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Jo Graham

Black Ships

United States of America (2008)

TAGS: Aeneas Anchises Aphrodite Iphigenia / Iphigeneia Neoptolemus Nestor Persephone Pythia Troy





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

General information	
Title of the work	Black Ships
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	Jo Graham, *Black Ships.* New York: Orbit Hachette Book Group USA, 2008, 431 pp.
ISBN	9780316068000
Genre	Historical fiction, Mythological fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
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Creators



Jo Graham , b. 1968
(Author)

Graham is an American novelist who resides in Maryland. She was influenced by Mary Renault and others. Her maiden novel, *Black Ships*, was nominated in 2009 for the Locus Award for Best First Novel. In an interview, cited at the end of Black Ships, she recounts her love for mythology. She mentions that she read the Aeneid in Latin "and fell in love with Vergil and his storytelling". (p. 417). She is interested in the ancient period as it was, according to her, a time of crisis and change and she wishes for the readers to think about different kinds of heroes.

Sources:

Online interview at web.archive.org (accessed: February 26, 2019)

Profile at fantasticfiction.com (accessed: February 26, 2019)

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Additional information

Summary

This is the story of the fictional Pythia, from her birth to adulthood. Gull was a girl born to a Trojan slave woman who was brought to Pylos, to King Nestor's palace after the fall of Troy (which is named Wilusa in the book, the name comes from Hittite texts and is associated with Troy; thus the author shows her proficiency with classical archaeology). The background of the Trojan cycle is referred to in the book, especially the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the curse it incurred on the house of Atreus. Since her mother was raped at the young age of 14, Gull never knew her father and lived with her mother as a slave who attended the linen fields. Gull's life is difficult yet not miserable. Her mother is even courted by Triotes, Nestor's brother, and gives birth to a boy, Aren, who is recognized by his father. Yet when Gull is 8, after being physically hurt in an accident and severely hurting her leg, her mother realizes she will not be able to work in the fields and in order to save her decides to dedicate her to the Pythia.

The Pythia in this story is a revered priestess of Persephone (who is referred in the story as "The Lady of Death" or "Her"); she has no connection to the more known Pythia of Apollo. The Pythia possess the power of foretelling, and the gift of foresight is also discovered in little Gull. The Pythia agrees to rear Gull and train her to become the next Pythia. One of the most important things she teaches her is to guide people according to her own wisdom and understanding of the human heart and mind, not just to be a vessel for the goddess. After the Pythia dies, the teenage Gull inherits her place and her own adventure begins with the coming of the black ships to Pylos. The black ships turn out to be the remaining Trojans, led by Aeneas.

Gull decides to leave Pylos and joins Aeneas and the remaining of her people in their quest for a new home. They go through different adventures and challenges, loosely based on Virgil's *Aeneid*. They travel to a pirate city (Millawanda), to the Isle of the Dead, to Egypt and then to Italy. The story in Egypt is a retelling of Aeneas and Dido's fatal love-affair in Carthage. However, in this rendition Aeneas sacrifices himself in order to secure his people in Egypt, from the whims of the Egyptian princess, Basetamon, from whom he eventually flees, not because of a prophecy, because she humiliates and threatens him and his men. Along the way the Trojans are being chased by the ruthless Neoptolemos, Achilles' son, who wishes to annihilate them. Throughout this difficult voyage, Gull grows up and

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matures, as Pythia (referred to as Sibyl now by her people) as well as a young woman. She falls in love with one of the sailors, Xandros and gives birth to three children. In the end of the story, Gull encounters sadness and loss with the death of her lover and son in a final battle against Neoptolemos. Yet, Gull also experiences joy with the establishment of a new city for the Trojans in Latium and with the rest of her family.

The book also contains extras, including a glossary of locations and people, discussion questions about the story as well as a detailed interview with the author which sheds light on her inspiration and her creative process.

Analysis

The Pythia was a mysterious woman, one of the most revered women in ancient Greece. We have no real knowledge about the Pythia and therefore this book is trying to fill in this gap and give the symbol of the Pythia a face and a developed character. The author deliberately alters the more common role of the Pythia, as the famous priestess of Apollo, by making her the priestess of Persephone. The importance of death is crucial to the story, especially during the narration of Gull's background. She is surrounded by misery and death, yet by strong and caring mother-figures as well. Thus, like the mythical Persephone who dies and reborn, the theme of death gives the story a kind of frame: Gull would also die – her old slave-girl self, when she is dedicated to the Pythia, and she will later reborn as the new Pythia, exploring her own strength as a woman and a priestess.

The emphasis the former Pythia teaches her about advising people with wisdom and by being able to read situations carefully, also sheds light on what the actual Pythia might have done. The Pythia is more than a vessel for the sometimes incoherent words of the gods; she is a guide and an advisor. In a world where women are violated and sold to slavery, the Pythia is a role-model, a strong and independent woman who stands equally with men. Her independence is also reflected in the prohibition on her to have a husband. The Pythia can take a lover, she can even have children but she is not bound to a man by marriage. Marriage in the ancient world made the husband the ruler over his wife; yet the Pythia is her own mistress, who only answers to the goddess. The author thus makes the ancient Pythia an almost modern liberated woman. She is also somewhat connected with the amazons (who were also regarded as mysterious). If she has

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children, she keeps the girls and the boys are sent to their father. Thus a strong sisterhood of women is created by this religious role.

The author asserts she was greatly influenced by the *Aeneid*, but also altered the story according to her imagination. The growth of Gull is also paralleling the growth of Aeneas into his role of King and founder of a new city for his people. Aeneas is a tragic hero; he lives for his people and does not think of his own pleasure. While Gull experiences true love and joy, Aeneas is lonely, living as a vessel for his people. An example is his affair in Egypt. The author claims that since Cartage did not exist at the supposed time of the Trojan War, she replaced it with Egypt. There is no grand love affair in their story, but rather Aeneas is the one presented as the sacrificial lamb, who must succumb to the whims of the princess for his people. It is an interesting and rather unique approach to Aeneas. While he is a hero, he is also a lonely and sad character, who does not receive the love he yearns for. He is loved by many (including Xandros and Gull), yet he is not permitted to love aimlessly. Usually we see tales of women whose marriage are used as a political tool; in this tale it is Aeneas who becomes such a pawn in order to secure a future for his people.

Focusing on Egypt instead of Carthage naturally shifts the focus from the Roman-Punic relations and grant the author freedom to explore Aeneas' difficult role as a king in his relations with the Egyptian princess. The princess herself somewhat resembles Cleopatra. (The author admits watching the 1963 *Cleopatra* movie with Elizabeth Taylor). Thus there are layers of reception within this novel.

The gods are also absent from this retelling of mythological events. Although the power of the Goddess Persephone is emphasized in the book, there are no real divine interventions. Aeneas is described as the son of Anchises and Priams' eldest daughter Lysisippa, who is simply greatly favored by Aphrodite (Aphrodite is referred in this book as the Lady of the Sea without mentioning her role as the goddesses of love); he is not the real son of the goddess. While Gull mentions his fate in relation to the establishment of a new city, this matter is hardly stressed in the book as it is in the original epos. The author concentrates on the acts of humans and how they create their own paths, while the gods are used as guides but do not make the decisions for the people. Thus the author creates her own world, which exists parallel to the mythological world. In both worlds we find similar people and deities, yet the emphasis is different. The emphasis is transferred from the gods to the people.

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While the actual role of the gods in the narrative is secondary, the author does blend together Greek, Egyptian and even reference to Mesopotamians deities and shows that the gods are very similar even if they belong to different cultures. The mentioning of Egyptians rites and deities is less imperative to the development of the story and perhaps is used more as an exotic ornament to the story as is the mentioning of other Mesopotamians deities. For example, at Cumae, Gull becomes also connected to Mik-el (the name might suggest an influence of the guardian angel Michael) – a Phoenician warrior of Baal who represents life, while she still worships the Lady of Death. In doing so the author connects different worlds and religions, and shows that accepting different cultures leads to greater strength. Gull becomes the mediator between the worlds.

In the end, more than a retelling of the *Aeneid*, this is a coming of age story of one brave woman and an empowering message to many women who faced rape and misery in their lives. The emphasis on women and children as the main victims of war crimes is a recurring theme in the story, especially rape during war. Thus the ancient setting of the story is gaining modern relevance, as similar crimes continue today around the world. Yet even these victimized women can still achieve their much-deserved happiness. While joining Aeneas in their underworld visit at Cumae, the author makes them leave through the Horn gate of the dreams that come true. This is another powerful message; dreams can come true, even after great straits and difficulties, as long as people believe in themselves.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aeneas Anchises Aphrodite Iphigenia / Iphigeneia Neoptolemus Nestor Persephone Pythia Troy
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Heroism Identity Journeys Love Memory Prediction/prophecy Rape Sacrifice Sexuality

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