Young Zeus

By G. Brian Karas

*Submitted by Paul Kelsey, Reference and Youth Services Librarian, East Baton Rouge Parish Library*

*Young Zeus* is a retelling of the traditional Greek myth from the prospective of Zeus’ childhood. In Karas’ retelling, Zeus accomplishes all of his feats of bravery and ascends to power when he is still a young child (in contrast to the classic myth featuring Zeus as a fully grown protagonist). Young Zeus is hidden by his mother, Rhea, on the island of Crete when he is still a baby. She first appears to Zeus after secretly visiting Crete and finding him in a foul mood because he has no brothers and sisters to play with him. After accusing his mother of missing all of his birthdays, Zeus questions her and discovers that his father Cronus has devoured all of his siblings. He and his mother form a plan to free his siblings, and Zeus embarks upon his quest, which includes freeing the Cyclopes and Hundred-Handers from the underworld. Zeus succeeds in his quest, and his brothers and sisters are freed, Cronus is cast into the sea, and the powerful Titans are defeated. A playful power struggle ensues between Zeus and his young siblings, until his grandmother, Gaia, intervenes and names him supreme ruler. Young Zeus restores order on Mount Olympus, and the fun begins as he finally has someone to play with him.

Many of the traditional elements and themes of the hero’s journey, including using ingenuity, trickery, and bravery to overcome immense obstacles, are present in Karas’ skillful retelling. Young Zeus is portrayed as a very likeable character, and the tone and the setting are decidedly innocuous and almost whimsical in this mythological rendering. The illustrations, rendered in gouache and pencil, are humorous and add to the playful quality of the retelling. Children will identify with the youthful dramatis personae, and the timeless and universal themes of the hero’s journey will greatly appeal to young readers.

**Author Biography and Awards**

George Brian Karas was born in 1957 in Milford, Connecticut. He writes and illustrates books for children. In an interview with SCBWI, he states: “I grew up in suburban Connecticut. I lived in a small town on Long Island Sound and then moved to a smaller town which was, at that time, wooded and undeveloped. To make up for the lack of real adventure I had to rely on my imagination. To my young mind the Sound was the great open ocean with wild shores and the woods were a vast uncharted forest waiting to be explored. Simple stone walls were the remains of ancient fortresses and unusual plants were alien life forms ready to take over our planet. I believed in the worlds I created, and to a certain extent still believe in the places where I go daydreaming. Children’s books were a look into other worlds that were just as real to me.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Brian Karas is the recipient of a number of awards, including the Blue Ribbon of the Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books for *Saving Sweetness*, a Boston Globe Honor Book Award for *Home on the Bayou*, an SLJ Best Book Award for Like Butter on Pancakes, and a Smithsonian Notable for Children awarded for *The Class Artist*. [[2]](#footnote-2)

**Related Titles**

*Greek Myths for Young People* by Marcia Williams.

*The Gods and Goddesses of Olympus* by Aliki.

*D’aulaire’s Book of Greek Myths* by Ingri D’aulaire.

*Pandora* by Robert Burleigh.

*King Midas: The Golden Touch* by Demi.

**Classroom Connections for Young Zeus:**

**English & Language Arts**

*Young Zeus* can be introduced to classes as part of the English or Language Arts curriculum, or taught

1. Select several stories from mythology and read these aloud. What do these myths have in common? How are the myths different? What narrative elements or motifs commonly occur in mythology or in folktales? How do myths and folktales differ?
2. Discuss the plot or plan of action of a myth (or myths). Where are these myths set, and how does the setting contribute to the plot? What type of journey or quest does the hero or main protagonist embark upon? What problems are encountered along the way? How do the characters in myths grow and develop?
3. Read the *Chocolate Touch* by Patrick Catling. Ask students to discuss how and why contemporary authors incorporate themes and ideas from classical mythology into their books. Do these stories still have relevance today? Why are these myths so enduring?
4. Ask your students to write their own myth, and to think about why their myth would have meaning or relevance. Students can give their myths any cultural or historical setting, and have fun creating their own cast of characters or dramatis personae. What setting did they choose and why?

**World History/Mythology**

1. Why were myths so important to the ancient Greeks, and how did myths inform or have meaning to their lives?
2. Examine the history of other ancient civilizations. Did these cultures also have myths? What do these myths explain for a civilization or culture?
3. Think about how mythology relates to modern civilization. Is mythology alive and well in modern societies? Are myths present in contemporary American society, and if so, what forms do they appear in?

**Discussion Questions for Young Zeus:**

1. Why was Zeus so lonely? How did he react when he discovered what became of his brothers and sisters?
2. Was it fair for Uranus to lock the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handers in the underworld? Why or why not?
3. How did Zeus manage to free his brothers and sisters? Why did they think they should be in charge? If you have brothers or sisters, do you ever get into arguments? How do you resolve your arguments fairly?
4. How did Zeus manage to trick the dragon in the underworld? Do you think Zeus was brave to travel to the underworld?
5. Do you think Zeus could have defeated the Titans single handedly, without any help? What gifts did Zeus receive from the Cyclopes? Did he use these gifts wisely? Discuss how teamwork is helpful to accomplish a difficult task.
6. Why do you suppose Gaia chose Zeus to be the supreme ruler of heaven and earth? Even though Zeus was the youngest, what attributes did he possess to make him the leader?

**Websites:**

**g Brian Karas – Official Website**

<http://www.gbriankaras.com/index.html>

Description: Brian Karas’ website includes a short biography of Brian and an interview about his life and work conducted by SCBWI International. The website also includes a list of titles written or illustrated by Karas, as well as his contact information, a link to his blog, and a list of his book awards.

**Myths, Folktales, and Fairy Tales**

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/>

Description: Scholastic’s site includes an online teacher’s guide to myths, folktales, and fairy tales, a section devoted to exploring myths around the world, and an interactive myth brainstorming machine (for students to create their own myth), and a workshop on myth writing with Jane Yolen.

1. http://www.gbriankaras.com/aboutme.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bowker Books in Print Professional Edition, Author Biography for *Young Zeus.* Accessed December 17, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)