



The Song of Achilles

Books Reviewed:

[The Song of Achilles](#) [1]

Issue:

[192](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Madeline Miller trained in classical languages in her native America and her scholarship informs this fine first novel, which revisits the story of Achilles. Her choice of Patroclus as her narrator is daring, lending the old tale a moving intimacy. In life, Patroclus is Achilles' friend and lover; his death draws the proud warrior from his tent, first to fire the Greeks, then to butcher Hector and finally, to meet his own fate. This Patroclus bears little kinship to the 'effeminate man' of Shakespeare's **Troilus and Cressida**, ridiculed by Thersites as Achilles' 'male varlet', his 'masculine whore'. In his actions, Miller's Patroclus is much closer to Homer's steadfast friend, with little taste for battle until, wearing his comrade's armour, he cuts swathes through the Trojan ranks, crazed by the shedding of blood, before meeting his own death at the hand of Hector. Miller is faithful to the events of **The Iliad**, but then she adds a 21st Century insight not available to the ancient poet.

Beginning with their shared boyhood, she delicately traces the growth of the love of two gay ? or bisexual ? men into a bond so powerful and enduring that Patroclus is willing to die for the love of his life. (How Ms Miller retains Patroclus as her narrator after his mortal death could not be more consistent with classical belief.) The modern perspective lends psychological complexity to the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles ? and to the devious Greek generals as well as the gentle and constant slave Briseis, here more devoted to Patroclus than Achilles. For his part, Achilles' concern for his own reputation leads to the sacrifice of his beloved; a concern very like a modern political leader's obsession with 'legacy'. Alongside her treatment of personality, Miller remarkably includes Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, as a major player in the drama ? and we are even aware of the rest of Them bickering away in the background. Thetis' possessive jealousy dogs Patroclus to the day of his death.

Although published on a list for young readers, this book will be read with great pleasure by many adults. Bloomsbury have given the novel the kind of hardback packaging we expect from a high quality American production, though this volume is typeset and printed in the UK, with generous dimensions, margins and line spacing, a gold ribbon page-marker, black endpapers and a black and gold dustjacket. There is also an e-book version. If this is a young reader's first step onto the plain before Troy, let it be by way of these ivory pages rather than on the cold screen of Kindle.

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/192/childrens-books/reviews/the-song-of-achilles>

Links:

- [1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-song-of-achilles>
- [2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/192>
- [3] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>