



The Wisdom of the Myths: How Greek Mythology Can Change Your Life (Learning to Live, #2)

Luc Ferry

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A fascinating new journey through Greek mythology that explains the myths' timeless lessons and meaning

Heroes, gods, and mortals. The Greek myths are the founding narratives of Western civilization: to understand them is to know the origins of philosophy, literature, art, science, law, and more. Indeed, as Luc Ferry shows in this masterful book, they remain a great store of wisdom, as relevant to our lives today as ever before. No mere legends or clichés ("Herculean task," "Pandora's box," "Achilles heel," etc.), these classic stories offer profound and manifold lessons, providing the first sustained attempt to answer fundamental human questions concerning "the good life," the burden of mortality, and how to find one's place in the world. Vividly retelling the great tales of mythology and illuminating fresh new ways of understanding them, *The Wisdom of the Myths* will enlighten readers of all ages.

The Wisdom of the Myths: How Greek Mythology Can Change Your Life (Learning to Live, #2) Details

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From Reader Review The Wisdom of the Myths: How Greek Mythology Can Change Your Life (Learning to Live, #2) for online ebook

Constanza Gomez says

The book was very good and helped me on clarifying certain things, but the writing voice of the author was quite poor at some parts and didn't feel like a serious work at all. Not sure if it's a translation thing,

Stephen says

Although Ferry underwhelmed me the last time I read him, I enjoyed his introduction to the Greek mythos. Wisdom from the Myths is two things; Ferry retells the major stories of Greek mythology, patching them together from Homer and the dramatists, but brings them together to argue that they constitute a coherent worldview. This is one of an orderly universe in which man has a definite role as a member of a polis. (Odysseus' journey is read then as a spiritual one, with the hero confronting the death of his identity when tempted by Calypso. He may remain with her as an immortal, but in so doing would destroy every aspect of what makes him human -- his identity as a father, a son, a husband, a king...a mortal, whose glory is in living well in the face of death.) The cosmos' order is nearly self-correcting in that most negative behavior results in self-destruction, though it does seem to require the occasional hand from Zeus through his agents, Heracles and those who are aware of this unitive order. As in A Brief History of Thought, Ferry turns again and again to Stoicism, which he views as the fulfillment of this worldview. Ferry is not a Stoic, but quite sympathetic. He's unusual in that he champions a secular worldview but takes mythology and philosophy seriously, as more than just-so stories and naval-gazing. He manages to go almost the entire book without overly arcane references, a triumph for an academic. I enjoyed this far more than A Brief History of Thought, at least as a recap of Greek mythology with a Stoic bent, but the title is overblown.

Stewart says

One of the apexes of Western culture occurred in Greece of 2,000 to 2,500 years ago, a historical period that still influences – if not permeates – life today. We can find Homer, Hesiod, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Sappho, and Lucretius in bookstores; the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes are performed in theaters and they and the “Iliad” and “Odyssey” are made into movies. We can find television series about Hercules and movies about him, Achilles, Odysseus, Helen, Jason, and the Muses. (There is a new Hercules movie about to open in U.S. movie theaters at this writing.)

More importantly, ancient Greek ideas have formed the basis of and provided the vocabulary for life in the West and increasingly around the globe: the ideas and often the words such as democracy, jury trial, rationality, science, theater, history, philosophy.

But in the beginning were the Greek myths.

“The Wisdom of the Myths: How Greek Mythology Can Change Your Life” by French philosophy professor Luc Ferry, translated by Theo Cuffe, recounts and comments on many of the Greek myths, from the stories about the birth of the cosmos and the pre-Olympian gods to the triumph of the Olympian gods such as Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Athena, Dionysus, and Aphrodite to the classic stories of human heroes Odysseus, Sisyphus,

Hercules, and Prometheus and tragic figures Oedipus and Antigone.

Within this book are many illuminating thoughts about these individual gods, goddesses, demigods, and humans. But it is the overall look at Greek mythology and its importance to those living two millennia later that provided a thunderbolt to my mind.

The penetrating look at the psychology of human life and the makeup of the cosmos make Greek myths fascinating reading today – and the reason we see so many movies, TV series, and books about them. More than this, Ferry argues that the Greek myths – even with their gods, goddesses, monsters, and supernatural actions – made Greek philosophy possible. “If philosophy was born in Greece, this is because mythology had prepared the ground by reflecting in an extraordinarily profound manner upon the plight of mortal men within the universe. Indeed, the fundamental question to be asked by philosophers had already been clearly formulated by the time they arrived on the scene.”

“From this point of view, mythology delivers messages of astonishing profundity, perspectives that open up to mortals the vista of a good life without recourse to the illusions of a hereafter, affording us a means of confronting human mortality, of facing up to our destiny without dosing ourselves with the consolations that the great monotheistic religions claim to bring mankind.”

The centrality and inevitability of death for human beings is a given in the Greek myths. So the question becomes, for later Greek philosophy, indeed Western philosophy to this day, how does one lead the good life in the face of death.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, a lifelong admirer of Greek myth, stage tragedy, and philosophy, grappled with this question in the 19th century.

“Nietzsche was to reiterate this, long after the Greeks – which proves in passing that their message preserves an actuality such as can still be found in modern philosophy: the ultimate end of human life is what Nietzsche calls ‘amor fati,’ or ‘love of one’s fate.’ To embrace everything that is the case, our destiny – which, in essence, means the present moment, considered as the highest form of wisdom, and the only form that can rid us of what Spinoza (whom Nietzsche regarded as ‘a brother’) named, equally memorably, the ‘sad passions’: fear, hatred, guilt, remorse, those corrupters of the soul that bog us down in mirages of the past or of the future. Only our reconciliation to the present, to the present moment – in the Greek, the ‘kairos’ – can, for Nietzsche, as for Greek culture as a whole, lead to proper serenity, to the ‘innocence of becoming,’ in other words to salvation, understood not in its religious meaning but in the sense of discovering ourselves as saved, finally, from those fears that diminish existence, stunting and shriveling it.”

Greek myths continue to fascinate and illuminate men and women of the 21st century. There are many fine books about the “who” and “what” of ancient Greek mythology. Ferry’s 2014 book provides some of the “why.”

Laurie says

Author Luc Ferry is an award winning scholar and former French minister of national education. He knows his mythology, and goes back to the oldest sources he can find for his reading; in many cases, sources more than 2000 years old. He’s very thorough, and roots out the basic meaning of the oldest Greek myths: the creation, King Midas, the Odyssey, Oedipus and others. A lot of it all boils down to the opposing forces of chaos and order; order (as personified by Zeus et al) must continually beat chaos (as personified by the pre-Olympian gods, Gaia (earth) and Chronos who is time itself). Everyone and everything has a place in the universe, and those who try to go against this natural place have hubris, and will end up punished by the universe. No one can defeat death. Accept this, and get on with living the best life you can- in other words, be an expression of order.

Even people who have never read the Greek myths know something about them; references to them abound in our vernacular (Oedipus complex, Midas touch, Pandora's box, Achilles heel etc) so it pays to know where these references come from. The book is interesting; the author treats the myths, as philosophy, with respect rather than as childish tales. He shows how many of these myths connect with each other, and tells us why the things that happen to people happen. Sadly, making the connections means some repetition, but it's not huge problem.

Did reading this book allow me to change my life? No. I'm not even sure how understanding the myths can change my life; perhaps that means I still don't understand them.

Léa Moreau says

Je suis relativement déçue par cet ouvrage. Sa promesse était pourtant belle: disséquer la philosophie sous-tendant les mythes grecs et en tirer un enseignement pour notre vie quotidienne. Or, il s'avère que l'auteur ne présente que deux concepts qu'il répète (recycle?) pendant 400 pages, ce que je trouve bien maigre vis-à-vis de la promesse du titre.

Par contre, et c'est le point positif de cet ouvrage, il offre une plongée dans la mythologie grecque en la présentant d'une manière simple et vivante.

Matt McCormick says

Luc Ferry is a beautiful writer with keen insight. He is a marvelous story teller with an important message. Some, who have reviewed *The Wisdom of the Myths*, rightly point out that Minister Ferry can be repetitive. I don't find the repetition to be a flaw. He tells us at the beginning that he believes myth can inspire everyone, including our children. He writes to an audience that is thoughtful, not academic, and provides a storyline that can serve adults as they share the Greek Myths with young people. I, for one, benefit from the constant reinforcement of his main lines of thought and the many examples he uses to support them. His passion for philosophy and the fabula of western civilization is infectious. His capacity for articulate reasoning is itself an inspiration.

I found the main threads of his argument to be succinct; first that we have but one life - the life we are living now and, second, that our happiness comes from accepting this fact and then placing ourselves "in our proper place". This isn't an elitist statement that seeks to make us content in some sub-class strata of humanity, rather, it's a call to use the power of reasoning to understand our world (our cosmos) and adapt our lives to its marvelous organization and order. When we display hubris we are fighting that cosmic order. We are creating chaos and no good will come from our rebellion. My examples would be: The hubris that leads us to believe our environment exists to serve our will - was in fact created "for us" - can have no consequence other than then the suicidal destruction of our "place". The hubris that leads us to believe we are entitled to live beyond our means leads to economic catastrophe and thus a much unhappier life than would otherwise be experienced. The hubris of believing we are gods, that we have immortality ahead of us, leads us to embrace the wearing of an explosive vest and destroy others with it's detonation if we see it as a our path to deification.

It's is through the retelling of many of the stories of Greek Mythology that Ferry shares his premise and

attempts to show the reader that the ancient Greeks knew there was a way to live that would “tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world” (my use of a quote and not Ferry’s). His retelling is enjoyable to read and his humor well placed. Credit should be extended to the translator Theo Cuff.

I was disappointed in one small section as it failed to answer for me a puzzle. He mentions Odysseus's trek to the underworld and his meeting of Achilles. Achille’s statement that he would rather be a living slave than a dead hero works to Ferry’s argument - it’s living well that ensures to happiness. The conflict for me has always been my understanding that the ancient Greeks believed heroism was a path to be remembered and it was this remembrance that created some form of mortality. If anyone can resolve this conflict I would appreciate understanding the nuance.

Please, if you simply enjoy the stories of Greek mythology or if you have an interest in the history of philosophy or if you simply would like a perspective on ‘how to live’ - pick up this wonderful book by a very interesting, accomplished and articulate thought leader.

Pequete says

Gostei mesmo muito deste livro! Um verdadeiro guia através da mitologia grega (e um pouco de filosofia, mais para o final) pela mão de quem conhece a fundo os textos antigos e nos leva consigo através dos mitos que, afinal fazem parte da nossa história colectiva, mesmo quando não temos consciência disso. Li-o através do BookCrossing e entretanto decidi oferecer um exemplar a mim própria (nem de propósito, está aí o Natal), porque gostei tanto, porque tem partes que gostava de voltar a ler, e ainda porque quero tê-lo disponível para as minhas filhas (a quem já fui lendo algumas coisas, por aqui e por ali).

Alexander Verbist says

In dit boek maakt de auteur duidelijk wat precies het nut was (en is) van Griekse mythen en sagen. Interessant om zijn mening te horen over bepaalde verhalen en hun betekenis, en over wat de eeuwige hoofdthema's in veel mythen (zoals de strijd tussen chaos en kosmos).

Louis Chatelet says

Les grands mythes grecs, origine de la philosophie et fondement de notre civilisation, sont ici racontés mais aussi expliqués dans leur sens le plus profond par Luc Ferry, dans une langue accessible à tous, parents et enfants.

La « pomme de discorde », « le pactole », « le taureau qu'il faut prendre par les cornes », le « dédale », la « boîte de Pandore » sont des expressions que nous utilisons quotidiennement. Pourtant, peu de gens savent qu'elles sont tirées de la mythologie grecque. Ce livre nous raconte les histoires passionnantes où elles prennent leur source.

Mais la mythologie est surtout une représentation du monde que l'ouvrage met en lumière : l'univers y apparaît comme un être harmonieux, juste, beau, et bon. Mais si l'équilibre était donné d'emblée, il n'y aurait pas de vie : « sans les hommes, les Dieux s'ennuieraient ». C'est pourquoi la lutte contre le chaos, les premiers Dieux et les Titans constitue un thème majeur de cette mythologie. Et lorsque Zeus instaure enfin

un partage ordonné du monde, ce sont encore des excès de ceux qui veulent subvertir cet ordre que découlent catastrophes et tragédies. Tel est le sens le plus profond du précepte inscrit sur le temple de Delphes : « connais toi toi-même », c'est-à-dire « ne te prends pas pour un Dieu ».

Rien n'est plus passionnant que cette plongée dans les mythes grecs : si la magie qu'ils dégagent est au moins égale à celle des contes de Grimm ou de Perrault, ils constituent de surcroît une irremplaçable source de culture qui éclaire merveilleusement les fondements de notre manière d'appréhender le monde et les hommes.

Meg says

This is well worth reading for anyone interested in Greek mythology, philosophy, or exploring how to live well when life is just really really hard. Ferry does an excellent job of putting the myths back into the Greek world. He argues that by looking at the myths from the ancient point of view in which they were developed, we will see their purpose is not necessarily religious, but rather a means for the Greeks to figure out how to live in a difficult world.

I can't really do justice to this book in my review, but I was struck by Ferry's interpretation of the myth of Orpheus, who journeys to the underworld to rescue Eurydice from death. I hadn't given the myth much thought, and assumed what many people do – that it speaks to the impatience and power of love, or serves as a lesson for those who do not have faith. But not really, it turns out.

“In particular, how are we to understand the strange prescription by Persephone that Orpheus should not look behind him? Stranger still, how can Orpheus have been fool enough to turn around when he had all but reached his goal and after so many painful tribulations?...Why, in effect, must the backward glance of Orpheus be fatal for the two lovers?

“I think that, in the end, we should rather keep the details of the story in our sights: the contradiction between love and death as insurmountable by mortals, despite all the hopes placed in the attempt by Orpheus. If Orpheus loses Eurydice a second time by *turning around*, and if she is under strict instructions to remain *behind* him, and on no account to pass *in front*, and if the gods have imposed these conditions in the full knowledge that they will not be obeyed (otherwise why impose them?), it is simply because by looking backward Orpheus will finally understand that what is behind is indeed behind, that the past is past, that time is irreversible, and that every mortal must accept...the human condition that is his....Our birth and our death are not ours, and Time, for us mortals, is quite irreversible.”

Heartbreakingly simple, and, once explained, plain to see. This book is full of gems like that. I could have done without the 70-page chapter toward the end detailing the adventures of Heracles, Perseus, Jason, and Theseus – the general point that bad things happen to people and we can't do anything about them could have been made in ten or so pages with a few examples taken from their stories. I loved the rest of it though.

Sara says

Il libro mi è stato regalato da mio padre per soddisfare la necessità di conoscere i miti e le storie più famose dell'antica cultura greca, per il corso di storia dell'arte classica. Il compito lo ha completamente rispettato

riuscendomi a dare addirittura di più del dovuto.

Luc Ferry, tramite questo libro, narra e insegna i concetti in cui credevano i greci nell'antichità, delle origini del mondo, dei primi dei, dei primi uomini fino alle vicende dei più grandi eroi del Peloponneso.

Ci dispone delle basi per riuscire a comprendere l'affascinante cultura greca arrivando addirittura a renderla attuale e indicando cosa sia giusto o sbagliato, ma non in modo imponente e prepotente. Per compiere questo incarico si avvale di un linguaggio semplice ed efficace, alleggerisce i complicati concetti con acute battute, senza mai apparire banale.

L'autore li spiega in modo così esaustivo da convincere ad adottare alcuni comportamenti e farli propri ed attualizzarli proprio come fa lui scrivendoli e rendendoli pubblici a tutti.

Penso quindi che sia proprio questo quello che vuole dirci con il titolo "Imparare a vivere": in miti e storie che hanno visto attraversare diversi secoli e interpretazioni non si deve smettere di imparare, poiché la loro saggezza sta proprio nel loro essere contemporanei e adattabili a ciascuno di noi.

Jan Cornelis says

I am a big fan of Luc Ferry his A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living. He gives the reader a history of thought that give specific answers to questions on life, death and love. In this history we see different modes, that together give an exciting picture of Western thought. In this work on mythology he tries to do the same, but it doesn't get nearly as good.

Three propositions: Immanent thought about harmony

The main proposition is that mythology forms a body of knowledge that stages the battle between chaos and order as main axis for all the stories. To show this, Luc Ferry retells a lot of the stories and for readers who quickly get lost in all the names (like me), he is willing to repeat a lot. This is pleasant.

His second proposition deals with the relation between Greek mythology and the beginning of philosophy. He states that the world of Greek mythology is an immanent place. The Gods are of this world, there is no (consciousness) afterlife so people have to find their place on this earth. This is a statement that I have some doubt about, I will treat this in with his third proposition. Let's assume that it is true. This immanent thinking, the search for answers right here, would have given birth to philosophy. Philosophy takes all the original themes from myth, like searching for order, your place, justice (*diké*) and how to deal with death or *hybris*. So, Ferry is stating that philosophy is as undressed myth.

The third main proposition that Luc Ferry states is that there is a relationship between Greek mythology and our life today. Because we live in a world that is immanent we could learn something from Odysseus, who has sometimes help from the Gods and sometimes he is throwback by the gods. Sure, I had some revelations myself during reading of these myths, but I doubt they had anything to do with the power that ancient Greeks experienced from them. It is rather naïve to assume that it doesn't matter that you live in a world without god(s), some greater personal power that you can praise in hope for good weather. Or that you believe that you are without gods. The Greeks did believe the gods had a personal interest in their life, this is for sure a transcendent relationship. Stated poetically: Being flows from above to below.

Conclusion

The reason I think that this was not nearly as good as his introduction to philosophy is that it treats just one area, that means it gets quite repetitive after some time. Also a big disappointment was that he has eye for the

meaning of myths and not how people lived with these myths. What was the role of myth in their society? How did this change in these hundreds of years? All these questions remain untouched. At the same time Ferry makes some big claims without taking the counter arguments seriously (he one time, when talking about the psychological interpretation of myths states simply: That is just not true). Still it was a good read. The stories are good and Luc Ferry does a good job in showing harmony is a central theme in Greek thought. Read this as an introduction but be critical.

Mitchell says

I received this book as part of Goodreads First Reads program. This book is written as an attempt to glean modern life lesson from ancient Greek myths. Specifically, the author promotes the idea of a "Secular spirituality" as a more modern, philosophically-based morality system than monotheistic major religions. Ferry argues that Greek myths teach us to find one's greatest happiness, one must find their natural state and stick to it, without hoping for unrealistic change in the future nor pining for glory days of the past.

This book is set up, in large part, like a college term paper. The initial chapter introduces his philosophy and views which he feels are supported by Greek mythology. He then spends a majority of the book relating selected mythic tales that support his thesis. This spans from the birth of the gods and the overthrow of the titans to the exploits of individual heroes like Heracles and Theseus. Odysseus is singled out as a prime example of the point that he wants to make; that we have to battle hubris, or the tendency to try and be something that we're not and instead make sure we are in our correct place (Ithica in Odysseus' case) and be happy with what we have. Finally, he summarizes and expounds on the virtues of his secular spirituality.

As a Christian (Mormon), I found his insistence in gleaning what he wanted from the myths interesting since, as I read those same myths, I found a lot of ways that the stories could be construed to teach Mormon doctrine. I think that things like myths can teach many different things to many different people, depending on their circumstances and experiences. To try and paint one interpretation as being the only correct one is difficult. That being said, I enjoyed this book both for the refresher of Greek myths, as it does go into some detail just in the recounting of the stories, but also for the philosophical take on them. I think it goes to show that there are things to be learned almost anywhere we look.

Joseph Adelizzi, Jr. says

I won this book on Goodreads.com.

Back in the summer of '79, like many teenaged kids, I was headed to the beach with friends. My biggest concern was finding a good book to read. Is that what most teenagers are concerned with as they head to the shore? Anyway, I settled on a book of Greek myths because I had always enjoyed hearing the stories and thought a more complete exposure was a good idea. From that summer on I was hooked on the myths. However, one aspect of the myths, or rather how the myths are perceived and presented today, always bothered me. Each presentation always left me with the feeling that the myths were cute, interesting, amusing stories but nothing more, nothing really significant – unlike our "more sophisticated" religious stories. To me, though, the myths were more than cute stories; they were significant views of how to live in and explain this world.

What I loved most about Luc Ferry's "The Wisdom of the Myths" is that he never puts forth that "isn't this cute" condescending attitude towards the Greek myths. Rather he recognizes them for the significant and legitimate religious or, as we see in his conclusion, philosophical treatises that they have always been for me. In short, he treats them with the gravitas they deserve. To paraphrase Ferry, the Greek myths deal with cosmic order, combating hubris, and meting out justice, and help mortals make their way through a cosmos that sometimes showers meaningless, absurd travesties down upon them. Sounds like the concerns of a legitimate religion or philosophy to me.

Ferry's presentation of the various myths is smooth and detailed. Particularly enjoyable is how he includes different versions from different mythographers of the same myths. It is also nice how he explains various etymological connections between the myths and Greek or Latin or even English words. Thanks to Ferry, every time I buy a container of OIKOS yogurt I'll know that "oikos" means "natural place."

A couple small things I did not like about the work. First, Ferry's description of the Perseus and Medusa story seems to neglect to mention the actual deed of severing Medusa's head. Second - and this could just be a personal foible of mine - on a number of occasions he says "try and." I was always corrected by grammar teachers that "try to" is preferable to "try and." Similarly, Ferry also says "refer back" where, I've been told, "refer" is sufficient and preferable. Picky I know, and insignificant; perhaps these two grammar issues are more a product of the translation by Theo Cuffe.

Overall I loved this book. If the attitude it proffers towards the Greek myths was prevalent back in the summer of 1979 then my trip down the shore would have been much more memorable than it was thanks to all the young women who would have been more impressed with my beach-reading choice than they seemed to be. Or not.

Karen says

The Wisdom of the Myths by Luc Ferry is about philosophy rather than mythology in the strictest sense, but it is still one of the best presentations of Greek myth for modern audiences that I have read. It is largely about how Greek mythology is now more important than ever in the quest for understanding humanity's place in the cosmos, based on how philosophy was born from and directly influenced by Greek mythology. Ferry insists that Greek mythology's lasting impact on our culture makes it imperative that people of all ages read and understand the myths in order to better understand our culture and philosophies today. Although he cannot touch upon all Greek myths, Ferry does an excellent job of presenting and interpreting a number of the most influential and important stories, remaining ever mindful of the various texts that have preserved them and adapted them over time in order to give a more rounded interpretation. Overall, he presents a thoroughly researched and well-reasoned argument about how Greek mythology can still be applicable in the modern world in such a way that everyone, even those who have not studied Greek mythology extensively, can understand and apply to their lives. Even if you are not interested in the philosophy aspect, I think this is a good introduction to Greek mythology because of the variety of stories that Ferry uses and the detailed history that he gives to each one.
