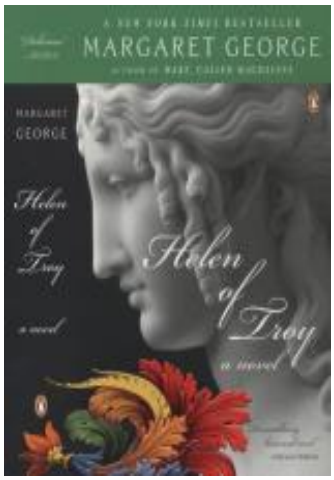
Helen of Troy

by Margaret George



About the Book

Fertility symbol. Goddess. Nymphomaniac whore. Guiltless victim. Bronze Age princess. For millennia, Helen of Troy has been many things to many people. The primary source for her legend is, of course, Homer. In the *Iliad* she is generally portrayed as a sympathetic if marginal character ashamed of the adultery she committed and horrified at its consequences. In book four of the *Odyssey*, back in Sparta with her husband Menelaus, Helen relates an interesting tale about her colluding with Odysseus during the Trojan horse episode because "my heart had changed by now-/I yearned to sail back home again!" Another ancient source, Stesichorus, claims that the real Helen never actually went to Troy but was kept in Egypt during the entirety of the war, while a ghostly double took her place in Troy. In his comedy *Helen*, Euripides draws upon this variation, portraying her as a misunderstood and virtuous woman warding off the advances of Egyptian princes until Menelaus rescues her. Finally, the second-century A.D. satirist Lucian imagines further trials for Helen in the underworld. After the judge Rhadamanthys awards Helen to Menelaus over Theseus, who had abducted her while she was a child, Helen runs off with another ghost.

While all these variations on the Helen story-as well as those by later commentators-agree on her powerful erotic appeal and its potential to cause havoc, they differ wildly on questions about the nature of her character and adultery. Was she, like her mother, the victim of a brutal rape? Was she taken to Troy against her will? Did the riches of an eastern kingdom lure her? Had she genuinely fallen in love with Paris or was he a convenient way out of a passionless marriage? Was she somehow deceived by Paris? Was she just the passive instrument for the gods to play out another of their quarrels?

Some of these questions are immediately answered in the prologue to Margaret George's retelling of the myth. Helen, who speaks for herself, is a widow preparing to bury Menelaus and then return to Troy in the hope of somehow seeing her beloved Paris once again. From there she proceeds to tell her entire story, beginning with her childhood in Sparta. Helen, we learn, is the product of a violent rape. Her mother Leda does her best to protect Helen from the secret of Zeus' rape of her (in the guise of a swan) and from the prying eyes of the public. Before long she uncovers the secrets of her

birth and the dark prophecies about herself and her sister Clytemnestra. (Both girls are fated to leave their husbands.) When Clytemnestra chooses to wed the Mycenaean king Agamemnon, she joins together two doomed families. (Agamemnon's family, known as the House of Atreus, is also cursed.) The strong-willed Clytemnestra believes she will be able to thwart this tragic destiny.

Shortly thereafter, Helen, still an adolescent, must choose a husband from a large gathering of suitors. The suitors are all notable warriors and restless for war during this long period of peace. This, coupled with an earlier terrifying prophecy about Helen's causing a dreadful war, provokes Helen's father to insist they all swear an oath to respect Helen's decision and to defend the chosen man if anyone attempts to violate the decision. Later on, of course, Agamemnon's enforcement of this oath is the means he uses to gather a great army against Troy. The two cursed families are now forever intertwined and Helen begins to see and hear ominous signs of the destruction to come.

Soon after the wedding it is clear that in Menelaus Helen has found a trusted friend but not a lover. Aphrodite answers her prayers for a sexual awakening with a newfound lust not for her husband but for a visiting ambassador from Troy-Paris. Little does Helen know that she has already been promised to Paris in exchange for his selecting Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess. Although her forbidding visions of a future with Paris become clearer and clearer, Helen rushes into his arms with reckless abandon. The consummation of their love on the small island of Cranae-the centerpiece of the novel-is a revelation to Helen. She gives thanks to Aphrodite for uncovering her desire and says, "I know now that to die without tasting this is truly not to have lived. In this we have lived, to feel all, to dare all, to try all." Love, particularly erotic love, is a heroic adventure as worthy of song as the tireless wanderings of Odysseus. There are, however, steep prices to pay for this decision, not least of which is the loss of her daughter Hermione and family.

The second and longest part of the novel concerns Helen's life in Troy as an unwelcome guest bringing danger to their peaceful kingdom. She eventually is tolerated by the royal family and even forms a strong friendship with Hector's wife Andromache, who is also a foreigner. While the saber rattling on both sides escalates, the dire prophecies continue to come to Helen and to the priest Helenus, and Cassandra, the tragic princess whose prophecies are destined to be ignored. As each prophecy inexorably is fulfilled, as Hector is killed by Achilles, Achilles by Paris, Paris by Philoctetes, and Troy finally falls to the deception of the Greeks, Helen becomes a tragic, almost stoic, figure. Her prayers to Zeus to save Paris are returned with the message "Paris is slated to die, and die he must. . . . You will live, because your blood decrees it." She is a survivor and she learns this most emphatically during her *nekuia*, or journey to the underworld. Like the epic heroes Odysseus and Aeneas, Helen communes with the dead in search of answers for her future. After seeing Paris, changed by death and lusting after the life she still possesses, she concludes that "there is no virtue, no solace in the afterworld, thus no merit in hurrying there betimes"-even if it means having to marry the next Trojan heir, the baleful Deiphobous.

Helen's survival grants her the opportunity to reconcile with her daughter Hermione and even with Menelaus. It is too late, however, to see Clytemnestra, who is killed by Orestes and Elektra in revenge for their father's murder. The eventual wedding of Orestes and Hermione, after Orestes appeases the gods and Hermione forgives her mother, breaks the curse of the two families. Menelaus remarks, "Our grandchildren can be ordinary people. No curses, no half-gods, no prophecies. . . . The age of heroes is over." When Helen buries Menelaus shortly thereafter she mourns for him and also for the passing age to which they had both belonged.

Discussion Guide

1. Helen has been the subject of numerous works of literature and art. Compare Margaret George's portrayal with others you are familiar with, such as Euripides' *Helen*, the recent film *Troy*, and the portrait by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

2. It has often been said that true romantic love cannot last; it usually suffers the fate of infidelity, indifference, or a premature death. While Helen and Paris have their ups and downs, and eventually meet a tragic end (in life), their relationship certainly lasts longer than other classic couples', e.g., Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra. Discuss Helen and Paris' relationship in light of these other famous couples. Do you find this a convincing portrait of romantic love?

3. Helen's divinelike beauty guarantees her a certain amount of power. Her mesmerizing looks command attention. In this novel what is the source of Helen's power? Does her power ever stem from more conventional sources like courage or wisdom?

4. Helen's origins are usually traced to Zeus' rape of Leda. Most of *Helen of Troy* follows this tradition but certain details of the Trojan Antenor suggest he may have known Leda intimately and may even be Helen's real father. What do you make of Antenor? Could he be her real father, a former lover of Leda's?

5. Because of her powerful allure, the young Helen is made to wear a veil and prevented from looking at her reflection. Once she is liberated from these routines she feels "more trapped without a veil than [before]." Explain what she means by this. How is Helen's divine beauty a curse rather than a gift?

6. Paris is usually characterized as a weak playboy or uxorious husband. In this telling, he is somewhat rehabilitated, especially when refusing to be ashamed of his lowly upbringing and showing genuine bravery and leadership after the death of Hector. Do you find Paris heroic in this novel? How does he compare with the feats of Hector? What do you make of Helen's favorable comparison of Paris with Achilles, the greatest of all Greek warriors (ch. 47)?

7. Throughout this novel Helen forms powerful, loving relationships with several men: Menelaus, Paris, Gelanor. Discuss the nature of each of these relationships and what it says about male/female relationships more generally.

8. Helen decides to leave Hermione behind in Sparta instead of taking her to Troy. Why does she do this? Does this complicate your judgment of Helen?

9. After Paris' death Helen is forced to marry Deiphobous, one of the least likable characters in the novel. Did you find her defense against his unwanted advances-i.e., making him impotent-unnecessarily cruel?

10. Apart from his running ability, Menelaus doesn't distinguish himself among the other suitors. In fact, he isn't even present for most of the contest. Why does Helen choose him for a husband?

11. Discuss the role of women in both Greek and Trojan society. In Sparta and Mycenae, the line of power is passed down on the woman's side but how much actual power do women have? Is it symbolic only? How are women treated in Troy? Contrast these societies with the two exclusive female societies in the novel: the Amazons and the fertility cult on Mount Ida.

12. The Olympian gods can be petty, capricious, heroic, honorable, generous-in short, everything humans can be. Discuss the gods' behavior and their power over mortals. What is their relationship to fate, destiny?

13. Consider the Greek proverb "Never count a person happy until dead." How does Gelanor manifest this wisdom? Compare his fate with those of the other main characters.

14. Freud, Jung, and others have used Greek mythology to explain human psychology. One concise interpretation of the myth of Helen is that sexual desire can be seemingly powerful enough to destroy families, cities, even civilizations. What other possible interpretations are available in this version of the Helen myth?

Author Bio

Margaret George is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eight novels of biographical historical fiction, including THE SPLENDOR BEFORE THE DARK; THE CONFESSIONS OF YOUNG NERO; ELIZABETH I; HELEN OF TROY; MARY, CALLED MAGDALENE; THE MEMOIRS OF CLEOPATRA; THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HENRY VIII; and MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES. She also has coauthored a children?s book, LUCILLE LOST.

Critical Praise

"Margaret George depicts with bravado, grace and eloquence the grand spectacle surrounding Helen of Troy"

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