

5.16 A Beginner's Guide to Greek Mythology

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Tongva tribes as the first peoples of the land on which this work was developed and is presented.

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Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

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Angourie [host]

The title of this episode can be interpreted in two ways. Most commonly, "A Beginner's Guide" refers to a guide for beginners. But it could also refer to a guide by beginners – such is the nature of English grammar. For example, one would interpret: "A hairdresser's guide to cutting your own hair at home" as a guide by the hairdresser for people who don't know how to cut hair. I'd like to offer both interpretations of this title to you, the listener, because they are both correct. This episode is a guide to Greek mythology by a beginner, for beginners. If you haven't visited The Community Library before, I am so happy you're here, welcome! My name is Angourie, and I created The Community Library as a space to talk about books and stories. You will find a range of episodes here, covering all different formats and media and types of stories from all different time periods, although Greek mythology is certainly the farthest back in time I've gone.

So as a kid, I was always interested in Greek mythology, but this kind of ran in my family. My sister is named Kalliope, for the Greek muse of eloquence and epic poetry. But the first time I remember really reading any of the Greek myths was from a tarot deck booklet. We had a deck of Greek mythology tarot cards, and each card in the major arcana referenced a God, Goddess or myth. And then the corresponding booklet retold the myths or described the Gods or Goddesses associated with each card. And I remember my two favourites were card number 2: The High Priestess, shown as Persephone in the Underworld, and card number 11: Justice, represented by Athena. My understanding of Greek mythology has come a long way since discovering that tarot deck, although my preferences haven't really changed – I still love Persephone and Athena. But the world of scholarship on Ancient Greece and its mythology is so vast I know I'm only at the beginning.

The Greek myths, like many old things, might at first seem complicated, dull, or irrelevant. But I promise you, the stories themselves are not complicated. They are also far from dull – they're filled with lust, revenge, and so many more horrific and dramatic events that I cannot recount for you here – and they are so relevant that they are still being retold today.

I do concede that the Greek myths seem intimidating. But, just as we've explored with Shakespeare, Austen, and other classics on this podcast, there are so many people out there writing, creating and retelling the classics in an accessible way for contemporary audiences. So today, I'm going to share with you a few of the ways I've learnt about Greek myths, and talk about why each resource might be good or bad or different. And in doing this, I just want to share my love of the Greek myths, and hopefully inspire you to discover them, as well. I've grouped my list into three sections: Beginner Friendly, Myth Busters, and Classics. Let us, aptly, begin with ...

Beginner Friendly

Percy Jackson

Post tarot-deck, my next key exposure to the Greek myths was the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, the first in the five-book series, was published in 2005 to wide critical acclaim and commercial success. It follows Perseus Jackson, a seemingly ordinary twelve-year-old boy, who one day discovers his real dad is the Greek God Poseidon. With this newfound identity, Percy finds his way to a summer camp for other demigods – called Camp Halfblood – where he trains in archery, sword-fighting and chariot-racing, before he is sent on a Quest to uncover who stole Zeus' coveted lightning bolt.

Percy Jackson is a middle-grade modern fantasy twist on the Greek Gods. The story is mostly about Percy and his friends, but the Gods and monsters they encounter are all taken straight from Greek mythology – albeit updated for the 2005 tween audience. Ares, God of War, wears a leather jacket and rides a motorbike, and the Amazons; the race of female warriors, uh ... literally run Amazon.com. Percy's quests, too, are lifted from Greek mythology. The second book in the series, *The Sea of Monsters*, follows Percy and his friends on a seafaring journey to find the Golden Fleece. If you're familiar with Greek mythology, this storyline will be familiar to you as it is just like Jason and the Argonauts. As a kid, this book series excited me about the world of Greek mythology because it was so accessible. And as an adult, it's still really fun to read, and is a great way to encounter new myths I've never read before, or else if I have encountered these myths before, to find new easter eggs or sly references to the mythology. *Percy Jackson* is not a text on Greek mythology, because that's not what it's there for. It's like, you're not going to watch a Thor movie for a history lesson on Norse mythology. But within the frame of a new story, it might inspire you to go back and read some of the original mythology.

Mythos

My interest in Greek mythology renewed in 2019 when I went into a bookstore and *Mythos* by Stephen Fry, caught my attention. Published in 2017, actor, broadcaster, comedian, director and writer Stephen Fry retells the classic myths with vigour, comedy and lots of research to back it up. This is a book you can dip in and out of; with family trees, maps, footnotes, forewords, afterwords and a very healthy index. And for me, this was the perfect thing to read to get back into Greek mythology. Stephen Fry retells the myths using active voice and dialogue, so it's not like you're reading a dull recount, like: "then he said this, then he went there, then he died." It's very interesting and readable, and filled with funny Stephen Fry quips, which some might not enjoy, but I really did. But beyond being readable,

Mythos also works as a reference book. It tells the myths in order – well, as much order as you can tease out from the messy world of mythology – and covers the fan-favourites and the lesser-knowns. Most importantly, however – and my favourite thing about *Mythos* – is that it's kind to the reader. Stephen Fry assures the reader that they need not remember everyone's name, or how to pronounce it, or how they're tied to other myths. He emphasises the stories themselves, and the emotion within them, and rarely offers his own take on the meanings or morals. But of course, if you do want to remember characters' names, and what they did in other myths or wars or adventures, Stephen Fry dutifully reminds the reader of the characters' heritage, legacy, and defining features.

Mythos is just the first in Stephen Fry's "Great Mythology Series", as he's titled it. Next is *Heroes*, which I have also read, and of course recounts the adventures of some of the most famous heroes in Greek mythology. It's told with the same energy and style as *Mythos*, though I personally enjoyed it less, because there are fewer women. The third book in the series is *Troy*, which recounts the Trojan War, and it was actually my favourite, but *Troy* is different from *Mythos* and *Heroes*, because it's focussed on a single narrative, rather than many different myths. I really loved getting more time to sit with one story and one cast of characters, because I connected with it more. And as we got further away from the Gods and ancient mythology and closer to how mythology intertwines with history, Stephen Fry had some interesting things to say on how myth is inextricably linked with history – in the case of the Trojan War, we cannot separate one from the other. The next book in the series, which will be published in October of this year, is Stephen Fry's retelling of *The Odyssey*, which I am very intrigued by. In summary: if someone came up to me on the street and said: "I want to get into Greek mythology but I don't know where to start!" I would recommend them Stephen Fry's *Mythos* – and with that concludes my Beginner Friendly section. Next up, we have:

Myth Busters

Let's Talk About Myths, Baby!

Now, don't get me wrong, the texts in this section aren't necessarily beginner unfriendly, but their readability is not the major thing they have in common. In this section you will find three resources which not only retell the Greek myths, but reframe them with a particular issue or idea in mind. Let's start with *Let's Talk About Myths, Baby!* You have to sing it because she sings it in the podcast! This describes itself as "not your average mythology podcast". It's hosted by 30-something-year-old Millennial Liv Albert, who has a degree in English Literature and Classics, and has studied in Greece and Rome. I would also place this podcast in the beginner friendly section, as the stories are deeply researched and thoroughly told. But Albert's main intent is "examining [the myths] through a modern intersectional feminist lens, focusing where possible on amplifying the voices of women, trans, and non-binary people." As is often the case with recentering stories on previously ignored voices or characters, a lot of myth-busting comes along with this. If you prefer to listen rather than read, I'd recommend *Let's Talk About Myths, Baby!* because it's in a similar vein to Stephen Fry's *Mythos*. It's fun, it's accessible, but it has that added layer of looking at the deeper at the issues of power and politics that pervade the myths and their retellings.

Pandora's Jar

If you're looking for a more focussed approach to a feminist take on the Greek myths, I would suggest *Pandora's Jar* by Natalie Haynes. This book re-examines ten female characters in Greek mythology, critiquing how they've been portrayed in media, and offering insight to their deeper motivations and feelings. This book is equal parts retelling and literary criticism. Natalie Haynes covered some characters I was familiar with, such as Medea and Helen, and some I didn't know, such as Jocasta and Penelope. But in the end, it actually didn't matter if I knew the stories or not, because they were retold. And while Natalie Haynes offers her interpretations, the reader is encouraged to form their own, too, which is something I really loved. This book is very readable and introduces and explains a selection of myths, though would recommend it to people who are at least somewhat familiar with the key Gods, Goddesses and myths – even if it's just from having read *Percy Jackson*.

Women & Power

If we started off this myth-busting section with myth retellings with a sprinkling of literary criticism, we're ending it with a full-on literary criticism text: Mary Beard's *Women & Power: A Manifesto*. Dame Mary Beard is one of Britain's most famous classicists, with a plethora of books, blogs and TV specials to her name. In 2017, following the dramatic and disastrous US presidential election, she wrote and published this manifesto on women and power through the lens of ancient Greek and Roman mythology. She explores women's relationship with power – and the social attitudes towards women in power – throughout history, beginning with Greek myths and plays, Roman society, and how it all links back to current-day politics and discourse. This book is very short – like, under a hundred pages short – but it's jam-packed full of history and social commentary. The book retells myths as needed, but is much more focussed on drawing parallels between then and now, rather than retelling the stories. If you're a reader of feminist criticism or social commentary or essay collections, then this is a great way to transition into the world of Greek mythology and ancient Greece. And if you're questioning whether Greek mythology is relevant to today, this book will give you so much evidence that it is.

So, now that we've talked about beginner-friendly materials and texts that debunk what we think we know about mythology, let's take it right back to where it all began with ...

The Classics

Medea

Now, I have only read one original ancient Greek text, and that is Medea, a tragedy play by Euripides. Of course, what I mean by original – I didn't read the original text, as I cannot read ancient Greek, but I read a 1963 English translation by Philip Vellacott, published by Penguin Books. I studied Medea in year 12 English class, and it received mixed reviews from our class. Of all the texts I studied that year, it was probably my favourite, but I don't remember being very enthusiastic about it, all the same. Here's what I'll say about reading a classic text: it depends on the translation. The translation we read in class was relatively new, and quite accessible. The language wasn't modernised, but it wasn't wordy or convoluted, and the quotes were really easy to remember. And then I remember, when I tried to find a digital version of Medea, I stumbled across an older translation, which used

archaic language and read very pretentious. So, it definitely depends on which translation you get. But then, you know, having read only one ancient Greek play in translation, it's really difficult for me to compare or offer any broad advice on how to go about it. But I would say that, for me, it's more fun and engaging to begin with modern retellings – and then go back and read the original text, if I'm still interested. Cause there are so many people out there who have dedicated their life's work to retelling the stories in an efficient and engaging way. And I'd prefer to start with them than to struggle to get through a play I don't understand.

Mythology

And finally, the other book in my Classics section is a much newer classic: Edith Hamilton's *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. Published in 1942, this one is a staple of any Greek mythology retellings – and Marilyn Monroe had a copy on her bookshelf, which is how I initially found out about it. I've been reading this book for about three months now – just a story or two before bed. The blurb says it's "praised throughout the world for its authority and lucidity" and is "the standard by which all other books on mythology are measured." Um ... listen ... I think it's fine. Here's what's great about it, okay let's start off positive: It's very comprehensive, covering many of the lesser-known myths, and it includes a section on Norse mythology at the end. The other thing I like about it is that she's very explicit about where she gets the stories from; whether she retells from Ovid, or Homer, or Pindar. And she includes a note about the ancient poets' writing styles and beliefs, and how she takes that into account in her retellings. There are also some really interesting moments of insight on the meaning of the stories and how they were believed or interpreted in the ancient world – but those paragraphs are few and far between. For the most part, the retellings are just ... dry. She doesn't emphasise the drama, retelling much of it in passive voice with minimal dialogue. The structure is often confusing – she'll jump backwards in the middle of a myth to tell a character's backstory without making it clear that's what she's doing. And I can see how Edith Hamilton might have been the Mary Beard of her time, but she lacks a certain humour and vigour that I really appreciate in more modern retellings of the myths. It makes for light bedtime reading, but it's certainly not my favourite.

I hate to close off that section on a low note, but alas, it must be done. But I want to talk about a few things I've noticed in the three years I've been rediscovering my love of Greek mythology and reading material on it.

1. It takes a while for it to stick.

I've read the story of Prometheus so many times, and yet I would really struggle to recount it for you now. But I think that's totally normal. There are so many myths, and so many of them have similar patterns and tropes, and also there are multiple characters with the same name, or very similar names – I always get confused between Aegeus and Aeneas. So it's no wonder that it takes a couple of reads for me to remember a story.

2. You don't have to read the original texts.

Of course, you don't have to read anything you don't want to. I touched on this before – but there are so many great modern retellings of the myths, you can save the time and effort it would take to read the *Odyssey*, and instead just read an abridged version that highlights the good bits and chucks out the rest. And the thing is, unless you can read Ancient Greek or

Latin, all of the ancient texts are translated anyway, so you're still going to be reading someone else's retelling of it. So you might as well read a retelling from someone you like and find engaging.

3. Everyone wants to be the best.

This was an unexpected thing I've noticed now that I've read retellings from multiple different authors. Every writer at some point in their retelling says some version of "some historians believe this, but I think they're all wrong and this is the way the story goes." Yes, even Stephen Fry and Edith Hamilton, objective as they try to be, suffer from this. It's just amusing to me, more than anything. And the more I encounter this phrase, the less I believe it. Which leads me to my final point ...

4. Only by reading multiple versions of the same myths am I beginning to see a bigger, more complete picture of Greek mythology.

Now, I know that's not what you want to hear. In a field so saturated with content from the past two thousand years, it would be so much easier for me to say: here is the one book you need to read to know everything there is to know about Greek mythology, and you can do away with the rest! And many books claim to do that, but of course the fickle nature of storytelling is that each retelling is going to be filled with the author's biases, opinions and judgement. With each retelling I read from a different author, I start to see holes, missing links, and artistic interpretations or choices that are presented as fact. And that's fine by me; in fact, it fascinates me. But it just confirms that reading as widely as possible is the key to deeper understanding.

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Now that's all I have for you today, but if you'd like to know more me and what I'm reading and thinking about, you can follow me on Instagram @the_community_library. I always love to hear what you're reading and thinking about, too, so if you have any thoughts on this episode – perhaps more books on Greek mythology you'd like to recommend me – there's always an Instagram post you can comment on, or if you'd prefer to send me your thoughts via DMs, that is lovely, too. I hope you are all staying safe and healthy and reading great books, or watching great movies, or listening to great music, or just surrounded by people you love. I'll chat to you in two weeks' time! Bye.