

# NOVELS OF ANCIENT GREECE

BY JESSICA TEISCH



“The art of living well and the art of dying well are one,” noted ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, and few words better describe ancient Greece’s cultural and military achievements. Classical Greece inspired much of Western civilization: its politics and its architecture, its literature and its philosophy, its scientific thought. Generally bookended by the fall of the Athenian tyrant Hippias in 510 BC and the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, these two centuries—which witnessed the Persian Wars, the Peloponnesian War, and the influence of figures such as Aristotle, Aeschylus, Socrates, Hippocrates, and Plato—forever changed the Western world through thought, sword, and might.

Along with its culture, classical antiquity also passed down the myths from the ancient Greeks and Romans. Transmitted orally, the stories—ways of explaining the world—often centered on the gods and demigods as they navigated through their worlds and our own, mixing with the mortals and meddling in their affairs.

Through historians such as Herodotus and poets such as Homer, we have a plethora of vivid anecdotes describing ancient Greek life, as well as the mythology that played a large role in its culture. We examine these topics below. The first part reconsiders Homer’s legacy and Greek mythology

in modern-day novels, and the second offers suggestions of historical novels on classical Greece.

## GREEK MYTHOLOGY

**DURING THE BRONZE AGE**, gods still frequented the Earth from high above their perch on Mount Olympus. They loved, quarreled, waged war, and wreaked revenge.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the celebrated ancient Greek epic poems attributed to the blind poet Homer in the eighth century BC, describe some of the gods’ antics in Mycenaean Greece in the twelfth century BC, though the influence of these epics extends to classical Greece and beyond. The *Iliad*, set during the final year of the decade-long Trojan War, tells the story of the Greek struggle to rescue Helen of Sparta—the love child of Queen Leda and Zeus and the face that “launched a thousand ships”—from her Trojan captors and chronicles the carnage of war. The *Odyssey*, in part a sequel to the *Iliad*, features the Greek hero Odysseus slowly—and perilously—journeying home to his kingdom in Ithaca after the fall of Troy. In this fantastical tale of wandering, Odysseus overcomes beasts and temptations as his wife Penelope and his son deal with the unruly suitors vying for the palace.

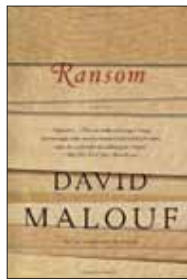
Later ancient Greek authors reworked these subjects: Aeschylus's play *Agamemnon* expands on the *Odyssey*'s brief account of the king's homecoming after the war; Euripides' *Troades* (*The Trojan Women*) follows the stories of the women who received Hector's corpse at the end of the *Iliad*. Later, Greek mythology influenced writers from Chaucer to Shakespeare, Goethe, and James Joyce.

Although the "events" of Homer's epic poems took place more than 3,000 years ago, Greek mythology remains alive and well in modern fiction. Some of the following novels reimagine events and characters from Homer's classics, while others update the ancients' lives and bring them into our own era.

## RECONSIDERING HOMER'S ILIAD AND ODYSSEY

### Ransom (2010)

By David Malouf



Inspired by the *Iliad*'s climactic scene, Malouf weaves a tale of grief and loss from both sides of the Trojan War. Hector, the beloved prince of Troy, has killed the Greek soldier Patroclus—the demigod Achilles' boyhood friend—in battle. Achilles, devastated and overcome with vengeance, slays Hector and, disregarding the tradition of returning him to his royal family for burial, he drags his corpse across the battlefield for endless days and nights. Also overwhelmed with grief is Hector's father, old King Priam of Troy, who sets off for the Greek camp to negotiate a ransom for his son's body. With simple, graceful prose, cinematic descriptions, and a deeply ingrained respect for two grieving heroes, Malouf both enhances and venerates Homer's ancient epic. (★★★★ May/June 2010)

### Achilles (2001)

By Elizabeth Cook



The *Iliad* opens with the pronouncement that Achilles, who has quarreled with the Greek leader Agamemnon, will not fight—and yet he alone remains the key to Greek victory. *Achilles* eventually destroys the Trojan champion Hector, though he is soon to be killed himself by a divinely guided arrow. Achilles tells the backstory of the Greek hero—from his birth to a goddess and a mortal and his childhood disguised as a girl to his encounter with Odysseus in Hades. This short novel (a poetic meditation, of sorts) also establishes connections with the 19th-century Romantic poet John Keats. Keats felt akin to this great Greek warrior and hailed Achilles' courage and despair through his poetry, which reflects the continuity—and transcendence—of the human experience.

### An Iliad (2004)

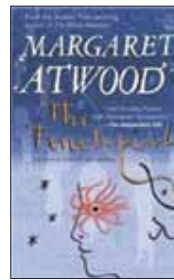
By Alessandro Baricco, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein



In this slender retelling of the *Iliad*, the gods are nowhere to be seen (human motivations, instead, direct history), and two dozen narrators, including Odysseus, Achilles, and Nestor, chronicle the events of the siege of Troy. But the basic story remains intact: Agamemnon insults Achilles, who refuses to fight, which allows Hector to rally the Trojans. Achilles' best friend, Patroclus, dies in battle; Achilles returns to the battlefield and kills Hector. In Baricco's hands, the story becomes one of treacheries, vanities, and misplaced deeds of honor and glory. The *New Yorker* called Baricco's retelling of the Homeric epic "defiantly modern," and while it reflects on the ever-present cruelties of war, it nonetheless remains true to Homeric themes.

### The Penelopiad (2005)

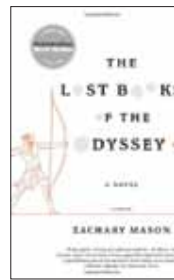
By Margaret Atwood



While Odysseus was fighting in Troy and then voyaging home, what was his wife Penelope *really* up to? Atwood's novella retells the long-suffering Queen of Ithaca's life in hindsight from 21st-century Hades: Penelope recalls her difficult childhood, her devoted marriage to Odysseus and her raising of their son Telemachus, the rowdy suitors during the Trojan War, and Odysseus's return. Penelope also addresses historical misconceptions. The twelve maids, who were eventually hanged, occasionally interrupt Penelope's narrative to offer their perspectives in various genres—from an idyll and ballad to a lecture, folk song, and court trial. In her introduction, Atwood writes: "The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself." Atwood gracefully fills in the missing pieces.

### The Lost Books of the Odyssey (2010)

By Zachary Mason



Forty-four brief chapters make up this debut novel, which reimagines the lives, personalities, and appearances of characters from the *Odyssey*. In Mason's version, Odysseus is really a wily PR man, an ancient self-promoter who reinvents his adventures to cast himself in a more favorable light. In one story, Odysseus returns home to Ithaca only to discover that Penelope didn't wait for him after all. Another reveals Polyphemus (Cyclops) as a kindly farmer who discovers a ragtag group of soldiers pilfering his property. And when the aging Odysseus returns to Troy, he is shocked to dis-



cover a thriving tourist trap overrun with costumed actors. This novel breathes new life into a classic. (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2010)

## Lavinia

By Ursula K. Le Guin



Lavinia is known, if at all, as the second wife of the hero Aeneas in Virgil's Latin epic poem *Aeneid* (Aeneas also appears in the *Iliad*). In Virgil's work, which narrates Aeneas's wanderings from Troy to Italy, the young daughter of Latinus warrants only two lines. In Le Guin's richly drawn world, Lavinia is a complex, practical young woman who understands the political implications of a marriage to Aeneas (war between the Trojans and the Rutulians) and her place in a society that undervalues women (she has been betrothed without her approval). She also bemoans her treatment at the hands of Virgil: "He slighted my life in his poem." Le Guin's incarnation of the classical poet recognizes his error in a metaphysical twist when he is transported on his deathbed to Lavinia's time and the "the unfolding of a hint." (★★★★ **SELECTION** July/Aug 2008)

## Helen of Troy (2006)

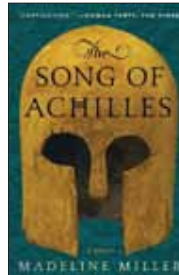
By Margaret George



When Helen of Sparta is seven years old, a prophecy predicts that she will start a long, bloody war. Secluded, she eventually marries Menelaus of Mycenae, but—with Aphrodite's meddling, and in George's retelling—she falls in love with Paris, a visiting Trojan prince. The pair elopes to Troy, but, soon after, her jealous ex-husband and his greedy brother, Agamemnon, wage war against the city. George compassionately explores the conflicted adulteress Helen's story in the first person. Homer leaves much about Helen to be read between the lines; in this intelligent, emotional retelling of the Trojan War myth, George fills it in with impressive research.

## The Song of Achilles (2011)

By Madeline Miller



The relationship between Achilles, the beautiful, doomed hero of the Trojan War, and Patroclus, a gangly exiled prince, is a seminal one in Greek mythology. In Miller's hands, the two become unlikely companions and eventually lovers. Patroclus explores his childhood and his relationship with Achilles while humanizing his lover's motivations and actions: the proud warrior fears his ultimate demise (a prophecy has dictated that Hector's fall precedes that of Achilles, so Achilles avoids facing off Hector on the

battlefield), but he strives for glory more than anything else. Patroclus ultimately shows Achilles not only as the selfish, egotistical hero responsible for the deaths of thousands of Greeks but also as a deeply devoted companion and lover.

## Further Reading

**ILIAM** | DAN SIMMONS (2003)  
**OLYMPUS** | DAN SIMMONS (2006)  
**ODYSSEUS: A LIFE** | CHARLES ROWAN BEYE (2004)  
**THE FIREBRAND** | MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY (1987)  
**THE WAR AT TROY** | LINDSAY CLARKE (2004)  
**LORD OF THE SILVER BOW** | DAVID GEMMELL (2005)  
**AGE OF BRONZE: A THOUSAND SHIPS** | ERIC SHANOWER (1998)  
**THE MEMOIRS OF HELEN OF TROY** | AMANDA ELYOT (2005):  
**THE SONGS OF THE KINGS** | BARRY UNSWORTH (2003):  
**THE SONG OF TROY** | COLLEN MCCULLOUGH (1998)  
**LAST OF THE AMAZONS** | STEVEN PRESSFIELD (2002)

## REWORKING THE GREEK MYTHS

### The King Must Die (1958)

By Mary Renault



In this bildungsroman, the acclaimed historical novelist adds a realist touch to the Theseus myth. Excising the gods-and-monsters elements, she limns the early life and adventures of the Greek hero Theseus—the mythical founder and king of Athens. The story begins with his childhood in the Greek city-state of Troizen and follows him to Athens and Crete before returning him to Athens. Part of the appeal of *The King Must Die* is that by drawing amply on historical and archaeological evidence from the Palace of Knossos, Renault tells the story as if Theseus were a real person instead of a mythical figure, thus bringing him and his era vibrantly to life. The sequel: *The Bull from the Sea* (1962).

### The Night Life of the Gods (1931; reprint 2010)

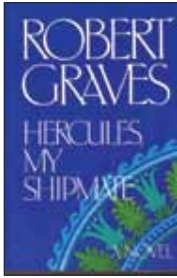
By Thorne Smith



Smith was a fantasy writer in the 1930s, but his comic story of a madcap scientist who goes on a nighttime adventure with the Greek gods is hardly dated (if no one is too picky about reviving the ancients). After much experimentation, Hunter Hawk masters the craft of turning matter into stone, or—by application—the art of transforming statues into people. When he decides to practice his new skill in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he sets the Greek gods—Bacchus, Neptune, and Diana among them—loose in Prohibition-era New York.

## Hercules, My Shipmate (1945)

By Robert Graves

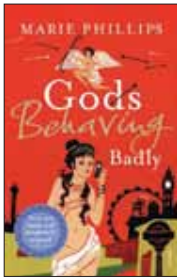


In the years before the Trojan War, Jason and the Argonauts traveled to Colchis to find the Golden Fleece. Graves, a renowned poet and classicist (*I, Claudius*), retells this myth in *Hercules, My Shipmate* (originally published as *The Golden Fleece*). As befitting the scholar-author, the novel has some academic trappings: the harpies are not supernatural beings

but a trick accomplished by Phineus's Scythian wife, and the gods are not omnipotent beings but rooted in the mortals' beliefs. Despite his highly realistic tone, Graves adheres to the story of the voyage of the legendary *Argo* and shows that it was one of the bloodiest and most unrestrained expeditions of all times.

## Gods Behaving Badly (2008)

By Marie Phillips



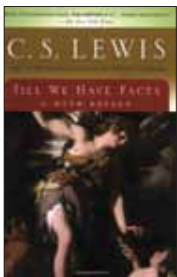
Stuffed into a dilapidated mansion in an unfashionable London neighborhood, a dozen of the familiar Greek gods are facing hard times—and, unimaginably, their possible demise. Desperate to retrieve their old powers, the gods have been forced to take “real world” jobs: Aphrodite has become a phone sex worker; Artemis, goddess of the hunt, is reduced

to walking dogs for a living; and Dionysus works nights as a DJ. Into this madcap household, a perplexed cleaning woman (mortal) and her Scrabble-obsessed, comic book-collector boyfriend arrive—only to face the challenge of negotiating peace among the battling gods, restoring them to their former glory, and perhaps even saving humankind in the process. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2008)

## Till We Have Faces (1956)

A Myth Retold

By C. S. Lewis



Lewis, best known for his Narnia Chronicles, claimed an interest in the myth of Cupid and Psyche—an allegory about love and passion, appearances versus the soul—his entire life. In Lewis's retelling—this is a psychological, rather than an action-filled, tale—Orual, Psyche's older, unattractive sister, relates her jealousy, her struggle to find love, and her quest for

identity. Though described as a merciful queen after years of tragedy and pain, Orual views herself as ugly inside: “I would set out boldly each morning to be just and calm and wise in all my thoughts and acts, but before they had finished dressing me I would find that I was back in some old rage, resentment, gnawing fantasy, or sullen bitterness. . . . I could mend my soul no more than my face.” But as Orual suffers, she slowly approaches her perfect form within.

## LIFE AND WAR IN CLASSICAL GREECE

Much of our understanding of classical Greece comes from various ancient Greek sources. Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon give us ethnological knowledge about life in Greece, as well as the origins of the Greco-Persian Wars (499–449 BC), a sequence of wars fought between the coalition of Greek city-states and the powerful Persian empire. In their accounts, the city-states of Athens and Sparta rise to power through alliances and victories against the invading Persian armies. The Persian War results in the dominant position of Athens in the Delian League which, in turn, leads to the Peloponnesian War between Athens and the Spartan alliance (431–404 BC). Athens and Sparta fall in turn, and the small kingdom of Macedon emerges as the dominant Greek power. Plutarch's later *Life of Alexander* chronicles the life of the fourth-century Macedonian warrior-king (356–323 BC) who leads a united Greek army into lands of the Persian Empire, including Egypt and India, thus paving the way for the Hellenistic culture that flourished after his death.

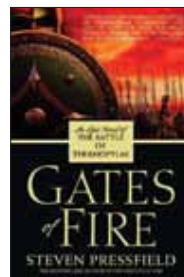
Though war and military training were facts of daily life, classical Greece is notable for its contributions in drama, music, art architecture, sports, and, in city-states like Athens, democratic institutions. Given its vast influence over the course of Western civilization, it's not surprising that classical Greece and its main events and figures have inspired many historical novels.

## THE FIGHTING SPIRIT

### Gates of Fire (1998)

An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae

By Steven Pressfield

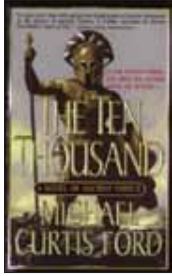


Pressfield, the author of a quintet of novels of ancient warfare, chronicles the seminal battle for freedom that took place in 480 BC between Greek citizen-soldiers and the Persian infantry: the battle of Thermopylae. He tells the story of how the Greek alliance of city-states held back the mighty Persian army from an unusual perspective: Xeonas, a captured Greek slave and the only Spartan survivor of Thermopylae, tries to explain to the Persian king Xerxes why, given the terrible odds, the combined armies of Sparta and Athens chose to fight an army that outnumbered them thousands of times over. In the process, Xeonas covers his own childhood, his military training in Sparta, and the six-day ordeal at Thermopylae. With its impressive evocation of the brutality of war, *Gates of Fire* is the definitive novel of the great battle.

## The Ten Thousand (2001)

A Novel of Ancient Greece

By Michael Curtis Ford

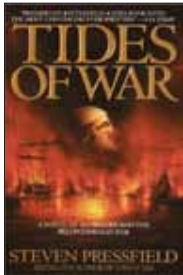


The “Ten Thousand,” a group of Greek mercenaries hired by Cyrus the Younger (King Darius II’s son), attempt to wrest control of the throne of the Persian Empire from Artaxerxes II. But after moving inland and fighting the Battle of Cunaxa, the Greek army, led by Xenophon, an officer and writer who accompanied the mercenaries and then recorded their trials in the famous work *The Anabasis*, finds itself stranded—and begins a dangerous journey through enemy territory in Kurdistan and the Armenian mountains during winter to return home by way of the Black Sea. Ford based this historical novel, which takes place between 401 and 399 BC, on Xenophon’s writings, and it tells of politics, war, hardship, treachery, and, for those lucky ones who overcame overwhelming odds, survival.

## Tides of War

A Novel of Alcibiades and the Peloponnesian War (2000)

By Steven Pressfield

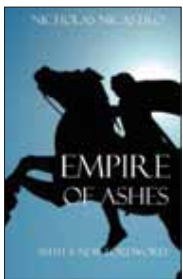


Pressfield’s acclaimed *Gates of Fire* documents the Battle of Thermopylae; *Tides of War* chronicles the Peloponnesian War that followed through the eyes of Athenian soldier and assassin Polemides. Awaiting execution for treason, Polemides tells the story of the nearly three-decade-long conflict, in particular the rise and fall of the powerful, brilliant, and mercurial Athenian general and politician Alcibiades, for whom he worked as a bodyguard and who—a victim of his own hubris—was banished from Athens only to fight for Sparta. A psychological analysis of democracy and theocracy, Pressfield’s book offers an intimate look at the time of Sophocles, Pericles, Socrates, and its people.

## Empire of Ashes (2004)

A Novel of Alexander

By Nicholas Nicastro



We generally view Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.), the Greek king of Macedon, as perhaps the most powerful empire builder and commander the world has ever seen. But Nicastro presents the career of the successful commander from the perspective of Machon, the late king’s ally and Athenian soldier and historian, who becomes the scapegoat for Alexander’s downfall. Charged with the crime of corrupting a god (which is, indeed, how Alexander viewed himself), Machon must reveal the truth behind Alexander’s seeming greatness—from his bloodthirsty victories to his brutality—to save himself from certain death.

## Further Reading

**THE LOST ARMY** | VALERIO MASSIMO MANFREDI (2008)

**THE ISLE OF STONE: A NOVEL OF ANCIENT SPARTA** | NICHOLAS NICASTRO (2005)

**THE END OF SPARTA** | VICTOR DAVIS HANSON (2011)

**THE VIRTUES OF WAR: A NOVEL OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT** | STEVEN PRESSFIELD (2004)

**FIRE FROM HEAVEN** | MARY RENAUULT (1969)

**THE PERSIAN BOY** | MARY RENAUULT (1972)

**FUNERAL GAMES** | MARY RENAUULT (1981)

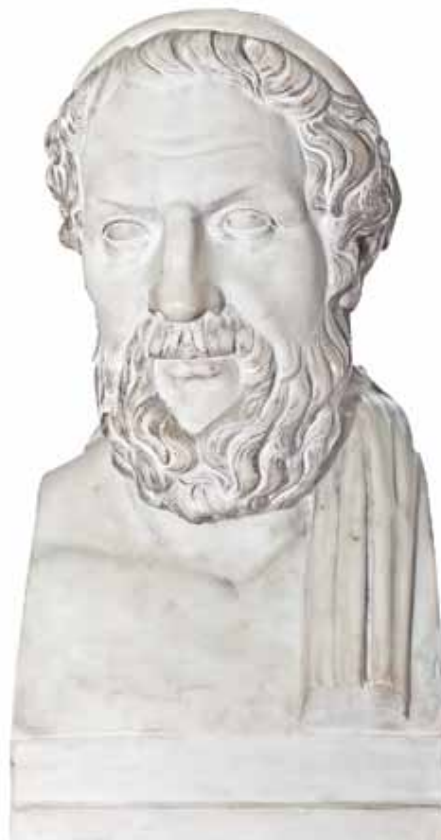
## DAILY LIFE IN CLASSICAL GREECE

### The Last of the Wine (1956)

By Mary Renault



Set in Athens during the Peloponnesian War, *The Last of the Wine* recounts one man’s life in ancient Greece. Alexias, a young aristocrat, starts with the story of his childhood, but his relationship with Lysis—an older man with whom he falls in love—as well as his time studying under Socrates form the heart of his tale. Alexias and Lysis compete in the palaestra (wrestling school), travel to the Olympic games, and fight in the wars against Sparta. Although the tragic end to Athens’s glory is soon to come, the pair harbors hopes



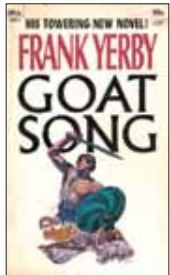
Homer



and dreams, though disappointment abounds; the novel's themes of friendship, love, commitment, and duty make it relevant to our times. Above all, Renault paints a rich and convincing swath of Greek culture during one of its most turbulent, dynamic times.

## Goat Song (1967)

By Frank Yerby

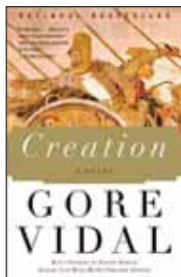


Ariston, a beautiful boy born to a Spartan general, is captured by the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War and sold into slavery as a prostitute in an Athenian brothel. He becomes its star attraction—only to be purchased by a wealthy man for his own personal use. After a stint on the stage, Ariston rises to become one of the ancient world's greatest warriors. Sweeping

in scope, *Goat Song* captures the drama and minutiae of ancient Greek life, while showing how one man must navigate between the wildly divergent Spartan and Athenian lifestyles—and, raised as a Spartan, face off with Sparta as an Athenian.

## Creation (1981; expanded in 2002)

By Gore Vidal

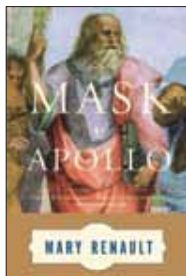


Cyrus Spitama, the fictional grandson of the prophet Zoroaster and a friend of Xerxes, has spent much of his life as the Persian ambassador for King Darius. His travels take him to India, where he discusses nirvana with the Buddha; in China, he engages Confucius. But old age finds him in Athens during the time of Pericles, Herodotus, and Socrates, where

he recounts his life story to his nephew and tries to understand the questions that have guided his journey, including the known world's various political and religious systems. In his view, the pretentious Greeks are up to no good—and he readily shares his caustic observations on Athens and its people. But the real purpose of *Creation* is, Vidal suggests, to question “history” as reported by the winners.

## The Mask of Apollo (1966)

By Mary Renault

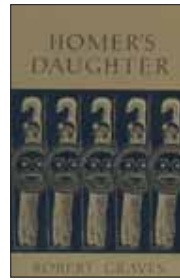


Theater was a way of life in ancient Greece; *The Mask of Apollo*, set after the Peloponnesian War, explores the world of political intrigue and theater. Although Renault's central character and narrator, Nikeratos—a professional tragic actor who plays parts in dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—is invented, historical characters, including

Plato, appear. Renault successfully re-creates the world of theatrical production, including the music, the scenery, and the actors, as she places Nikeratos at the center of a political crisis.

## Homer's Daughter (1955)

By Robert Graves



It is generally assumed that Homer was a blind poet living in ancient Greece. Graves explores the possibility that Homer was really a princess of mixed Greek heritage—a woman named Nausicaa, who included herself as a character in the *Odyssey*—living in a Greek-Trojan settlement in Sicily in the eighth century BC. Given that the *Odyssey* has been

described as a “women's epic” because of its female leading characters (and, outside of Odysseus's adventures, domestic life), the speculation seems reasonable. When Nausicaa's father and older brother depart for sea, conspiracy threatens her home—and she finds herself in much the same situation as the *Odyssey*'s Penelope during the king's absence. In this tale of intrigue and suspense, Nausicaa recounts the events of her life and tells how she came to write the famed epic poem.

### Further Reading

**OVER THE WINE-DARK SEA** | H. N. TURTELTAUB (2001)

**THE PRAISE SINGER** | MARY RENULT (1978)

**THE PLOT TO SAVE SOCRATES** | PAUL LEVINSON

**ANTIGONE'S WAKE: A NOVEL OF IMPERIAL ATHENS** | NICHOLAS NICASTRO (2007)

## FOR YOUNGER READERS



What would happen if the boy next door—in this case, 12-year-old Percy Jackson—was really the modern-day son of a Greek god who is alive and well in the 21st century? This is the premise of Rick Riordan's *New York Times* best-selling Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. In the first novel, *The Lightning Thief* (2005; adapted into a film in 2010),

Percy, after being expelled from yet another school, finally learns the truth about his heritage. Soon, he embarks on his first mission: a journey to the Underworld to prevent a war between Zeus, Poseidon (the boy's father), and Hades over a lost thunderbolt. The story continues in *The Sea of Monsters* (2006), *The Titan's Curse* (2007), *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008), *The Last Olympian* (2009), and *The Demigod Files* (2009). Riordan recently started a sequel series, *The Heroes of Olympus*. Ages 10 and up. ■