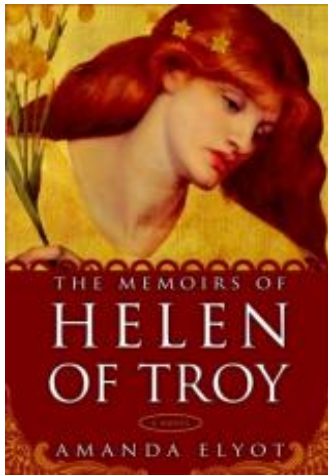


The Memoirs of Helen of Troy: A Novel

by Amanda Elyot



About the Book

In this lush, compelling novel of passion and loss, Helen of Troy, a true survivor, tells the truth about her life, her lovers, and the Trojan War. This is the memoir that she has written---her legendary beauty still undimmed by age.

Gossips began whispering about Princess Helen from the moment of her birth. A daughter of the royal house of Sparta, she was not truly the progeny of King Tyndareus, they murmured, but of Zeus, king of the gods. Her mother, Queen Leda, a powerful priestess, was branded an adulteress, with tragic consequences. To complicate matters, as Helen grew to adulthood her beauty was so breathtaking that it overshadowed even that of her jealous sister, Clytemnestra, making her even more of an outcast within her own family. So it came as something of a relief to her when she was kidnapped by Theseus, king of Athens, in a gambit to replenish his kingdom's coffers.

But Helen fell in love with the much older Theseus, and to his surprise, he found himself enamored of her as well. On her forced return to Sparta, Helen was hastily married off to the tepid Menelaus for the sake of an advantageous political alliance. Yet even after years of marriage, the spirited, passionate Helen never became the docile wife King Menelaus desired, and when she fell in love with another man---Paris Alexandros, the prodigal son of King Priam of Troy---Helen unwittingly set the stage for the ultimate conflict: a war that would destroy nearly all she held dear.

I learned that I was different when I was a very small girl: when the golden curls, which barely reached my shoulders at the time, began to turn the color of burnished vermeil. Your grandmother Leda, whom you never knew, told me that I was a child of Zeus. Since I thought my father's name was Tyndareus, her words upset me. Seeing my pink cheeks marred by tears of confusion, my mother handed me a mirror of polished bronze and asked me to study my reflection.

"Do you look like me?" she asked.

I nodded, noting in my own skin the exquisite fairness of her complexion, and her hair the same shade as mine that

tumbled like flowing honey past the hollow of her back.

"And do you resemble my husband Tyndareus?" she said to me.

I looked in the mirror and then looked again. For several minutes I remember expecting the mirror to show me my father's face, but Tyndareus was olive complected where I was not, his nose like the beak of a falcon where my own was straight and fine-boned, and his cheekbones were hollow and slack where, even then, beneath a child's rosy plumpness, mine were high and prominent.

"It's time for me to tell you everything," my mother said . . .

-From **The Memoirs of Helen of Troy**

Discussion Guide

1. Helen is one of the most enduring figures of mythology and literature. Did reading the story of her life in the first person enhance Helen's legend for you? Why or why not?
2. The author fills **The Memoirs of Helen of Troy** with rich imagery? sights, foods, clothing, landscapes, passion, violence. What are some of the images that stand out the most?
3. Helen's great beauty is described throughout the book, but Helen has long considered it a burden. Do you agree that an envy-inducing quality such as beauty can be more of a curse than a blessing? If so, how? If not, why?
4. Interestingly, the etymology of the word *misogyny* is Greek, from *misein*, "to hate," and *gyne*, "woman." Helen refers to many instances of misogyny and rails against women's oppression by men, at one point confronting her stepfather Tyndareus with, "The Goddess was here before you were!" and at another hotly observing, "It galled me that marital infidelities were winked at or shrugged off when instigated or committed by a husband, but a wife was branded a harlot for her indiscretions." Does her feistiness and willingness to stand up to intimidating men make Helen a feminist in today's terms? What are the things Helen does that might detract from today's definition of feminist?
5. In chapter seven, Helen observes: "[Aethra] had been prescient in acknowledging that through my sexual awakening I would discover the vastness of my own power. Already, only a few hours a woman, I began to feel its strength and to wield it like a flaming sword." Discuss what Helen means by her "power." How did she ultimately exercise it?
6. In chapter sixteen, Helen describes how she realized that Paris returned her ardor: "Exquisite and charming Paris Alexandros, with his honeyed speech and overt attentions, swooped down and took hold of my heart before I had time to stop for breath. So long unaccustomed to affection from my husband, and never anticipating the possibility of onslaught from another quarter, it was an undefended citadel, vulnerable to attack from an outsider." Helen's use of military metaphor here? while she recounts a moment of significant emotional importance? is striking. Why do you think she uses such imagery?
7. Helen and Paris Alexandros act upon their feelings for one another during the Spartan festival of Kronia, where nine days of religiously sanctioned hedonism is followed by nine days of atonement and subsequent amnesty. What are the

benefits and detriments of such a tradition, where wanton and irresponsible behavior is encouraged and the consequences of such behavior nullified?

8. Helen helps King Priam retrieve the defiled corpse of Hector from the Achaeans, offering Achilles her body as payment of the ransom (chapter twenty-five). Then, in chapter twenty-eight, Helen assists the Achaeans in tricking the Trojans into accepting the wooden horse. Were you surprised at Helen's complicity, or her duplicity? In each case, Helen took tremendous risks. Do you think her actions and behavior were justified?

9. Initially described as a hero, Achilles is depicted in the book as an extremely violent warrior. As discussed in the previous question, he mutilates the dead body of Hector, dragging it from a chariot around the citadel walls, and refuses to relinquish the remains to Paris's grieving family. Earlier, in chapter twenty-one, after mortally wounding the Amazon queen Penthesilea in battle, he savagely rapes her in full view of the troops. Achilles is killed by Paris Alexandros after Helen reveals the only way Achilles can be felled. Helen observes in chapter twenty-six, "Despite their collective hatred for Achilles, the Trojans had a certain reverence for him as a warrior and let the Achaeans bear him from the field undefiled." What defines a warrior in this book? How does this definition contrast with a modern view of a warrior?

10. As the daughter of Zeus, Helen was born demimortal, meaning she cannot die until Zeus chooses to end her life. But several times in the book Helen wishes that she could die. Is this understandable, given the hardships she suffers, or not, considering the expectations placed on her as a half-goddess and as a member of royalty?

11. Romantic passion guides Helen's decision-making at crucial points in the novel. Her deep infatuation for her captor Theseus fuels her unwillingness to leave his custody when she has the chance. Her intense love for Paris Alexandros leads her to abandon her children to return with him to Troy, thereby humiliating her husband. Should Helen have given her emotions such power over her actions?

12. Having read this novel, what do you feel actually sparked the Trojan War?

13. When Helen and Menelaus return to Sparta following the Trojan War and their subsequent sojourn in Egypt, Helen is jeered by antagonistic crowds. In facing their hostility, Helen observes ruefully, "Murder is easier to forgive than beauty" (chapter thirty-one). In modern society, are physically attractive people held to a tougher standard than everyone else? Why or why not?

14. In chapter thirty, Helen says of Menelaus, "In many ways, I believe that the intervening years between our leaving Ilios and returning home to Sparta were beneficial to our marriage, for Egypt was a neutral territory on which Menelaus and I could construct a new foundation of love and understanding." Was it surprising that Helen returned with Menelaus after the Trojan War, acquiesced to being his wife once more, and grew to love him so deeply?

15. Sensual pleasure is actively sought and sensuality highly prized in the Greek culture that the author describes in **The Memoirs of Helen of Troy**. But violence also has an accepted place. How is one reconciled with the other, if at all?

16. At the end of the novel, Helen asks her daughter Hermione: "Are we *fated* to behave as we do, or is it the exercise of free will that compels us to follow our destinies?" How would you answer this same question?

Author Bio

Amanda Elyot is a pen name of Leslie Carroll, author of several novels of contemporary women's fiction. An Ivy League graduate and professional actress, she currently resides in New York City.

Critical Praise

"Luminously intelligent, beautifully written, a delightful blend of magic and mythos."

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