



## 2012 WINNER

### THE SONG OF ACHILLES BY MADELINE MILLER

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Madeline Miller is the author of *The Song of Achilles*, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction 2012, was shortlisted for the Stonewall Writer of the Year 2012, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller, and was translated into twenty-five languages. Her second novel, *Circe*, was shortlisted for the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction. Madeline holds an MA in Classics from Brown University, and she taught Latin, Greek and Shakespeare to high school students for over a decade. She has also studied at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, and at Yale School of Drama, where she focused on the adaptation of classical texts to modern forms. Her essays have appeared in publications including the *Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Lapham's Quarterly* and *NPR.org*. She lives outside Philadelphia.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

Greece in the age of heroes. Patroclus, an awkward young prince, has been exiled to the court of King Peleus and his perfect son Achilles. Despite their differences, the boys develop a tender friendship, a bond which blossoms into something deeper as they grow into young men. When Thetis, Achilles' goddess mother, sends him away from court to be trained by Chiron the centaur, Patroclus follows.

But when Helen of Sparta is kidnapped, Achilles is dispatched to distant Troy to fulfil his destiny in the

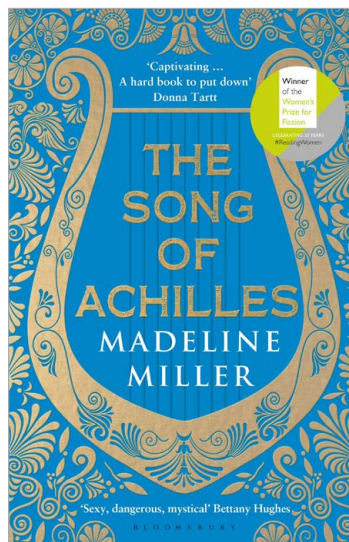
Trojan War as the most glorious warrior the world has ever known. Torn between love and fear for his friend, Patroclus follows, little knowing that the years that follow will test everything they hold dear.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Madeline Miller's extensive classical knowledge and research underpins this exemplary retelling of a well-known Greek myth, and yet Miller's version brims with a vital sense of humanity, ensuring that a modern reader is deeply invested in its characters; the same can be said of her second book *Circe*, a re-working on *The Odyssey* told from a nymph's point of view. We feel deeply sympathetic for Patroclus, a really quite average boy, sent away from his own family to a court of strangers; a boy who, though he can hardly believe it himself, is befriended by golden, perfect Prince Achilles. Miller gives us a love story, written entirely from one side. In so doing, she tells the tale of a hero through

the eyes of someone who loves him for his humanity, someone who watches him while he sleeps and knows him at his most vulnerable. In the end, perhaps it's Patroclus who is the real hero – the young man who refuses to stop loving Achilles, even when he knows his lover's death is inevitable.

Miller's writing is fluid and clear, adopting the cadence and rhythm of a myth, whilst retaining all the action and magic of the original.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

The story of Achilles and the Trojan War was originally told as part of the rich mythology of Ancient Greece. Mythology represents what its parent culture sees as 'universal truths' about the human condition: what do you know about what the ancient Greeks thought about male friendship and love between men? How is Achilles and Patroclus' relationship depicted by Madeline Miller, and how do we see their relationship with the lens of our modern understanding of love, identity and sexuality? Is it rare for you to read a book depicting this kind of relationship between men? How does Achilles and Patroclus' relationship compare with the relationships of men in more modern fiction? Choose some modern examples and contrast them.

## QUESTIONS

Thetis really doesn't want Achilles and Patroclus to be friends. What might be her reasoning?

What do you think of Thetis? Does your opinion of her change by the end of the book?

In the original myth, Patroclus is a minor character. Why might Madeline Miller have written her novel from his point of view? How does Madeline Miller represent the theme of destiny in this novel?

Do you think there is a difficulty in depicting gods as fictional characters, in terms of making those characters more three-dimensional and relatable? Does Miller achieve this? Is there a good balance in the novel between the necessary grandeur of myth and the more mundane realities of being human?



Chiron, a wise man who lives out of the context of the court and conventional life, seems to understand Patroclus' feelings for Achilles. Is there an 'otherness' about Chiron and if so, how does Miller explore this?

## NEXT STEPS

Find a Greek myth you like (or don't like very much!) and rewrite the main bones of the story from a minor character's point of view. How does it change the story? How does the minor character feel about what happens? They might perceive things very differently indeed.

The Trojan Horse is such an iconic idea now that we use it in conversation as a widely understood

concept rather than part of a story. Find another intriguing turn of phrase that you don't know the history of, and write a story that in some way expresses what you think might be the concept or history of the phrase (or, look it up, and use the actual reason as inspiration for a story). Here are some odd British-isms you might use:

- Sweet Fanny Adams
- The apple of my eye
- A flash in the pan
- Kicking the bucket
- Bob's your uncle

**“ THIS IS A MORE THAN WORTHY WINNER: ORIGINAL, PASSIONATE, INVENTIVE AND UPLIFTING ”**

JOANNA TROLLOPE  
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2012

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*CIRCE* BY MADELINE MILLER

*A THOUSAND SHIPS* BY NATALIE HAYNES

*THE SILENCE OF THE GIRLS* BY PAT BARKER