

A Short History of Myth by Karen Armstrong. Canongate 2005

The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus by Margaret Atwood.
Canongate 2005

Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Hercules by Jeanette Winterson.
Canongate 2005.

Songs on Bronze – The Greek Myths Made Real by Nigel Spivey.
Faber and Faber 2005.

The publication of the first three volumes in Canongate's The Myths series represents one of the most exciting and creative events in publishing in 2005: Several of the world's greatest writers invited to re-write ancient myths that are nevertheless still vibrantly alive in the 21st century.

The first volume, by the prolific and incisive scholar of religion Karen Armstrong, is a short but convincing description of the steady development of myth through a series of defined ages, the most significant of which – in terms of the development of human thought – was the Axial (800-200 BCE). Armstrong also describes the ways in which different types of society are amenable or hostile to myth, and what is lost to humanity when the latter is the case.

The first myth, the Penelopiad, by the brilliant and redoubtable Margaret Atwood, presents the story of Odysseus told, from Hades, by his abandoned wife Penelope. The story of their courtship and marriage, her abandonment while he fought in the Trojan wars, and her protracted wait for his safe return, fending off the suitors who ate and drank her out of house and home is compelling and convincing. The other voices in the story, expressed in rhyme, are those of her twelve maids, hanged for no apparent reason by her son Telemachus after Odysseus' safe return.

Penelope comes to life in this version, and the lop-sided nature of Homer becomes all too lamentably apparent.

In Weight, Jeanette Winterson re-tells the task of Hercules to get apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, and his relationship with Atlas, the Titan whose garden it was and who shouldered the weight of the world. Winterson puts a great deal of herself into the story – and very successfully too – exploring within the myth such themes as loneliness, abandonment and the burdens we all carry.

As might be expected from a writer of her quality this is a haunting story whose ideas live on in the mind after the final page has been read.

Testimony to the enduring power of ancient myths is also provided by Nigel Spivey's Songs of Bronze: The Greek Myths made real. Spivey, a classical scholar, takes the most famous Greek myths such as...and, eschewing the rigidity of such classicists as E V Rieu, presents them in contemporary style and language. This is an excellent version of some great stories, and provides an excellent opportunity for young and not-so-young to engage or re-engage with some of the most important tales in world literature.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh