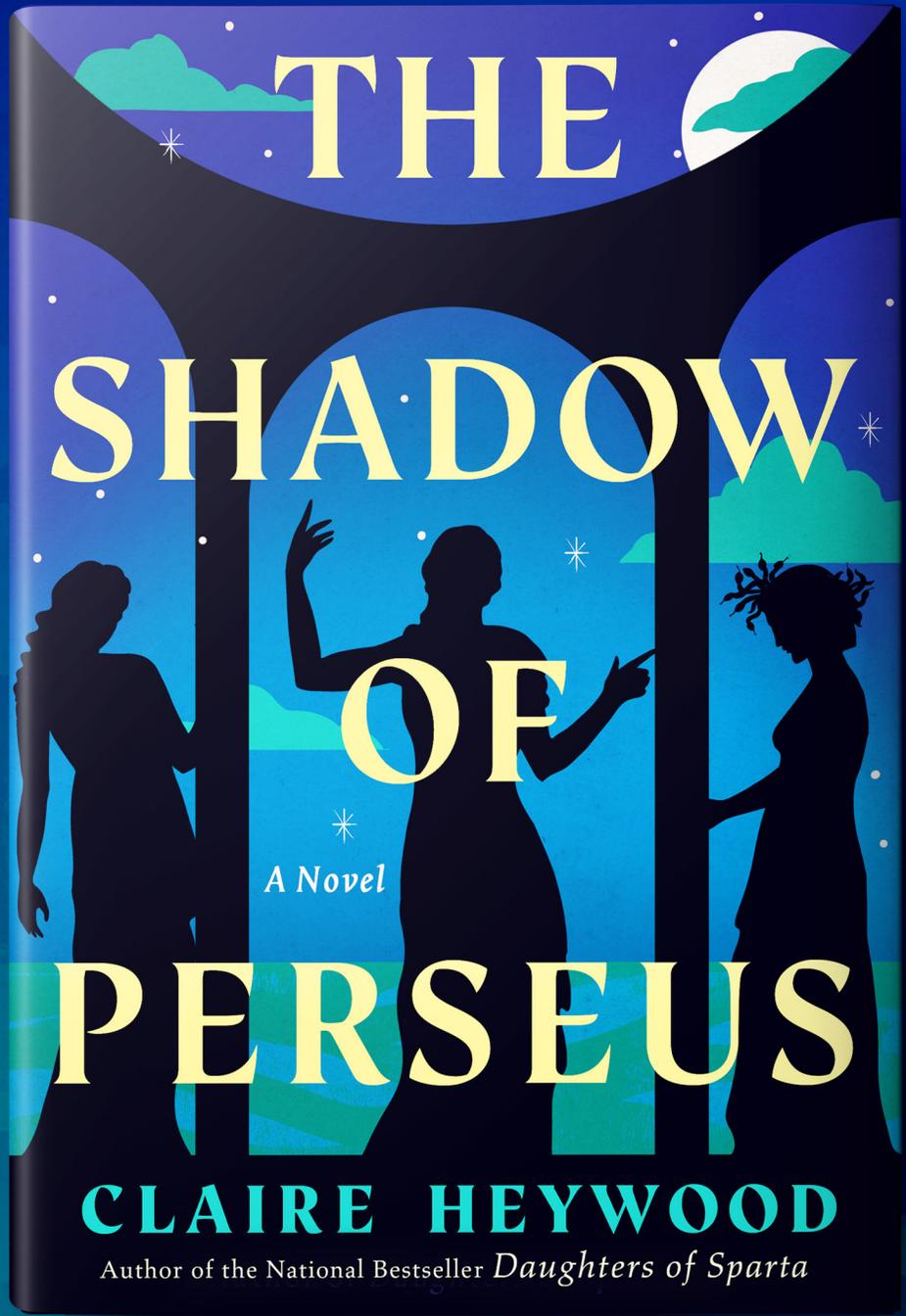


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THE

SHADOW

OF

A Novel

PERSEUS

CLAIRE HEYWOOD

Author of the National Bestseller *Daughters of Sparta*





DEAR READER,

The legend of the great Greek hero Perseus bears many elements that we might now consider typical of a hero's story—he vanquishes monsters, rescues damsels, and ultimately rises from disinherited underdog to celebrated city founder. It's a tale for the ages, and so it has proven. Perseus's story, or the most captivating parts of it, have been retold and reimagined in art, literature, and every other medium over the past three millennia. And through all these reimaginings, from ancient sculpture to modern cinema, the most enduring image has been that of Perseus's dreadful foe: Medusa.

It was through Medusa that I came to this myth. Despite her monstrous depiction, she had always seemed a rather sympathetic character to me. Cursed with a horrifying appearance and a gaze that would petrify anyone she chanced to look at, Medusa struck me as a figure who must have been, above all, terribly lonely. That is, until we remember that the myth gives her sisters, fellow gorgons with whom she shares her life, hidden away together at the ends of the earth. And they might have been happy, mightn't they? These women minding their own business, protecting one another in peace and isolation. If only Perseus hadn't come all the way across the sea to hunt them.

Studying for two degrees in Classics has taught me that there is never simply one version of a myth, and so I first began by reading every ancient source about the Perseus and Medusa story that I could find. As I examined these narratives, and the visual culture that responded to—or sometimes predated—them, I realized that for me, Perseus's story was not really about heroic deeds, and it was not about Medusa either. It was actually about three women, who each hold a key place in the myth and yet whose stories feel undertold. Medusa is one. But before her comes Danae, Perseus's mother, who endures imprisonment and exile at the order of her father, and who nevertheless finds a safe haven in which to raise her son. And later there is Andromeda, offered up as sacrifice to a sea monster, then rescued only on the understanding that she will marry Perseus in return.

Reading these women's stories, I saw how little agency they were allowed. They exist as damsels to be saved, or monsters to be slain. And I began to wonder what their view of events might have been. What if Danae and Andromeda did not want or need to be rescued? What if Medusa was not monstrous but rather kind and complex? If we could see Perseus's heroism through the eyes of these women, would it look like heroism at all?

I wrote *The Shadow of Perseus* as a direct challenge to the traditional myth surrounding the hero. I wanted to strip away the supernatural aggrandizement—divine lineage, magical accessories, fantastical foes—and imagine the raw events beneath, through the eyes of three women whose lives were devastated by them. I wanted to ask questions about the stories we tell ourselves, about history and myth, and how one might fold into the other. Who controls the narrative that gets passed down through generations, and whose account remains a silent truth? In a world where history is written by the victors, it's easy for a man to shape his own legend. But in *The Shadow of Perseus*, we find that the women have their own story to tell.



Claire Heywood
Claire Heywood





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

***Note: These discussion questions contain spoilers!**
We suggest you finish the book before you read through them.

1. In *The Shadow of Perseus*, women have little agency over their own lives. Danae's father rejects suitor after suitor, and Andromeda is subject to inspection at a bride fair. Perseus tried to forbid his mother marrying Polydektes and asserts his guardianship over her, even though he is still a boy. In what ways do the women assert their independence despite these constrictions?
2. The novel tells a version of Perseus' myth that removes the gods as active characters and reinterprets the magical or prophetic elements of the story. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story in this way? How does it change our understanding of events? Do the gods and the supernatural still play a role in this version?
3. Female relationships are critical in the novel, but they are also fraught. Danae and Korinna know each other so well "their bodies flowed around one another, each hand knowing where it was needed," but Korinna's true master is Akrisios, and she reports Danae's pregnancy to him. Klymene accepts Danae into her household and they live like sisters, but when Diktys dies, they both must leave. The Gorgons have a tightly knit, self-sufficient community, but there is dissent in the group when Medusa invites Perseus into the fold. How do the actions and choices of men both bring the women together and drive them apart?
4. At the beginning of the novel, Danae longs to see more of the world. She is jealous of a passing bride, whom she imagines to be starting her life. Years later, Danae realizes her first life ended on that particular day. How does the passage of time shape the way the women see their past and current lives? Is there a moment in your own life that you now realize was a turning point, but one that can only be recognized in hindsight?
5. Medusa is often portrayed as a monstrous figure but, in *The Shadow of Perseus*, she is independent, warm, and trusting. Were you able to reconcile the author's depiction with the widely held myth? Do you see this novel as wildly divergent or simply told from a different perspective?
6. Though Medusa's section is the shortest of the three women's narratives, she remains a part of the story after her death. Perseus tells tales about his confrontation with the "Gorgon" and carries her head as his trophy, while Andromeda and Danae are horrified by it. What significance do you think Medusa has in death? How does she impact the other characters? Do you think her head is symbolic in any way?



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7. Each main character experiences her community turning on her: Akrisios calls Danae a whore and condemns her unborn child as a bastard; villagers turn on Medusa when the rapist priest claims she seduced him; Osorkon insists that Andromeda's family make a massive financial sacrifice to atone for her so-called vanity and pride. How does each woman start to trust people again? Which interactions help restore their faith? Were they right in their newfound trust?
 8. Certain events are repeated again and again in this story. When Perseus confines Andromeda below deck, he unwittingly mimics his mother's exile at sea. Proitos regrets failing to protect Danae from Akrisios's banishment, and she in turn regrets sending Perseus on the merchant ship. Danae returns home just as she left nearly two decades earlier: pregnant, with a fatherless child. What other patterns did you notice? Are they coincidences, or do they point to the circular nature of fate?
 9. When Andromeda resolves to stay with Perseus, she decides "if she were to build herself a new happiness, this is where she would do it." How do the characters in this book adapt themselves to meet the conditions they face? Who sees happiness as something to be built, and who relies on fate and circumstances? Do you think Andromeda will be able to build happiness in her current situation?
 10. Initially, Andromeda relies on complete silence as strength, but later she resolves to use her words as power. How does this decision play out in her dealings with Perseus? How much do you credit her with preventing further violence?
 11. Near the end of the book, Proitos says, "We cannot thank the gods with one mouth and curse them with another." How successfully do the characters accept their changeable circumstances? How can any of us reconcile the convergence of the joyful and tragic events in our lives?
 12. In the afterword, the author writes that she intended to set the novel "within an authentic historical context, based on my research and understanding of the Bronze Age Mediterranean world." How did the details of culture and geography enrich your understanding of the myth of Perseus?
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