

Think you're **strong**? Think you're
a **fighter**? Could you **strangle** a python
or **wrestle** with a lion? Could you **capture**
a raging bull or travel to the **Underworld** –
and come back **alive**? Once there was a man
who could **do all** these things – and **more** ...



HERCULES

told by **CHRISTOPHER YOUNG**

Winner of the Blue Peter Award

Hercules

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Hercules

You there! Think you're strong, do you? Think you're a fighter? Suppose a lion came strolling by. Suppose a python came sliding along. What good would your fists be to you then?

There's not a soul who can crush a stone in his fist or uproot a hollybush barehanded. There's not a man born but a rabbit can outrun him, a ferret outfight him, a cockroach endure more hardships. Not one. Not now.

Listen! before the constellations of beastly stars are herded away into the far distant barns of night. Once there was such a man. Once there was Hercules.

As strong as the moon that drags the sea up the land, as strong as the glacier that carves out a valley, as strong as the sun that cracks open the dry earth, that was Hercules. Listen! before the god who holds up the sky grows weary and lets it fall—because there is no one now who could prevent it crashing on to the place beneath.

Hercules is ~~no~~ none.

Geraldine McCaughrean has written over a hundred books for children and adults. After many years spent working for a London publisher, she now writes full-time. Her novels have won her the Whitbread, Carnegie, *Guardian*, UKRA, Smarties, and Beefeater Awards. She has also written plays for stage and radio. Among her other books for Oxford University Press are *A Little Lower than the Angels*, *A Pack of Lies*, *Plundering Paradise*, *The Kite Rider*, and *Stop the Train*.

Other books by Geraldine McCaughrean

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Perseus

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Saint George and the Dragon

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The Odyssey

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Gold Dust

Plundering Paradise

Forever X

The Stones are Hatching

The Kite Rider

Stop the Train

Hercules

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I

The Son of Zeus

The first time Zeus created Humankind, he used gold. Of course he did. Zeus had every precious substance at his fingertips, and an eye for beauty. Unfortunately the Race of Gold had an eye for beauty, too, for no sooner were they moulded and cast and buffed up to a shine than they began to prance and preen, and pride themselves on their looks.

'How beautiful we are! How fine! How precious! Who will treasure us? Who will admire us? Who will worship us and do our bidding?'

Zeus melted them down and ground their golden bones into dust which he sprinkled into the rivers.

The second time, he used silver. It had a ghostly loveliness and was agreeably soft within his clever hands.

The Race of Silver was elegant and effete. They did not prance about or flaunt their sinuous silvery beauty. In fact they scarcely moved at all. When they were not thinking beautiful thoughts, they were gazing at spiders' webs sprinkled with dew or stroking the silky strands of each other's hair or watching their breath cloud their own

shining kneecaps. When they lay down and slept, they rarely woke up again.

Zeus piled hills on their sleeping forms and turned instead to bronze. The Race of Bronze was bursting with energy and needed little sleep. It was tireless and hard-working and brutally strong. It tore down spiders' webs in gathering wood for its forges, and on these forges it made spades and mattocks and hoes, armour and knives and spears. Once the Race of Bronze discovered war, they were happy indeed. The fields lay fallow and the beds unslept in . . . for the Men of Bronze were busily slaughtering one another with mace and arrow and sword.

Zeus had no need to destroy them. They killed each other, leaving their brazen bones scattered about among the ruins of their fallen forts.

There was nothing left but iron. Iron and earth and clay. Rather than dirty his hands, Zeus gave the work over to Prometheus the Titan. Once, before their conquest by the Olympians, the Titans had ruled Heaven and Earth. Now Zeus could snap his fingers and the few surviving Titans were obliged to do his dirty work.

But it was a good choice. Prometheus was a master craftsman. Despite being given such poor quality materials, his big hands twisted the iron into a delicate filigree of bone, and clad it in coarse clay with a topknot of grass. He lavished the tenderest care on his little manikins and grew fond of them, for all their imperfections.

When they asked *Who? When? Where? and What?* Prometheus taught them the Sciences. When they gazed up at him, in their innocence, and asked *Why?* he taught them the Arts—Music, Painting, Poetry, and Dance. When they shivered in their furless, goosy skin, he even climbed to the mountaintops and plucked a glimmer of Fire from the wheel of the Sun Chariot to warm Mankind.

Zeus was enraged. 'Steal fire from the gods? Give fire into the hands of those . . . those . . . *termites*? I'll make you pay, Titan! I'll make you wish you were never born. I'll make you wish you had become extinct like the rest of your kind!' And he took Prometheus and chained him, spread-eagled, against the Caucasus Mountains, a prisoner for all time. Eagles tore at his unprotected stomach, from dawn to dusk, feeding on his liver, rending at his liver, shredding it with their beaks. But because Prometheus was immortal and because the liver can heal and renew itself, there was no end to his Titanic pain. There was no end to Zeus's revenge. There was no end to the guilty knowledge in every Human heart: '*We did that to Prometheus. He stole fire for us. He is suffering for us.*'

Why do I tell you this? I don't know. It all happened thousands of years before Hercules was born.

And yet the picture would not be complete without that background skyline, without those distant crags specked red by Prometheus's torment. It tells you something about the gods. It tells you something about strength and weakness, about tyranny and freedom.

'Strangle him. Bite on him. *Crush him in your coils!*' raged the queen of the gods, thrusting her face so low that her cheeks flushed with blood.

The two serpents coiled around the base of her throne were as thick as jungle creepers and sleeved in overlapping scales as large and green as leaves. They blinked their hooded eyes, and their forked tongues flickered lovingly around her cheeks and ears. 'We hear, O Hera. Yes-s-s, Hercules-s-s sh-shall die.'

'Another woman's child,' she seethed.

'We hear, O Hera.'

'Fathered by my husband!'

'He dies-s-s, O Queen.'

' . . . made me the laughing stock of all heaven!'

'S-s-surely not, O Queen.'

'Imagine! The king of heaven preferring a common mortal woman to me, his sloe-eyed queen!'

'S-s-sloe-eyed, but not slow to see,' whispered the grovelling serpents in her ear. 'We go, O Queen, to s-s-strangle the puny child in his cradle, to s-s-smother him as he s-s-sleeps-s-s.' And they slithered across the marble floor of heaven like two streams of fetid green water, trickling over the brink of the clouds.

The baby's cradle stood in the shade of the eaves, and his hands reached for the lazy flies that circled overhead. His mother Alcmena was indoors sleeping through the heat of the day. So too was the king she had married after Hercules was born. Not a grand king, nor one who lived in a grand palace, but one who had come to love his little stepson. His gardens were greenly watered, and the air was filled with the scent of azaleas, and with silence.

So at the sound of a scurrying rattle, the baby smiled and looked around. Two heaving heaps of green, quivering and shivering, fumed like compost heaps on either side of the cradle. Out of the thorny heaps, horny heads rose up, wavering; gaping wide red mouths with flickering tongues and bared, pronging fangs. Venom dripped on the bedclothes and scorched large, sizzling holes.

'*Strangle him. Bite on him. Crush him in your coils,*' murmured the leaves on the trees. The baby boy laughed out loud at the ducking dance of the serpents' swaying heads. He reached out and took each by its thick green throat.

Their hinged jaws gaped. Their tails slumped, coil upon coil, into the crib on top of the baby's legs. Their

thrashing rocked the wooden bed so that its feet thumped on the wooden verandah. The noise woke Queen Alcmene in her room overhead, and looking out of her window, she clutched at her hair: 'My child! My Hercules! Save my Hercules! O Zeus in heaven, our baby!'

The young child looked up at her and smiled at the sight of his mother's face. And he held up the snakes—one in each hand—as if to say, 'Look what I've got!' He jabbed his nose into their red mouths, saying, 'Aboo! Aboo!' Venom trickled down their scaly trunks.

First he knotted their necks. Then he knotted their tails. He plucked off their scales like petals off a daisy, and he bit into their soft, sheeny bellies to see what was inside.

'Dead! Dead! My darlings!' murmured the wind in the hollow trees of the garden.

At last Hercules dropped the serpents out of the crib and watched rather sadly as their lifeless coils slumped one by one out on to the floor. Then his mother came running along the verandah outstretched like a bird, her clothes billowing. He turned on her a pair of doleful eyes, then looked over the side of his cot at one of the snakes and said, with a trembling chin, 'Broke it.'

For all Hercules was not his own son, King Amphytrion took a burning pride in the boy as he grew. No expense or trouble was too great when it came to his education. One tutor was not enough: the king's stepson must have three—one to teach him wisdom, one to teach him sport, and one to teach him music. Eminent men they were, all three. But neither Rhadamanthus (with his wise sayings) nor Linus (with his lutes) could fire Hercules with a desire to learn. Only his sports-master, Chiron, could do that. Perhaps the fact that Chiron was a centaur—half man and

half horse—made the difference. From discus-throwing to steeplechasing, there was no sport at which Chiron did not excel, and Hercules longed to be like him. Because Chiron told him to, he found it no hardship to get up early, go to bed early, and run and exercise for long hours every day.

One day the centaur said, 'Never touch strong drink, lad.'

'When do I ever get offered strong drink,' said the eleven-year-old Hercules laughing.

But Chiron stamped his hind hooves and said with uncharacteristic fierceness, 'Promise me!' Hercules promised without a second thought.

Not that Hercules was slow at his other subjects. In fact he played a lute rather well, though his fingers had a tendency to snap the strings. And he soon knew every one of Rhadamanthus's wise and pompous sayings, and would teeter and stoop along the corridors wagging his finger and, in a piping voice, doing his Rhadamanthus impersonation: 'The heart is bigger than the fist.' 'A bad man may be punished by the gods but only a good one is envied by them.' 'Folly is the fool's choice.' 'Hardship is the hero's pride.' Whether he understood them, that was a different matter. He learned the words . . . and he did do a splendid impression of Rhadamanthus. It was a pity there were so few people to appreciate it. When his mother saw it, she only told him not to be disrespectful.

In those days, Thebes was a small place, keeping itself to itself. It was uncommon to see strangers in the area unless they were passing by on the road. So Hercules looked once and looked again when he saw two women in a tree one day.

He had been stalking a deer through the woods, and his eyes ached from searching out its blotched hide among the dapple of the trees. He lost sight of it for a

moment, and when he once more discerned a moving shape among the blobby sunlight, it was not the deer at all but a woman dressed in austere grey. She went and stood in the hollow of a tree—as if it were a doorway—and Hercules's eye was drawn up the trunk to where another blousy-looking woman in dark red and black slouched along a branch, like a kill draped there by a lion. 'Greetings, Hercules,' said the second woman in a liquid, mellifluous voice. 'Come nearer. There's so much I could give you . . . '

Hercules was rather embarrassed: the other woman, upright in the alcove of the tree, made him feel uncomfortable, watching him with her uneven, grey eyes. Even the birds were not singing: they had been thrown off-key by a skirl of unearthly music blowing through the wood. 'Yes, come nearer, Hercules. Show us what manner of man you are.'

Man! Ha! He was only thirteen! So to overcome his awkwardness and a feeling that someone was about to make a terrible mistake, he moved towards the tree doing his funny 'Rhadamanthus' walk, tottering and hinnying and wagging one finger in the air.

As he reached a spot beneath the branches, the woman in red rolled startingly off her perch and dropped down behind him. Her feet made hardly a sound. Her arm circled his shoulders and her mouth pressed against his ear: 'I know what *you'll* choose.'

In some panic, Hercules looked to the other woman but she had folded her arms across her chest and remained inside the hollow tree. Her face was quite blank: she simply said, 'Well? Which *do* you choose? Hardship or happiness? Danger or daydreams? To struggle and to suffer, or to sleep?'

Hercules giggled maniacally. 'I think you've got the wrong . . . '

'You are Hercules the Strong, aren't you? Son of Alcmena?' snapped the grey woman.

The other, in red and black, ran her fingers over the muscles of Hercules's arm. 'Oooh, yes. He's strong all right.'

'And slow-witted seemingly. Well? Choose, boy. You're privileged, you know. Most don't get the choice. Hardship or ease? We haven't got all day: other people have fates to be decided.'

Afterwards, people asked him, 'What possessed you? What came over you? Who in their right mind . . . ?' But at the time it wasn't like that. Hercules simply felt awkward, and the words they were using brought to mind all Rhadamanthus's pompous, ponderous sayings. So he put on his Rhadamanthus stoop, and did his comical Rhadamanthus walk, and recited two or three epigrams in the scholar's thin, piping voice. Anything to break the tension.

'"Hardship is the hero's pride." "Fame was never found in bed."' (He wagged his finger: it was a very good impersonation.) '"Failure is easy, success is hard!"'

The grey woman's eyes, at first dismayed by the faces he was pulling, suddenly flashed. 'True! That's perfectly true!'

The red woman's hand slipped off his stooping shoulders. 'You mean you choose hardship and danger? *Nobody* does that. *Nobody ever* does that. Everybody chooses an easy life!'

'"Danger is the pathway from cowardice to Fame!"' hinned Hercules, too busy racking his brains for more sayings to pay much attention. '"Folly is the fool's choice!"'

'Pompous little brat,' said the woman in red, and turning to the other she said, 'So you've won one at last, Virtue. Good riddance, I say.'

The woman in grey seemed equally surprised. Her

sharp, precise voice bobbed with delight. 'How very heartening. Still, you can't say I wasn't due for a win. Nobody has chosen a life of hardship and suffering for two hundred years now. Come along, Vice. Fasten your fastenings—and do at least braid your hair: you look a real slummock. Don't dawdle now.'

Together they strode away through the trees, Virtue and Vice. Hercules called after them: 'Hey! Where are you going? Anyway—who are you?'

The women linked arms and looked back at him quizzically. 'Don't worry,' said the woman in grey cheerfully. 'Your wish is granted. You shall live a life of struggle and suffering. Fame, danger, pain, work—all of those. I'll see to it. Extraordinary . . . ' (She turned back to her companion.) 'I really expected this one to choose you, Vice.'

And Hercules was left standing on one foot, his finger still pointing foolishly at the sky, his face gradually losing any likeness to old Rhadamanthus. Even the strange, haunting music faded away, and the birds rediscovered their voices. Hercules tried to remember the tune . . .

Inside the house, Linus, the music teacher, was crouched over his lute. A vague, short-sighted young man, he had difficulty remembering what time of day it was. When Hercules arrived for a lesson, Linus always supposed it must be time to give one. So when Hercules ran into the room humming loudly, and sat down at once, and took a lute on his lap, and picked at it, Linus stood up.

'Good morning, Hercules.'

'Shsshsh!'

'Don't shsshsh me, boy!'

'Shsshsh! I'm trying to remember a tune.' (He tried

to pick out the mysterious music on his lute, but could not find the right key.)

'It might help if you held the lute properly,' said Linus.

'Be quiet, can't you? I'm forgetting it! Mmmm . . . hmmm . . . hmmm . . .'

'Wrist, boy. How often do I have to tell you—keep that wrist arched.'

'Oh please! Quiet! Mmmmm . . . hmmmm . . . hmmm . . . ' But the haunting tune was dribbling out of his head like sand out of a fist.

'That fourth string is flat. Haven't I taught you yet? You can't ever play a lute till you've tuned it. Let me have it.' And Linus tried to take the lute out of Hercules's lap.

'Give it here!' protested Hercules. But already the tune had soaked away like spilled water and was lost everlastingly.

So unnerved was Hercules by his meeting with the two women, so lost was the piece of music, that Hercules's frayed temper snapped. Linus had hold of the body of the lute; Hercules had hold of the neck. With a turn of the wrist he wrenched the instrument away from his teacher and swung it like a club. His eyes were shut with fury.

He heard the lute crush like an egg-shell. He felt the broken strings coil back around his wrists and hands. When he opened his eyes, he thought that Linus must have run from the room in fright: he waited for the man's pale, refined face to reappear at the open door. Then he saw, at the other end of the slippery marble floor a heap of familiar clothes.

Hercules retreated to the other end of the room and sat down in a corner. Strangely enough, he could remember the ragged tune perfectly now. He was still

humming it when the king came into the room. 'What are you doing there, boy? Aren't you supposed to be with Chiron doing sports? Where's Linus? I need a lutenist tomorrow at dinner. There are visitors. Important visitors . . . Hercules? Boy? Answer me.'

Hercules looked up and showed the stump of his lute still festooned with curling, broken cat-gut. 'Why am I so strong, father? Why? Other boys aren't so . . . I killed him, father. I didn't mean to. But I killed Linus.'