



AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP WOMACK

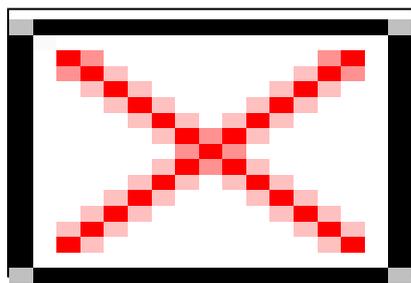
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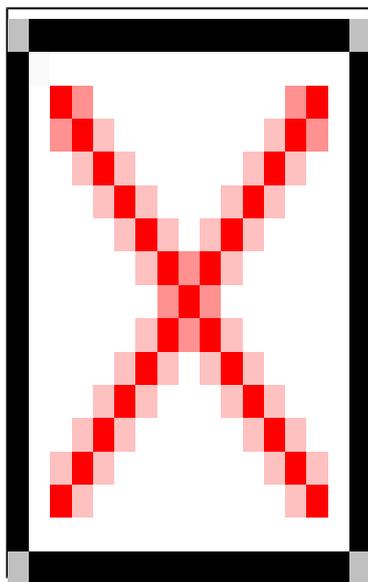
Byline:

The author of **The Double Axe** on reinventing Greek myth



Philip Womack has an established reputation for his exciting fantasy novels for readers of 10+; gripping and always written with intelligence and sensitivity they have won him comparisons with Susan Cooper and Alan Garner. A classicist, Womack often finds inspiration in ancient myth and the story of the Minotaur is the starting point for his new book **The Double Axe**, the first in a series called **Blood and Fire**. Andrea Reece spoke to him about **The Double Axe** for **Books for Keeps**.

Philip Womack chooses to start **The Double Axe**, his version of the Minotaur story, on the hillside above Knossos,



where a hunt, lead by his hero, young Prince Deucalion Stephanos, is thundering through cypress forest in pursuit of a white stag. It's a vivid scene that plunges readers into the moment. Prince Stephan, caught up in the excitement of the hunt and whispering to his horse Swift when no-one can hear, feels like a real thirteen-year-old, the kind you meet today. Womack's passion for the ancient world is obvious and quite contagious. When did he first discover classical mythology, and what did it mean to him?

One of the earliest things I remember is a book of Greek mythology which my father had been given for his 10th birthday. There weren't very many books aimed at children at the time and it's actually quite academic - lots of Titian paintings and fragments of pottery as illustration and the explanations of the myths are quite dry, but I absolutely loved it, looking at the pictures and reading it as I got older. It's one of the first things I can actually remember properly learning about, then at my prep school aged about nine or ten, I acquired a copy of the **Iliad**. I was far too young to read it, but I really liked the cover, which had a chariot battle scene. I remember reading that and the **Odyssey**, I probably

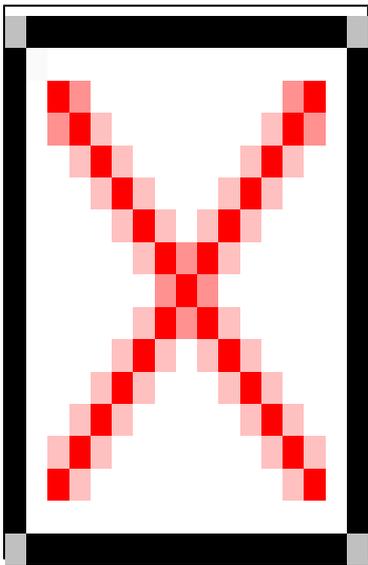
only understood half of it but I definitely took in quite a lot. I loved it so much because it was so exciting and because it felt to me like the characters were alive.? He went on to read Classics and English at Oriel College, Oxford.

In [an article](#) [3] for **Books for Keeps**, Womack praises classical mythology for the plasticity of detail which allows the stories to function just as well with entirely different settings. His earlier novel [The Liberators](#) [4] partly transports the story of the Bacchae to another age, had he ever considered moving the Minotaur story to a modern setting?

?It's rare that I have a moment of actual inspiration but with **The Double Axe** I had the voice of Stephan in my head, and just started writing - the book just came out like that. I hadn't really considered moving it to another setting or time, though it would definitely work, there are endless possibilities in the story.?

The descriptions of the Minoan setting, life in the palace and the city beyond, also feel effortlessly done, there's a real sense of place and people. Did that take research?

?People often ask if I have to do lots of research and I tend to say no. I did read about Crete and Minoan civilisation, and there are a few details about things they use which I've seeded in, but largely speaking it was unconscious. I've drawn on what I already knew.?



Philip has invented a new background to the legend, in which the story of the blood-thirsty creature, half-man, half-bull, is deliberately created by forces within the palace scheming to overthrow the royal family and take control of the city. There's a palpable sense of the dangers facing Stephan and his sister Ariadne, and of the risks that come with the trappings of power. The two of them have a very close relationship, and the bond between siblings is also explored to dramatic effect in his recent fantasy series [The Darkening Path](#) [5], in which a boy called Simon must venture into the frightening and dangerous world of the Broken King to rescue his little sister.

?In children's books family is very important. Effectively a children's book is about breaking away from the domestic sphere and then returning to it. As a child you grow up within that sphere and it's very safe, but things break in, and a lot of the best children's books are about that fracturing of comfort. The ideal children's book will repair that breakage, so that the child, though now outside the sphere, is still connected to it. Even a book like Melvin Burgess's [Junk](#) [6] is really about seeking another kind of domus ? I call it that in my lectures (he teaches children's fiction at Royal Holloway University) ? it's Latin for house but also everything that's connected with it, all the concepts you associate with being in a family. So in **The Double Axe** the family's very important in that sense but also because I wanted to show that a ruling family, and the people in it, were not distant and strange, that's Stephan is just a 13 year old boy even though he's a prince and his sister, though a princess, still likes sneaking out at night.?

Stephan's sister Ariadne is an intriguing character, bold, fearless and intelligent. Did he deliberately set out to create a 'feisty' female character?

?It sounds silly and a bit mystical but actually when I was writing the book I felt such a connection to Stephan that I would have day dreams of him and his sister and that's just what she was like, she felt very real and alive to me from

the beginning. Sometimes I think I do find it harder to write female characters ? Anna in **The Broken King** for example was hard to write, perhaps because she?s younger ? but Ariadne just sort of appeared.? He likens the process to Robert Graves?s approach to his poetry, ?Graves described it as analepsis, a vision of the past, and it did almost feel to me as though I?d been transported back to Knossos and saw through the eyes of Stephan.?

The Double Axe is the first in a series of reimagined myths, and the next book continues the story and stars Ariadne, deserted by Theseus on Naxos. Again, Philip is adding a new twist, interweaving the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Stephan?s challenge is to rescue his sister, and to free Daedalus from prison. It promises to be another thrilling story, and an excellent way in to what Philip describes as ?the great store of stories that is Greek mythology.?

Books mentioned:

The Double Axe, Alma Books, 978-1846883903, £6.99

The Broken King, Troika Books, 978-1909991002, £6.99

The King?s Shadow, Troika Books, 978-1909991125, £6.99

[The Liberators](#) [4], Bloomsbury Children?s Books

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