The Maze, the Minotaur, and the Matador

by Camille Hayward

Although the importance of Greco-Roman mythology is widely recognized, for many children the myths are a confusion of too many characters with hard-to-pronounce names. As a result, the excitement of the plot is lost. But children can be eased into mythology through the introduction of a sure-fire story.

For example, the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur can be used from third to eighth grade with equal success. Begin by reading the story aloud to the class—regardless of the children's age—as this conveys a sense of the oral tradition and restores that power to a modern audience. Once children experience the depth of myth, they will gain confidence in their ability to understand mythology and realize how enjoyable the mythological world can be.

Background art from Leonard Everett Fisher, *Theseus and the Minotaur*

The Link to the Labyrinth

The Theseus myth is an exciting story, made doubly so by its underground labyrinth. So, I begin the unit with a look at mazes, without making any connection to the myth.

I set the stage by involving the children with some commercially prepared paper mazes. Many books are available on the market. Shepherd's *Big Book of Mazes and Labyrinths* (one of several books on mazes published by Dover) includes many intriguing and unique challenges and gives a brief but informative history of mazes in the foreword. *Anno's Math Games III* includes a section on mazes and supplies a number of maze problems to solve.

I then read Snyder and Mikolaycak's *The Changing Maze*. No matter how old your students are, this picture book is a wonderful starting point for looking at the mystical property accorded to mazes in story and legend. The story can be interrupted at the climax for discussion or used as a "write-your-own-ending" exercise.

Although Van Allsburg's *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* does not feature a maze per se, it makes a good companion to *The Changing Maze*. Van Allsburg's use of topiary, his lush foliage, and the other illustrative effects provide the feeling of entering a mazelike enclosure, echoing what the maze in the Snyder book may have looked like in its prime.

Next, I give my students an opportunity to create their own paper-and-pencil mazes. When they finish, I photocopy and collate them into books so that each child has a copy of everyone else's maze. Then we hold a maze-solving period in which the maker of each maze initials a classmate's copy after he or she has successfully solved the puzzle.

At this time, I also introduce two novels, which some students read on their own. They will also work as read-alouds later, depending on what direction your study takes. One is Browne's rendition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. One may not readily think of *Alice* as a book about mazes, but the entire tale, from the initial fall into the rabbit hole to Alice's return on the riverbank, is that of a mind journey through a twisted labyrinth of wrong endings, doorways that are too small, tables that are too large, and all manner of perplexing situations. In the context of mazes, ask children to think about Alice's question "Which way do I go from here?" and the answer she gets: "That depends a great deal on where you want to get to."

No child should be denied the experience of first encountering Alice in the traditional Tenniel illustrations. Browne, however, has achieved a remarkable feat in giving us a "new" *Alice*, seen in his modern, surrealistic art. We come away knowing that the subtlety of Carroll's language and wit is the better for Browne's treatment.

Another choice is Dexter's *Mazemaker*. In this novel, 12-year-old Winnie Brown goes back in time through the center of a maze spray-painted on the blacktop of the school playground; the maze appears on the exact spot where an identical maze of shrubbery existed a century earlier. Winnie's challenge is to solve the riddle of the maze's power and, by doing so, return to her own time. While the story focuses on this task, Winnie is also involved with learning to adjust at home, where a new baby sister has robbed her of being an "only child." In one of the beginning chapters, Dexter refers to the Theseus myth and to ancient Egyptian mazes.

Another intriguing connection is Sleator's *House of Stairs*. This futuristic novel makes a wonderful complement to the Theseus myth, especially if read after the students have worked with the idea of the Greek youths and maidens who were picked by lot to be given to the Minotaur in the labyrinth. Sleator's story, which is not unlike Orwell's *1984*, suggests various avenues for comparison and contrast to the myth and may lead the students to imagine individual attributes of the young people given to the Minotaur. Some of the art of M. C. Escher, and some of the pictures in Anno's *Topsy-Turvies* (Philomel) that depict stairs leading nowhere, will be natural connections to Sleator's novel.

Maze Sightings

- Brown's *Alphabet Times Four* uses a picture of a labyrinth in showing the letter L.
- Children will also be intrigued to learn about shrubbery mazes; an article in the March 1992 issue of the magazine *European Travel and Life* includes numerous photographs of various mazes in England.
- *Parabola, the Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, Summer 1992, includes the article "The Labyrinth."

The Myth

Gates' superb retelling, "Theseus and the Minotaur," which appears in *Lord of the Sky: Zeus*, is one of the best read-aloud versions I know. I plunge into the heart of the story without going

into a lengthy description of the Greek pantheon. However, a wonderful introduction to the major gods and goddesses can be found in Fisher's *The Olympians: Great Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Greece*.

I read enough each day to keep the momentum going, and yet I follow a leisurely pace as the story is one we will live with for over a month. I have the children draw pictures of various parts of the tale and often stop to involve the class in an impromptu dramatization of a section.

When the children first hear of the half-man, half-bull monster, I encourage them to imagine what the creature looked like. How is the Minotaur divided between his human and animal parts? At this point, I refrain from showing any illustrations in order to allow them to express their own ideas either through drawing or through working in clay.

After they have created their images, I show them a variety of illustrations and reproductions of paintings. For example, the creature (see right) in Cohen and Cabat's *Erni Cabat's Magical World of Monsters* (which has a maze spreading over the endpapers) or Giraudy's *Pablo Picasso: The Minotaur* provides an accessible entry into rather abstract looks at the creature. Full of wonderful suggestions for use in the classroom, Giraudy's clever and playful book is designed to encourage children to try out the ideas. It also reveals Picasso's personal identification with the Minotaur: along with the abstract painting is a reproduction of a collage he did of the subject, and, on the last page, there is a photograph of the artist wearing a Minotaur costume—a delightful surprise for the children that may inspire them to create their own "found art" disguises.

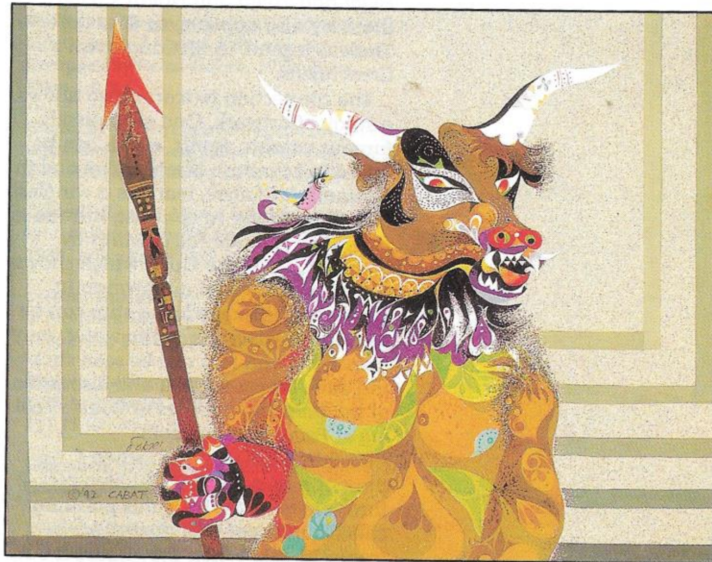
Another section in the book features half-pages that can be turned to create a variety of imaginary Picasso-drawn creatures. Students may be inspired to make similar books of their own. Made with tagboard, these books will withstand classroom circulation and may provide the vehicle for the children to write their own myths.

Next, I involve the class in looking at a situation from another's point of view by introducing George Frederic Watts' haunting painting *The Minotaur*, found in Bernard Evslin's *The Minotaur* and in *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Greek and Roman Fables Illustrated*. The picture shows the monster overlooking the labyrinth walls, gazing into the distance. His hands are human; one of them looks to have absentmindedly crushed a small bird in its palm. This painting evokes much empathy from children. Their ability to gain a sense of complexity of character is enhanced, and the painting also supplies a stimulus for them to devise first-person accounts of the Minotaur.

Two picture book versions of the myth that offer excellent avenues in looking at illustration are Fisher's *Theseus and the Minotaur* and Hutton's book by the same name. Fisher uses his characteristic large-scale technique, supplying bold images that emphasize the dramatic elements of the myth. In the text, he includes some background on the hero's childhood and young manhood, tells of the murder plot against Theseus by his father's wife Medea, and depicts the dream in which Dionysus appears to the hero to demand that Ariadne, Theseus' new love, be given to him. The final illustration is that of the old king, Aegus, just before his suicidal plunge into the ocean. Fisher conveys a balance between the optimism of the slaying of the monster and the various tragic elements of the myth.

Hutton creates a different mood altogether in his retelling of the myth. Using a softer, watercolor palette, he

From Daniel Cohen, *Erni Cabat's Magical World of Monsters*, illustrated by Erni Cabat



In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance, how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

—excerpted from *Musee des Beaux Arts* by W. H. Auden

depicts the glories of the civilization and deliberately re-creates a sense of the Cretan setting. An interesting illustration is that of the Minotaur lying on a luxurious bed in the middle of the labyrinth. Not only is the monster "resting in state," but the labyrinth looks to be the lower level of the palace. This would agree with a theory that has been put forward, and is mentioned in Ventura and Ceserani's *In Search of Ancient Crete,* that the labyrinth may have merely been the confusing layout of the palace itself, and not a true underground maze. Hutton's text seems to endorse this theory.

The two picture book editions of the myth open up the idea that changes take place when a story goes through many oral retellings. After several readings and looking at the artwork, the class compared the two books and made contrasts to Gates' version.

The Link to Icarus

Students should now be ready to tackle a new myth; introduce the story of Daedalus and his son, Icarus, who drowned in the sea when the wax in his wax-and-feather wings melted in the sun. Daedalus was the builder of the Minoan labyrinth and it was an attempt to escape from King Minos that led to the fatal flight. Two picture books that adroitly deal with the Icarus tragedy are McDermott's *Sun Flight* and Yolen and Nolan's *Wings*; the story also appears, as does the Theseus legend, in McCaughrean's *Greek Myths*.

The connection to Icarus also allows a study of artwork. One of Matisse's famous cutouts, *Icarus*, which can be found in Munthe's *Meet Matisse* and in Benjamin's *Matisse*, features a wingless nighttime flight. In contrast, introduce *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, which shows a medieval scene of a plowman at work on a hillside while a ship can be seen in the distance; in the water, only Icarus' leg and foot can be seen sticking out. A reproduction and discussion of the painting appears in Roalf's *Looking at Paintings: Seascapes*.

Children are intrigued when I present it as a "find the hidden picture" exercise. "Why is this painting called *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus?*" I ask. When they figure it out, I ask them to keep it a secret until everyone has had a sufficient try at discovering the title's mystery. This is always a satisfying experience; the children feel proud of being able to "get" the artist's message. Icarus is such a minor part of the scene that the painting led W. H. Auden to write his famous poem "Musee des Beaux Arts" (excerpted at left), which can be found in its entirety in Kennedy's *Introduction to Poetry*. Even children as young as third-graders enjoy having the poem read aloud. The Brueghel piece also inspired William Carlos Williams and Michael Hamburger to compose poems. All three are available in various collections but are conveniently grouped together in *Norton Introduction to Poetry*, a volume in the Norton Introduction to Literature series.

Using the inside halfs of large, empty Brie containers—ask a local cheese shop to save the cartons for you—the students can create collages of the fall of Icarus. The circular shape of the container allows for any moment of the flight to be shown: sometimes it becomes a backdrop for sky, other times the sea; sometimes children use the perspective of falling straight down into the water, other times the collages are made to be seen head on. White feathers (available from a costume supply house) provide a touch of authenticity. All sorts of collage materials will lend themselves to this project.

The Link to Bullfighting

Historians believe that there is a connection between the bull worship that went on in early Crete and the current Spanish art of bullfighting. Leaf and Lawson's classic story *The Story of Ferdinand the Bull* is a perfect place to make the connection. It also builds a basic bullfighting vocabulary. Older children may enjoy dramatizing the story for younger ones.

Older students will enjoy reading Wojciechowska's *Shadow of a Bull.* This Newbery Medal–winning book is notable for its ability to present both sides of the bullfight—the glory of the drama as well as the death of the bull—in a noncompromising way that maintains a sense of suspense and intrigue throughout.

A splendid accompaniment to Wojciechowska's novel is Say's picture

book *El Chino.* This true story of Billy Wong, a Chinese American with a persistent determination to enter the Spanish arena as the first Chinese matador, will hold the interest of older students who have learned about the bullfight. Another book to introduce is Batterberry and Ruskin's *Children's Homage to Picasso*, which includes 52 drawings by Picasso and 48 by French children from the village of Vallauris, prepared in honor of Picasso's eighty-fifth birthday. Picasso's pottery work helped to revive the town's industry in the medium, and the townspeople reciprocated with a gift: paintings and drawings of his love—the Spanish bullfight. Picasso's favorites among these pictures, along with his own bullfighting scenes, were brought together at the artist's urging. An excellent introduction to the bullfight is included.

While discovering the link from the Minotaur-of-myth to the matador-of-modern-times, why not read Kennedy's poem "Minotaur," found in the author's own collection *Did Adam Name the Vinegaroon?* and also in Carle's *Eric Carle's Dragons Dragons*, where it is marvelously illustrated in a large, full-page collage. Rudyard Kipling's "The Bull That Thought," a short story anthologized in various literature collections, is the delightful tale of Apis, a bull that is almost Ferdinand's opposite. Instead of innocently refusing to participate in the fight, Apis "plays" the matador until he has won the man's respect, and the fight finishes with them equally heroic. Although this story includes sophisticated references to literary names and European historical events, adept middle school readers should not be denied enjoyment of a truly thinking bull. Other students may enjoy parts of it read aloud.

The Link to Archaeology

As the unit continues and children begin to ask about the existence of the labyrinth, it is a perfect time to turn to a look at archaeological studies. One is W. H. Matthews' *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development* (Dover), a scholarly but excellent resource (with diagrams) for tracing the history of labyrinths and mazes. A major section deals with Sir Arthur Evans' archaeological excavations in Crete. Another is Ventura and Ceserani's *In Search of Ancient Crete*, which presents, in picture book fashion, Evans' contribution to the understanding of the Minoan civilization, giving children a grasp of what life and times in ancient Crete might have been like, including what may have caused the collapse of the Minoan civilization. Pearson's *Ancient Greece* includes a double-page spread featuring the Theseus and Minotaur legend, a map, a photo of Knossos (reputedly the site of the labyrinth), and a mural of a boy somersaulting over a bull. Another helpful book will be Gallant's *Lost Cities.* Though out-of-print, Edmonds' *The Mysteries of Homer's Greeks* is another excellent resource, as it weaves together mythology and archaeology and discusses the bull men of Crete and the sport of bull leaping.

Minotaur

King Minos had a minotaur
That all the people dreaded.
It gobbled fourteen kids a year,
Incredibly bullheaded.
It dwelt inside a twisty maze
That no one could escape
Till Theseus, shouting loud
OLES!
Swung sword and swished red cape.

—X. J. Kennedy

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Hemingway, Ernest. Dangerous Summer. 1985. Scribner, paper, $9.95 (0-684-18355-2).

In this illustrated account, Hemingway tells of the summer of 1959 he spent in Spain watching a series of bullfights between two rivals. James Michener's introduction includes a detailed glossary of bullfighting terminology. Also note Hemingway's "Death in the Afternoon," which has been widely anthologized in short story collections. ■