

THE CLASSICAL WORLD

All literature began with the ancient art of storytelling. Our ancestors told stories to entertain each other, to comfort each other, to instruct the young in the lessons of living, to pass on their religious and cultural heritage. Storytelling is an integral part of every world culture. In early times, people did not distinguish between adult and children's literature. Children heard and, presumably, enjoyed the same stories as their parents, whether they were the adventurous tales of cultural heroes—as retold by Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—or the wondrous tales of gods and demons and magic spells and talking animals—as are found throughout the world.

Western civilization has its roots in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, which flourished between about 500 BCE and 400 CE, now known as the Classical period. Greece in the fifth century BCE is in many ways the birthplace of Western culture and so that is where our story begins. In this cradle of democracy and individualism, children grew up with the stories of the Trojan War (from Homer's *Iliad*) and of the travels of Odysseus (from Homer's *Odyssey*) and the stories of Jason and the Golden Fleece and the adventures of Hercules. They also knew of the now-famous fables attributed to the slave Aesop, believed to be a teacher, writing to instruct his students in cultural and personal values.

With the decline of Greek civilization, the Roman Empire rose to power, but the Romans remained under the long shadow of Greeks, whom they greatly admired. The children of Rome in the first century CE undoubtedly knew not only Homer's tales, but also Virgil's *Aeneid*, which recounted the stories of Aeneas, the Trojan hero who was credited with founding the Roman race. They also knew the wildly imaginative tales of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the tales of the gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines of the classical world. The power of these ancient stories remains with us, and modern writers and illustrators frequently turn to the Greek and Roman myths for inspiration and retelling.

Our culture is filled with references to these Classical stories—we speak of Achilles' heels, Herculean tasks, the Midas touch, Pandora's box, and sour grapes (a reference to one of Aesop's fables). Planets, galaxies and star clusters, days of the week, months of the year, automobile tires, and tennis shoes—all bear names of classical gods and heroes. These stories are both exciting and an important part of our cultural heritage—they should not be missed. A great many of these stories live today and children continue to find them fascinating. The retellings by the poet Padraic Colum (*The Children's Homer* and *The Golden Fleece*) are excellent sources for children. Most recently, Jeanne Steig's *A Gift from Zeus: Sixteen Favorite Myths* is a lively—sometimes racy—version for modern middle and high school audiences, and it is illustrated by William Steig's earthy, even ribald, drawings. It is just the kind of rendition to bring the stories to life for older readers. These myths are an essential part of culture and indispensable to any well-rounded education.