

the
MYTHS
series

&

ME



by
**Margaret
Atwood**

Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key, they speak in new languages, they take on other meanings.

Just for example: the Sibyl of Cumae, desired by Apollo, was granted a life as long in years as the grains in a handful of sand, but she forgot to ask for endless youth. Before ending up as a whispering voice in a heap of dust,

Photo of Margaret Atwood © 2005 by Jim Allen

she acted as the wise, powerful, oracle-uttering, cave-dwelling, and sometimes manic guide to the Underworld, notably in Virgil's *Aeneid*. But that wasn't the end of her. Back she came again in a different and somewhat snazzier outfit in

obscure origin who overcomes monsters, and even death itself; the journey to the land of the dead—how old are they really? How many times have their tales been told and retold, and how many times will they be told again?

Myth precedes literature: the oldest stories were passed from

George MacDonald's Curdie books, and then in Walter Pater's interpretation of the *Mona Lisa*, and in H. Rider Haggard's late-nineteenth-century romance, *She*; and then again in *Lost Horizons*; and then, in a more benevolent form, as Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*. She casts her shadow over the vampire queens of Anne Rice and, most recently, over Stephen King's 1995 Cupid-and-psycho shocker, *Rose Madder*, in which the beautiful but sinister oldster totes the full bag of tricks, and more—Water of Death, lots of waving hair, nasty tree with suspicious pomegranates, oracular pronouncements, maze with monster, spidery eating habits, and incipient decomposition—all going to show that young Stephen's time in the school library was not wasted. In each of her incarnations, this extremely long-lived and much-experienced lady must eventually fade away or fall apart: otherwise she'd be a goddess. Meanwhile she can be quite scary; but then, so was the original Sibyl.

Constellations such as this—clusters of motifs and personae and stories—have circled the globe. Cinderella and her little fur or glass slipper and her handsome prince and those who mistreat her have been around for a long time.

The beloved girl who in her animal form is a swan (or a goose, or a snail); the hero of

Myth precedes literature: the oldest stories were passed from mouth to ear to mouth long before they travelled from hand to page. As Robert Bringhurst has pointed out in his commentary on Haida poetry, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, oral poetry is local, and although myths may resemble other stories like them around the world, each embodiment of such a story is particular, and takes its meaning and flavour from its own specific context. The story of Medea was spun one way in Athens, another way in Corinth. Who's doing the telling and who's doing the listening have a lot to do with the slant the story's given: this is true even of our own history. Was Richard III really an evil child-murdering hunchback? Probably not, but it suited Shakespeare's royal audience to have it so.

Myths cannot really be translated with any accuracy from their native soil—from their own place and time. We will never know exactly what emotional resonances they had for their ancient audiences because we are not those people and can't fully share their assumptions. But myths can be used—as they have been, so frequently—as the foundation stones for new versions, new renderings—renderings that have, in turn, their own contexts, that find their meanings within their own historical moments.

This, or something like it, seems to have been the concept behind *The Myths* series, which—rumour has it—was cooked up during one of those legendary, superheated Frankfurt Book Fair evenings by Jamie Byng of Canongate in the U.K., with Louise Dennys of Knopf Canada, Morgan Entrekin of Grove Atlantic in the United States, and Arnulf Conradi, then of BerlinVerlag in Germany.

The idea was to ask a number of writers from around the world to retell a myth, any myth, each in his or her own way and in his or her own language, at a length of roughly a hun-



COMING SOON

“They are rants, mini-fictions, monologues, pretend histories, pretend autobiographies, animal fables, minisciencefictions . . .”

Margaret Atwood's description of the writings in her newest collection *The Tent*, hitting bookstands in January 2006.

dred pages. The results would be translated by all participating publishers—as many as the original Fearless Four could entice into their *Myths* series corral. What were their expectations? New lamps for old, as it were. Perhaps a

coffeed moment, I promised to give *The Myths* caper a try.

I did give it a try. I tried it this way and that, with no results. I couldn't seem to get the kite to fly. As every writer knows, a plot is only a plot,

mouth to ear to mouth long before they travelled from hand to page.

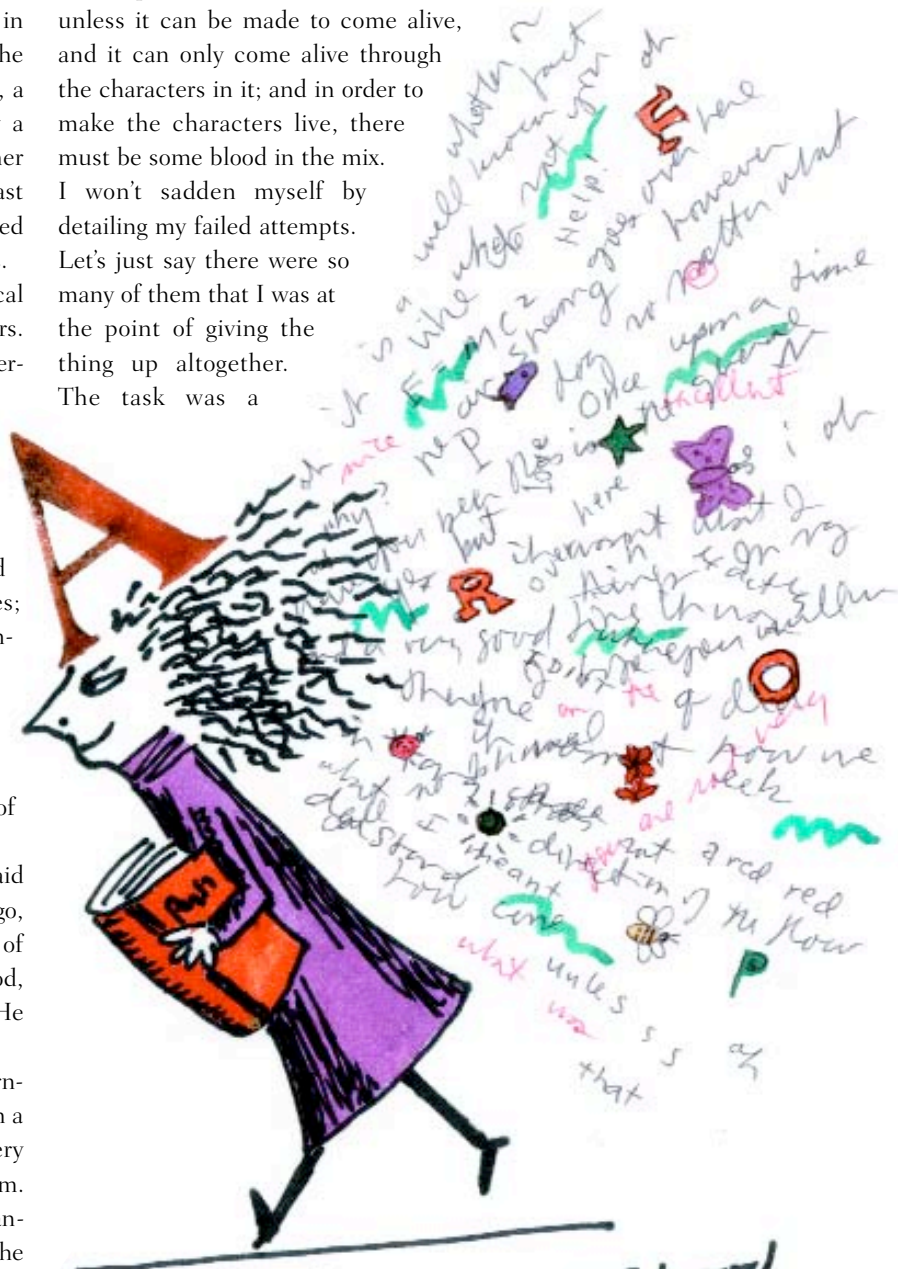
few shining lights. Increased knowledge of myths that might otherwise have languished in the shadows. Some interesting additions to the worldwide story hoard. And, at the very least, a curious batch of manuscripts produced by a bunch of writers who usually did quite other sorts of things. I'm guessing here, but at least some of these desiderata must have been tucked in among the other items in their hope chests.

It would be fun to ascribe a mythological character to each of the original four publishers. Louise Dennys could be grey-eyed Athene, perhaps—sage goddess of intricate weaving, and of knots and their untying, and thus well equipped to be the editress of my book, once I had managed to produce it. Morgan Entrekin could be a suitably North American Coyote, inventor of novelties, gadgets, and schemes, and patron of unusual neckties; Arnulf Conradi might serve as Poseidon, earthshaker, tamer of horses, and encourager of watery flow, that flow we all need when we write; and Jamie Byng is surely Hermes, player of tricks, master of the crossroads, bearer of messages, and shameless deviser of entanglements.

It was in this guise that Mr. Byng waylaid me one morning in Edinburgh, several years ago, at breakfast. Breakfast is my weakest time of day—I have no willpower then—but, as a god, Byng would already have divined that. He picked his moment well.

I knew this designer-stubbed, well-worn-cashmered person by reputation—he was then a rising small publisher who'd had some very bright ideas, *The Assassin's Cloak* among them. He made his pitch in an artfully ingenuous manner befitting the stealer of Apollo's cattle and the inventor of the lyre and the first practical joke. Needless to say, I was ensnared: in a help-a-young-publisher, unfamiliar-cornflaked, pre-

and a plot as such is two-dimensional unless it can be made to come alive, and it can only come alive through the characters in it; and in order to make the characters live, there must be some blood in the mix. I won't sadden myself by detailing my failed attempts. Let's just say there were so many of them that I was at the point of giving the thing up altogether. The task was a



Wordrocket
An illustration by Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood
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great deal more difficult than I'd thought, and not being a mythological being myself, I couldn't call on the ants or fishes to come and help me sort out the words.

"Do you think Jamie Byng would mind very much if I just gave back the advance and cancelled the contract?" I asked my British agent, Vivienne Schuster of Curtis Brown. By this time I was embarrassingly behind deadline, and the first page was just as blank as it had always been. True, I had quite a few thirtieth pages, but they were crumpled up in the waste bin.

Odyssey seemed to me unfair at first reading, back when I was in my teens, and it seems so still; and that my brain was addled early in life by Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*. The result of my rather feverish period of writing is the book that has now appeared before you.

I wonder if my fellow participants in *The Myths* series found the recreation of their own chosen myth as hard to do as I initially found mine? I hope not. But I do hope they found it as rewarding. Writing *The Penelopiad* allowed me not only to revisit an ancient and powerful tale,

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Vivienne's upper lip is nothing if not stiff—she has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro—but I detected a quavering over the telephone as she said actually she expected that he might in fact mind quite a lot. But that I shouldn't let that influence me one way or the other. And if I couldn't I couldn't, she added staunchly. But Jamie would probably be gutted.

I am susceptible to British slang. I did not want to be responsible for gutting anyone. "Give me a couple of weeks, then," I said. Desperation being the mother of invention, I started writing *The Penelopiad*. Don't ask me why, because I don't know. A door opens and you go through, or else you don't; sometimes it's the right door. Let's just say that the hanging of the twelve "maids"—slaves, really—at the end of *The*

but also to explore a few dark alleyways in the story that have always intrigued me. I look forward to the other books in the series, and to seeing how the members of what by now has become a large group of writers have handled their chosen material.

And I'll offer up an egg at the crossroads to Hermes, god of articulation and patron of pathways both neural and other. He or somebody like him opened a door for me when all doors seemed closed; and, as protector of travellers, mental travellers included, he helped me make the necessary connections. In addition to that, he has been very good company along the way. **R**

Visit www.ReadMagazine.ca to read an excerpt from *The Penelopiad*.



Publishing simultaneously with Atwood's *Penelopiad* are *A Short History of Myth*, an introduction to the series by Karen Armstrong; and *Weight*, a retelling of the myth of Atlas and Heracles, by Jeanette Winterson. The series has a home online at www.TheMyths.ca