

## Myths Made Modern

Even the oldest myths never grow old, enjoying rediscoveries and retellings in almost every generation. Myths remain popular because they simultaneously entertain and make us think. They connect us to other peoples, eras, and cultures through imaginative storytelling, the artistry of language, and the resonant power of metaphor. As a form of “sacred history,” they represent belief systems of past or “primitive” cultures that use fantastical tales to speak to real, lived experiences and ways of attempting to make sense of the world. Myths blend adventure, endurance, and magic to help us connect to timeless human experiences.

This series presents five high-quality, contemporary reworkings of centuries-old myths and legends. Especially in recent years, we have seen a renaissance for classical mythology, as filmmakers, TV producers, translators, and writers have revisited, reimagined, and retold ancient tales for the modern era. Many of these repackaged versions come from the perspectives of those who were not allowed to participate in the original tellings, such as the women on the sidelines of heroic journeys, or the modern children who have inherited traditions or rivalries from ancient cultures they barely understand. These new lenses on old stories help us to see them with new eyes, appreciate them more deeply, and maybe even find undiscovered meanings.

But sometimes just reexperiencing the stories is enough. In *Ragnarok*, A.S. Byatt describes how the language of myth lodges in our minds as a form of omnipresent knowledge: “This is how myths work. They are things, creatures, stories, inhabiting the mind. They cannot be explained and they do not explain.” Similarly, as the beloved scholar of myth Joseph Campbell describes it, “mythology is the penultimate truth—penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words [. . .] what can be known but not told.” In Campbell’s thinking, removing ourselves from the everyday world to read mythology, to join our minds with the characters in myth, we are nudged into remembering the “rapture of being alive.” Myths often simply entertain—no explanations or analysis needed—with fantastical tales of shapeshifting beings, supernatural powers, monsters, or epic battles. Still, as they entertain, they lodge deeply within us because they provide the wisdom of the ages, sharing and teaching on a cellular level about the various ways in which all beings manage the competing forces of ecstatic triumph and traumatic loss. Our current world certainly seems rocked by triumph and loss in mind-boggling extremes. Perhaps stories can help.

***A note to sensitive readers:*** most ancient myths contain depictions that some may find troubling, such as scenes of warfare, ritual violence, sexual seduction, sexual violence, or animal sacrifice. These modern retellings are in keeping with the

*traditional versions but do so tastefully and with intention. The series is intended for mature audiences.*

The series begins with new perspectives on the two oldest works in western civilization: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Together they confirm the importance of thematic cornerstones of our culture: war and loss, and the journey to home and family. For those who also would like to revisit the original versions of these tales, the recently published new translations by classicist Emily Wilson are highly recommended.

***The Song of Achilles***  
**by Madeline Miller**

“Bright sunlight broke and poured over Achilles, went rolling down his hair and back and skin, turning him to gold.” From the point of view of his close boyhood companion Patroclus, we watch the coming of age of “the best of all the Greeks,” the demi-god warrior at the heart of *The Iliad* and the legendary siege on Troy to retrieve the beautiful Helen. Years before the war, Patroclus is an awkward young prince when exiled from his kingdom and taken in as a foster child of King Peleus. Though he is to be trained in the art of war alongside many other boys, he is introverted, unskilled, and taunted—by all except Achilles, the beautiful son of the king and the sea goddess Thetis. Achilles sees something in Patroclus that others do not and takes him in as his chosen companion. The two grow up and grow close in the remote woods as they pursue further training with the centaur Chiron, who helps Achilles to refine his fighting prowess and Patroclus to find a destiny as something other than a warrior. As they move toward the battlefields at Troy, the story invites us to enjoy epic adventures while also metaphorically exploring questions about the powerful forces in our lives that we cannot control as well as those choices we *can* make—choices about the legacies we want to leave behind, and about whom and how we love. Told with empathy and sensitivity, Miller’s novel shines new light on ancient customs and helps us examine the expectations placed upon young men.

***The Penelopiad***  
**by Margaret Atwood**

Flipping the script of Homer’s story of a long homecoming after the Trojan war, *The Penelopiad* reconsiders the hero’s journey through the eyes of the legendarily patient wife Penelope. Now dead, Penelope has eternity to think back on her life and consider her marriage as she wanders the underworld and encounters the spirits of famous characters from the Greek epics. Readers will enjoy a creative invention of her adolescent years, the motives her family had for marrying her to Odysseus (and his for marrying her), and her frosty reception by his family when she arrives as a young bride on the island of Ithaca. We consider through her eyes famous events of

Odysseus's exploits, such as the battle with the Cyclops and his long affairs with the goddesses Calypso and Circe; the coming of age of their son Telemachus during Odysseus's twenty-year absence; and her own sly attempts to stall her suitors by famously weaving and unweaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law. Taking on the various interpretations of Penelope's character, Atwood explores with both humor and poignant empathy the rationales for imagining her as a clever vs. naïve woman, a faithful vs. adulterous wife, and a stern queen vs. a caring companion to the women of the palace. With a Greek chorus to interrupt Penelope's tale, we also experience witty, thought-provoking songs from the twelve palace slave girls who, after Odysseus's homecoming, were hanged as punishment for sleeping with the suitors. Did they deserve to be punished? How might Penelope reconcile her own guilt about the deaths of these girls in the afterlife? And what happens when she crosses paths with her husband's spirit in Hades?

### ***Ragnarok: The End of the Gods***

**by A.S. Byatt**

The unnamed "thin child" at the center of Byatt's story is navigating the challenges of surviving World War II in England when she receives a copy of *Asgard and the Gods*. The Norse myths occupy almost her entire psyche and become the lens through which she experiences the natural world after relocating to the countryside from Blitz-torn London. With the adults in her life occupied by the war—and only half understanding it herself—she spends most of her time alone, wandering outdoors and immersed in fantasy. She overlays the real war around her with Ragnarok, the series of battles between the gods that will destroy and allow for the remaking of the world. Written in the tone and style of a fairy tale, Byatt's autobiographically influenced story provides an evocative retelling of the Norse myths—featuring characters like Odin, Loki, Thor, Frigg, and Hel—ultimately showing how relevant ancient story can be to a modern person, and how even stories of destruction can offer us hope and strength.

### ***Praisesong for the Widow***

**by Paule Marshall**

Avey Johnson seems like a lot of people we might know: someone who has lived a "normal," risk-averse life according to what is expected of her as a wife and mother. Now an aging widow, she agrees to do something out of character: leave her comfortable home in suburban New York to go on a Caribbean cruise with two friends. She begins the voyage as a prim and proper, upper middle-class woman who is preoccupied with her luggage and maintaining the peace of the friend group. As the story's events unfold, however, she is forced to leave her friends and *all* her baggage behind. The further she wanders from the cruise itinerary, and the more exposed she becomes to the island culture, the more her buried memories of childhood summers with her grandmother come to the surface. The accented voices

on the Caribbean island echo the voices of those summers immersed in the Gullah-Geechee culture on the coastal islands of Georgia, where Avey first heard the legendary stories of Ibo Landing and the 1803 rebellion of newly arrived slaves. There are various mythic versions of that story, some involving a hand-to-hand revolt, others that describe the would-be slaves swimming away from the landing and across the Atlantic to successfully reach Africa, and still others tell of a single “super” African who rose up and *flew* back across the ocean. The story of Ibo Landing that settled into Avey’s childhood bones begins to awaken as it hears the island music and language. Evoking this and other African legends that were adapted to the blended cultures of the “New World”—the Dahomey warrior women of West Africa and the gods Erzulie, Yemoja, Oya, and Papa Legba—Paule Marshall’s novel makes the case for myth as a powerful source for understanding one’s identity and for connecting peoples who have been taken away from their original cultures and dispersed across the globe.

***The Whale Rider***  
**by Witi Ihimaera**

Like *Ragnarok*, *The Whale Rider* helps us see myth anew through a child’s experience. Weaving together indigenous creation stories with the narrative of a modern Maori family, ever present through both storylines is the mythic hero Paikea, who rode the whale that first brought the Maori people to the land of Aotearoa (present day New Zealand). The book begins with a recounting of that oral story and establishes the modern tribal chief’s admiration for and reliance on the power of Paikea’s guardianship of the people. He anxiously awaits the birth of the family’s first great grandchild so that he can pass on this cultural knowledge and the leadership traditions. The patriarch is disappointed, however, when the girl Kahu is born. Her arrival disrupts the male leadership lineage, and expectations are further thwarted when she is given a traditionally male name. As she grows, other details about her personality hint that she is no typical child. Her young uncle Rawiri narrates the story, seeing with the relaxed distance of an easy-going teenager and expatriate the ways in which the generations of his family and community will navigate both the disruption of customs and a major crisis in the natural environment. Told with both sweet humor and the honoring tone of the oral tradition, it is easy for readers to grow fond of this family as they attempt to adapt ancient rituals for a new era.

“Myths Made Modern” was developed by Tracy Floreani. She is Professor Emerita of English at Oklahoma City University (2010-2024) and now works in public humanities at the national level. A specialist in multiethnic American literature, she is the author of *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury*,

editor of *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Ellison*, and is completing a biography of Fanny McConnell Ellison.

