

# MYTHS

**A review of three books that revisit ancient myths:**

**Where Three Roads Meet by Salley Vickers**

**Binu and the Great Wall by Su Tong**

**Girl Meets Boy by Ali Smith**

Close your eyes and think of a story. I bet images from fairytales come flooding in — red sashes, scimitars, pools of tears, golden tombs: romantic visions that set us exploring what it is to be human. The mind's eye likes pictures. Metaphysical ideas roost happily in a physical setting.

Which is why — once upon a time — myths were not only ubiquitous, but in your face. Offerings would be left at roadside shrines, all situated significantly: on the very spot where Theseus unburied his sword or the grove where Aphrodite loosened her girdle to tempt Paris; Greek virgins' bridal wreaths were woven with the same flowers that bedecked Helen's; the ashes of the dead started their journey to the afterlife in myth-themed urns. (A gruesome aside; these paintings are particularly well preserved when human fat seeps into the pottery.)

Because we live in a print-heavy age, the publisher Canongate has sponsored as our myth-merchants not stonemasons, painters or dramatists, but wordsmiths. Ritual self-exploration comes courtesy of prettily bound pages. Six reworkings of ancient myths have been published, now come three more. It has become something of a sport waiting to discover who will be next to explore how we should/could/should not behave.

Salley Vickers steps up to Oedipus and his love for his mum Jocasta. In her *Where Three Roads Meet*, Freud flees Germany with his protectress, the (spearless) goddess Athena. A blind visitor tracks him down to North London. Freud's mouth and jaw are filleted by cancer, propped open by a grazing prosthesis, but the two share a dialogue.

Muthoi first meant “things that were spoken”. Myths transferred information, and Vickers' account is plump with shared knowledge; we learn of Freud's favourite pain relief, the daily routine of a Delphic priest, the Middle Eastern provenance of hollyhocks. The conceit is satisfying. Vickers, a psychologist as well as a novelist, gives the dying Freud the pleasure of reliving his touchstone Greek tragedy with an eyewitness. It is simply and strongly done, laying bare many of our mortal anxieties.

*Binu and the Great Wall* by Su Tong is even simpler — a straight retelling of an idiosyncratic journey. At first — with all the grace of a truculent four-year-old craving Cinderella rather than unfamiliar folklore sent by a well-meaning aunt — I couldn't settle to it. Myths work at their best when they are cocooned with familiar cultural references. Su Tong's disarming naivety (one chapter ends: “Overcome by exhaustion, Binu and the boy fell to the ground and slept.”) can feel weird. But then China's strange landscape — the Fragrant Forest, Great Swallow Mountain and the Blue Cloud Prefecture — starts to mesmerise. Binu's struggles, as she attempts to

deliver a coat to her husband, who has been pressganged into building the Great Wall, as she is chained to a coffin, and hunted by deer-boys and candy-selling assassins have the acuity of a dream.

The Chinese language is also a visual art, and the painterly quality of Tong's words is striking: a moon's silver hand strokes an oatfield. Lime-white slaves' mortar-rasped lungs spill out scarlet blood. Little surprise that Tong's *Raise the Red Lantern* became such a visually exciting film, and that this new myth-picture splashes in the memory.

Ali Smith's killer opener lays out her variegated palette: "Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says." *Her Girl Meets Boy* admits how humdrum are orthodox gender distinctions. Two eccentric sisters change the orientation of their lives thanks to Robin, a gay, spraycan-wielding activist.