

# MADELINE MILLER

## The Song of Achilles

WINNER OF THE 2012 ORANGE PRIZE FOR FICTION

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## Reader's Guide

Includes a Note from the Author, Mythological Background & Discussion Questions

### Note from the Author

I have loved ancient Greece since I was five and my mother began reading me the Greek myths. I was enthralled: by the larger-than-life gods, the epic adventures, and most particularly by the stories of the Trojan War, with its noble and deeply flawed heroes. “Sing, goddess, of the terrible rage of Achilles,” begins the Iliad. The words resonated in me, lingering long after my mother had closed the book and turned out the light.

Years later, when I became a student of Greek and Latin, I immediately sought out the Iliad. Achilles’ story was just as gripping as it had always been, and I found myself particularly moved by his desperate grief over the loss of his companion Patroclus. Patroclus is no more than a minor

character in the Iliad, yet Achilles mourns him with a shocking intensity, unlike anything else in the entire work. Why? Who is this man whose death could undo the mighty Achilles?

The answers I found—about Patroclus' exile, his compassion and loyalty, his courageous and gentle heart—eventually became The Song of Achilles. I hope that you will enjoy reading their story as much as I have loved writing it.

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## Mythological Background

The story of the Trojan war begins with the wedding of the mortal Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis. All the gods are invited to this lavish feast except one: Eris, the goddess of strife. Angry at not being included, she comes to the party anyway, just long enough to throw a golden apple into the crowd. On it is written: “for the fairest.”

Immediately the three most powerful goddesses, Hera, queen of the gods; Athena, goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, begin to quarrel over which of them deserves the apple most. At an impasse, they present their arguments to the king of the gods, Zeus, who wisely declines to be the judge. Instead, he picks Paris, a beautiful young prince of Troy, to make the final choice.

The three goddesses appear to Paris, each with a tempting reward if he chooses her. Hera promises unlimited power, Athena exceptional wisdom, and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife. She does not add that this woman, Helen, is already married.

The rest is (mythological) history. Paris chooses Aphrodite and she in turn helps him steal Helen from her husband Menelaus, thus starting the Trojan War. She also becomes his personal protector, and in the Iliad it is she and the god Apollo who are Troy's staunchest defenders. The other two goddesses declare their eternal enmity towards Troy and, joined by the sea-god Poseidon, conspire to aid the Greeks in destroying the city.

Meanwhile, the now-wedded Thetis becomes pregnant by Peleus. The child is Achilles, who will grow up to play his own part in the war against Troy.

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## A Word about the Heel

There is no such thing as a definitive Greek myth. Examine the tales of any hero and you will find at least half a dozen variations. Some are small—the names of their parents change, or how many children they had. Others are huge—Did Helen actually go to Troy? Or was it only a golden phantom, meant to take her place while she escaped to Egypt? Achilles himself continued to have new adventures right up through the Middle Ages (where he is credited with a chivalric romance with the Trojan princess Polyxena).

Achilles' most famous myth—his fatally vulnerable heel—is actually a very late story. Our earliest account of it is by a Roman author, almost a millennium after the Iliad and the Odyssey were first composed. During those thousand years a number of other stories popped up to explain Achilles' seeming invincibility, but the Iliad and Odyssey contain the simplest: he wasn't really invincible, just extraordinarily gifted in battle. Since the Iliad and Odyssey were my primary inspiration, and since their interpretation seemed more realistic, this was the version I chose to follow.

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## Discussion Questions for The Song of Achilles

- 1) In the Iliad, Patroclus is a relatively minor character. Why do you think the author chose him to be her narrator? Which other figures in the story might make interesting narrators?
- 2) Near the beginning of their friendship, Achilles tells his father that he values Patroclus because “he is surprising.” What do you think Achilles means by that? How is Patroclus different from the other foster boys? Why?
- 3) What do you think are the reasons behind Thetis' opposition to Patroclus?
- 4) How do the boys change during their time with Chiron? Do the centaur's lessons continue to be a guiding force in their lives?
- 5) On the island of Scyros, what motivates Deidameia's desire to speak to Patroclus alone? What does she hope to achieve?
- 6) To what extent does Achilles' ultimate destiny shape his choices? Is there such a thing as free will in this world?
- 7) Historical events can sometimes turn upon the will or personality of a single person. Aside from Achilles, are there other characters whose faults or virtues significantly affect the Trojan War's outcome?

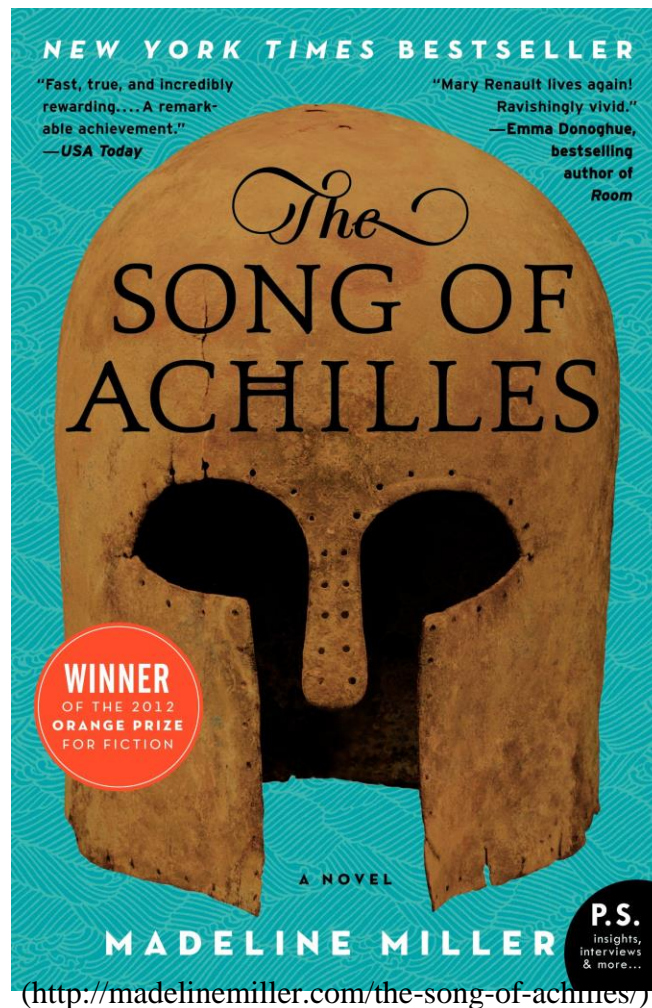
- 8) Myths are often called “timeless” for their insights into human behavior. What parallels do you see between the characters and conflicts of this novel and today? What pieces of Patroclus and Achilles’ story can be universalized?
- 9) What is the significance of song and music in the novel?
- 10) Patroclus is often a self-critical narrator. Consider how other characters in the novel regard him—do they see him in the same way he sees himself?
- 11) As represented in the novel, what are some of Odysseus’ defining qualities? Do you find him a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
- 12) Consider the explosive falling out between Achilles and Agamemnon. In what ways are each of them at fault for the rift? Could it have been avoided, or was it inevitable given that Achilles’ fate is determined?
- 13) Achilles and Briseis each claim Patroclus’ loyalty and affection. In what ways are they similar or different? What are the dynamics of each of their relationships with Patroclus?
- 14) What does the encounter between Priam and Achilles reveal about Achilles? Why do you think Achilles grants his request?
- 15) Near the end of the book, Odysseus comes to speak to Pyrrhus on Patroclus’ behalf. Why do you think he does this? How did it change (or not) your opinion of Odysseus?
- 16) Peleus warns his son that any mortal who visits the sea-nymphs in their caves beneath the sea does not return the same. How is this belief borne out by the character of Pyrrhus, who was raised there? In what way does Pyrrhus confirm or deny Patroclus’ fears about the gods?

17) In the final pages of the book, we learn more about Thetis. How does this affect our view of her?

18) Patroclus tells Thetis that he is “made of memories.” What does he mean by that? What role does memory—both personal and cultural—play in the novel?

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More About the Book



## Awards & Honors

**Winner of the 2012 Orange Prize (now The Women's Prize for Fiction)**

**New York Times Bestseller**

**Massachusetts Must-Read of 2013; Finalist for the Mass Book Award**

**Stonewall Honor Book, American Library Association**

**Shortlisted for the UK Independent Bookseller Award**

**Shortlisted for Stonewall's Writer of the Year**

**Finalist for the Chautauqua Prize**

**Semi-finalist for the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award**

## Reviews for The Song of Achilles

"Others have penned imaginative retellings on Homer's epics, not least Margaret Atwood in her witty and wise *The Penelopiad*. Yet Miller's fantastic first novel—shortlisted for the Orange Prize—seems singular in its scope and scholarship. . . Miller has combined scholarship with imagination to turn the most familiar war epic into a fresh, emotionally riveting and sexy page-turner. Patroclus follows Achilles into battle, but it is their magnificent and very modern love story that makes this an epic." —**The Independent**

"A wildly romantic retelling of the Trojan War as a story of longtime companions narrated by Patroclus. Miller plays with the historical record as established by Homer. . . and puts a sexy new narrative spin on the ancients that is surprisingly suspenseful. Some of the suspense comes from curiosities, like who will tell the story after Patroclus dies, but most of it comes from the urgency of Miller's storytelling. . . bringing those dark figures back to life, making them men again, and while she's at it, us[ing] her passionate companion piece to *The Iliad* as a subtle swipe at today's ongoing debate over gay marriage. Talk about updating the classics." —**Time Magazine**

"The Song of Achilles becomes a quiet love story, one so moving that I was reluctant to move on to the war and Homer's tale of perverted honor and stubborn pride. But Miller segues into that more public story with grace. Her battle scenes are tense and exciting, as the young, half-divine Achilles comes into his own. . . Informed by scholarship, her imagination blends seamlessly with incidents from *The Iliad*. In prose as clean and spare as the

driving poetry of Homer, Miller captures the intensity and devotion of adolescent friendship and lets us believe in these long-dead boys for whom sea nymphs and centaurs are not legend but lived reality. In doing so, she will make their names known to yet another generation, deepening and enriching a tale that has been told for 3,000 years.” —**Washington Post**, [Click here for full review](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-song-of-achilles-by-madeline-miller/2011/12/12/gIQAW7satR_story.html)

([http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-song-of-achilles-by-madeline-miller/2011/12/12/gIQAW7satR\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-song-of-achilles-by-madeline-miller/2011/12/12/gIQAW7satR_story.html)).

“You don’t need to be familiar with Homer’s *The Iliad* (or Brad Pitt’s *Troy*, for that matter) to find Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* spellbinding. While classics scholar Miller meticulously follows Greek mythology, her explorations of ego, grief, and love’s many permutations are both familiar and new. . . Miller treats the men’s mutual sexual passion with refreshing straightforwardness and convincingly casts their love in such mythic proportions that we’re convinced when Patroclus declares, “He is half of my soul, as the poets say.”” —**O Magazine**

“Madeline Miller’s brilliant first novel, *The Song of Achilles*, is the story. . . of great, passionate love between Achilles and Patroclus, as tragic as that of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. . . Even for a scholar of Greek literature, which Miller is, rewriting the Western world’s first and greatest war novel is an awesome task to undertake. That she did it with such grace, style and suspense is astonishing.” —**Dallas Morning News**

“Next to the daughter-killing Agamemnon, Achilles was my least favorite character in *The Iliad*. . . How accomplished is Madeline Miller’s debut novel? Darned if she didn’t make me like the guy in *Song of Achilles*. Miller, a scholar of Latin and Ancient Greek, brings a remarkably conversational style to her Homeric retelling and manages to inject urgency and suspense into a tale whose outcome is already a foregone conclusion.” —**The Christian Science Monitor**

“Miller’s debut novel. . . is a tour de force of history, mythology, politics, and devotion. . . What Miller adds is depth, and life, to every character and facet of the story. . . Immersion into Miller’s world, with descriptions reminiscent of Mary Renault at her best, and not a single false note in the dialogue, is a true pleasure. Readers may suffer from withdrawal as they reluctantly finish this book, and this reviewer hopes to see more soon from this talented author.” —**Historical Novels Society, Editor’s Choice Review**

“One of 2012’s most exciting debuts is Madeline Miller’s *Song of Achilles*, a prequel of sorts to *The Iliad* that traces the rise and fall of the Greek golden boy of myth. A young classics scholar who specialized in adapting classical tales for a modern audience at the Yale School of Drama, Miller has penned a seductive, hugely entertaining backstory that lends complexity to Homer’s virile action-adventure by imagining the intimate friendship between Achilles and the devoted Patroclus, who meets his end fighting in the Trojan War on Achilles’s behalf. Scouring ancient Greek texts for every mention of Patroclus, Miller conjures a lonely child whose sympathetic vulnerability becomes the foundation of the bond. The boys grow up together, becoming not simply companions but soulmates. The resulting novel is cinematic—one might say epic—in scope, but refreshingly, compellingly human in detail.” —**Vogue.com**

“*The Song of Achilles* retells *The Iliad* like you’ve never read it before. . . in a realistic account of history and fantasy. . . Madeline Miller’s knowledge of ancient Greek history and her affinity toward the classic myths intensifies the novel and heightens the experience for the reader. Seamlessly blurring the lines of reality and

time, Achilles is an amazing, spellbinding page-turner that I couldn't put down until I'd read it cover to cover, twice!" —**Instinct Magazine**

"With this novel, we can fall in love again: for Madeline Miller has made blind Homer sing to her. . . It has the magnificence of myth; it has the passions of humanity. . . Madeline Miller avenges the girls left behind while their brothers and husbands and sons "spoke to Plato." Her Homer has sung to her, and the result is *The Song of Achilles*." —**Bryn Mawr Classical Journal**

"Miller skillfully weaves tender scenes of the boys' relationship with breathtaking descriptions of battles and their bloody aftermath. [Her] degrees in Latin and Greek as well as her passion for the theater and the history of the ancient world have given her the tools to create a masterly vision of the drama, valor, and tragedy of the Trojan War. Readers who loved Mary Renault's epic novels will be thrilled with Miller's portrayal of ancient Greece." —**Library Journal, \*Starred review\***

"A captivating retelling of the Iliad and events leading up to it through the point of view of Patroclus: it's a hard book to put down, and any classicist will be enthralled by her characterisation of the goddess Thetis, which carries the true savagery and chill of antiquity." —**Donna Tartt, author of *The Secret History* and *The Little Friend*, in *The Times***

"To re-write Homer's Iliad as a modern novel was a bold move—but it has paid off superbly. . . I read this book awestruck with admiration for the quality of its writing, its narrative pace and its imaginative depth. If I were to give a prize for the best work of fiction I've read this year, this would be the runaway winner. As a first novel, it heralds the arrival of a major new talent." —**Reader's Digest**

"For a whistlestop tour around the life and times of Achilles, you'd be hard pressed to find a better guide than Madeline Miller. . . This accomplished and enjoyable novel. . . is original, clever, and in a class of its own. . . an incredibly compelling and seductive read. Her skill is considerable: she has to make us believe in Achilles and Patroclus almost as if they were modern-day characters in a Hollywood movie. . . It's an entirely successful piece of writing, sitting comfortably between literary and commercial genres. It does what the best novels do—it transports you to another world—as well as doing something that few novels bother to: it makes you feel incredibly clever." —**The Independent on Sunday**

"With language both evocative of her predecessors and fresh, and through familiar scenes that explore new territory, this first-time novelist masterfully brings to life an imaginative yet informed vision of ancient Greece featuring divinely human gods and larger-than-life mortals. She breaks new ground retelling one of the world's oldest stories about men in love and war, but it is the extraordinary women—Iphigenia, Briseis, and Thetis—who promise readers remarkable things to come as Miller carves out a custom-made niche in historical fiction." —**Publishers Weekly, \*Starred Review\*/Pick of the Week**

"Only the finest of historical novelists are able to adequately convey the sheer strangeness and otherness of the past, particularly the ancient past. By this criterion alone, Madeline Miller shows exceptional promise. . . a remarkably fresh take on one of the most familiar narratives in western literature. . . It is quite an achievement." —**The Times**



“Miller draws on her knowledge of Classical sources wisely. . . [she] is particularly good at characterization. . . The novel is well paced, engaging and tasteful. For a writer of Miller’s training and talent, the characters of The Iliad and The Odyssey offer a wealth of further story-telling possibilities.” —**The Times Literary Supplement**

“[The Song of Achilles is] brilliant at conjuring a world where capricious gods and unbreakable prophecies are simply part of life, and at capturing the tangled amorality of politics and war, like some delirious fusion of Game of Thrones and Jean Genet. . . the story wonderfully brings home how eye-poppingly weird and gripping classical mythology really is.” —**Word**

“Beautifully done—sensitive and scholarly, without sacrificing the page-turning qualities of an unashamed romance.” —**The Metro**

“Extraordinary. . . Beautifully descriptive and heart-achingly lyrical, this is a love story as sensitive and intuitive as any you will find.” —**Daily Mail**

“An original page-turning homage to The Iliad. . . Miller’s prose is vividly atmospheric, retelling the siege of Troy in all its heroic devastation.” —**Marie Claire**

“If every first novel I read was as accomplished as this one is, it would say much for the future of publishing. This deft pairing of subject and craftsmanship is enormously impressive, and makes the book stand out as something original and fresh and beautiful. . . it’s on my ‘best of the year’ list.” —**Cornflower Books**

“This is a terrific novel. Miller’s style (uncomplicated) and her language (modern) is a winner. This book, in my opinion, deserves a wide readership. I was enthralled from beginning to end. I shall now tackle the dustier Iliad with vigour (well, perhaps restrained vigour) thanks to Miller for whetting my appetite. Highly recommended.” —**The Bookbag**

“Miller’s prose flows easily and poetically, and she treats the relationship between the two men with sensitivity and skill. . . A fascinating debut.” —**Sunday Herald**

“I loved the book. The language was timeless, the historical details were slipped in perfectly. I hope Song of Achilles becomes part of the high school summer reading lists alongside Penelopiad.” —**Helen Simonson, author of Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand**

“Mary Renault lives again! A ravishingly vivid and convincing version of one of the most legendary of love stories.” —**Emma Donoghue, author of the bestseller Room**

“The Song of Achilles is at once a scholar’s homage to the Iliad and a startlingly original work of art by an incredibly talented new novelist. Madeline Miller has given us her own fresh take on the Trojan war and its heroes. The result is a book I could not put down.” —**Ann Patchett, author of Bel Canto and State of Wonder**

“The Iliad turns on Achilles’ pride and his relationship with Patroclus, but Homer is sparing with the personal—so much so that, though we believe in their friendship, we do not understand it. The Song of Achilles brings light to their love. This is a beautiful book.” —**Zachary Mason, author of The Lost Books of the Odyssey**

“Madeline Miller takes the ancient art of the rhapsode, the singer of Homeric tales, and makes it sing again. The mutual devotion of Patroclus and Achilles is at the heart of a world so richly imagined that we seem to walk through it with them. . . Reading this book recalled me to the breathless sense of the ancient-yet-present that I felt when I first fell in love with the classics.” —**Catherine Conybeare, Professor of Classics, Bryn Mawr College**

“A real page-turner. It’s a gripping narrative and vividly told.” —**Charles Palliser, author of The Quincunx**

## Madeline Miller


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