

The Song of Achilles

by Madeline Miller · Language: EN

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Overview

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller is a masterful retelling of Homer's Iliad, focusing on the profound and fated relationship between the legendary Greek hero Achilles and his companion, Patroclus. Narrated by Patroclus, the story begins with his childhood exile to Phthia, where he meets the demigod Achilles. Despite their vastly different backgrounds—Patroclus, a clumsy, unremarkable prince; Achilles, a golden, destined warrior—a deep and unbreakable bond forms between them, evolving from friendship into an all-consuming love.

The novel meticulously traces their upbringing, their training with the centaur Chiron, and their eventual conscription into the Trojan War. Miller humanizes the epic figures, portraying Achilles not just as an invincible warrior but as a complex individual torn between his destiny for glory and his love for Patroclus. The narrative explores themes of fate versus free will, the nature of heroism, and the devastating cost of war, all through the intimate lens of their relationship. Patroclus's perspective offers a unique and often heartbreaking insight into the events leading up to and during the ten-year siege of Troy, culminating in the tragic fulfillment of Achilles's prophecy and the enduring power of their love beyond death. The book resonates as a timeless exploration of identity, sacrifice, and the legacy of love in the face of an unforgiving world.

Key Takeaways

- True love can blossom in the most unexpected circumstances, transcending social status and expectations.
- The pursuit of immortal glory often comes at a devastating personal cost, impacting not only the hero but also those they love.
- Even in the face of predetermined fate, individuals can make choices that define their character and legacy.
- Grief is a powerful and transformative force, capable of driving both immense destruction and profound introspection.
- The stories we tell about heroes often omit the most human and vulnerable aspects of their lives.
- Sacrifice, whether for love or duty, carries immense weight and can alter the course of history.

- The impact of war extends far beyond the battlefield, leaving lasting scars on individuals and entire societies.

Chapter Summaries

Childhood and Exile

Patroclus, a young, awkward prince, is exiled to Phthia after an accidental killing. There, he meets the golden, god-like Achilles, son of King Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis. Despite their stark differences, a tentative friendship blossoms between them, with Achilles choosing Patroclus as his companion. Patroclus struggles to find his place but slowly begins to feel accepted and cherished by Achilles, laying the foundation for their deep bond.

Training with Chiron

As their bond deepens, Achilles and Patroclus are sent to live with the wise centaur Chiron on Mount Pelion. Under Chiron's tutelage, they learn medicine, music, hunting, and warfare. This period allows their love to flourish away from the constraints of court and Thetis's watchful eye. Patroclus discovers his own quiet strengths, while Achilles hones his extraordinary talents, preparing for the heroic destiny foretold for him.

The Call to War

The abduction of Helen by Paris sparks the Trojan War, and all Greek heroes are summoned to Aulis. Achilles, destined for glory but also a short life, is hidden by his mother, Thetis, but is eventually discovered. Patroclus, though not a warrior, chooses to follow Achilles to Troy, unable to imagine a life without him. Their journey marks the end of their idyllic youth and the beginning of their fated confrontation with destiny.

Years at Troy

The Trojan War rages for years. Achilles quickly establishes himself as the greatest warrior, while Patroclus serves as a healer and companion, often struggling with the brutality of war. Their love deepens amidst the chaos, but tensions arise from Achilles's pursuit of glory, his pride, and the arrival of the captive Briseis, whom Patroclus protects. Achilles's growing hubris and the demands of war strain their relationship.

Achilles's Withdrawal and Patroclus's Sacrifice

After Agamemnon dishonors Achilles by taking Briseis, Achilles withdraws from battle, causing the Achaeans heavy losses. Patroclus, distraught by the suffering of his countrymen, begs Achilles to return. When Achilles refuses, Patroclus, with Achilles's reluctant permission, dons Achilles's armor to rally the Greek troops. He succeeds in turning the tide but is tragically killed by Hector, fulfilling a part of Achilles's prophecy.

Grief, Revenge, and Death

Patroclus's death shatters Achilles, plunging him into inconsolable grief and a furious desire for revenge. He returns to battle, mercilessly killing Hector and desecrating his body. Achilles's rage consumes him, making him an unstoppable, terrifying force. Soon after, Achilles himself is killed by Paris, fulfilling his own prophecy of a glorious but short life. His death leaves the Greeks victorious but heartbroken.

Aftermath and Legacy

After Achilles's death, his body is cremated alongside Patroclus's, their ashes mingled as per Patroclus's dying wish. Thetis, initially scornful of Patroclus, eventually comes to understand the depth of their love. She carves Patroclus's name onto Achilles's tomb, ensuring that their names are forever linked, honoring their bond and allowing their spirits to find peace together in the underworld, a testament to their enduring love.

Themes

- Love and Loss
- Fate vs. Free Will
- Heroism and Glory
- War's Devastation
- Identity and Legacy
- Grief and Revenge

Notable Quotes

- "I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell; I would know him blind, by the way his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world." — Patroclus reflecting on his profound connection to Achilles, emphasizing the depth of their bond.
- "We were like gods, at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other." — Patroclus describing the idyllic early years of his relationship with Achilles, before the war.
- "Name one hero who was happy." — Achilles's response to Patroclus, questioning the true cost of glory and heroism.
- "He is a weapon, a killer. Do not forget it. You can use a spear as a walking stick, but that will not change its nature." — Thetis warning Patroclus about Achilles's inherent nature as a warrior, despite his gentle side.
- "And perhaps it is the greater grief, after all, to live, to see all these things in the earth, to know that you are not one of them." — Patroclus contemplating the pain of survival and witnessing the loss of loved ones.

- "There are no bargains between lions and men. I will kill you and eat you raw." — Achilles's furious and brutal declaration to Hector before their final duel, driven by grief for Patroclus.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *The Song of Achilles* about?

The Song of Achilles is a retelling of Homer's Iliad from the perspective of Patroclus, focusing on his deep and fated love story with the legendary Greek hero Achilles. It traces their lives from childhood through the Trojan War, exploring their bond, Achilles's pursuit of glory, and the tragic consequences of their intertwined destinies.

Is *The Song of Achilles* worth reading?

Yes, *The Song of Achilles* is widely considered a highly rewarding read. It offers a fresh, intimate, and emotionally resonant perspective on a classic myth, with beautiful prose and compelling character development. Readers often praise its ability to humanize legendary figures and evoke profound empathy for its protagonists.

How does *The Song of Achilles* end?

Spoiler: The book ends tragically, mirroring the original myth. Patroclus is killed by Hector while disguised in Achilles's armor. Achilles, consumed by grief and rage, avenges Patroclus by killing Hector. Shortly after, Achilles himself is killed by Paris. In the afterlife, Patroclus waits for Achilles, and eventually, Thetis, Achilles's mother, acknowledges their love by carving Patroclus's name on Achilles's tomb, allowing their spirits to reunite.

Who should read *The Song of Achilles*?

This book is ideal for readers who enjoy historical fiction, mythological retellings, and character-driven narratives with strong emotional depth. Fans of Greek mythology, epic love stories, and literary fiction exploring themes of fate, war, and identity will find it particularly engaging. It's also suitable for those new to Greek myths, as it's very accessible.

How long does it take to read *The Song of Achilles*?

On average, it takes approximately 6 to 7 hours to read *The Song of Achilles*. This estimate is based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's typical length of around 370 pages.