



A Short History of Myth

By Karen Armstrong

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This brilliant, readable synthesis of the history of mythology and the function it serves to humanity is the launch title of the groundbreaking publishing event, *The Myths* . “Human beings have always been mythmakers.” So begins Karen Armstrong’s concise yet compelling investigation into myth: what it is, how it has evolved, and why we still so desperately need it. She takes us from the Paleolithic period and the myths of the hunters right up to the “Great Western Transformation” of the last five hundred years and the discrediting of myth by science. The history of myth is the history of humanity, our stories and beliefs, our curiosity and attempts to understand the world, which link us to our ancestors and each other. Myths help us make sense of the universe. Heralding a major series of retellings of international myths by authors from around the world, Armstrong’s characteristically insightful and eloquent book serves as a brilliant and thought-provoking introduction to myth in the broadest sense -- and explains why if we dismiss it, we do so at our peril.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This is an pedestrian study from the noted and popular religion scholar, in which Armstrong takes a historical approach to myth, tracing its evolution through a series of periods, from the Paleolithic to the postmyth Great Western Transformation. Each period developed myths reflecting its major concerns: images of hunting and the huntress dominated the myths of the Paleolithic, while the myths of Persephone and Demeter, Isis and Osiris developed in the agricultural Neolithic period. By the Axial Age (200 B.C. through A.D. 1500), myths became internalized, so that they no longer needed to be acted out. Reason, says Armstrong, largely supplanted myth in the Post-Axial Period, which she sees as a source of cultural and spiritual impoverishment; she even appears, simplistically, to attribute genocide to the loss of "the sense of sacredness" myth offers. Armstrong goes on to relate that in the 20th century, a number of writers, such as Eliot, Joyce, Mann and Rushdie, recovered the power of myth for contemporary culture. Although the book offers no new perspectives or information on the history of myth, it does provide a functional survey of mythology's history. But a more engaging choice would be Kenneth Davis's *Don't Know Much About Mythology* (Reviews, Sept. 5). (Nov.)

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From [Booklist](#)

In this essay, superpopular religion historian Armstrong (*Islam: A Short History*, 2000) fastens the attributes of myth to the major chronological categories of human history. At each transition from the Paleolithic to scientific eras, she argues that a mythical conception of natural forces has drifted ever further from interpretation in pragmatic and logical terms, such that myth in modern times is a beleaguered species of fiction. To Armstrong this state reflects a profound misunderstanding of what myth is and does. Defining it as an art form that, on the assumption of the existence of an invisible realm of reality, protects one against the despair arising from the limitations of the tactile world (death in particular), Armstrong relates how mythology has historically been reformulated. She traces a theogony, illustrating it with examples from Chinese, Middle Eastern, Egyptian, and Greek cultures, as sky worship phased into anthropomorphic gods and then into ethical systems such as those of Confucius or Jesus. Written with great explanatory clarity, Armstrong's review of mythology is an efficient, fascinating experience. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

"With characteristic incisiveness, Armstrong explores the development of myth from prehistory to the present day." —*Daily Mail* (UK)

"A Short History of Myth is a good companion piece to the series, and a fine primer on the basics of mythological truth."

—*Toronto Star*

"Armstrong has the gift of being able to compress a lot of information into a small space without losing focus or clarity ... and she succeeds admirably here."

—*Edmonton Journal*

"A Short History of Myth is a handy stand-alone overview of the ever-evolving partnership between myth and man from Paleolithic times to the present. Succinct and cleanly written, it is hugely readable and . . . often moving. . . . Armstrong's exposition is streamlined and uncluttered without being simplistic."

—The New York Times Book Review

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Yolanda Ocasio:

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Deborah Mazzarella:

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