Author Philip Womack looks at how the Ancient Greeks influence today's children's literature.

Greek myths have been reeling in readers for thousands of years, but what makes ancient stories such a rich resource for children's authors? Author and classicist Philip Womack considers.

Classical mythology retains two remarkable qualities which sustain its continued presence in literature for the young: one, the rigid nature of its stories, in which plots are uncovered, quests fulfilled, and loves torn apart; often with recognisably whole or just endings; and two, conversely, the plasticity of detail which allows those stories to function just as well with entirely different settings. David Almond's A Song for Ella Gray is the most recent example of this trend: a plangent tale of adolescent passion which re-packages the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The classic version has Eurydice, newly married to the semi-divine bard Orpheus, being killed by a snakebite; Orpheus performs the heroic act of katabasis (a journey into the underworld) in order to retrieve her. By charming Hades, he succeeds, on the condition that he never look back at Eurydice until they reach the world of the living; at the very last minute he transgresses, and Eurydice is dragged back to the ghost-world. We have heard this many times, and yet Almond injects it with lyrical beauty and life, transposing Orpheus and his new love, Ella Gray, to Northumberland of the twenty-first century. He wears a purple coat and plays the lyre; even the bad girls at school want to follow him, and in a haunting foreshadowing of Ella's death, they wear necklaces of dead snakes. The Maenads appear, inevitable as the sun rising, at the end, and Orpheus is torn from us once more. But there is the comforting knowledge that he will come
again; maybe not next year, but the next century, in another guise, another country.

There is a sense, then, that adolescence is a prime ground in which to explore and work out ancient myths. It is a time in which passions are more keenly felt; in which emotions boil and burn with an importance that adulthood rarely reaches. Alan Garner knew this well: his *The Owl Service* sees three teenagers inextricably forced to re-play the story of Blodeuwedd and her lovers. The intensity of feeling in the novel is immense; linked to a myth, it becomes universal. We enact and re-enact the same stories, whether we like it or not. It is a beautifully wrought cycle: myth inspires life, life inspires story, story becomes myth.

It is for this very reason that I chose to use the god Bacchus as he appears in Euripides’ *The Bacchae* as a starting point for my second novel, *The Liberators*, in which two villains find the god’s magical staff, and misuse it; they wish to remove people’s consciousness, and make people ‘free’. It seemed a good way of dealing with that dizzying sense of freedom that one gets as a teenager: something that we all need to learn how to control.

There is another reason, apart from the emotional, why myth works so successfully in children’s books. There is the element of the fantastical too, which finds its way into almost everywhere. E Nesbit’s psammead, the ‘sand-fairy, in *Five Children and It*, is a playful take on the naiads and dryads of myth; John Masefield’s *The Box of Delights* has a phoenix in it. C S Lewis notoriously threw in pretty much anything he thought of into his *Narnia* novels? the faun and the river god and Bacchus mix with witches from medieval romance. Even *The Wind in the Willows* has a strange, quasi-erotic, appearance from the god Pan. Closer to home, there’s Rick Riordan’s best-selling *Percy Jackson*, about the children of the Greek gods; while *The Hunger Games* takes its cue from the myth of the tribute sent to Athens to feed the Minotaur. The globally-recognised *Harry Potter* series is full of remnants from myth: from the phoenix to the centaur.

Because they are both fantastical and recognisable, younger children respond very well to myth since it takes what they know already, and makes it into something magical. Horses are great? but a horse with wings? Step forwards Pegasus, both symbol of the power of the imagination and a delight to children the world over. Classical myth deals with darkness in a way that is palatable for children, too: the death of a monster is not as troubling as the death of a person, however wicked.

It also serves as an introduction to further knowledge: the further you look into classical myth, the more you learn and understand about literature and life. One of the most popular exercises I do with my creative writing classes is to ask them to imagine a Greek god? but on his or her day off. It often provides excellent pieces of writing, as they grapple with the idea of the unnatural appearing alongside the ordinary. And that, surely, is what gives books for the young their power.

Philip Womack is a literary critic for the *Telegraph* and also a Contributing Editor to *Literary Review*. He is the author of three children’s books, including *The Liberators* and *The Broken King*.

*A Song for Ella Grey*, David Almond, Hodder Children’s Books, 978-1444924398, £12.99 hbk


*Five Children and It*
The Box of Delights, John Masefield, Egmont, 978-1405275521, £8.99 pbk
The Liberators [3], Philip Womack, Bloomsbury, 978-0747595526, £6.99 pbk
The Broken King [4], Philip Womack, Troika Books, 978-1909991002, £6.99 pbk

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