

Women's  
Prize for  
Fiction  
2020

25



Fremantle



## 2020 SHORTLIST

### A THOUSAND SHIPS BY NATALIE HAYNES

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

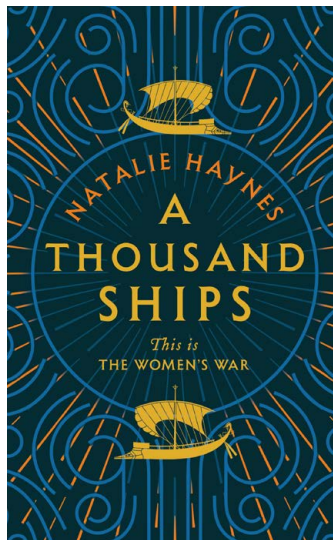
Natalie Haynes is a writer and broadcaster. She is the author of *The Children of Jocasta* and *The Amber Fury*, which was shortlisted for the Scottish Crime Book of the Year award, and a non-fiction book about Ancient History, *The Ancient Guide to Modern Life*. She has written and presented two series of the BBC Radio 4 show, *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*. In 2015, she was awarded the Classical Association Prize for her work in bringing Classics to a wider audience.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

In the middle of the night, Creusa wakes to find her beloved Troy engulfed in flames. Ten seemingly endless years of brutal conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans are over, and the Greeks are victorious. Over the next few hours, the only life Creusa has ever known will be turned to ash.

The devastating consequences of the fall of Troy stretch from Mount Olympus to Mount Ida, from the citadel of Troy to the distant Greek islands, and across oceans and sky in-between. These are the stories of the women embroiled in that legendary war and its terrible aftermath, as well as the feud and the fatal decisions that started it all.

Powerfully told from an all-female perspective, *A Thousand Ships* gives voices to the women, girls and goddesses who, for so long, have been silent.



#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Haynes honours the horrific experiences of the Trojan women: Clytemnestra's bloody revenge on Agamemnon and the slaughter of their daughter Iphigenia, the reason for her revenge; the murder of Polyxena; Cassandra's rape by Ajax and her final death; Chryseis' abduction; Andromache being made to kill her own son; Hecabe's murder of Polymestor. She leaves us in no doubt about what war looks like for women, and what would have happened to the women taken as 'prizes' from the defeated side: Polyxena knows that the

Greeks are the ones, in this case, abusing the women, but if the Trojans had won, they would have done exactly the same thing.

To be a woman in the patriarchal societies of ancient Greece and Troy was to be owned by a man, as we are shown in *A Thousand Ships*: all the women are defined by their relationships to their husbands, fathers and sons, and then, like Briseis, become the property of another man after the Greeks' victory. Only the goddesses stand apart from this ownership; Artemis, Aphrodite and Hera are all powerful in their own right, and mostly independent – though they are all ultimately at the father god Zeus' command, and Zeus is just as much of a predatory patriarch as any of the Greeks or Trojans.

Yet, there's also a black, slightly irreverent humour that winds its way through Haynes' writing: when the goddesses Aphrodite, Artemis and Hera compete for Eris' golden apple, Artemis thinks, "We're doing this? Really?" Penelope's letters to her long-absent husband Odysseus are full of wry wit: she wonders what she would ever talk about with the young, firm-bodied, but stupid suitors who are vying for her hand in marriage.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

Later in the novel, the goddess Gaia explains that it was her that inspired the Trojan war:

“Stop, she wanted to cry out . . . You cannot graze enough livestock on the grasses around your cities, you cannot build enough homes on the peaks of your hills. You must stop, so that I can rest beneath your ever-increasing weight . . . Gaia thought back to the last time mankind had become too heavy, and remembered that Zeus had not left her to suffer for long. The Theban Wars, when a civil war had spilled over into the rest of Greece, had served his purpose then. But this time the problem had grown weightier. A larger war was needed.”

Does Gaia’s chapter have a particular resonance today, in terms of climate change, pollution and other issues relating to the footprint humanity leaves on the earth? How do you respond to the idea that humanity needs war as a solution to over-population (famine and disease are also considered by Zeus and Themis as possible solutions)? Is there ever a good reason for war? And is there any good way of naturally reducing world populations?

Haynes presents the reader with a variety of reasons given by Greek mythology for the Trojan war, and none of those reasons involve any real choice for the major players. Helen explains that Aphrodite enchanted her to go with Paris or be driven mad with the noise of screaming in her ears; the golden apple incident is manufactured by Themis, knowing that the vain goddess Aphrodite will win, tempting the young Paris with the vision of her loveliness. The gods also know that Priam and Hecabe will spoil their son, letting him have whatever he wants, so that when he sees Helen, he will think nothing of taking her for himself. How much does choice come into the stories of the Trojan women – and how might you compare some of these stories to incidents of rape and domestic violence now? Is it all too easy to say of women ‘she was asking for it’ or ‘why didn’t she leave?’ when in fact choice is absent? Has patriarchal society now replaced the patriarchal pantheon of Greek gods in terms of controlling the lives of humanity?



THE 2020 WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

## QUESTIONS

Why is Helen more reviled than Paris in the story of Troy?

How does Helen use her beauty, and how do others treat her because of it? Is her beauty a blessing or a curse?

Given that Hecabe was Queen of Troy and must have presided over many executions and wars, do you sympathise with her revenge for her family’s deaths?

Penelope has little sympathy for Circe and Calypso, but were they also just women protecting themselves?

Which goddess do you like the most, and least? Why?

## NEXT STEPS

Goddess origin stories are usually fascinating: research a goddess from a culture you’re unfamiliar with, e.g. Hinduism, Sumeria, Norse legends, Celtic mythology, Slavic cultures, Polynesian culture, Aztec beliefs, etc. Find out as much as you can: what or who was she a protector of, what animals are associated with her, does she have a special festival or day in the year? Are any other deities related to her and how, i.e. marriage, siblings? What special powers does she have, does she have a day of the week or a special hour of the day? Does she have special prayers and rites associated with her? If she had a cult, what

was it called? Write up your findings, or perhaps write a devotional hymn, poem or prayer to your goddess.

Inspired by Natalie Haynes, you might like to take a pantheon of gods and construct alternative stories for them, or put them into modern day life. If Artemis was a human now, what would she be like? What sort of person would Hera resemble? What would they want in life, and how would they go about getting it? Would they have godly powers, or not? You can have fun with it and go with a humorous take or be serious – perhaps imagine a contemporary character talking or interacting with a goddess. What might the goddess tell him/her to do? How would this be viewed – as a spiritual practice, or as something else? How does the relationship develop? How does the goddess feel about the modern world?

“ ALL OF THE PLOT TWISTS, DRAMA AND INTRIGUE OF THE ORIGINAL STORY BUT TOLD THROUGH A FRESH LENSE ”

MELANIE EUSEBE  
JUDGE 2020

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE AMBER FURY BY NATALIE HAYNES  
CIRCLE BY MADELINE MILLER