INTRODUCTION

Long ago, in the time of myths and legends, the Greek hero Odysseus was re-turning from triumph in the Trojan War, having used his wits to bring down the city of Troy. As he sailed home to Ithaca, where his family and kingdom waited, circumstances intervened to delay his homecoming. Waylaid by storms, capri-cious gods, monsters, witches, alluring nymphs, and more, Odysseus took ten long years to complete his journey. When he finally reached home, he found it under threat (though his resourceful wife, Penelope, was skilfully keeping those threats at bay), and had to use his wits again, to protect his family and restore order.

If all had gone to his original plan, Odysseus would have been home quickly and without incident. His story, known as the *Odyssey*, might not have existed in the same way, and the word "odyssey" would certainly not have had the same sense: of a winding, curious journey, involving unexpected and interest-ing encounters. Nor might it have been so often retold, in quite the same way, to adults and children, especially children.

The *Odyssey* appeals greatly to children and to writers of children's stories, which draw inspiration mainly from Books 9 to 12, the stories that Odysseus himself tells, while on the island of Scheria: the adventures he had at sea while trying to return to his home of Ithaca. These stories have a tight frame – the focus on an individual adventurer (and his crew), and a wonderful setting – a scenic voyage through a beautiful and mysterious seascape, as well as the series of seemingly random encounters with mythical and magical beings. On the one hand the *Odyssey* has a simple narrative line and a clear goal, being the story of a journey home – something that is appealing to children, who are interested in travelling away, but also returning home. On the other hand, it encourages readers to look around them – to think about emotions (fear, joy, enchantment, longing), and to think about exploration and the wider world. Writers are also inspired by other parts of Homer's *Odyssey*: the wider story of the Trojan War's aftermath, the minor characters who feature only fleetingly

in Odysseus' retelling, and the characters at home who wait patiently for him, facing challenges of their own. There are hundreds of retellings of the *Odyssey* for children and young adults: as novels, as story collections, with illustrations and without. Its interesting settings and magical plot inspire writers and artists to retell, adapt, and write their own versions, for readers of all different ages. There are hundreds, even thousands, more works inspired by other parts of the classical world in children's literature: a veritable sea of retellings, adaptations, and rewritings, bringing the ancient past to modern audiences.

Classical myths are extremely influential in children's literature: they deal with the fundamentals of life (birth, growth, death, love, nature, war, identity), and they express succinctly issues that concern children and young adults. Many of the stories involve rites of passage, transitions from childhood to adulthood, including journeys, facing fears, fighting battles, coming of age, transforming, and finding out one's identity. The capriciousness of life is expressed by the paradoxical gods – who are powerful but inconsistent – kind but dangerous. Major moments in life (such as falling in love or facing death) are expressed through powerful stories that help us understand our emotions and learn to handle them. The myths are not sentimental: indeed, they are thought-provoking, offering insights rather than resolutions.

Myths and their reception are part of an important literary tradition: in Ancient Greece and Rome, retellings, adaptations, and new versions of old stories were an accepted and vibrant part of literary and artistic culture, infusing art, music, and writing. The art of *imitatio*, for instance, was an important aspect of proving one's ability as a writer – taking on the forms of admired precursor texts and incorporating them into new ways of telling familiar tales.[1] Emulating the great writers would not only educate one in ways of writing well, but also inspire one to enrich and expand the stories available. This is a tradition that has continued through to the present, though perhaps for some writers the idea is less to engage in imitation or emulation, and more to write new versions, to adapt and expand in relation to modern ideas and concerns.

When we engage with classical reception, there are multiple layers and approaches to take into consideration: the myth or legend that inspires the text; the versions that the author may be drawing on; and the transformations or adaptations that occur in it (and the reasons and contexts for them). Is a writer

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[1] Described in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* as 'the study and conspicuous deployment of features recognizably characteristic of a canonical author's style or content, so as to define one's own generic affiliation' (Gian Biagio Conte and Glenn W. Most, "imitatio", *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3266).

referring to the ancient world in order to provide a cultural touchstone, or to connect to a rich and constant heritage? (See, for instance, Lise Lunge-Larsen's picture book *Gifts from the Gods* [ill. Gareth Hinds; 2011], which explains how Ancient Greek myths and legends influence modern ideas in language and expression.) Are they bringing them up to date for modern children so that they seem more relevant and accessible? (Terry Deary's "Horrible Histories" series for children [1993–2013], including *The Groovy Greeks* [1996] and *The Rotten Romans* [1994], both illustrated by Martin Brown, offers warts-and-all accounts of history using satire and gross-out humour.) Are they correcting the record in light of new ideas about the ancient world? (The young adult novels of Jennifer Cook, *Ariadne: The Maiden and the Minotaur* [2004] and *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess* [2005], recast the ancient myths from the perspective of teenage characters.) Or are they using the core structures and patterns of the myths in new forms of storytelling? (See the novels of Margaret Mahy, which recast well-known legends in the lives of modern New Zealand teenagers – for example, *The Catalogue of the Universe* [1985] draws on aspects of the *Aeneid* in imagining a life for Dido's daughter.) Funny, serious, peculiar, and puzzling, these texts reveal an exciting but daunting array of approaches, in literature written for children of all ages, from babies to new adults.

The influences of the ancient world are visible in a sea of modern texts, moved by lapping and overlapping waves of topics and concerns, styles and types, genres and forms, inspirations, influences and revisions, retellings and adaptations. How does one find one's way through this ocean of meaning, without being tumbled and tossed, waylaid and held up, or without missing something important along the way? How much could we cover, in this book, and how could we keep things clear? How would we present a world of literature that is so various in its styles and approaches, and how could we do so while retaining a sense of objectivity and neutrality? For not only are there so many approaches to classical subject matters, there are so many different styles of children's books. There are also so many readers, with changing likes and interests, dependent on their age, reading ability, reasons for reading, and their needs. The ocean becomes bigger every time we consider it.[2]

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[2] For our study, we decided to focus on children's books published (mainly) in the past fifty years: the texts that we grew up reading, and those that came after we grew up. For a historical study of earlier texts influenced by children's literature, see Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts's excellent *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), a book that we admire greatly and that provides a superb overview of the field.

Which is where the shape of this book came from. We realized we were heading out on a literary odyssey, sailing through the multiple seas of texts, readers, contexts, and scholarly traditions (see below). Our goal has been to write a work that draws on these contexts, and groups the themes and issues we discuss in manageable sections. We have arranged our chapter-islands alphabetically, by theme, as we explain below, in what we see as a combination of an alphabet book (popular for familiarizing learner-readers with the components of written language), a dictionary, an encyclopaedia, and even a traveller's guidebook, which use the alphabet to put information in an easily consultable order.

How to Use This Book (Island-Hopping Encouraged!)

In the course of his long wanderings, Odysseus stops at many islands. Some are close to one another, others are far from civilization. Some he visits only briefly, while on others he remains for a long time (for example, he spends years with the nymph Calypso). He even returns to some places, such as the kingdom of Aeolus. This idea of island-hopping, allowing lingering, skipping, and revisiting, appealed to us in our presentation of the book, and we have provided a map of our chapters as islands (beautifully illustrated by Steve K. Simons), which readers can move amongst. Although arranged alphabetically, the twenty-six chapters of our guide can be navigated however the reader likes, to be read and revisited in any order, each chapter-island offering a place of meaning and context, a point from which to survey the scene, and a different perspective from which to view the material. As in the *Odyssey*, island-hopping is encouraged! Some chapters contain thematic links that become clear when considered next to one another (for example, "C is for Childhood" is a companion to "Y is for Young Adulthood"), while other chapters are delineated by different subject matter (while "B is for Beasts" covers real animals, "M is for Mythical and Magical Beings" focuses on hybrid, fantastical creatures).

The opening chapter, "A is for Adaptation", establishes the conceptual framework for our book, identifying kinds of mythic retellings, from direct and literal to allusive and symbolic, and emphasizing that change is a core aspect of classical mythology and its ongoing reception. "B is for Beasts" concentrates on the enduring appeal of Aesop's animal fables, as well as examining the way that other creatures, both wild and tame, have been used in children's stories to reveal the essence of what it is to be human. In "C is for Childhood" we look

at the ways that children in literature are thought to have a special affinity with the world of myth, and how literary associations with nature, animals, innocence, and freedom align to create a space for them in their reading. In contrast to the idyllic conception of childhood presented in "C", "D is for Dealing with Difficult Subjects" reveals that the confronting and challenging elements of classical mythology have regularly been employed to support children and young adults in overcoming issues and experiences they face in the contemporary world. The chapter that follows, "E is for Emotions", extends this line of inquiry to examine how children's and youth literature draws upon mythological material to promote empathy and social connection, and to acknowledge the power of the emotions in myth, in storytelling, and in childhood.

A significant number of retellings are motivated by the desire to introduce young readers to the mythological corpus, and in "F is for First Encounters" we explore the formative influence of encountering these stories at a young age, as well as the implications of what is often a didactic agenda. The next chapter, "G is for Girls and Boys", addresses the role played by gender in both traditional and revisionist versions, and examines the ways that some books and series are marketed to engage a specific audience of male or female readers. "H is for How to Be Heroic" outlines the key elements of hero stories, identifying character traits and experiences that are intended to inspire and instruct young readers. In "I is for Being Informed" we expand our focus on mythology to address other elements of the ancient world, and examine how children's literature represents history with both respect and irreverence.

"J is for Journeys" examines the ways in which a pervasive narrative trope gives shape to the relationship between what is known and unfamiliar, and how a journey, whether physical or emotional, aligns with the experience of coming of age. Humour and silliness pervade children's books, and "K is for Kidding Around" addresses how storytellers use comedy to offer young readers an appealingly off-kilter presentation of the ancient world.

"L is for Labyrinth" studies how this compelling, confounding edifice (and its monstrous inhabitant) plays such an important role in mythology and literature. The discussion of the Minotaur anticipates the other terrifying and captivating creatures who figure in "M is for Mythical and Magical Beings", some of whom, we argue, have been reimagined as sympathetic figures who possess their own subjectivity and challenge the status quo.

In "N is for Nature" we address the role of the natural environment in mythic retellings, with a focus on dystopian and ecocritical literature. The following chapter, "O is for the Olympians", reveals the immortal gods and goddesses

as powerful but flawed figures, members of a dysfunctional family or a kind of collectible set in which each individual has distinct attributes and accoutrements. "P is for Philosophical Approaches" explores the ways that children's and youth literature engages with existential questions, highlighting the appearances of ancient world thinkers and their ideas within modern narratives.

In "Q is for Quality" we step back a little from the mythical scene to comment on the staggering amount of material being published in this field, the undeniable fact that some works are more successful, appealing, and popular than others, as well as offer some pointers for thinking about what might make a book good, valuable, or interesting – for children, and for the adults who are interested in what children read. "R is for Relationships" returns to a focus on the classical myths, with an examination of how stories consider social connections between friends and family members, with the intention of guiding readers as they navigate their own relationships. In "S is for Speculation", we examine the ways that the genres of fantasy and science fiction draw upon mythological material, while "T is for Time" addresses stories of travel between the modern and ancient spheres. The following chapter, "U is for Underworld Adventures", explores the recurring theme of the katabasis, the descent into the underworld, and the topography of the realm that fascinates and terrifies ancient and modern readers alike.

"V is for Visual Storytelling" concentrates on picture books and graphic novels, and the influence and impact of the illustrations and other pictorial elements. "W is for Weaving" addresses the significance of stories in which mythic women are represented weaving, which link the act with the craft of storytelling. In "X Marks the Spot" we examine the power of place within these retellings, charting unexpected appearances of mythological motifs far from the Mediterranean, and considering how writers from different places and backgrounds are influenced by, and challenge, classical models. "Y is for Young Adulthood" locates youth as a more complex successor to the simplicity of childhood, and reveals how the genre of young adult fiction engages with the classical world in ways that are often darker and also sophisticated. The final chapter, "Z is for Zest", concludes our journey through this corpus of mythological stories for children and young adults by summing up their genre's distinct qualities and attributes, reflecting on the profound and enduring appeal of the myth itself, and considering the pure fun of exploring the field. While the original *Odyssey* involves a quest to go home, in concluding with "Z", we suggest that odysseys are never quite over, that the journey and the topics we have discussed offer a way of launching readers into new journeys and realms.