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Esther M. Friesner

Nobody's Princess

United States (2007)

TAGS: Aegisthus Althaea / Althea Aphrodite Atalanta Castor Clytemnestra Helen Iolaus Leda Meleager Polydeuces Theseus Thyestes Tyndareus

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Nobody's Princess
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2007
First Edition Details	Esther Friesner, *Nobody's Princess*. New York: Random House Children's Books, 2007, 325 pp.
ISBN	9780375875298
Genre	Fiction, Historical fiction, Mythological fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
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Creators

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Esther M. Friesner , b. 1951
(Author)

Esther Mona Friesner (b. New York 1951) is an American fantasy and science fiction author, editor and college professor. She attended Hunter College High School, studied Spanish and Drama at Vassar College, and has a PhD in Spanish from Yale. Prior to becoming a full time writer, she was a Yale professor of Spanish.

Friesner is author of over forty novels and editor of many anthologies. She also frequently writes short stories. Much of her work draws on ancient history or myth. *Nobody's Princess* is the first of her four two-book series about legendary princesses. The other three look at Nefertiti, Himiko and Maeve. Additional novels in which she draws on ancient history include *Druid's Blood* (1988) and *Child of the Eagle: A Myth of Rome* (1996). She has also written novels tied into the Star Trek and Sabrina the Teenage Witch franchises.

Friesner has two children and multiple cats and hamsters. Her married name is Esther Friesner-Stutzman. She lives in Connecticut and has won multiple writing awards.

Sources:

Back cover of book.

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Additional information

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	*Thunderbolt* (2005), *Nobody's Prize* (2008).

Summary

This novel follows the early life of Helen of Troy, before her marriage to Menelaus and prior to becoming Queen of Sparta. Helen begins the story age four and ends it age fourteen, although most of the book is set at the latter age. Central themes explored include Helen's feelings about her beauty, her family, the gods, her inheritance, growing up as a girl, boys and the elusive concept of freedom. Told in the past tense in the first person, the novel is a lightly narrated look at somewhat serious themes.

Nobody's Princess is a prequel to Friesner's short story *Thunderbolt,* which appeared in the 2005 YA fantasy anthology *Young Warriors: Stories of Strength* (edited by Josepha Sherman and Tamora Pierce). *Thunderbolt* gave a humorous version of Helen's abduction by Theseus in which Helen cunningly escapes her captors before her brothers have the chance to rescue her. *Nobody's Princess*, then, tells how Helen came to be the cunning, confident and strategic young woman depicted in that story.

The story begins with young Helen as a beautiful and much-loved princess of Sparta who takes a special liking to the goddess Aphrodite. She is frustrated, however, that she isn't free in the way she envisions freedom and has little power over her own life. Helen's resentful sister Clytemnestra complains that Helen gets away with everything because she is so beautiful. Helen ponders this and wonders whether beauty might be the key to the control over her own life which she desires. Not finding it enough, she instead sets out to learn the skills reserved for royal men, persuading her brothers' tutor Glaucus to teach her to fight in secret and practising running and hunting.

As a teenager, Helen allegedly loses her looks in awkward growth spurts and is unsure how to feel about this. Meanwhile Clytemnestra, in spite of her distress, is sent away to Mykenae to marry her first husband, Tantalus (in this version the son of Thyestes). Thyestes attempts to coerce Helen into marriage to his other son Aegisthus, but through trickery Helen and her brothers escape to Calydon to

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participate in the Calydonian boar hunt.

Arriving in Calydon, Helen sees and is struck by the huntress Atalanta and the freedom of her lifestyle. She persuades Atalanta to teach her to ride horses and the two become friends. She also encounters the arrogant Theseus of Athens, to whom she is initially attracted until she hears him boast. There are hints she may be transferring her affections to Heracles' nephew Iolaus. After the tragic ending to the Calydonian boar hunt (in which Helen secretly participates), she and her brothers travel to Delphi. Helen frees a slave named Milo who becomes devoted to (and by implication infatuated with) her. When Castor and Polydeuces pledge themselves to join the quest for the golden fleece, Helen longs to go too, and she hatches a plan with the Oracle of Delphi that will allow she and Milo to sneak along. The Argonaut quest is the subject of the sequel.

Analysis

Friesner included an author's note at the end in which she explains her intent for this novel. She says she was fascinated by the question of how Helen felt about her legendary beauty, as well as Helen's degree of agency in her own life and what happened *before* Helen became famous. She states that part of the story is "about not fearing freedom" (p. 305).

In the author's note, Friesner also dangles the question of Helen's complicity in her abduction by Paris – "Did she go with him willingly, or was she kidnapped?" (p. 300). She does not answer this question. However, given the nature of this Helen, her ability to get herself out of unpleasant situations including an earlier abduction, her love of freedom and her lack of interest in doing the responsible thing, the novel implicitly seems to come down in favour of the "it was an elopement" side of the argument.

Allusions to Helen's future adult life are present but limited. Troy is never mentioned, although many other major mythological locations are. The Mykeneans, the people of Helen's future husband Menelaus, are built up as a sinister and powerful presence. However, Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon are never mentioned. Thyestes is the Mykenean king and we are told he has driven out his brother Atreus after the infamous episodes in which Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife and Atreus fed Thyestes his own sons. But whilst Thyestes' son Aegisthus (Clytemnestra's future lover) appears, Atreus' sons do not.

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Most other future figures of the Trojan War are also not mentioned (e.g. Achilles, Ajax, Diomedes, Idomeneus, Nestor). Instead, the focus is on the heroes from before the *Iliad* and two cities that do not play a major role in the Trojan War, Calydon and Delphi.

Helen, contrary to what she is associated with in the modern day, spends most of the novel insisting she has no interest in love or marriage or babies, which is scandalous to many of the other female characters. She is initially sexually attracted to the physical appearance of Theseus, but put off by his obnoxious character, then seems to be drawn to Iolaus whom she claims is not physically attractive. (She never explicitly acknowledges the latter desire, however.) In one scene near the end, the Pythia Eunike prophesies Helen's mythological future to her. "You're going to grow up rich and beautiful, you're going to meet a handsome man who'll change your life, and you're going to go on a long voyage with him." (p. 242). She then laughs and reveals this is not a genuine vision but "Isn't that what every girl wants to hear?" Helen's future with Paris and the Trojan War is therefore teased but apparently not genuinely prophesied.

Helen's family in this version is small; her siblings are Castor and Polydeuces (not twins here) and Clytemnestra. Other sisters of Helen, such as Phoebe from *Iphigenia at Aulis,* Timandra from Hesiod/Steischorus and Philonoe from Hesiod, do not exist. Helen is rumoured to be the daughter of Zeus but does not take this seriously. Her sister, Clytemnestra, is in many ways the anti-Helen in this story. She is appropriately feminine and dutiful, excels at weaving, which Helen hates and loves the goddess Artemis, whom Helen distrusts. Clytemnestra (rather harshly called "prissy" by the blurb) is framed as the appropriate royal Greek woman, but receives little appreciation. As she resentfully points out, everyone prefers Helen simply because she is beautiful. Even their parents, portrayed as good and loving, are shown to be harsh to Clytemnestra when compared with Helen. There seem to be elements to Clytemnestra's character of critiquing not only what a good Mykenean woman was supposed to be like, but also what a good twenty-first century American girl is supposed to be like.

If this Clytemnestra resembles any of the adult forms of herself which grace the Greek tragedies, it is the version in *Iphigenia at Aulis* where she angrily tells Agamemnon that she has been the perfect dutiful wife and done everything she is supposed to do. She makes similar arguments here about her dutiful behaviour not being rewarded. We also see Clytemnestra marrying Tantalus, who is her first husband in

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Iphigenia at Aulis but not in the other tragedies. The dark, unsympathetic portrayal of Artemis is also reminiscent of the Iphigenia plays. In contrast, Clytemnestra in *Nobody's Princess* has little in common with the confident, strategic and dominant version of herself that appears in Aeschylus.

Freedom is a major theme of the novel. The final sentence as Helen and Milo leave to join the Argonauts is "We were free." (p. 296). Freedom is explicitly mentioned many times throughout the story, with Helen frustrated that as a girl she does not have it in the way that she wants. Helen longs for a life "where I was free to make choices that mattered, one where people listened to what I had to say." (p. 35).

Another major element of the novel which ties into this is slavery. Helen's parents are implied to be liberal in their attitudes to slaves; for example, Polydeuces tells Helen that if Leda ever learns she threatened to have their nursemaid whipped she'll be furious. Later, as a teenager, Helen seems to have adopted their attitude on this and is often critical of the way slaves are treated. There are perhaps hints of anachronism for the sake of palatability; sometimes Helen seems to just "know" slavery is bad as if she is a modern girl, although her exact philosophy is never spelt out. (Compare this to Caroline Cooney's similar *Goddess of Yesterday*, Delacorte Press: 2002, in which the teen protagonist has a more realistic attitude towards slavery.)

The culmination of this theme occurs when Helen frees the Calydonian slave, Milo, after seeing him beaten by Oeneus. Interestingly, Helen does not consult Milo in this or consider that he might have family, friends or other things he does not wish to leave when taking him with her. Conveniently, however, it turns out he did not. His devoted and grateful attitude to Helen means he acts in the role of a slave without being one, although towards the end he does begin to stand up to her. The novel treats Milo almost as if he was not a full person prior to being freed, ignoring the reality that ancient slaves would have made the most of their situation, had complex feelings about their position and might still have led meaningful lives.

Helen's feelings about the status of royal women are somewhat more realistic, presented as a natural frustration at her lack of power and freedom rather than her being a modern girl who simply "knows" sexism is bad. As with her views on slavery, she is partially following in the footsteps of her mother, who led a free life of hunting prior to her marriage and still sometimes hunts. The marriage of Helen's parents is

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presented as unusually egalitarian. Their daughters, however, are still pushed into a life of embroidery and little else, and Clytemnestra is married off young and sent away. Helen encounters greater misogyny when visiting Calydon and Delphi compared to her home of Sparta, but also encounters women she finds inspirational – that is, Atalanta and the Pythia Eunike.

Compared to other YA novels about the Trojan War, *Nobody's Princess* includes a large amount of historical detail. Whilst the characters of Geras' 2000 *Troy,* for example, sometimes act like products of a generically classical society, this world is clearly Mykenean in terms of fashion, activities and attitudes. Geography and the Greek climate are described in detail, and mythological family trees are largely preserved, if simplified.

The novel has a cheerful tone, which is almost at odds with what we know will happen to these characters as adults. Helen's freedom and adventurous spirit will lead to war and death, Clytemnestra's desire for a loving and appreciative family will end with her being murdered by her son, Atalanta's wish to remain without a husband will be thwarted and Castor and Polydeuces will die young. The story does not hint at these things and in fact makes the characters seem as if they are moving towards greater happiness and fulfilment. In a way, however, this may be the point. *Nobody's Princess* seems to exist in an optimistic realm of youthful hope and freedom that shows the characters enjoying life in the moment in a way that is curiously divorced from the ancient source material to which it positions itself as a prequel.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aegisthus Althaea / Althea Aphrodite Atalanta Castor Clytemnestra Helen Iolaus Leda Meleager Polydeuces Theseus Thyestes Tyndareus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Appearances Freedom Gender, female Heroism Identity Travel

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