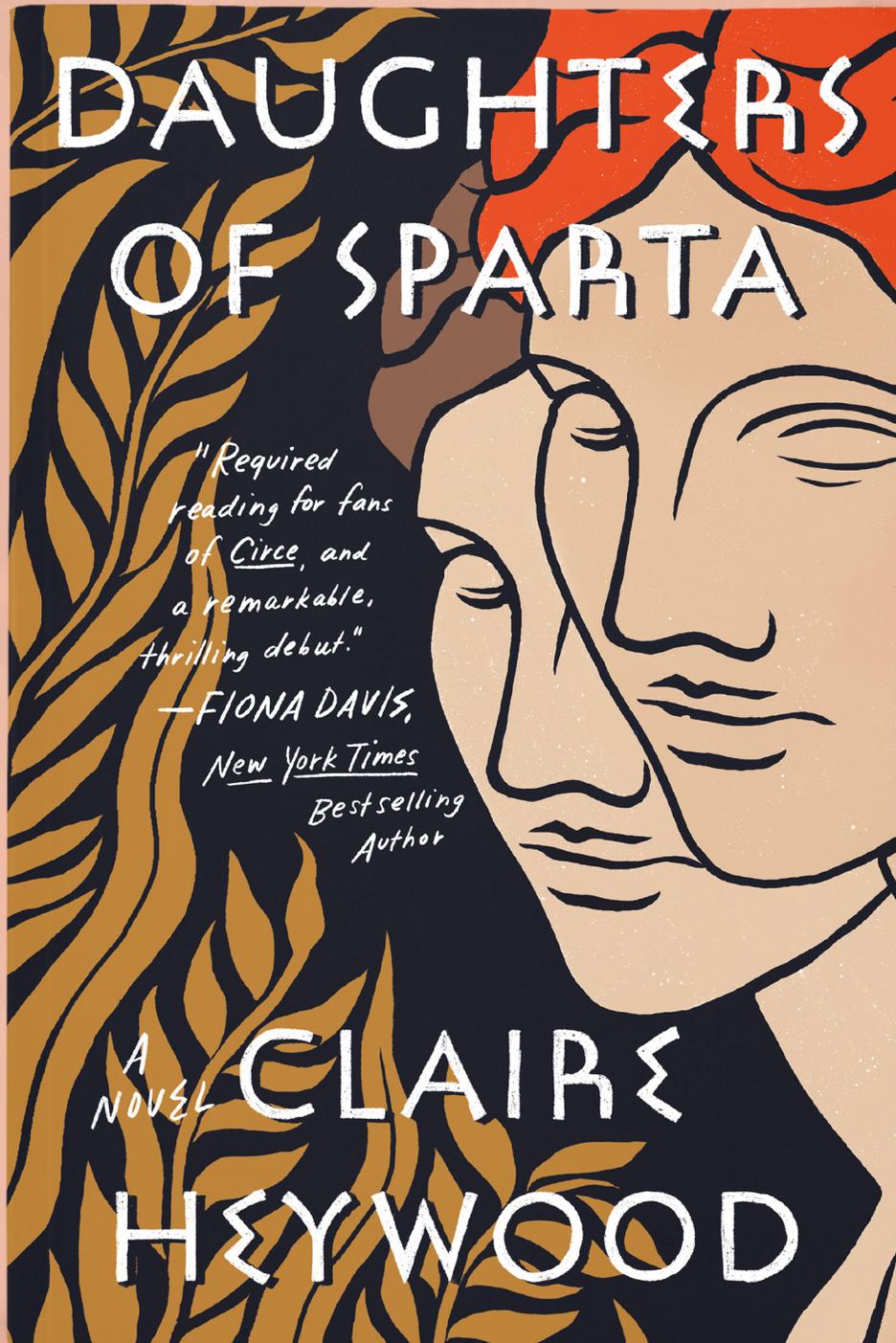


# BOOK CLUB KIT



## DAUGHTERS OF SPARTA

*"Required  
reading for fans  
of Circe, and  
a remarkable,  
thrilling debut."*

*—FIONA DAVIS,  
New York Times  
Bestselling  
Author*

*A  
NOVEL*

CLAIRE  
HEYWOOD



DUTTON

## DEAR READER,

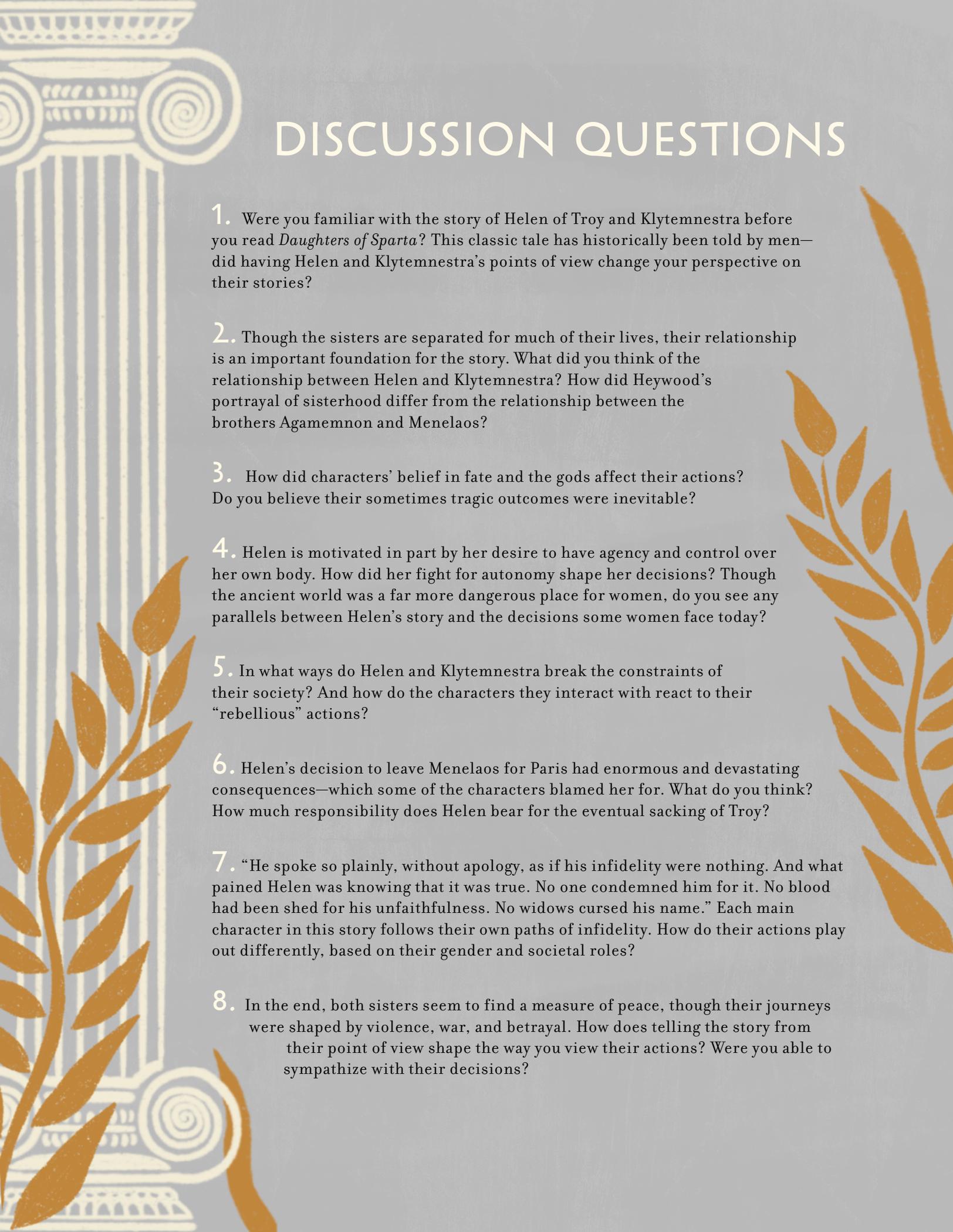
The idea for *Daughters of Sparta* came to me while I was studying the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome at university. As is common for students of the past, I have often wondered what it would be like to live there, while in the same instant knowing I would not want to. The ancient world was for many a dangerous and powerless place, and not least for women. What's more, the women—both historical and mythological—who fought to seize some agency of their own were often vilified. Prickled by these injustices, I decided to take two such figures, the infamous Helen of Troy and her sister Klytemnestra, and retell their stories in full, to give a window into their experience, to humanize and vindicate them. And so this is where my research began—with these two anti-heroines, as the ancients might have viewed them, and the desire to understand the world they might have inhabited.

I found inspiration in my archaeological research, but mostly it was the ancient texts that fired my imagination: the grim tragedy of Aeschylus, the heartbreaking pathos of Euripides, and of course the epic tales of Homer. Amid the stories of male pride and glory, these ancient writers give us tantalizing glimpses into the characters and experiences of Helen and Klytemnestra, but they are few and far between. I wanted to expand on these moments of empathy and make these women the heroes in their own story.

In the novel we see how both sisters lack control over their own lives—whom they will marry, where they will live, whether they will have children and how many. This last point is one that has always struck me. Even in our modern age, the prospect of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood is filled with risks and worries. In the ancient world, these risks were far, far greater, with the mortality rate for both mother and child terrifyingly high by modern standards. Add to this that, should both survive the birth, there was a significant chance that the child would not survive past infancy, and it makes me think that if I myself had lived in the ancient world, I would have chosen to never have children at all. But did women ever really have that option? We know that they tried to gain some control over their fertility—recipes for contraceptives and abortifacients have been found in some of the world's oldest writings—but such methods would have been semi-reliable at best and, in the case of abortifacients, often quite dangerous. And so these fears, which must have been shared by women throughout the millennia—of uncontrollable fertility, of child bearing, and of losing the precious children for whom one had risked so much—became one of the themes I wanted to explore in the novel.

But Helen and Klytemnestra are more than fearful victims. These women became infamous for the very fact that they were agents of their own fortune. Both sisters, in different ways and for different reasons, change the course that has been set for them. They go against the expectations of their sex, and do all they can to make the best of their situation. They are trying to survive, to protect themselves and their loved ones, and, above all, to build lives they can enjoy and not just endure.

CLAIRE HEYWOOD



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Were you familiar with the story of Helen of Troy and Klytemnestra before you read *Daughters of Sparta*? This classic tale has historically been told by men—did having Helen and Klytemnestra’s points of view change your perspective on their stories?
2. Though the sisters are separated for much of their lives, their relationship is an important foundation for the story. What did you think of the relationship between Helen and Klytemnestra? How did Heywood’s portrayal of sisterhood differ from the relationship between the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaos?
3. How did characters’ belief in fate and the gods affect their actions? Do you believe their sometimes tragic outcomes were inevitable?
4. Helen is motivated in part by her desire to have agency and control over her own body. How did her fight for autonomy shape her decisions? Though the ancient world was a far more dangerous place for women, do you see any parallels between Helen’s story and the decisions some women face today?
5. In what ways do Helen and Klytemnestra break the constraints of their society? And how do the characters they interact with react to their “rebellious” actions?
6. Helen’s decision to leave Menelaos for Paris had enormous and devastating consequences—which some of the characters blamed her for. What do you think? How much responsibility does Helen bear for the eventual sacking of Troy?
7. “He spoke so plainly, without apology, as if his infidelity were nothing. And what pained Helen was knowing that it was true. No one condemned him for it. No blood had been shed for his unfaithfulness. No widows cursed his name.” Each main character in this story follows their own paths of infidelity. How do their actions play out differently, based on their gender and societal roles?
8. In the end, both sisters seem to find a measure of peace, though their journeys were shaped by violence, war, and betrayal. How does telling the story from their point of view shape the way you view their actions? Were you able to sympathize with their decisions?

# A CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE HEYWOOD

## **What was it about *Daughters of Sparta* that made this story your first novel?**

After finishing university I was really keen to get back into writing creatively—something I hadn't had time for during my studies—and I had the idea that I might ease myself in with a series of short stories about the most vilified women in Greek mythology. I had come across so many ancient stories, written by men about women, that made me ask the question: is that really fair? These writers seemed to revel in showing women at their worst, without truly considering what might have led them to that point. The women in these myths often felt like caricatures, cautionary tales of the types of women who bring ruin, rather than real people with whom you could empathize. So I made it my aim to fill in all those holes. I wanted to imagine what these women had thought and felt, to explore the more minor events that had shaped their lives but which had so far been left unwritten.

## **When you considered all the ancient mythologies surrounding women, what drew you to the stories of Helen and Klytemnestra?**

As I was considering the list of potential villainesses that I might write about, I realized that two of the most obvious candidates—Helen and Klytemnestra—were in fact sisters and that, while their transgressions formed key parts of the narrative of the Trojan War, they were rarely spoken about together. I knew that there was potential here to tell these two stories in parallel, to examine how the lives of these sisters intertwined, how they shaped the war and were shaped by it. They both stood out to me as women who had stepped outside of what was expected. To the Greeks they were an adulterer and a killer—the two very worst things a woman could be—but I wanted to show them as more than their legacy, as real and complex women with hearts and desires and fears.

## **What kind of research did you do for *Daughters of Sparta*?**

I read a lot of ancient literature—Homer, Greek tragedies, as well as other perceptions of the sisters' stories—as it was these texts that had sparked my imagination in the first place. I wanted to gather together all the things that had been said about them—mostly negative, though there were some moments of pathos as well. *Daughters of Sparta* is not simply a retelling of the myth but a response to it, a filling in of all that had gone unspoken, so I needed to know the tradition that I was building upon.



I also did a considerable amount of archaeological research. It would be inaccurate to call it “historical” research, as the Late Bronze Age setting for *Daughters of Sparta* is in actual fact prehistoric. There are no written historical accounts for this period, and very little writing survives at all. Therefore, much of my research concerned the archaeological sites left behind by the Mycenaean civilization, not only the buildings they inhabited but other tangible things such as food, jewelry, art, burials. I read about ancient medicine—including early attempts at gynecology—and about religion, marriage, the veiling of women. I also researched wool working, as I knew that this was how ancient women spent a lot of their time and I wanted to better understand its processes. In this case I didn’t feel as though reading was enough, so I learnt how to spin wool myself using a traditional drop spindle. I was lucky enough to work at a city farm which kept sheep, and so I even tried spinning with raw wool freshly shorn, still full of all the natural grease and smell and texture, and ran a few workshops where I taught local children how to spin. There is something special about engaging in an activity which has barely changed over thousands of years. It made me feel in some small way that I was connected to all those ancient women who had spent their lives with a spindle in hand.

### **What do you want readers to take away from *Daughters of Sparta*?**

I hope that my novel shows that there is never just one side to a story. Ancient writers were clear in their condemnation of the things Helen and Klytemnestra did, but I hope that my version gives a more nuanced telling, full of humanity and empathy, and if not a full vindication, then at least a fair trial for these women who have been vilified for millennia.

Though the story is full of struggle and tragedy, I hope that it also contains a thread of positivity, that we can change the course set for us, that we have a right to pursue happiness and carve the life that we want rather than accept the one that is given. The novel makes clear that this is by no means an easy path, and that it may not lead where we expect, but there will always be some things beyond our control. The best we can do is try for something better.

I hope that *Daughters of Sparta* joins other novels in the genre in sparking a resurgence of interest in these ancient stories. The success of novels such as *Circe* by Madeline Miller, *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker, and *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes, shows how these stories can still be relevant and fresh and thought-provoking. I think they also help to broaden access to the subject of “Classics” and Ancient History, which I myself only discovered at university and would recommend to anyone curious about the complexity, ingenuity, and folly of humanity.

Above all, I hope that readers enjoy the novel. I find the ancient world an endlessly fascinating place, at once foreign and familiar, and so I hope to impart some of that fascination to anyone who picks up *Daughters of Sparta*.