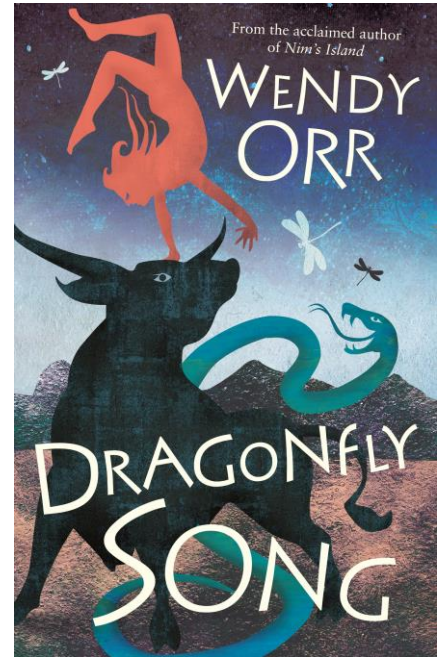


Dragonfly Song

By Wendy Orr

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Summary

The firstborn daughter of a priestess is abandoned as a baby. She lives with the slaves, nameless and mute, until they cast her out to live by her wits alone. At age twelve, she discovers that her name is Aissa – Dragonfly – and realises that her only escape is to become a bull dancer – one of the young athletes taken away each spring as tribute to the Bull King. If she can survive the lethal dance in the arena, she can set her island free. But no bull dancer has ever returned.

For ages 9 to 13, *Dragonfly Song* is a strong, compelling adventure with a courageous 12 to 14 year-old heroine, set in Bronze Age Crete. Written partly in free verse, it links mythology and ancient history with a touch of fantasy.

Use in the curriculum

Dragonfly Song may be studied in upper primary and lower secondary English classes, and should stimulate activities and in-depth discussion around language and literature. In the general curriculum capabilities it is relevant to:

- Literacy
- Critical and creative thinking
- Ethical understanding, including:
 - cultural comparisons
 - learning to distinguish and question established conventions in our own society
 - bullying and crowd mentality
 - definition of disability

It also links specifically to Year 7 History: The Ancient World.

As an English text, *Dragonfly Song* can be used as a resource:

- to discuss the classical 'hero's journey' in literature and what makes a hero
- the use of poetry and the difference between free verse and rhyme
- to discuss the use of language to construct a new world
- to discuss the use of myth in literature

It could also be used for art activities.

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Related texts/Further reading

Texts to support the reading of *Dragonfly Song* include Homer's *Odyssey*, *Pankration* by Dyan Blacklock, the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan, *Scarlet Runner* by Julie Hunt and the Chronicles of Ancient Darkness series by Michelle Paver. *The Hunger Games* uses the same myth as a seed for the story, but goes in a very different direction. The novels of Rosemary Sutcliff, which are now out of print but available as ebooks, are also some of the best books for entering a totally different historical times. Wendy credits these books for kindling her passion for ancient history.

The author

Wendy Orr was born in Edmonton, Canada, but grew up in various places across Canada, France and the USA. She studied occupational therapy in the UK, married an Australian farmer, and moved to Australia. She's the author of many award-winning books, including *Nim's Island*, *Nim at Sea*, *Rescue on Nim's Island*, *Raven's Mountain* and *Peeling the Onion*.

Wendy has always been fascinated by the Aegean Bronze Age. Doodling on a finger-paint app several years ago, she sketched a dark, curly-haired girl with a twisted mouth, and knew that she had to find this unhappy girl's story. The plot and Aissa's fictitious island formed as Wendy researched and read, but the story was sparked to life by serendipitous, seemingly unrelated events, such as finding a piece of chipped flint on a Danish beach, and taking a wrong turn and ending up at the extraordinary deep blue Source de la Sorgue in France. Most mysteriously, every time that she made a significant decision or discovery about the story, Wendy saw a dragonfly the following day...

About *Dragonfly Song*, Wendy Orr says:

It takes place around 1450 BCE. The ancient Greeks of this period, the Minoans and Mycenaeans, did not leave any written records describing their history or culture (the only written records we have are clay tablets about how many sheep or cattle someone owns, and how many of these they owe the gods or their rulers.) Our theories about these people therefore come from the archaeological remains: ruins of magnificent buildings, and beautiful art. However, there are also myths and poems that were handed down over centuries before they were ever written down – and although they have a lot of magic and impossible things, there are also parts that probably started with real history.

For this story, I drew on the Greek myth of Theseus, in which seven youths and seven maidens are sent as tribute from Athens to Crete, to be eaten by the monstrous half-man, half-bull Minotaur. It seemed like a completely crazy story until the Minoan palace of Knossos was excavated on Crete. The bull was obviously a very important symbol, probably even a god – even though the real animals would be sacrificed to their god – and there were many scenes, on paintings, vases, and gold jewellery, showing young acrobats somersaulting over the backs of bulls. What if these acrobats were part of a payment to Crete in return for protection by – or from – their powerful navy? If so, the tribute would have come from as far as the Minoan navy reached.

The Minoans are often depicted as a peaceful civilisation, because there are very few paintings of war or armies. However, even if this is true, this was a violent time, and at some point the warlike Mycenaeans from mainland Greece took over the island, probably after an earthquake had damaged the Cretan palaces. Archaeologists are still arguing over the dates, but I've chosen 1450 BCE as a date when the Mycenaeans were in power but still respecting the older Minoan religion, which probably worshipped earth goddesses. The Mycenaeans probably also worshipped many gods, like the classical Greeks, but Poseidon, the earthshaking god of the sea, appears to have been the most important. Some people believe that the Minoans were a matriarchal society; the Mycenaeans were definitely



patriarchal, but women may have had more rights and freedom than they did in classical Greece.

Aissa's home island is fictitious, though I based it partly on a smaller version of the island of Samothrace, and placed it in a similar position in the far north of the Aegean, just out of the known range of Minoan influence. I gave it inhospitable cliffs, with a shallow cove that couldn't be entered by the original Minoan ships – but with the coming of the Mycenaean ships, that had a shallower draft and could be dragged up onto the beach, the island's isolation was at an end. I made the society similar to earlier Minoan society: matriarchal, with a ruling priestess, worshipping a mother goddess and her emblem of the snake. We know that snakes were sacred, and there are statues of priestesses or goddesses holding snakes. The priestess singing to the snakes is entirely my own invention.

For useful images and links, see the pinterest board:

<https://www.pinterest.com/wendyorr1/dragonfly-song-bits-of-background-and-teaching-ide/>

Activities

1. **Art:** In Chapter 2, Aissa and the potter's daughter make 'circles of flowers in a ring of stones'. Later, she makes patterns of flowers and shells for the fishers' goddess (the first in Chapter 9) and patterns of rocks and her small treasures for the goddess in her sanctuary cave. Patterns are used in some religions and meditative practices; Indian or Tibetan mandalas and Navajo sandpaintings are probably the best known now.

To draw a mandala: <http://www.art-is-fun.com/how-to-draw-a-mandala/>

Ideas for mandala-type patterns using fresh flowers:

<http://twistedgifter.com/2014/07/flower-mandalas-by-kathy-klein/>

Make your own patterns with sea shells, flowers, pebbles, leaves, seeds, or other natural materials. Glue them into place on card, or photograph them.

2. In Chapter 24, Aissa learns to write on the **clay tablets** used for taxation records. The writing she used was called Linear B, and was a combination of a 'syllabary' – each symbol representing a syllable of a word – and logograms, which are symbols of whole words. These tablets were supposed to be temporary, but were baked into pottery when the palaces burned down, so surviving tablets can be read today. Have students make their own clay tablets using real clay or as in these instructions:

http://www.ehow.com/how_12110304_make-egyptian-hieroglyphics-tablet.html

For some of the Linear B logograms: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/linearb.htm>

3. **Time Capsule:** Without written historical records, interpreting archaeological finds can be very difficult. Put together 'time capsules' of small items – eg a Christmas card, Barbie doll, shopping list, old iPod, CD... Break the class into small groups and have them use the items to 'interpret' questions such as this society's religion, dress code, and social structure.
4. **Draw a map** of Aissa's island.

Discussion questions

1. Discuss how the physical setting of Aissa's home is a metaphor for the grimness of her life there. (e.g. The island is rocky, poor and isolated; buildings are dark, built of rock or burrowed into the side of the mountain.) What about the springtime when she develops new strengths after being cast out of the servants' kitchen?
2. In the Bull King's palace, the buildings are awe-inspiring, filled with light and extraordinary art. The culture appears to be obsessed with beauty – but is there a darkness underpinning it?
3. *Dragonfly Song* is set in the Bronze Age, but the ordinary people of Aissa's island still use stone tools as well. Why?
4. In the prologue, 'The Firstborn Daughter', what are the clues that this is a matriarchal society? How does it differ from a patriarchal society? The Mosuo of China are an example of a matriarchal society in the present day.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoTrARDa8BU>
5. Chapter 8 mentions that the chief killed the last lion for his cloak when he married the Lady. Why might he have wanted a lionskin cloak rather than a deerskin? Why do you think the islanders didn't worry about conservation and keeping all their native species alive?
6. In Chapter 9, the servants are 'screaming with joy at their game of hate.' Why do you think the author described bullying Aissa as a game? How does bullying Aissa make the servants feel?
7. Aissa is an 'elective mute' because there is nothing physical or intellectual preventing her from speaking. However, that doesn't mean that she could speak if she wanted to: Mama's command, 'Stay quiet, still as stone till I come back,' is buried so deep in her subconscious, and is so mixed with the trauma of the family's death and disappearance, that Aissa can't simply decide to start talking, even when she's safe. Would she have been more accepted by the other servants if she could talk? How might it have changed the story if she had regained her speech after singing the snake away from Luki? Do you think she could have regained her speech if she had been treated kindly after being rescued? Do you think that meeting Mama again was the only reason she regained her speech, or might it also have been influenced by being safe after facing death in the bull ring?
8. Discuss the book's structure with the students. What was their reaction to the combination of free verse and prose?
9. Wendy Orr says that using free verse made it easier for her to access and portray Aissa's emotions. Have the students choose an emotion, e.g. rage, grief, or joy – and write about it in free verse. Next, have them write a short story using the ideas and images that arose from the verse.
10. Why do you think the author chose to write in free verse rather than rhyming, like the children's rhyme in Chapter 10:
*Here comes rabbit, hippity hop
See his ears flap and flop;
Here comes hedgehog, curled up small
Roll him over like a ball.*
11. The author also says that she normally writes in silence, on the computer, but found that the verse sections for this story had to be written by hand, playing the album *Agaetis Byrjun* by the Icelandic band Sigur Ros. Experiment by playing different types of music as the students write verse.

Allen & Unwin wishes to thank the author, Wendy Orr, for providing these curriculum notes and her notes on the writing of *Dragonfly Song*.