

Circe

by Madeline Miller · Language: EN

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Overview

Circe is a feminist reimagining of Greek mythology, centered on the minor goddess Circe, daughter of the sun god Helios. The novel traces her life from her childhood in the halls of her father, where she is overlooked and mocked by her divine family, to her exile on the island of Aiaia. There, she discovers her powers of witchcraft, which set her apart from the gods and align her with mortals. The story follows her encounters with famous mythological figures, including Hermes, the Minotaur, Daedalus, and Odysseus, and her eventual transformation from a passive victim of the gods' whims into a powerful, self-determined woman who chooses mortality over divinity.

The novel's arc is one of self-discovery and defiance. Circe's journey is marked by loneliness, love, betrayal, and motherhood, as she navigates the brutal politics of Olympus and the mortal world. Her relationship with Odysseus is a central episode, but the book ultimately focuses on her own growth and the choices she makes to protect her son, Telegonus. The narrative culminates in Circe's decision to embrace her mortal side, sacrificing her immortality for the chance to live a fully human life. Miller's novel matters because it gives voice to a character traditionally sidelined in myth, exploring themes of agency, power, and the meaning of mortality. It is a compelling meditation on what it means to be a woman in a world dominated by gods and heroes, and it has resonated with modern readers for its timeless relevance.

Key Takeaways

- Circe's story shows that true power comes from self-knowledge and the courage to defy the expectations of family and society.
- The novel reinterprets Greek myths from a female perspective, giving depth to characters often dismissed as mere obstacles in heroes' tales.
- Circe's transformation from a naive nymph to a formidable witch illustrates that growth often requires isolation and suffering.
- The book emphasizes the value of mortality, suggesting that the finite nature of human life gives it meaning and urgency.
- Circe's relationships with mortals, especially Odysseus and her son, teach her empathy and the importance of love over divine indifference.
- The novel challenges the notion that power is inherently corrupting, showing that Circe uses her magic to protect and nurture, not to dominate.

- Miller's prose demonstrates how myth can be retold to highlight themes of agency, feminism, and the complexity of motherhood.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Birth of a Witch

Circe is born to Helios, the sun titan, and the nymph Perse. She is the least of her siblings, plain and unremarkable in the eyes of her divine family. She feels an outsider among the gods, who are cruel and capricious. Her early life is marked by loneliness and a desperate desire for attention, which leads her to befriend mortals, a choice that will have lasting consequences.

Chapter 2: The Transformation of Scylla

Circe's jealousy over a mortal lover, Glaucos, drives her to use magic to make him a god. When he spurns her for the nymph Scylla, Circe, in a fit of rage, transforms Scylla into a monstrous sea creature. This act reveals the destructive potential of her powers and leads to her exile by Helios to the island of Aiaia. It is a turning point, as she begins to understand the weight of her actions.

Chapter 3: Exile on Aiaia

On Aiaia, Circe learns to harness her witchcraft, experimenting with herbs and spells. She discovers that her powers are tied to the natural world and that she can transform mortals into animals, a skill she uses to protect herself from unwanted visitors. She also encounters Hermes, who becomes a recurring presence, offering cryptic advice and a complicated friendship. Her isolation forces her to confront her identity and her place in the cosmos.

Chapter 4: The Minotaur and the Labyrinth

Circe's sister Pasiphae gives birth to the Minotaur, a monstrous child. Circe is summoned to Crete to help, and she meets Daedalus, the brilliant inventor. She is horrified by the Minotaur's suffering and the cruelty of the gods. Her brief time in Crete deepens her empathy for mortals and her disdain for divine callousness. She returns to Aiaia with a renewed sense of purpose.

Chapter 5: The Arrival of Odysseus

Odysseus and his crew land on Aiaia. Circe, wary of mortals, turns his men into pigs, but Odysseus, protected by the herb moly given by Hermes, resists her magic. They become lovers, and Circe is captivated by his intelligence and vulnerability. She helps him prepare for his journey to the underworld and eventually lets him go, a decision that haunts her for years.

Chapter 6: The Birth of Telegonus

Circe gives birth to Odysseus's son, Telegonus. She raises him alone on Aiaia, fiercely protective and loving. Her maternal instincts clash with her divine nature, and she must navigate the challenges of motherhood without a guide. The boy's presence forces her to confront her own

mortality and the dangers of the world outside their island.

Chapter 7: The Prophecy and the Journey

A prophecy foretells that Telegonus will cause great harm. To protect him, Circe sends him away to find his father, Odysseus. This decision is agonizing, but she believes it is the only way to avert disaster. The chapter explores her grief and her growing understanding that love sometimes requires letting go.

Chapter 8: The Reckoning with Athena

Athena, furious that Circe has defied the gods by protecting Telegonus, confronts her. Circe stands her ground, refusing to be intimidated. This confrontation marks a turning point in her relationship with the divine order. She realizes that she no longer fears the gods' wrath, and she is willing to sacrifice everything for her son.

Chapter 9: The Choice of Mortality

In the final chapter, Circe makes the ultimate choice: to drink a potion that will make her mortal. She does this to be with Telegonus and to embrace the fullness of human experience, including love, loss, and death. The novel ends with her stepping into the sea, ready to live a finite life, a powerful affirmation of her agency and her rejection of divine immortality.

Themes

- Female agency
- Power and corruption
- Mortality vs. immortality
- Motherhood and sacrifice
- Isolation and self-discovery
- Reclaiming myth

Notable Quotes

- "But in a solitary life, there are rare moments when another soul dips near yours, as stars once a year brush the earth. Such a constellation was he to me." — Circe reflects on her relationship with Odysseus, after he leaves her island.
- "Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep." — Circe's internal commentary on the way women are portrayed in myths, spoken during her time with Odysseus.
- "I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything, for they are unchanging, and can hold nothing in their hands." — Circe's realization

about the nature of gods versus mortals, near the end of the novel.

- "It is a common saying that women are delicate creatures, flowers, eggs, and anything that may be crushed in a moment's carelessness. If I had ever believed it, I no longer did." — Circe's reflection on her own strength after surviving the challenges of motherhood and exile.
- "You cannot know how frightened gods are of pain. There is nothing more foreign to them, and so nothing they ache for more." — Circe explains to Telegonus why the gods are so cruel and distant.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Circe about?

Circe is a novel that retells Greek mythology from the perspective of the minor goddess Circe. It follows her life from her childhood in the halls of Helios to her exile on the island of Aiaia, where she develops her witchcraft. The story explores her encounters with famous figures like Odysseus and the Minotaur, and her journey toward self-empowerment and understanding of mortality.

Is Circe worth reading?

Yes, Circe is widely praised for its lyrical prose, deep character development, and feminist reimagining of myth. It appeals to readers who enjoy literary fiction, Greek mythology, and stories about strong female protagonists. The novel has won awards and has a strong following, making it a worthwhile read for many.

How does Circe end?

Spoiler: Circe chooses to become mortal by drinking a potion she has crafted. She does this to be with her son Telegonus and to embrace a finite, human life. The novel ends with her walking into the sea, ready to experience love, loss, and death, rejecting the cold immortality of the gods.

Who should read Circe?

Readers who enjoy mythological retellings, literary fiction, and character-driven stories will likely love Circe. It is also a great pick for those interested in feminist perspectives on classic tales. If you liked Madeline Miller's other novel, The Song of Achilles, or books like The Silence of the Girls, you'll appreciate this one.

How long does it take to read Circe?

Circe is about 400 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 8-10 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a week or two if reading a few chapters daily.