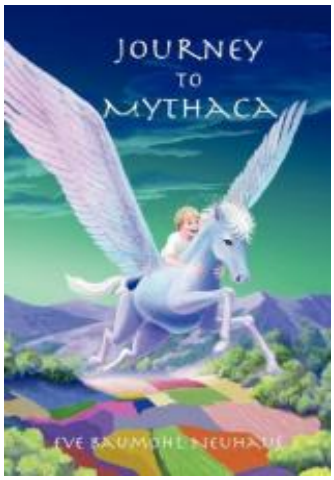
Journey to Mythaca

by Eve Baumohl Neuhaus



About the Book

Ivan, nearly eleven, and Marianna, twelve, find themselves in a miniature world when they shelter under a bush on a rainstorm. When Ivan brags about his city home, Magellan, a winged equus (please don't call him a horse), and Paracelsus, an ancient and slightly hard-of-hearing dragon, are convinced that the boy is describing the fabled city of Mythaca. As soon as Paracelsus gets the spell right and the children are small enough to ride on the backs of the mythical creatures, the four are off on an unforgettable quest.

The children are listening to the passed-down tales of Mythaca and its inscrutable antagonist, Maya, when Marianna discovers that she is growing wings. Unfortunately, the effects of the fruit that must have caused the transformation are unpredictable, and the wings shrivel up and disappear at the wrong moment. Soon the travelers are separated, and Magellan and Ivan fall into one of Maya's traps. The travelers eventually meet at the woodland workshop of Icaria, flying cat and featherer, who tries to fit the girl with artificial wings. Photinus Pyralis, a glowing creature from another world, asks each of the travelers to draw what wisdom they can from their adventures before presenting them with gifts. Magellan, Paracelsus, and Icaria receive some duct tape, a penknife, and a mysterious tool with a spinning disc at its end. Ivan is given a perspectus, a sort of helmet that will let him see from the point of view of anyone or anything once he learns to use it; Marianna gets the gift of languages, which, with some practice, will let her to understand the language of anyone or anything. The rest of their journey is not as easy as they hope. The group is again separated, there are riddles and paradoxes to resolve, and peace, both internal and external, to be made, before the portal to Mythaca will open.

Full of gentle humor and wisdom, **Journey to Mythaca** is a story about stories, set at the border between belief and reality. When Ivan loses patience with Paracelsus's tales of Maya, he cries out, "Why should I believe you? Have you ever seen her? Everything you know is just stories!" to which Paracelsus replies mildly, "Stories? It's all stories, Ivan. Our lives are stories. We live stories." In the end, beyond the uncertainty of not-knowing that that understanding brings, the children discover that some things, such as music, love, and friendship, have magical power in all the worlds they visit.

Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of the story, Ivan comes into the storyteller's living room as the old man is about to start a story. The boy glances at the clock, "though he knows its hands won't move during the telling." What does this indicate about the nature of time in stories? How many different kinds of time can you think of? How do they differ? What makes time stand still? What makes it slow down or speed up? What does, "Once upon a time," mean to you? How much control do you think we really have over time?

2. When the storyteller says the story opens in a world where magical beasts don't exist, Ivan thinks he's come to the wrong story. The storyteller then says, "or at least, no one knew they existed," and Ivan, much relieved, decides it's probably the right story after all. Can you think of an example of something you didn't believe in until you experienced it yourself? Do you believe in things or ideas that science can't prove? Where do you draw the line between what's imaginary and what's real? Do you think it's useful to believe in things that can't be proven?

3. The children are told that, so far, an inscrutable enemy has foiled every quest for Mythaca. Because it appeared as a winged serpent calling itself Maya a few times, the name stuck, but Mythaca's nemesis really has no set name, shape or gender, nor can its motives be easily understood. Ivan is so upset by the intangibility of such an antagonist that he almost quits the quest before it begins. Can you think of any examples of intangible or shape-changing enemies you have fought with in your own life?

4. Pyralis asks the travelers to share what they've learned on their journey before they receive their gifts. Marianna can't put what she learned into words, yet Pyralis gives her a gift anyway. What do you think she learned? Discuss the lessons each traveler shares and describe experiences you've had where you learned the same or a similar lesson.

5. Ivan is given a perspectus, a sort of helmet that will let him see from the point of view of anyone or any thing once he learns how to use it, and Marianna receives the gift of languages, with which she will be able to understand the language of anybody or anything. Can you think of a situation in which a perspectus or the ability to understand any language would be useful? Which of the two gifts do you think is the more valuable? If you had one or the other, how would you use it? Imagine a situation in which you have one of the gifts and describe your experience.

6. **Journey to Mythaca** begins with a quote by the poet, Muriel Rukeyser, "The universe in made of stories, not of atoms." In the story, Paracelsus tells Ivan, "Our lives are stories. We live stories." What do you think Rukeyser and Paracelsus mean? What are some of the stories told in your family that you live by? What are some of the important stories our culture tells? What stories are told in our churches, our schools? By our politicians? How do the stories we believe affect the way we act? How do stories connect us? Is it possible to change the stories we live? How would you go about trying to change a story you have always believed? Some people believe that changing the story can save the

earth. How could that be possible?

7. Two magical worlds are described in **Journey to Mythaca**, the upper world, where the children first meet the beasts, and the lower world, Grund, where Ivan and Magellan go on their own. What are some of the differences between the two? How is each of them like or unlike our own world?

8. In the end of the story, the travelers reach Mythaca. Or do they? What do the magical creatures think Mythaca is? What do you think Mythaca is? Do we all have a personal Mythaca we're searching for? What does your own Mythaca look like? What kind of journey would you have to take to reach it? What magical gift would you find useful along the way? Tell a story about your journey so far. Is your Mythaca very far away?

Author Bio

Eve Baumohl Neuhaus was born in Philadelphia in 1950, the much-loved only child of older parents who left Vienna when Hitler invaded in 1938. One of the stories with which she grew up was about her parents leaving their home forever with only one suitcase each, not once but twice, first from Vienna and then from France. Each time, they made the best of their circumstances and started over. To the day he died, her father's favorite song was Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien" ("No, I have no regrets.")

Resettled by the Quaker community, Neuhaus's mother went back to school to become a social worker, filling her daughter's early years with tales of children displaced by the war finding homes in America. Her father opened an appliance store, which kept him busy all day. Every evening, however, he found marvelous stories up his sleeve. Neuhaus grew up thinking all fathers had stories up their sleeves.

A shy and imaginative child who never quite fit in with her all-American neighbors, Neuhaus came of age in the sixties, loved the Beatles with all her heart, and easily found her place in the hippie world. Her passion for stories led her to major in English at Temple University, and then to spend a few years exploring both the inner and outer worlds.

In time, she married and moved to the country to raise children and goats. It was during this period that she was fortunate enough to have a classic experience of the guru coming to her door. He came after she'd given up the search for a teacher, of course, and the experience brought equal amounts of pain and growth. Neuhaus gratefully acknowledges the deep influence of Shri Mahant Swami Ganeshanda on **Journey to Mythaca**.

At her guru's suggestion, Neuhaus went back to school for a teaching certificate and spent the next two decades in the classroom, working with gifted children for majority of those years, but also running enrichment programs, working as a story-teller, teaching special needs populations, and facilitating learning in wonderfully diverse multi-age classrooms.

Her last class, a group of 6th, 7th and 8th graders in California, where she now lives, played a significant role in the genesis of Journey to Mythaca: the first 108 pages of the book were written collaboratively with the class. Neuhaus read new sections aloud daily for the students' critiques and suggestions, many of which were incorporated into the story.

After her years of teaching, Neuhaus completed a second Master's degree, this one in Mythological Studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute, and then finished writing **Journey to Mythaca**, which was published in October, 2006.

She currently runs workshops exploring the creative potential of myth in art and is working on a second Mythaca book, in which the magical creatures visit the children's world.

Critical Praise

"Journey to Mythaca directs our attention towards the parts of our experience that we want to discount or ignore because they are mysterious -- intangible. Through the eyes of two intrepid children, Ivan and Marianna, we journey into worlds within worlds and, as the story unfolds, we understand that 'not knowing' is the most difficult and the most important of lessons. This book offers an opportunity for both children and adults to consider the ways in which science, myth, spirituality and daily life converge to create our respective "realities."

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