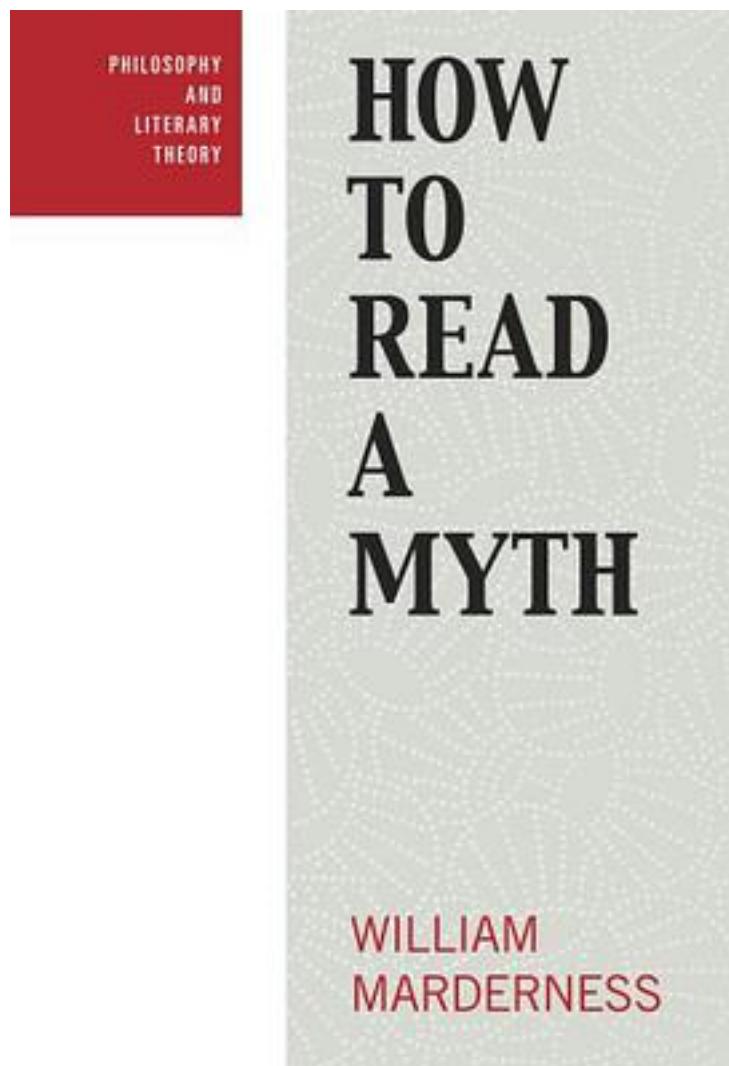


How to Read a Myth



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著者: Marderness, William

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Confusion surrounds the idea of myth. In common parlance, the term myth often means falsehood, as in the sentence The administration's claim that inflation is under control is a myth. Scholars understand myth in a deeper sense, as an important expression of a society's values. Scholars study myths of the past, such as ancient Greek and Roman myths, and myths of contemporary society, such as those embodied in sports, politics, and religion. Roland Barthes and Mircea Eliade pioneered two contrasting yet equally influential theories of myth. Until now, no one has successfully integrated Barthes' interpretation of myth as a system of signs and Eliade's interpretation of myth as a sacred narrative. In this important contribution to the study of myth, philosopher William Marderness proposes a comprehensive theory that accounts for the diverse interpretations of Barthes and Eliade, among others.

Marderness articulates four ways of understanding myth: mythical reading (myth as truth), cultural reading (myth as cultural convention), extra mythical reading (myth as enigma), and mythological reading (myth as artifice). Through this interpretive framework, Marderness explicates portions of the Bible, Virgil's "Aeneid", Anchee Min's "Red Azalea", and Julia Alvarez's "In the Time of the Butterflies". Marderness shows us through diverse contexts how his comprehensive theory enriches our understanding of myth as cultural expression.

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