

Press

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Sherman brings myth into modern era

By Sue Harrison

BANNER STAFF

Greek myths may sound like dusty old stories with no meaning in today's world, but illustrator Oren Sherman says that's not so. The message in them is as current and real as today's myth-in-the-making tales about JonBenet Ramsey, Star Wars or O.J. Simpson.

Sherman's illustrations for "The Random House Book of Greek Myths" (released in October) represents the first new edition of those myths in nearly 40 years and the first ever in color. The time was right, he says, for those myths to be brought back-right because they are timeless and because they represent the way we pass knowledge from one generation to another.

Sherman who splits his time between Truro and Boston, never dreamed he would wind up re-illustrating one of the books that meant so much to him as a boy. He had been on the fast track of the illustration world and had carved out a very comfortable niche for himself in the corporate world.

After growing up outside Boston and taking his art degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, Sherman became the golden boy almost overnight. He gained success and was pre-ulcerous by 29. The crash of '89 put him in a slump and he began to review his priorities.

"I became interested again and revived my career," he says, adding that along the way he realized it was not enough that his work look like something, it has to have a deeper meaning. Then about eight years ago, he found his old childhood copy of Greek myths, and when he began to read them he realized they had truths to tell him about his own life.

"In the '80's, there was a lot going on, we were losing our friends. I reread it and it was incredibly meaningful for me." he says. He decided to re-illustrate them, moved by their 4,000 years of relevance. So he did two paintings with local models and made his pitch. He was turned down by 26

publishers. "My favorite turndown letter said, "Thank you for your lovely paintings but Greek mythology is a dead subject," Sherman says with a laugh.

Unbeknownst to him, Random House had commissioned a manuscript by Joan D. Vinge. Two illustrators had failed to come up with the drawings. "They saw my Pandora illustration and called me and asked me to do it. I said, "I've been waiting for this all my life," he remembers.

The book paid little compared to his commissions like the Brooklyn Bridge Centennial, the Kentucky Derby or Disney, but he found a way to make the time to do it.

"The cool thing I discovered was that it was the opposite of the '80's," he says. "Money meant nothing. This was the payback, I got to do something that meant everything to me. It was grueling but I would do it again in a second."

So why does Sherman think the time is right for Greek myths? Noting that the stories are full of adventure and sex, the kind of stuff everybody wants to know about, he adds that they are based on human nature and that even the gods made bad calls we can recognize from our own lives.

"Think about Pandora," he says. "Pandora was the most beautiful and capricious goddess, and she was given a gift by the gods that she was told not to open. It was the Eve myth all over again. Eve was shown the apple and told not to eat it. So what did she (Pandora) do? She opened it and the modern age began (when all the gifts like peace and joy flew away). She managed to clamp down the lid just in time to capture hope. Who in Provincetown in the '80's didn't live on that, hope? So I was telling my own story through these stories. Suddenly, it was contemporary. It was our story."

Then taking a broader view, he jumps to the present and into the future to explain the allure of myths in general.

"Like the hero myth," Sherman says. "'Star Wars' is a Greek myth, top to bottom. a young man sets out on an impossible mission. He leaves home, confronts danger and many tests. In the end, he returns home after accomplishing the mission and he is a changed person. That's the pattern. The circumstances change but the pattern remains. In 'Star Wars' the young man was tested many times. He learned to trust that the self and his intuition would give him what he needed. In the final test, he finally faces the enemy. Who is it? His father (showing the good and evil present in us all). He passed that test, too."

Myths serve many of the same purposes as religion and

science. They explain the hows and whys of a frightening world. Like, Sherman says, explaining the seasons or how the sun travels through the sky. "It makes more sense to me that we have winter because Persephone is underground for six months than because of the tilt of the axis," he says with a smile. And, he adds, because the stories were passed from parents to children, they set out the right path for the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Many current practices have their roots in myth, Sherman says, shifting to Perseus slaying Medusa.

"She's a hideous creature, her hair is snakes," he says. "Perseus has a reflecting shield because he cannot look at Medusa. Anyone who does turns to stone. So he sees her in the shield, closes his eyes and cuts her head off. He puts the head in a bag because even dead she will turn you to stone if you look at her. He continues on his journey and when he stops, he makes a little nest of seaweed for the head. The blood is still coming out and it turns the seaweed to stone, red coral. Modern Italians still wear red coral to ward off evil spirits. They are wearing Medusa's blood."

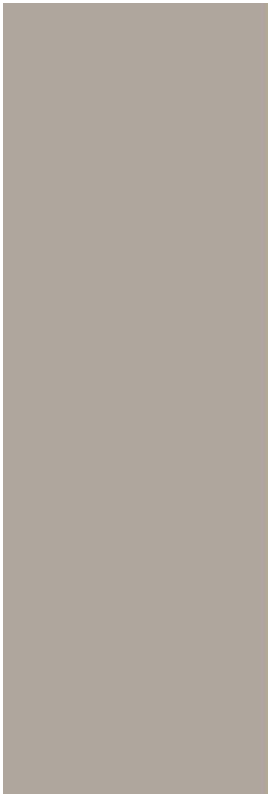
Modern connections like that abound, he says. He learned some of them during his research and some when he taught an illustration class on myth at RISD. (He's now on the faculty of his alma mater.)

The myths have it all, even today. They have the excitement but they also have content, something he says is missing in our culture which seems driven by more and more stimulation with less and less content.

"We live in a time that's extremely overstimulating, especially for kids," he says, noting that TV is fragmented and kids get jolt after jolt with little story line. But the desire for a story still exists.

"When a news story plays big, like the JonBenet Ramsey murder or O.J. Simpson, those are stories that never end," he says. "Those match a mythological story that we all know."

Myths and fairy tales tell us about the dangers in our world, he believes. "JonBenet is a hideous version of a fairy tale, of Little Red Riding Hood," he says. "She was sent to the woods, which always represent danger, and told not to dally, but she does, and who hasn't? She's all dressed in bright red, the color of sexual availability, she's sent out into the woods in bright red. The wolf sees her, kills the grandmother, dresses in her clothes and gets into bed. This is an incest myth. In the end, she is saved by the woodsman. JonBenet is



like Little Red Riding Hood. She was sent out into the world in a sexualized way and something horrible happened to her. The story is repeated endlessly because it has a message and a root in myth.

"We need to continually retell the stories, like the horror of Jon Benet, the little girl that became sexualized. We are warning ourselves and our children. The little girl was not responsible. We tell it as a lesson not to do this to children."

On the flip side, he says, we continue to love stories about young men and women going into the world on adventures and returning home triumphant. That is why we get so angry at sports heroes when they fall short.

"We are so angry because they are no longer what we need them to be," Sherman says. "We need a better self to look up to. Clinton is no better or worse than us so we are angry, because we need him to be a hero."