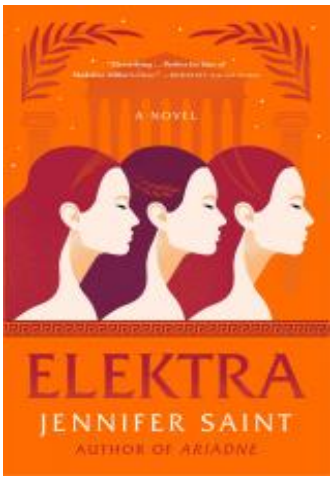
Elektra

by Jennifer Saint



About the Book

A spellbinding reimagining of the story of Elektra, one of Greek mythology?s most infamous heroines, from Jennifer Saint, the author of the beloved international bestseller, ARIADNE.

Three women, tangled in an ancient curse.

When Clytemnestra marries Agamemnon, she ignores the insidious whispers about his family line, the House of Atreus. But when, on the eve of the Trojan War, Agamemnon betrays Clytemnestra in the most unimaginable way, she must confront the curse that has long ravaged their family.

In Troy, Princess Cassandra has the gift of prophecy but carries a curse of her own: no one will ever believe what she sees. When she is shown what will happen to her beloved city when Agamemnon and his army arrives, she is powerless to stop the tragedy from unfolding.

Elektra, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon?s youngest daughter, wants only for her beloved father to return home from war. But can she escape her family?s bloody history, or is her destiny bound by violence, too?

Discussion Guide

1. In the novel?s epigraph, taken from Sophocles? play, Elektra vows to seek revenge: ?For if the hapless dead is to lie in dust and nothingness, while the slayers pay not with blood for blood, all regard for man, all fear of heaven, will vanish from the earth? (p. v). What do her words mean to you? What tone do they set for the story to come?

2. The novel is alternately narrated by Elektra, Clytemnestra and Cassandra. Did you have a favorite narrator? If so, why? Why do you think the author chose to include all three perspectives, especially since the title is ELEKTRA?

3. Once Helen leaves with Paris for Troy, Clytemnestra realizes she had misunderstood Helen?s suitors: ?I had believed they were there because they loved her, but I had been wrong. They hated her. They hated her because she was so beautiful and because she made them want her so much. Nothing brought them more joy than the fall of a lovely woman. They picked over her reputation like vultures, scavenging for every scrap of flesh they could devour? (p. 72). What does she mean? Do you agree? How might Clytemnestra?s view of men continue to resonate in our own time?

4. Early in Agamemnon and Clytemnesta?s marriage, we see Agamemnon turn into a cruel and harsh ruler, while Clytemnestra attempts to be a voice of reason. After the start of the war, though, Clytemnestra begins to transform. Ultimately, do you think she is all that different from her husband? What about Aegisthus? Is he any better than Agamemnon?

5. When Elektra learns of Iphigenia?s death, she quickly makes peace with it: ?If the gods told you that you must do something, you had no choice? (p. 90). Why does she feel that way? Discuss Clytemnestra?s and Elektra?s very different views of Agamemnon. Do you sympathize?

6. How does Clytemnestra change after Iphigenia?s death? Why does she have such a hard time mothering her remaining children?

7. Although her mother warns her against desiring the gift of prophecy, Cassandra longs for it: ?Why would anyone not want it? If you could see into the future, know what was going to happen, if you could protect yourself against it --- why did she make it sound as though it would be absurd to want such a gift?? (p. 20). Once Cassandra becomes a seer, she begins to feel very differently. Are there any ways in which her power is a gift, or is it only a curse?

8. When Helen arrives in Troy, Cassandra expects to see a vision of catastrophe in her eyes, but instead she sees nothing. She realizes: ?I had seen nothing in Helen?s eyes because there was nothing new to see. We had known it all for years, from the moment of my mother?s dream. A fire, coming to sweep the city. Troy would fall. And for all that everyone might disbelieve me if I said it aloud, somewhere in their bones, I knew they knew it too? (p. 59). Do you think she?s right? Why does her family refuse to believe Cassandra?s warnings?

9. Clytemnestra reflects on marriage as Iphigenia prepares to marry Achilles: ?When Helen and I had talked of our husbands back in Sparta, I could see that we were naive, grasping at the prospect of sophistication and womanhood before us without understanding what it would be like. Even at sixteen, neither of us had really mentioned love. The bards would sing of it, but it seemed more the stuff of myth and legend than reality.... Those were the romantic stories of girlhood. They weren?t the truth of marriage. So, I could not tell my daughter of love, exactly? (p. 68?69). Are there examples in the novel of love and marriage coexisting? How do Elektra?s relationships with Georgios and Pylades fit in?

10. When Cassandra fails to persuade the Trojans to leave the wooden horse outside the city, she considers, ?Perhaps I should leave them to their doom, let them happily embrace the devastation of the city? (p. 161). Instead, she returns to the city and tries to destroy the horse herself. Why do you think she goes back? What does her choice reveal about her character?

11. As Elektra yearns to avenge her father?s death, Georgios attempts to reason with her: ?You?ve lived under the shadow of this curse all your life. You?ve learned from your family?s history that blood must be repaid in blood.... It?s a cycle constantly changing, but always the same. And your family?s curse, it?s like that too? (p. 256?57). Can justice and revenge occur simultaneously? Why or why not?

12. The tension between fate and free will is present throughout this novel. How much agency do you think the characters have over their choices, and how much are they manipulated by the gods? Do they bear any responsibility for what happens to them?

13. Although the Trojan War is a major part of the plot in ELEKTRA, we see it not through the perspectives of the men fighting in it but through those of the women back home. How do their voices tell a different story of the war? What new insights do we gain through them?

14. Traditionally in Greek mythology, Clytemnestra murders Cassandra out of rage or jealousy. In Saint?s version, Cassandra chooses to die. Do you see her death as an act of powerlessness or power?

15. Would you consider ELEKTRA to have a happy ending? Do you think Elektra?s baby daughter will continue to be cursed, or has the cycle been broken? Do you think Clytemnestra?s death was justified?

16. Prior to reading Saint?s retelling of ELEKTRA, were you already familiar with the stories and mythology of the Trojan War? Were you surprised by the portrayal of any of the characters here? How can retellings of classic stories change or expand our view of the original? What are some of your favorite retellings?

Author Bio

Jennifer Saint grew up reading Greek mythology and was always drawn to the untold stories hidden within the myths. After 13 years as a high school English teacher, she is now a full-time author, living in Yorkshire, England, with her husband and two children. She is also president of the Leeds and District branch of the Classical Association. All four of her novels have been *Sunday Times* bestsellers, with ELEKTRA and ATALANTA hitting the coveted number-one slot.

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