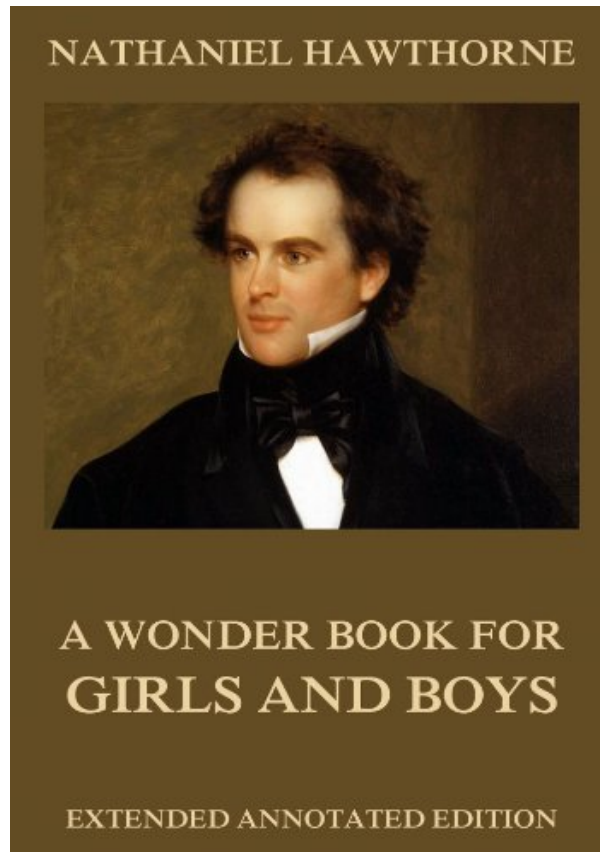


A WONDER BOOK FOR GIRLS & BOYS BY NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE



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During six weeks of the summer of 1851 the "Wonder-Book" was written. It is a children's book, made up of classic legends, re-told for them, and set in a slight frame-work, as entertainment given to a company of children at Tanglewood, a Hawthorne family residence in Berkshire.

Contents:

The Gorgon's Head
The Golden Touch
The Paradise Of Children
The Three Golden Apples
The Miraculous Pitcher
The Chimera

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Most helpful customer reviews

38 of 39 people found the following review helpful.

"...it had the effect of a vision." - from the Introductory

By OwlSong

Hawthorne's gentle, charming collection of classic myths retold for the children of his day is a neglected classic. Addressing the reader in personable Victorian fashion, his prose is clear and beautiful. Consider this sample:

"Within the verge of the wood there were columbines, looking more pale than red, because they were so modest, and had thought proper to seclude themselves too anxiously from the sun. There were wild geraniums, too, and a thousand white blossoms of the strawberry. The trailing arbutus was not yet quite out of bloom; but it hid its precious flowers under the last year's withered forest-leaves, as carefully as a mother-bird hides its little young ones."

But Hawthorne is also equal to the task of less genteel, more vigorous images:

"At this sound the three heads reared themselves erect, and belched out great flashes of flame. Before Bellerophon had time to consider what to do next, the monster flung itself out of the cavern and sprung straight toward him, with its immense claws extended, and its snaky tail twisting itself venomously behind."

Adding to the pleasure of these retold tales is the gorgeous art of Arthur Rackham, both in black-and-white drawings and full-color plates, which captures the unearthly beauty and the unexpectedly surprising humor of Hawthorne's work. Highly recommended!

28 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent retellings of Greek myths

By Michele L. Worley

Once upon a time (I was about 8), a family friend handed down his Collier's Junior Classic series to me - each volume is a glorious hodgepodge of short stories from here, there, and everywhere. I got to be very fond of Greek mythology, especially "The Chimaera" and "The Miraculous Pitcher", since the Collier retellings of their respective legends were much more lively than the ordinary.

Alas, I forgot the name of the author of "The Chimaera", and even that my favourite versions of the myths were all written by the same person. Some talented guy writing for the series, no doubt, I would have said, if I'd thought about it. A couple of years ago, I started browsing through an impressive-looking illustrated volume of mythology in a bookstore (which you now see before you). Whoa. "Scarlet Letter" Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *THESE*?

His retellings of Greek myths were originally spread over 2 volumes (the other being *Tanglewood Tales*), but they can be obtained in a single volume these days. I can personally do without the gang of Tanglewood kids providing the official audience for the stories-within-a-story, or the defense against critics put into the mouth of the storyteller Eustace Bright, but then I want more space for more myths. :) Each myth in *A Wonder Book* has an Introductory and After the Story section where the storyteller leads up to the tale, then fends off any awkward questions from his young audience.

"The Gorgon's Head" - The story of Perseus, from his infancy through the quest for Medusa's head. Hawthorne skates delicately past the question of who put Perseus and his mother, Danae, in a chest and abandoned them on the sea, let alone why (toned down for kids, and all that), and of course doesn't go into detail about what mischief Polydectes might intend if Perseus can be got out of the way.

Hawthorne is otherwise thorough about details: he even includes the Three Gray Women, who share the use of a single eye, who had to be persuaded to reveal the location of the monsters whose gaze turns living creatures to stone.

"The Golden Touch" - The Midas legend, of how a king, blinded by a love of gold, foolishly asked Apollo that he be given the gift of turning things into gold with a touch. Be careful what you ask for...

"The Paradise of Children" - The story of Pandora's box. Hawthorne's version, much as I like his other mythological tales, has been prettified a little too much: everyone in the world was a child who never grew up, before the box arrived.

"The Three Golden Apples" - The 11th labour of Hercules, wherein the king sent him to fetch the apples of the Hesperides. The tale begins with Hercules meeting a band of nymphs, who hear his account (only briefly summarized, alas) of his preceding labours before directing him to the one person who can direct him to the garden: the Old Man of the Sea...

"The Miraculous Pitcher" - Philemon and his wife Bauchis have grown old together - the only kindly folk living for a good way around a prosperous village, whose inhabitants delight in tormenting vagabonds (although they'll fawn on wealthy-looking strangers). Then one day a ragged youth called Quicksilver and a taciturn man with an appearance of great wisdom are driven out of the village...

"The Chimaera" - Bellerophon's pursuit of Pegasus, whom he seeks because only in the air does he have a chance of killing the monstrous chimaera. Bellerophon's long wait beside the fountain of Pirene, where Pegasus descends to drink, is enlivened by several characters living round about: an old man who can't even remember his glory days, an overly timid maiden who'd run from anything unusual, a yokel who only appreciates plowhorses, and a little boy (the only one who really believes in Pegasus).

18 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Even purged of their "heathern wickedness," these tales are a delight

By D. Cloyce Smith

In the spring of 1851 Hawthorne wrote to his publisher, James Fields (of the renowned Ticknor and Fields), proposing a children's book retelling six well-known stories from Greek mythology. He planned to adopt "a tone in some degree Gothic or romantic." In addition, he wanted to make the fables suitable for young Christian children: "of course, I shall purge all the old heathen wickedness, and put in a moral wherever practicable."

I am usually not a fan of sanitized tales--even when written by someone the status of Nathaniel Hawthorne. But, in spite of their overt preachiness and their occasional preciousness, there's something charming and original about these adaptations. Even adults might enjoy these six tales: Perseus's slaughter of Medusa, Midas and his golden touch, Pandora's box (stripped of Prometheus's role), the apples of the Hesperides (or Hercules's Eleventh Labor), Baucis and Philemon and the magic pitcher (which, in my opinion, is the best of the lot), and Bellerophon and Pegasus's battle with the monster Chimaera.

Threading these stories together is Eustace Bright, Hawthorne's college-age narrator, who relates his versions to a gaggle of local children (a couple of whom taunt him for his bumptiousness). Hawthorne uses this framing device to insert himself as his own critic. Overhearing one of the stories, the father of one of the children is not amused, finding Eustace's taste "altogether Gothic" and advising him "never more to meddle with a classical myth." To this critique, Eustace petulantly responds that "an old Greek had no more right to them, than a modern Yankee has," and he accuses classical writers of forming these tales "into shapes of indestructible beauty, indeed, but cold and heartless." If anything, Hawthorne has certainly brought warmth to these old stories.

Still, the reading level might be a tall order for many children under 8 (although an adult can adapt them for reading out loud). Hawthorne sprinkles his prose with salutatory references to his real-life neighbors in the

Berkshires (there's even a line about Melville writing "Moby Dick") and with puns and quips that have lost their context. And he gets carried away with his descriptions of the countryside. Hawthorne's evocative passages will surely strike modern readers as hopelessly old-fashioned, although the author realized that he was trying the patience of children even from his own day. After three florid and nearly insufferable paragraphs describing a meadow, for example, Hawthorne apologetically interrupts himself that "we must not waste our valuable pages with any more talk about the spring-time and the wild flowers. There is something, we hope, more interesting to be talked about."

What's more interesting, of course, are the stories of Greek gods and monsters and flying horses. Fortunately for readers young and old, Hawthorne mostly stays away from the scenery and sticks to the legends.

See all 37 customer reviews...

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