



The Griffin and the Dinosaur: How Adrienne Mayor Discovered a Fascinating Link Between Myth and Science

Marc Aronson, Adrienne Mayor, Chris Muller (Illustrations)

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Growing up in South Dakota, Adrienne Mayor was the quiet girl who never raised her hand in class. Instead, she loved to wander the prairie seeking wonders and filling her mind with stories.

When she found herself in Athens, Greece, she plunged into reading the original versions of ancient myths--especially descriptions of the fabled griffin. As she read, an exciting idea took shape in her mind. Scholars had long treated accounts of the griffin as made-up fantasies. But to Mayor, they seemed to describe something ancient people had actually seen. What could that have been?

Mayor's quest to solve that mystery led her from books to ruined temples, from museums to the graves of great tattooed warriors. Finally, after poring over formerly top secret maps, she located the forbidding desert where nomadic gold hunters once entered the lair of the griffin--and she came face-to-face with her quarry.

Here is the story of Mayor's detective work, which has helped create a new science in which experts match myths and fossils and begin to see the world through our ancestors' eyes.

The Griffin and the Dinosaur: How Adrienne Mayor Discovered a Fascinating Link Between Myth and Science Details

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From Reader Review The Griffin and the Dinosaur: How Adrienne Mayor Discovered a Fascinating Link Between Myth and Science for online ebook

Cheryl says

Personally, 3.5 rounded up because if I were a kid I would have loved this, been inspired to read more non-fiction, and probably been inspired to have a similar career trajectory as did Mayor. World travel? Scholarship? Exploration? Science? Authorship? She's done it all. How fun, and how satisfying.

(Sorry, I don't know what exactly is imperfect about it for me right now... something idiosyncratic I'm sure. I do recommend the book.)

Vanessa says

So cool! I didn't realize these ideas were so recent. I'll be checking out more materials on/by Adrienne Mayor!

Becky B says

Adrienne Mayor grew up in a family of storytellers. Often those stories were inspired by artifacts or things found in nature. When she eventually went to spend some time studying ancient art in Greece, Adrienne realized that the stories of griffins weren't like fantasy stories, they were more like something inspired by a real object, like the stories her family used to tell. So she started to do more extensive research into griffins in art and what things ancients might have seen that would inspire stories about such creatures. Her research led her to fossils, and tracing down the griffin lore to match with a fossil that matched the first griffin mythology quite well.

This is a fascinating read. It looks longer than it is because it has so many photographs and illustrations included. Mayor's research took a *long* time but provides an excellent example of really digging to the roots of sources and checking those sources. The process of peer editing through journal articles is also highlighted (though it isn't called that). I think what's most inspiring about Adrienne Mayor's journey is that she didn't have any advanced degree while she pursued these studies, she was just really curious and dedicated to finding the truth. I found her theory to be quite interesting and plausible. We make up stories to explain things we see all the time, it makes sense that people 1,000s of years ago would do the same thing. A great book for those looking for a high-interest nonfiction read or for literature classes studying folklore, legends or mythology.

R. G. Nairam says

Fascinating! writing was a little meh at points, but great book.

Rob Chappell says

This book is an amazing, eye-opening read about the relationship between the fantastic creatures of Classical mythology and fossils of prehistoric creatures that have been (re)discovered over the last 200 years, because the major point of this book is that our ancient forebears were well aware of fossils and created legendary accounts of dragons, unicorns, griffins, etc., to explain their existence. Here's a fascinating, well-illustrated overview of this revolutionary hypothesis, along with an inspiring account of Adrienne Mayor's life and work in the sciences and the humanities (she originated this idea, based on years of research in the field and in numerous libraries around the world). Although the book is aimed at middle schoolers, students of all ages and armchair cryptozoologists alike will enjoy this tour-de-force where fact and fancy collide in an irresistible way.

Catalina Charles says

Gr 5-8. Marc Aronson has come together with folklorist/historian Adrienne Mayor to create this intriguing account of the development of the mythical creature the griffin of ancient lore. How did the ancients create these amazing creatures? Were they simply from a very creative mind or was there something in their environment that may have led them to believe in these creatures? Creatures such as the Cyclops and water monsters bear great resemblance to bones of ancient dinosaurs. The Griffin and the Dinosaur explains the journey that Mayor embarked on to discover if there was a connection between the myth of the griffin and facts based in science. Over the course of 8 well-written chapters we learn about Mayor life and her research. From a very young age Mayor sought answers to questions that became her life's work. A complementary blend of both photography and ancient artwork aid the readers' perception of the myths and science that are shared in this book. The Griffin and the Dinosaur will take the reader to many countries that Mayor visited to conduct her research. Each chapter provides details of different aspects of Mayors research such as The Cyclops and the Griffin Pup and Battlefield of the Gods. A good addition to most any collection to enhance mythology, art, and connections the scientific world.

Katy Charles, Virgil Elementary School, Cortland, NY

School Library Journal Reviewer

Scott says

This was a great though provoking book, asking "what if the mythology of Greece were based on tangible evidence?", and following the quest of Mayor to discover the origin of the Griffin legend in particular. With some other legends tosses in, this was an enjoyable, succinct read.

Shannon says

This audio was over before I knew it.
Interesting.

Tom Erickson says

This was an interesting book about proving that people tell stories, but within the stories there is sometimes truth hidden. I think this would be a great book for any fantasy or science fiction enthusiasts. I liked the illustrations and real life photos.

Bonnie says

Another engaging title by Marc Aronson. I love the idea of a girl taking years to take a closer look at things that she is curious about--and how Aronson takes us back to her grandfather's influence on her world view before bringing in the research topic. This will be great paired with *Monsters & Legends* by Davide Cali, another title that addresses the link between real animals and mythological creatures.

Paul Warner says

This non-fiction book for young people let's you know about a woman named Adrienne Mayor who carefully read the ancient myths and texts of Greeks and Romans to see if the ideas for some of their mythical creatures actually came from their own excavation and study of dinosaur bones. This is the story of a curious and persevering person who came up with new ideas to solve the mystery of the Griffin, and helped to invent a new science in the process. Adrienne Mayor, by the way, became an author, research scholar, and educator, and her work continues: today she and others travel the world matching myths to fossils.

Betsy says

I remember back in 2007 when the American Museum of Natural History in NYC premiered a show called "Mythic Creatures". It made a fair amount of press and with good reason. It's not every day you see full-scale models of mythical creatures presented in a serious museum setting. The show got some nice write-ups but though I listened to the explanations of why it was going on, I didn't quite catch the whole point. To me it just sort of sounded like a cheap ploy to lure more patrons into the museum's exhibits. A bit of the old P.T. Barnum, albeit with a classier imprimatur. Years passed and I forgot about the show right up until the publication of *The Griffin and the Dinosaur*. As I read the book, memories of the show came back to me, as did my complete and utter misunderstanding of what it had been trying to accomplish. Fortunately, I am happy to report that once in a while in this life a gal gets a second chance. With Marc Aronson and Adrienne Mayor's hard work, now I have a book before me that clarifies the true connection between the prehistoric and the mythical. Focused through a single woman's obsessive search, this book comes off as both a riveting historical mystery as well as a wonderful example of how a person's passions might take them places they never imagined they might travel. The future isn't written in stone but it might just be written in bones.

It was kind of a goofy idea. The sort of thing a person might consider off-handedly then forget about five minutes later. But for Adrienne Mayor, the idea stuck. It was simple too. You see, after doing lots of research at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Ms. Mayor noticed a strange pattern. Reading texts

by ancient Greeks she noticed that when they discussed creatures like griffins they always sounded like they knew about these animals firsthand. Is it possible that these creatures were conjured up after the Greeks found some ancient bones of one kind of another? Not a natural born scholar, Adrienne always considered herself more of an artist than anything else. Still, this question about the griffin's origins intrigued her. What she could not have expected was how her search would take her from Greece to Samos to The Museum of the Rockies to distant China. Infinitely interesting, illustrated with multiple photographs, sketches, ancient images and contemporary illustrations, Mayor not only shows where our ancestors got their seemingly goofy ideas, but gives these people a form of credit and respect that is certainly their due.

Every Marc Aronson book is different. Generalizing is not something you can really do when you discuss him as an author. I have found in the past that some of his books ran a bit on the long and lengthy side, but beyond that there aren't any real connecting threads between one project and another. Yet if I found Mr. Aronson to be a bit more loquacious at times than he needed to be, no such objection could possibly be leveled at *The Griffin and the Dinosaur*. Coming in at a svelte 48 pages, a number normally associated with slightly longer picture books, Aronson wastes no time getting to the meat of the matter. Turn to the first page and there's Adrienne, age six. Four pages later she's studying in Athens while her fiancé works on his ancient Greek fortress research. Aronson cuts to the chase, helped in large part by his interviews with Adrienne. The result is a well-rounded portrait of a single woman going against the odds to prove something both interesting and odd. It's research presented to kids as adventure in a format they're going to actually WANT to read. How rare is that?

I know that one reviewer of this book was dismayed by an interpretation of Marc Aronson's message here that says that people who closely observe the world around them are just as good as professional scholars in the field. For the record, I do not happen to agree that that is what Aronson is saying. I think it far more likely that Aronson is displaying the need for balance. You can sit behind dusty tomes all day long with your professional degree hanging up upon a wall, but if you don't go out and try new ideas and speak to new people and even do a bit of exploring (of one kind or another) then you cannot be surprised when a woman like Ms. Mayor goes about making a fabulous, hitherto unknown (or unproved) discovery. By the same token, the person who observes the world around them closely but never picks up a book or does even rudimentary research is going to completely miss the potential connections out there that could justify their work. Mayor exhibited both a willingness to learn and a sharp-eyed curiosity that was willing to question. In an era when so much research is beholden to outside interests, it does the heart good to read a book about a woman who set out to discover what many might have considered impossible to prove.

The extra details turn out to be just as enchanting. The entire history of the Scythians and how they might have been an inspiration for some of the Amazon women tales out there is captivating. Even more so their gold, as well as the discovery of Megalopolis. And then there's that amazing look at mammoth skulls and how they might have inspired the stories of the Cyclops. It all got me to thinking about the role of myths in the world and their beginnings. Maybe a kid will read this book and begin to wonder what the roots of other great myths might be. Will they start poring over Hindi and Norse myths, looking for clues to the past? Or will they simply get a better sense of one of the big themes of the book: that ancient people had reasons for making up the stories that they did. For me, that was a moral well worth taking away from the story. We have a tendency to look down our nose at our ancient ancestors, but as this book shows, these people had their reasons for thinking the way that they did. We should never be so egotistical as to believe that we are the first people to find the bones of long extinct creatures and to make up reasons for their existence.

As for the art, for the most part it's okay but artist Chris Muller gets off to a shaky start. His presence in the book makes a lot of sense. I could completely understand the need to ratchet up the kid-friendly elements of the story, of course. If you name your book *The Griffin and the Dinosaur* then you better bloody well have a

couple griffins in there (to say nothing of the dinosaurs). In fact, when Muller is working on the mythical, he is at his best. The cover, for example, is striking, as are his images of an Amazon fighting a griffin or a sleeping griffin protecting its nest. Where it all breaks down is when he has to deal with reality. The publication page says that the paintings were made with “traditional media – pencil and watercolors – and digital painting.” Traditional media is fine with me, but the digital painting proves to be occasionally painful. For example, a preliminary image of young Adrienne dowsing above the skeleton of a dinosaur is baffling partly because I couldn’t find any mentions of dowsing in the text and partly because the CGI cloud cover contrasts horribly with the drawn Adrienne. It feels like a cheap image in an otherwise classy book. Happily, it is the only moment when I felt that way. Other images in the book border or plunge right into the fantastical, and that’s appropriate for the moments they tend to illustrate.

This is the Possession by A.S. Byatt of children’s literature. An honest-to-goodness historical mystery complete with an early hypothesis, a likable heroine, multiple dead ends, and at the end? GOLD! Literally. It succeeds at doing many things at once, but never runs too long or bores the reader with its findings. Mayor is a likable and ultimately unintimidating subject for kids to follow. For those children obsessed with myths and legends, this might be the ideal way to transition them gently from the world of the fantastical into one of research and exploration. For Percy Jackson lovers everywhere.

For ages 9-12.

Margaux Collier says

Adrienne Mayor is a little girl who grew up in Sioux Fall, Dakota. She loved to “walk across the endless flat prairie” (Aronson pg.7) She imagined how life was for the people that lived before her, Adrienne felt like she was following the footsteps of her great-grandfather, George Halleck Center. Her dad, John, liked collecting things such as arrowheads, a Gila monster, snapping turtles, butterflies, and creatures that lived underneath for million years. As Adrienne grew, she was the kind of that was shy, quiet, would never speak, and never raises her hand. What she loved to do in her spare time was read myths of Greece and Roman mythology. Adrienne went to college in Minnesota, where she studied printmaking. Adrienne loved to spend her time in the library, and there she would read ancient tales. As she was reading a story, she saw something that was quite familiar to her, the hybrid of a lion and an eagle, which they called a “Griffin.” Adrienne started asking herself “what kind of bones, what sorts of fossils, might have inspired them” (Aronson pg. 13) One day, Adrienne finally had her answer to her question, the ancient Greeks came across bones coming out of the ground, on the island of Samos. Adrienne rushed to Samos, to find the answer to her questions, could it be the Griffin’s bones? She had convinced the mayor of the town to open the storeroom, where the bones should be. When she entered the room, Adrienne saw the bones of the famous ancestor if the giraffe. Although, they didn’t look like the Griffin at all, so she was quite disappointed. After many tries any disappointments, Adrienne was finally able to find what she wanted. “Adrienne’s decade-long quest to prove that the Griffin legend was based on a real fossil always had a larger aim.” (Aronson pg.38)

Since The Griffin and the Dinosaur is about Greek mythology, it makes the reader learn more facts, about Greek mythology such as; Samos which is a place located next to Greece was a center of worship. They worshipped Hera, who was Zeus’s wife. There the main statues were bronze griffins, which represented Hera in her honor. Another fact is that Cyclopes and the Griffin were not superstitions or myths. In fact, they are descriptions of real life fossil bones. The reader also learns that the Cyclopes are extinct mammoth and the Griffin was a Protoceratops. Greek myths explain that the Earth was populated with many creatures that no

longer exist. Those creatures were destroyed in many wars, started by Zeus, other gods, and heroes like Hercules. Another myth says that Zeus defeated the Giants with stems of lightning.

Thus, my favorite part of the book was when Adrienne finally found out that the Griffin existed. It was my favorite part because as a reader, I could feel how happy Adrienne must have been. Although my least favorite part was the beginning because it explained Adrienne's life as she was little and it wasn't interesting. I would recommend this book to students or adults that would like to learn more about the history of the Griffin or learn new myths from ancient Greece. Also, I would recommend this book for a project or anything like that.

Jessie says

Don't pick this up expecting a quick read-aloud picture book; there's a lot of text, and it's separated into short chapters. But it's really well-done.

Really encourages noticing the world around you and being curious about it. I also liked that it talked about how we shouldn't think of past peoples as being superstitious and not seeing the world around them. They noticed things like we did, and they tried to make sense of it like we do.

The book talks about Mayor not having formally studied in her fields, but it makes clear how much in-depth work and study she had to do in order to make her discoveries.

I liked the mix of images of historical art and artifacts, Mayor's art, and art made for this book.

Joan says

This was an excellent book and is gorgeous as well. It has one big problem: I just don't see the book being used a lot by kids. Those who find it and love mythology (a lot now, thanks to Riordan) will really enjoy this book. It will open their imaginations to wondering what else has been considered straight fiction that has a basis in reality. But this book won't be used a lot for homework assignments and reports, more the pity. It isn't recounting any myths, it doesn't give enough info to be used on dinosaurs, but is really an interdisciplinary book that won't be used much. Aronson did a wonderful thing collaborating with Mayor to produce a book for kids and I'm thrilled National Geographic published this book. I just wish there was some way to bring it to more people's attention. Hmm, wonder if there is any way to bring out another edition of the book with Riordan providing a blurb?

Mayor read the story of griffins in Greek mythology and wondered if there could be any truth to them. Oh maybe not exactly as the Greeks represented them, but the core basics of the myth. After much time and discouragement by official academic scholars, she made an amazing discovery where she was able to combine myth and dinosaur fossils into one map to show where the myth originated and what was the true origin of the story. However, she didn't stop there. This was merely the first step for her. She felt this could be done with many people's mythology to further knowledge. In other words, while the Greeks were amazing storytellers, a lot of what they told was not necessarily made up when you got to the core of the stories. This is true of other ancient people as well. Mayor is now being consulted by many different countries over the

possible reality of their country's myths. She has brought mythology out of the amused condescension that is most adults' reaction: We modern people know so much more now. Not so fast. There is plenty our ancestors knew that we never realized they knew. And they knew how to observe their surroundings a lot better than we do today! Highly recommended and if any librarian or teacher has a suggestion on how to bring this book to kids' attention, I'd love to hear it.
