology Charybdis Hector Homer Iliad Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Metamorphosis Monsters Norse Mythology Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Ovid Plato Sappho Scylla Sirens Virgil





Courtesy of the Author.

General information	
Title of the work	Neverland
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Country/countries of popularity	Australia
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	Margot McGovern, *Neverland*. North Sydney NSW: Random House Australia, 2018, 317 pp.
ISBN	9780143787846
Awards	2015 – The *Neverland* manuscript was shortlisted for the Text Prize, Text Publishing's annual prize for Young Adult and Children's writing.
Genre	Psychological fiction
Target Audience	Young adults (aged 14+)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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



Courtesy of the Author.

Margot McGovern (Author)

Margot McGovern is an Australian writer, editor and academic, based in Adelaide. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Flinders University, where she has also been a member of the English department. Her writing has been published in a number of Australian literary journals, including the *Australian Book Review*, and she has worked as an Associate Editor for the cycling magazine *Ride On*. *Neverland* is her first novel.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: March 23, 2020).

Profile at penguin.com.au (accessed: March 23, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

Questionnaire

1. Together with *Peter Pan* and *The Great Gatsby*, Homer's *Odyssey* figures as an important intertext in *Neverland*. How do you see Odysseus' character, and his protracted journey home, informing Kit's personality and psychology?

Their connection is rooted in the *Odyssey*'s theme of homecoming. At the start of their stories, both Kit and Odysseus have survived a traumatic ordeal and are struggling to find a way back from that experience. While Odyssues' journey is physical and Kit's psychological, the questions they face are the same: How do I get home? And is home still the place I remember?

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Kit also feels that, like Odysseus, she's lived much of her life as a minor player in another hero's epic (in her case, the hero being her father), and now finds herself at the start of a new story. *Her* story. She's not convinced she fits the "hero" role, so I gave her some of Odysseus' cunning and strong-headedness, and a little outside guidance from her psychiatrist Dr Ward, to help her on her way.

2. I've read that you were surprised when you reread *Peter Pan* as an adult you were shocked by how dark it is, and how different from your childhood memories of it. Nostalgia, and its power to distort memory, figures prominently within *Neverland*. Are we all at risk of misremembering our childhoods and the books we read when young?

I don't know that we're at risk of misremembering the books we love as children so much as we're capable of returning to those stories with greater experience and perspective. In Kit's case, she's supressed memories of a trauma and uses the stories she loved as a child to create an alternate, fantastical history for herself in order to cope. One of her main challenges is to go back and distinguish between story and memory. But, more generally, I think revisiting the books we love uncritically as children is an opportunity to develop a deeper, more complex relationship with those texts. And the same can be said for the past.

3. *Neverland* appears to have an Australian setting, but it seems only subtly conveyed (via passing references to surfing and the minor soapie star Ethan Hale, straight out of Home and Away!). Was the decision to limit cultural context a deliberate one?

Yes. The book is set on (the fictional) Learmonth Island, which is owned by Kit's family, but Kit almost always refers to it as Neverland, and insists that everyone else does too. She's determined to see it as an enchanted, storybook place, and wants the reader to view it that way too. So she very deliberately describes it in romanticised, non-geographically descript terms.

However, when I was growing up my family had a shack in Coobowie, a small fishing town on the heel of the Yorke Peninsula in South

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Australia. Much of the coastline down there is rocky and windswept with a history of shipwrecks—as kids we were convinced the bay was a secret pirate hideout—and on a clear day, with binoculars, Troubridge Island and its lighthouse were just visible on the horizon. Our dinghy couldn't make it that far, so the island became a mysterious, magical place forever beyond reach, and Learmonth Island is informed by those memories too.

4. Kit is well versed in Ancient Greek literature and language. Was this aspect of her character integral from the beginning, or did her passion for the Classics emerge during the course of writing the novel? And what is your own connection to the classical world?

A seventeen-year-old girl in crisis and Homer might not seem like the most obvious pairing, and I didn't set out to specifically write a story that incorporates the Classics, but it's something that became integral early on. Much of the narrative centres on Kit's attempts to recover a lost world and her relationship with the Classics became a way to reflect and strengthen that.

For my part, I'm more admirer than scholar. I'm particularly drawn to the idea that Ancient Greek heroes aren't necessarily "good". They accomplish great things despite being as flawed and human as the rest of us. It makes their stories relatable in a way that transcends time and distance.

5. Kit makes her own translations of ancient texts, but her readings aren't always correct, as in the way she misinterprets the allegory of Plato's Cave. Do you think we are in danger of misunderstanding the Classics as we adapt them?

In the instance of Plato's Cave, Kit is being deliberately obtuse, but it's fair to say that she appropriates the texts to suit her circumstances. And as a writer, it was really fun (and quite freeing), to give those texts to a teen character and see what she made of them. More broadly, I think the way we engage with the Classics necessarily changes over time and while it's essential that we're able to view them in context, it's equally important to consider them with modern

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eyes and approach them with new questions. I'm excited by many recent translations and adaptations of Homer, and am a particular fan of Madeline Miller's work. In *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* she conveys a deep understanding and love of Homer, while also offering a modern critique and fresh perspective, and that friction between respect and critique in those books feels vital.

6. The novel's depiction of self-harm is very confronting. How did you navigate the challenges of representing this and other conditions like anorexia accurately, while avoiding glamourising such illnesses?

Because Kit is reluctant to see herself and her friends as unwell and she isn't always a reliable narrator, it felt necessary to be quite direct in showing her self-harm and the way her illness and her friends illnesses affect their lives and wellbeing, as well as their relationships with family and friends. But I was also aware of the potential danger of taking things too far in the other direction and reducing the characters to their illnesses. It was tricky to balance! I tried to keep the characters always at the fore and to focus on telling Kit's story, with her illness as part of that narrative.

7. Kit's perspective dominates the narrative to the point that some of the other characters remain somewhat inscrutable. I'd like to know a bit more about the figure of Dr Hannah Ward.

Hannah is one of two psychiatrists on the island. There are hints that she, like Kit, self-harmed when she was younger, but she's also the one character who resists being drawn into Kit's world. So she's a voice of reason — Pallas Athene to Kit's Odysseus — but also someone with first-hand experience of what Kit and her friends are going through and proof that there's hope for them, even if they don't yet see it.

8. What are you working on now, and do you have plans to draw upon classical material in future projects?

I'm currently working on a stand-alone YA fantasy. It doesn't engage

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the Classics in a direct way, as *Neverland* does, but draws on several fairy tales and Greek myths about the afterlife. I suspect my work will always be influenced by those early stories that shaped me as a reader!

Prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com

See also: antipodeanodyssey.wordpress.com (accessed: April 20, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

When seventeen-year-old orphan Kit Learmonth tries to commit suicide by slashing her wrists in the swimming pool of her prestigious boarding school, her uncle takes her back to her childhood home to recuperate. Before her parents drowned in an accident at sea when she was ten, Kit grew up on an idyllic island owned for generations by her wealthy, infamous family. Though its official name is Learmonth Island, everyone refers to it as Neverland. In Kit's mind, it is a place of magic and adventure, populated with mermaids, pirates and sea monsters. Her beloved father featured these stories from his daughter's imagination in his bestselling book, *Kingdom by the Sea*, but drowned shortly before the book's release. Once the site of extravagant Gatsbyesque parties, Neverland has been transformed into a treatment facility and school for sick and damaged teenagers, the Lost Ones, under the care of Kit's psychiatrist uncle, Doc, and his colleague, Dr. Hannah Ward.

Kit is reunited with her old friends, anorexic Gypsy Jones, who is still besotted with her ex-boyfriend, a minor soap star called Ethan Hale, and sociopath Alistair Morden, Kit's first friend on the island and still her casual lover. Now the senior kids on the island, the group resume their old habits, including smuggling cigarettes, drugs and booze down to the lighthouse for all night parties. But since Kit left for school on the mainland another patient has arrived. Rohan Calder is deep in grief for his former girlfriend, Milly, who was killed in a car accident. Rohan and Kit are assigned as sailing partners in a high-stakes interschool competition, and the physical attraction between them grows into an intense relationship as she leads him on a tour of the secret places of the island. Doc makes repeated attempts to connect with her and tolerates her flouting of his rules, but their relationship remains strained.

Kit is forced to attend group and individual therapy sessions with Dr. Ward, but resists confronting her addiction to self-harm or her repressed memories of her childhood relating to the circumstances of her parents' death. She experiences panic attacks when sailing, has disturbing dreams of monsters from the sea and hears a persistent, sinister clicking sound. She neglects Gypsy and Alistair to spend time with Rohan, who is a revealed to be an obsessive, controlling boyfriend.

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But after Rohan is injured during a storm and confined to hospital, Kit finally begins to work to recover her lost childhood. Under hypnosis, she confronts the reality of her childhood with a mentally ill parent, and the shocking scene that she witnessed when her mother deliberately jumped from their boat, followed by her father, who chose to be with his wife rather than his daughter. Through therapy sessions with Dr. Ward, she begins to realise that her memorialisation of her father as her hero was inaccurate, and to overcome her compulsion to self-harm. The *click click click* sound that terrorises Kit is revealed to be an amalgam of scuttling crabs and sea creatures, the creep of her mother's bony, waterlogged fingers, and also the tap of the keys on her father's laptop.

She makes her peace with Rohan and her friends, who forgive her bad behaviour and are also on their way to recovery. Kit is also reconciled with Doc, whom she realises has been a reliable and loving mentor rather than the controlling warden she cast him as. Although she is almost an adult, they sign papers to formalise his adoption of her. In the final sailing race, she and Alistair triumph using courage and cunning, and she transforms the scars on her wrist into a tattoo of a ship riding a wave. Having completed her school exams, she decides to take a gap year before starting university, and embarks on a worldwide solo sailing voyage, having made her peace with her family history:

> "I can't change the past, and I don't know what lies ahead. Maybe my life will be filled with the kinds of adventures I dreamed of as a kid, and I'll do something epic and be remembered for all time like Odysseus. And maybe my life with be ordinary. Disappointing even. But like the ancient sailors who braved unchartered waters, I'm finally willing to try my chances." (p. 317).

Analysis

Neverland is rich in intertextual allusions. The title of the book refers to J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, and many of the imaginary characters and creatures who inhabit Kit's fantasy version of the island are borrowed from this narrative. In an interview on the Books and Publishing website, McGovern describes the unsettling experience of rereading this much loved childhood favourite as an adult:

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> "I was surprised by how dark it is and how different from the innocent bedtime story I remembered. Barrie's Neverland is a frightening place and there's a prevailing sense of melancholy throughout the narrative. I became intrigued by my misremembering." (see here, accessed: March 23, 2020).

The force of nostalgia and its power to distort memory is embedded within Kit's psychology, as is Peter Pan's refusal to grow up. Like Barrie's famous character, Kit resists the close of childhood, preferring to live like a savage pirate on her fantasy island.

From *Harry Potter* to John Marsden's *Tommorow* series, many other books – both for young and adult readers - are referenced within *Neverland*. The glamorous lifestyle of Kit's parents evokes the aesthetics of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, but this idyll is gradually exposed as the reality of life with Kit's mother, who suffered from bipolar disorder, is revealed. Nerissa remains an obscure, distant figure in Kit's memories in contrast to her charismatic, storytelling father, and it is painful for her to confront her mother's rejection and remoteness. Her portrayal seems to draw upon the figure of Zelda Fitzgerald, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and similarly died young in tragic circumstances. As a means of managing his wife's illness, Kit's father draws his daughter into the imaginary realm, making it a game that Kit has to be "quiet as a mouse" when "the monster" is in the house (p. 263). The book explores the allure of fantasy when the real world is difficult or frightening, but asserts that ultimately trauma can only be healed through direct confrontation, supported by therapy and medication.

In addition, the book contains references to many characters and narratives from classical mythology. Kit is a keen scholar of the ancient past, with knowledge of Greek and Latin that she uses to make her own translations of Homer's poems. Throughout the novel she persistently draws connections between ancient texts and her own life, although they are not always accurate. Soon after returning to Neverland, she compares herself to one of the people in Plato's Cave, misinterpreting the allegory to argue to Doc that "there's no point in exploring if it means giving up the place I want to be" (p. 21). Later, she compares her father's book "*mourning me and the fall of our family*" (p. 187), to the moving scene in Homer's *Iliad* in which Hector and Andromache are together for the last time. Throughout the book

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the *Odyssey* is repeatedly invoked as the model for a courageous and arduous journey, with its hero cast as the prototypical pirate, both brave and wily. Doc, who seems well versed in the classical tradition like his niece, visits her map-covered bedroom and murmurs to her sleeping form "Courage, Odysseus…Brave the monsters and come home to me" (p. 57). In spite of her rudeness and disobedience, his love for her remains as steadfast as Penelope's for her husband.

Neverland engages not only with Homer, but with the tradition of the poem's reception. During their illicit sessions in the lighthouse, Kit and her friends toast each other with words borrowed from Tennyson's *Ulysses*:

"One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will.

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." (p. 52).

The book presents the challenges faced by teenagers as battles requiring fortitude and endurance, and does not shy away from difficult topics. The representation of the practicalities and emotional impact of acts of self-harm is confronting. In the same interview McGovern writes that "challenging stories are vital because they promote empathy and show readers that they are not alone", but there are moments when the book risks glamourising Kit's illness. Kit's solipsistic first-person narrative has the effect of leaving some of the characters, Hannah Ward and Alistair in particular, undeveloped.

The setting of the book is Australian, though only subtly rendered via passing references to surfing champions, TV soap stars, and private school parents picnicking with "plastic champagne flutes and plates of strawberries and dip" (p. 284) as they watch their children competing in the sailing race. The complexity of the book's intertextual allusions, together with the cast of selkies, mermaids and other imaginary creatures who populate Kit's fantasy version of the island, locate *Neverland* as a story with multiple cultural influences.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Andromache Celtic Mythology Charybdis Hector Homer Iliad Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Metamorphosis Monsters Norse Mythology Odysseus / Ulysses Odyssey Ovid Plato Sappho Scylla Sirens Virgil
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Adversity Childhood Death Disobedience Family Friendship Gaining understanding Girls Harry Potter Intertextuality Loss Magic Memory Mental health* Orphans Other literary figures, texts and writers Parents (and children) Past Peers Philosophy Psychology Relationships Resilience Self Sport Storytelling Suicide Survival Tale vs reality Teenagers Water
Further Reading	*Memory trick: Margot McGovern on 'Neverland'*, booksandpublishing.com.au, published April 13, 2018 (accessed: March 23, 2020). Riverlea Miriam, *Courage, Odysseus: an Interview with Margot McGovern*, antipodeanodyssey.wordpress.com, published April 18, 2020 (accessed: April 20, 2020). Thalia, *Book Review – Neverland by Margot McGovern*, squishyminnie.com.au, published January 31, 2019 (accessed: March 23, 2020).

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