

# THE SONG OF ACHILLES

## Reader's Guide

Includes a Note from the Author, Mythological Background, and Discussion Questions  
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### 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.

### 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.

## 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.

## 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?