

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky, and this is the actress Robyn Kerr reading from the novel, The Song of Achilles.**

*He yawned, his eyes heavy-lidded. "What's your name?"*

*His kingdom was half, a quarter, an eighth the size of my father's, and I had killed a boy and been exiled and still he did not know me. I ground my jaw shut and would not speak. He asked again, louder: "What's your name?"*

*My silence was excusable the first time; perhaps I had not heard him. Now it was not. "Patroclus." It was the name my father had given me, hopefully but injudiciously, at my birth, and it tasted of bitterness on my tongue. "Honor of the father," it meant.*

*I waited for him to make a joke out of it, some witty jape about my disgrace. He did not. Perhaps, I thought, he is too stupid to. He rolled onto his side to face me. A stray lock of gold fell half into his eyes; he blew it away. "My name is Achilles."*

**In The Song of Achilles, the novelist by Madeline Miller reimagines The Iliad told from the point of view of a secondary character called Patroclus.**

**In her second and latest novel, Madeline also reimagined another work by Homer – this time it was The Odyssey from the point of view of another minor character called Circe.**

**I binged through both novels because her writing is so vivid. It's like the words disappear and you're there -- in your mind -- seeing what the characters see.**

**Both novels have been worldwide best sellers. They've won a number of awards. It was actually challenging to get a hold of Madeline Miller because she was on this huge book for Circe. What does it feel like to be in such high demand?**

MADELINE: Completely surreal, it's really hard to absorb it, I'm incredibly grateful for it. I still have the impulse when I see someone with my book, to give them my kidney. It still feels like this total shock.

***So tell me about your first encounter with Greek mythology as a kid, as far back as you can remember?***

MADELINE: So my earliest memory goes back to when I was 5 or 6, my mom used to read me pieces of the Iliad and the Odyssey. I think I felt like I was

getting a view into an adult world, as well as the excitement of the adventure, there's a Cyclops, and the sirens, and six headed monsters, and all that stuff which is exciting but the thing that most appealed to me is wow, this is real. This feels real.

***Why do you think it felt real?***

MADELINE: In some ways it's the same reason it feels real which is these stories are fundamentally six headed monsters and gods aside, they're fundamentally about people and human nature. And even though our culture has changed human nature hasn't changed and so it felt like I was seeing something that was true even though it was so old and fantastical.

**By the way, this episode is going to be full of spoilers, if you're not familiar with The Iliad and The Odyssey.**

**So Madeline was introduced to Greek mythology as a little kid, and then her interest picked up again when she studied Homer in college. That's when she got the spark of an idea that would lead to her writing The Song of Achilles. And this a-ha moment that she had actually touches on a debate that's been going on for years in literature.**

**Who gets to tell their story?**

**At story is powerful. The power comes from the question of why. Why does the main character do what they do? If the narrative is crafted in a way for us to understand their motivations, they get our empathy and our understanding. But traditionally that kind of identification has been reserved for straight white male characters going all the way back to the beginning of Western literature almost 3,000 years ago with The Iliad and The Odyssey.**

**For Madeline, this question centered around the character of Patroclus --- who is a close companion of Achilles during the Trojan War.**

MADELINE: Patroclus is killed and his body brought to Achilles and Achilles just completely loses it, it's as if a bomb goes off in his life, he wants to kill himself, his first thought, other Greeks stop him, and he wants to go and get vengeance on person who took Patroclus from him and once he has killed that person, Hector prince of Troy, he has to keep dragging body around walls of Troy. And so that level of having Achilles's life overturned was so interesting because it felt like a real mystery.

**Why did it feel like a mystery? Well, Patroclus wasn't a major character in The Iliad. Right before his death, the story had been focused on the conflict between Achilles and his commander, Agamemnon. Achilles is the ultimate warrior but he refuses to fight because he thinks Agamemnon has disrespected him -- and that was not a trivial matter.**

MADLINE: The backstory to the Iliad is that Achilles has made this choice to die young and be famous forever, he has literally given up his life for his reputation, and so when Agamemnon threatens that, he has to hit the nuclear button, say I'm not going to fight for you and in the background the whole time there's this time Patroclus, we hear he's the most beloved companion of Achilles. He's there but he doesn't really talk, he doesn't have a lot of stage time. And then it comes to this moment where the Greeks are losing, please Achilles will you fight? No he won't. And into this moment steps this character, Patroclus. He says I'll put on your armor Achilles and I will go out and I will fight and the Trojans will think it's you and they'll run away – and that is in fact what happens. But in the course of this very courageous thing that Patroclus does, he is killed. So it was Achilles's grief reaction of who is this mystery of who is person who is so important to Achilles that even though Achilles says nothing can make me fight again, as soon as Patroclus is dead, all that is out the window. And then it's also some of the descriptions of Patroclus in the Iliad are really unusual. Achilles is not the only person who mourns for Patroclus, he's also mourned by Briseis, a slave woman who is partly part of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, and she describes him as being always gentle, which is a really, if you know the ancient Greek myths that is a really unusual description for an ancient hero. It's strong, or brave, or fast, or beautiful but not gentle. So it sort of felt to me that Homer is telling the end of their story, what's the beginning of their story, how did we get to this point in the Iliad when Achilles's life is completely broken? And I wanted it to be a love story that was really important to me. The tradition of Achilles and Patroclus being lovers is a very old tradition, it goes back to Plato and Aeschylus but it had dropped out when I was studying classics, I think it's coming back now which is nice, but it had dropped out as an interpretation, and I was incredibly frustrated by that, so I wanted it to come from that perspective too.

**So she had a great idea a novel. But that's when the self-doubt creeped in because she had never written a novel before. And for her first book, she was going to rewrite Homer? She kept writing drafts and throwing them out. Years passed. It also didn't help that an ex-boyfriend at the time teased her that she was writing Homeric fan-fiction.**

MADELINE: He has since apologized, very graciously!

***Ha!***

MADELINE: I was absolutely worried about that. And I didn't tell any of my classics mentors that I was working on it, I didn't tell anybody in my life except close family and friends who had nothing to do with classics, it felt blasphemous, it felt presumptuous, who am I to do this? Really I didn't tell people for the whole ten years until I was working on it. I didn't tell my mentor until I had the finished final *The Song of Achilles* hardback in my hands, and I called up my mentor, and I said, so I wrote this novel, can I send it to you? It's about Achilles and Patroclus. And he said, well I certainly hope you made them lovers!

***(Laughs)***

MADELINE: Completely And I was like, oh I did! I think you're going to like it! So I sent it to him and he was very gracious and you know I think it was a big revelation for it to come out, because I kept waiting for the classics police to come and say I had been bad. But I think most classicists and classics departments were really supportive and what I realized, and should've realized earlier if I had been thinking about it is that these stories have been retold from the very first.

**In fact, the most famous thing we know about Achilles – that his main vulnerability was in his heel because his mother, the goddess Thetis (TEE-tis), dipped him in the River Styx when he was a baby by holding his heel – that whole story was not in the *Iliad*. That was in another retelling of the story written centuries after Homer had died.**

MADELINE: In Homer, in fact it's a more realistic version in Homer, he's an extraordinary warrior, the whole dipping by the heel, invulnerable, that comes later. And I like to write close to Homer because I like to be in conversation with Homer, and to be responding in specific moments with Homer but there were times that I needed to change something or I wanted to change something. It was instinctive, it was – in theater they always so go where the heat is. I felt like I wanted to go where the heat was.

**For instance, after Patroclus has died and Achilles is dragging Hector's body through the city – she felt like the heat was still on Patroclus, even though he's a lifeless corpse. So his spirit keeps narrating the story of Achilles.**

*He rises at dawn to drag Hector's body around the walls of the city for all of Troy to see. He does it again at midday, and again at evening. He does not see the Greeks begin to avert their eyes from him. He does not see the lips thinning in disapproval as he passes. How long can this go on?*

*Thetis is waiting for him in the tent, tall and straight as a flame. "What do you want?" He drops Hector's body by the door. Her cheeks have spots of color, like blood spilled on marble.*

*"You must stop this. Apollo is angry. He seeks vengeance upon you."*

*"Let him." He kneels, smooths back the hair on my forehead. I am wrapped in blankets, to muffle the smell.*

*"Achilles." She strides to him, seizes his chin. "Listen to me. You go too far in this. I will not be able to protect you from him."*

*He jerks his head from her and bares his teeth. "I do not need you to." Her skin is whiter than I have ever seen it.*

*"Do not be a fool. It is only my power that—"*

*"What does it matter?" He cuts her off, snarling. "He is dead. Can your power bring him back?"*

*"No," she says. "Nothing can."*

*He stands. "Do you think I cannot see your rejoicing? I know how you hated him. You have always hated him! If you had not gone to Zeus, he would be alive!"*

*"He is a mortal," she says. "And mortals die."*

*"I am a mortal!" he screams. "What good is godhead, if it cannot do this? What good are you?"*

*"I know you are mortal," she says. She places each cold word as a tile in a mosaic. "I know it better than anyone. I left you too long on Pelion. It has ruined you." She gestures, a flick, at his torn clothing, his tear-stained face. "This is not my son."*

*His chest heaves. "Then who is it, Mother? Am I not famous enough? I killed Hector. And who else? Send them before me. I will kill them all!"*

**But the Trojan War turned out to be the opening act because Madeline knew there was a bigger story she wanted to tell – one that would shift her perspective beyond anything she could imagine. After the break, Madeline learns to think like a god.**

**BREAK**

**While Madeline was writing *The Song of Achilles*, she knew her next book was going to take on *The Odyssey* -- and while she wasn't going to focus on Odysseus, he was still going to be a big part of the novel.**

**Now Odysseus was in her first novel because he's in *The Iliad*. But in shifting the focus toward him, she wanted to rethink how we understand his character – particularly because of his actions at the end of *The Odyssey*.**

**When Odysseus finally gets back to Ithaca at the end of his epic adventures, he slaughters every suitor that courted his wife Penelope, or had a hand in those courtships.**

**In her second novel, *Circe*, we hear about that slaughter from Odysseus's traumatized teenage son, Telemachus.**

*His words were running forward like an undammed flood.*

*“All those years of pain and wandering. Why? For a moment's pride. He would rather be cursed by the gods than be No one. If he had returned home after the war, the suitors would never have come. My mother's life would not have been blighted. My life. He talked so often of longing for us and home. But it was lies. When he was back on Ithaca he was never content, always looking to the horizon. Once we were his again, he wanted something else. What is that if not a bad life? Luring others to you, then turning from them?”*

MADELINE: The PTSD aspect was really important to me, and I feel there are two things going on in that in my imagination. One is that he has been through 10 years of a brutal war and 10 years of trying to get home, and in the 10 years trying to get home, he sees all his men brutally killed in front of his face. He is the only survivor out of 12 ships of his men, and really gruesome deaths like the Cyclops eating one of his crew. And then here is back home on Ithaca just expected to pick up his old life.

**But Odysseus is not the narrator of this novel – nor is Telemachus. The narrator of the novel is Circe, a character that only shows up in two chapters of *The Odyssey*. She's a minor deity who turns Odysseus' men into pigs after they land on her island. But Odysseus wins her over – in fact she becomes his lover.**

**Without hearing Circe's point of view in *The Odyssey*, Madeline always felt like this character didn't make any sense.**

MADELINE: At no point does anyone say, Circe why are you turning men into pigs? How did you start doing that? What is up with that? And I think the interpretation is because she's evil, she's just an irrational woman that is such an uninteresting answer and I feel that people do things for psychological reasons and that's part of what I love doing with these myths is Homer suggests psychology but he doesn't give us the Shakespearean inner monologue. And so I love drawing that psychology out.

***Another reason you've said you've been drawn to her is that she's considered the first witch in Western literature. Is there anything we can look at the way she's portrayed that sets a template for the way witches are portrayed in future literature?***

MADELINE: Completely Hmmm. Definitely. So you can see some witchy attributes already emerging with Circe. First of all, she has a connection to animals. And then there's her work with poisons, drugs, potions, you know that's very witchy double, double, toil and trouble. And then she has a staff as well that she uses at the moment she casts her spell. But more importantly, she's a figure who is a woman who is a source of anxiety that she is clearly this incarnation of male anxiety about female power. That's witches through the centuries.

**But Circe is also a goddess. The lifespan of human beings are like mayflies to her. And for Madeline, that was the hardest thing to imagine.**

MADELINE: It took me 7 year to write Circe and the first 5 years was just me trying to develop her voice and the voice of an immortal being who had lived for centuries would sound and how she would approach time. I think also was, I just wanted going deep enough, I was writing about this stuff in a superficial way in those drafts, I think no, go deeper, no go deeper. The scenes don't have that kind of underpinning. I have to learn her interior as I go.

**I got sucked into her point of view right from the beginning, when Circe remembers how much her father, the Titan Helios, adored her as a child.**

*At my father's feet, the whole world was made of gold. The light came from everywhere at once, his yellow skin, his lambent eyes, the bronze flashing of his hair. His flesh was hot as a brazier, and I pressed as close as he would let me, like a lizard to noontday rocks. My aunt had said that some of the lesser gods could scarcely bear to look at him, but I was his daughter and blood, and I stared*

*at his face so long that when I looked away it was pressed upon my vision still, glowing from the floors, the shining walls and inlaid tables, even my own skin.*

*“What would happen,” I said, “if a mortal saw you in your fullest glory?”*

*“He would be burned to ash in a second.”*

*“What if a mortal saw me?”*

*My father smiled. I listened to the draught pieces moving, the familiar rasp of marble against wood. “The mortal would count himself fortunate.”*

*“I would not burn him?”*

*“Of course not,” he said.*

*“But my eyes are like yours.”*

*“No,” he said. “Look.” His gaze fell upon a log at the fireplace’s side. It glowed, then flamed, then fell as ash to the ground. “And that is the least of my powers. Can you do as much?”*

*All night I stared at those logs. I could not.*

**What helped Madeline develop Circe’s voice was recognizing her lack of agency among the gods. Circe is technically a nymph, and nymphs are at the bottom rung of Mount Olympus.**

MADELINE: They are constantly being assaulted, being given away, used as pawns, treated as prey – so part of what Circe does in becoming a witch is refuse that and say I refuse that life. I’m going to literally invent my own power to get around that.

**Witchcraft is a power that can be used against the gods. That’s why Circe is often portrayed as a frightening character in ancient literature. And in looking at different sources on Circe – beyond The Odyssey -- Madeline was intrigued by a story from the Roman poet Ovid.**

MADELINE: Ovid’s Circe is very interesting, it’s a much more pathetic, figure, she’s constantly falling in love with the wrong guy and then she gets angry and she lashes out. But the part of Ovid that I found really interesting, so Ovid tells the story of Scylla – who is originally a nymph in the six-headed horror we see in the Odyssey, that does not come from Homer, that’s from Ovid.

**If you’re not familiar with that myth, Circe and Scylla (SKIL-uh) were in competition for the same man. When he chose Scylla, Circe took out her revenge by turning her rival into a six-headed sea monster.**

MADLINE: But instead of this being this flat story, oh women, they're so irrational, a woman scorned, etc. What are some psychological reasons why she would do that? And I also wanted to dig into the consequences which is something Ovid doesn't go into at all – now you've done this, you have to live with it, you to live with what it means you've created these monsters, you've done this to another person, and now they're going off and killing people and all that's on you.

**In Madeline's version of the story, Circe is still young and naïve when she's in competition with Scylla. This man was Circe's first love. Circe also doesn't realize the true power of her witchcraft. She thinks she's just added a potion to Scylla's bathwater that will take away her beauty, and reveal the true ugliness inside.**

**When Circe discovers what she's done, she's shocked and horrified. And the Gods -- used to think of Circe as a joke -- now see her as a threat that needs to be banished.**

**Years later, Circe finally sees with her own eyes what she's done to Scylla.**

*I strained my eyes upwards, and she came.*

*She was gray as the air, as the cliff itself. I had always imagined she would look like something: a snake or an octopus, a shark. But the truth of her was overwhelming, an immensity that my mind fought to take in. Her necks were longer than ship masts. Her six heads gaped, hideously lumpen, like melted lava stone. Black tongues licked her sword-length teeth.*

*Her eyes were fixed on the men, oblivious in their sweating fear. She crept closer, slipping over the rocks. A reptilian stench struck me, foul as squirming nests underground. Her necks wove a little in the air, and from one of her mouths I saw a gleaming strand of saliva stretch and fall. Her body was not visible. It was hidden back in the mist with her legs, those hideous, boneless things that Selene had spoken of so long ago. Hermes had told me how they clung inside her cave like the curled ends of hermit crabs when she lowered herself to feed.*

***I mean the imagery I could not get out of my head, all the sections of Scylla as a monster, and the Minotaur. I think you have a line in there where one of the gods talks about how the mortals love their monsters. Did writing those sections give you any insight into why we love monsters or what is so fascinating about them?***

MADLINE: I think in some sense they are the realization of those fears of being out of control. And it's a really arresting moment in the Odyssey. Odysseus says well, I'm going to put on my armor so maybe I can fight Scylla because Circe says you're going to have to pass by Scylla and Charybdis, you'll want to stay on the side where Circe is because she'll take six of your men, but if you go on the side of Charybdis, she'll take your whole ship. So you have to take the hit, and he says I'm going to put on my armor and try to kill Scylla and she says, there's nothing you can do. You can't kill her. She cannot be killed. And it comes to that moment in the straits and he's about to pass Scylla he puts on his armor anyway, he takes up his sword anyway, even though he knows he can't do anything about it! And he's going to lose six men and I feel like that is so human, this longing for control and fears for being out of control and how much control do we really have in this world?

*"There must be some way to prevent her," he said. "Some weapon I might use." It was one of my favorite things about him: how he always fought for his chance.*

*I turned away, so I would not have to see his face when I said, "No. There is nothing. Not even for such a mortal as you. I faced her once, long ago, and escaped only through magic and godhead. But the Sirens, there you may use your tricks. Fill your men's ears with wax, and leave your own free. If you tie yourself to the mast, you may be the first man to ever hear their song and tell the tale. Would that not make a good story for your wife and son?"*

*"It would." But his voice was dull as a ruined blade.*

**Whenever a writer decides to take on a classic narrative, what often stands out is the differences between then and now. The Song of Achilles feels modern in its expression of love, but it is still a Greek tragedy about the struggle between fate and free will. But Circe feels even more contemporary. Her character arc is all about empowerment. She finds the agency to rise above their circumstances and become the best version of herself that she can be.**

**And the so-called "classics police" did not come to get her because a lot of scholars believe these take weren't Homer's to begin with. He was just the person who told them most vividly, and memorably.**

**Good stories have the power to captivate us, but in their DNA is the power of reinvention. They give us permission to retell them in a way that speaks to us. That's how the stories can live forever, like the gods.**

MADLINE: I think the thing that most speaks to me actually is a way that I wanted the story to parallel the Odyssey. The Odyssey is animated for homecoming. The Greek word is *nostos*, that's where we get the word nostalgia, and I wanted Circe to also be longing for homecoming except she doesn't have an Ithaca. She has to create her own home and she has to look for a family, friends, a group of people that feel like home to her. I think that who she is and finding her people is something I identified with.

***You felt you in that time you were looking for home, and looking for your people so to speak?***

MADLINE: Yeah, I mean, thank goodness my family is not like Circe's family, I'm very grateful for that.

***Very few people are!***

MADLINE: But I grew up, you know, I was the typical writer kid. I was extremely bookish, very shy, very withdrawn, very imaginative, very weird. And I didn't have, I had some lovely friends but they didn't really understand me, so it was nice to find some people who understood where I was coming from and appreciated some of those weirdness's. (Laughs)

**Madeline is done with Greek mythology for now. She's said that she'd like to take on another titan of Western literature – Shakespeare, specifically The Tempest. Given how long it took for her to find the right voice for her previous characters, it might be a while before her third novel comes out, whether it's The Tempest or something else. Either way, I'm sure it will be worth the wait.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Madeline Miller and Robyn Kerr who did the readings.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky, and imagine worlds pod, and my website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.**