

NEPTUNIA. Teacher notes.

Cassie Georgiana Odysseos has the potential to become a champion athlete. However, both her training and her comfortable life are interrupted when Cassie and her little brother Timmy are sent to live with elderly Mike and Peg Calypso in Ithaca, a village without a training pool. However, when asked to deliver an important message to the underwater city of *Neptunia*, Cassie must use all her strength, strategy and spirit to survive a marathon swim.

Extract from Chapter 3.

...When I peer into the box, a tremor, a ripple, seems to disturb the surface. I breathe heavily. Use my t-shirt to polish the insides. My reflection stares mournfully back. These last few weeks my face has changed. Surely those high cheekbones, wide mouth and square chin belong to someone else. Not to Cassandra Georgiana Odysseos.

I close the lid to examine the outer side. Though the metal has dulled to a darkish grey, it's decorated with a relief of seals, penguins and dolphins. The animals are so real they seem snap-frozen in an abandoned dance. The sides of the box are inlaid with shells and raised engravings of more water animals. Sea-otters, penguins, fish, crabs, even molluscs. On the bottom, etched in copperplate writing is:

'Magic moment in my hand

Help me swim to Neptune's land.'

Is the poem a spell? Unlikely. Spells only belong in fairy stories, not in the real life I presently inhabit. But I figure this box must be valuable and an empty silo is a strange place to find it. Though Timmy is reluctant to hand it over, I convince him saying, 'We'll take it home and show it to Uncle Mike.'

I stow it under my arm. Then slowly, reluctantly, we make our way back to the Calypsos.

OUTLINE OF STORY:

Cassie Georgiana Odysseos has the potential to become a champion swimmer. However, when her father Paz, leaves home, Cassie's mother sends Cassie and her little brother Timmy to stay with elderly Mike and Peg Calypso in Ithaca, a small country town without a swimming pool. Finding a small bronze box, the magic entry to *Neptunia*, Cassie is asked by Miss Iris Laertes, a previous Olympic swimming champion, to carry an important message to

that city of water. Lost in an unknown ocean, Cassie's plasticine figures come to life when a wrathful Mer-King Neptune holds Cassie responsible for the damage humans are inflicting on his oceans. Athena, a telepathic turtle, informs Cassie that before she reaches *Neptunia*, the Mer-King will do everything in his power to exact his revenge and that she must undergo three dangerous trails before he will listen to her message. However, Cassie manages to use 'strength and strategy' to conquer the dangerous One-Eyed Octopus, the wily Enchantress, and the fearsome Boil and Bubble. On Lotus Island, Cassie loses her memory in the Lake of Forgetfulness, but shows 'spirit' when she rescues Athena and Jono Seal from a shark attack. Cassie finally delivers her message in *Neptunia*. She returns home where she wins a gold medal, but also knowing what other things are important. Between adventures, the story pictures her life back home.

In FANTASY, the trend is that

1. The story starts with the premise: 'in a familiar situation, what if something different and unusual happens'?

Cassie has been sent to live in Ithaca after her parents split. But it when she is asked to tackle a dangerous marathon swim that she discovers what is truly important to her.

2. The story describes something that is probably not possible.

Finding a magic silver box that takes Cassie to an unknown ocean to warn Mer-king Neptune of an impending disaster to the city of Neptunia.

3. The story has some kind of consistent internal logic

The logic here is that there really is a magic ocean and an underwater city ruled by King Neptune.

4. The story can contain unusual but sustained characters with whom the reader can identify .

Some examples include Athena, a telepathic turtle. The evil one-eyed octopus. The cunning Siren. The quarrelsome Boil and Bubble.

5. The story contains believable everyday characters.

Cassie. Timmy. Yia-Yia. Mike and Peg Calypso. Ms Iris Laertes.

6. The story can be based on previous stories.

Each human character has the same name as Odysseos in 'The Odyssey'. However, many of the other characters Cassie meets have other names.

“Neptunia” is very loosely based on Homer’s ‘Odyssey’.

The Odyssey” is a five thousand year-old story that follows on from ‘The Illiad” - the story of the Trojan Wars. “The Odyssey” describes the many adventures Ulysses (a.k.a. Odysseos) encounters as he sails home after those wars. Ulysses is a favourite of the goddess Athena. However, she cannot protect him when he incurs the god Poseidon’s wrath for accidentally killing the sea-god’s son. Now he must brave the terrible Cyclops, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and other life-threatening monsters before he can come to his home island of Ithaca. Even then he must rid his land of Penelope’s would-be suitors and re-establish justice and prosperity. No one is quite sure who wrote “The Odyssey”. But it’s generally believed that a blind poet called Homer included many ancient myths and legends into his epic poem. Historians think that the magical characters were used to warn sailors away from areas where they might get hurt.

SOME OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE ODYSSEY INCLUDE:

- Ulysses/ Odysseos: the adventurer who must travel twenty years before Poseidon allows him to return home.
- Ithaca: Ulysses/ Odysseos is this island’s king.
- Laertes: Ulysses/Odysseos’ father.
- Poseidon: the god of the seas and of earthquakes. Also known as Neptune.
- Athena: the goddess of hunting and of wisdom
- Cyclops: a terrible one eyed monster.
- Scylla and Charybdis: the seven headed serpent
- The Sirens: their song lures sailors to their death.
- Lotus Eaters: folk with no memory or thought for the future.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. What kind of village is Ithaca?
2. Cassie is very angry with her father, yet she both hates and loves him. Do you think she has good reasons for her mixed feelings?
3. Ms. Laertes and Athena are very similar in many ways. What most stands out about them apart from their advanced age?
4. Jan, the swimming coach, is very determined that her squad be successful. Do you think she expects too much?

5. Describe the more frightening creatures Cassie has to overcome in her mammoth swim. You could try drawing them. Make them as terrifying as they might seem if you had to swim towards them.
6. Why does Cassie agree to follow Ms Laertes instructions ? What happens once Cassie plummets into that unknown ocean?
7. Imagine you are a champion swimmer. What are the three elements you must always remember?
8. Cassie's adventures continue as she overcomes all her trials. Can you describe them?
9. What memories of Norris Park and her friends does she have?
10. Do you think this adventure actually takes place or is just a dream? If you think it is a dream, then how come Cassie finds that unusual box? How come Ms. Laertes has sent her on this dangerous mission? How come she wakes in her bed wearing a coral necklace? Or is all that a dream as well?
11. Do you like the idea of weaving fantasy and reality together? Or does it annoy you?
12. *Neptunia* is a very unusual city. Can you describe it in your own words?
13. By the end of the novel, Cassie has learnt a great deal about herself, the people surrounding her and her swimming. What are they?

MORE ACTIVITIES:

- Make a story-board or collage to convey 'NEPTUNIA'.
- Mock up an interview with Athena with you as the interviewer. Ask a friend to be the interviewer.
- Then change roles.
- Illustrate five different covers for this story.
- Find and/or draw the magic box that takes Cassie to that unknown ocean.

WRITING EXERCISES:

1. Design your own magic box.
2. Write a story called "ATHENA CAME TO OUR SCHOOL" and this is what happened....
3. Sketch a cover for your story.
4. You are trapped inside that magic ocean. What do you like about it? What do you dislike? What do you decide to change? How do you go about doing this?
5. Strength, Strategy and Spirit are needed to become a successful athlete. Do you agree?

6. Strength, Strategy and Spirit are needed to overcome more than activities than just sport!
Do you agree?

DEBATE:

1. Very few athletes are successful.
2. It is dangerous to try and fight mythical creatures like Boil and Bubble.
3. Not all sea creatures are evil.
4. All these stories from 'The Odyssey' are merely folklore. There is nothing to learn from them.

WHAT INSPIRED THIS STORY?

I was always intrigued by Homer's 'Illiad' and 'Odyssey' and regard them as a vehicle of much modern fiction eg 'Ulysses' by James Joyce. But my problem was how to make these classics relevant to kids who might be more interested in computer games and athletics? Thus I had the idea of taking some of the more exciting bits from the Odyssey and placing these in this fantasy. And because so many couples separate, I was aware of how hard their children might find this break.