



# Achilles

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## **Achilles** Elizabeth Cook

Born of god and king and hidden as a girl until Odysseus discovers him, Achilles becomes the Greeks' greatest warrior at Troy. Into his story comes a cast of fascinating characters—among them Hector, Helen, Penthesilea the Amazon Queen, and the centaur Chiron; and finally John Keats, whose writings form the basis of a meditation on the nature of identity and shared experience. *Achilles* is an affirmation of the story's enduring power to reach across centuries and cultures to the core of our imagination.

## **Achilles Details**

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Author : Elizabeth Cook

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## From Reader Review Achilles for online ebook

### Beth Asmaa says

The writing focused on Achilles, hero at Troy and known for his vulnerable Achilles' heel. Unconstraint and imagination of the prose had Achilles do fantastic feats from Homeric epic and explored his disposition. Except for the ending, the story is set in about 1200 B.C. Troy, then breaks off and enters British Romanticism in early 1800s. In London, the reader is in the surgical theater of Astley Cooper with Keats among the students and with a corpse. Btw, Keats wrote "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer". Cook the author brings in more surgeons and surgeries but also brings in Hazlitt, Hammond, Cary's Dante, Charles Cowden Clarke, and others. Cook mends the split in time, connecting Achilles to Keats, Troy to London, by Keats', being outdoors, catching a lock of floating reddish hair, an incident harking back to the air-blown locks of mourners' hair from off the pyres of Patroclus and Achilles on the Trojan plain. The similarity between Achilles and Keats has partly to do with their physical components of body and brain and with their holding and releasing an object. The human body apparently completely changes every seven years, so exactness is precluded.

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### Rosamond says

It's a hard book to understand, emotionally or in meaning. Especially for the 21st century, where we now realize rape is morally unacceptable and most wouldn't be able to kill someone with as much ease as these less-evolved men. I asked myself, in what sort of mind-set are we supposed to read such an angering story? But it seems we should look at history and see all the mistakes as well as the achievements. Achilles is many things, good or bad at different times. These characters are not perfect, they were a product of their blood thirsty, remorseless time and that's how they turned out. Cook is just staying accurate to the mindset of the time.

If I hadn't had to read this for AP Literature, I probably would have put it down during the second chapter (the vividly described rape of Thetis). But on comparing that scene to Helen's story, it seems to say those who choose the black river can contaminate those in the green one (re-read the first chapter for clarity). From the victim's (s) perspective, there is nothing glorious about pillaging villages, or any of the warrior's gains from doing so; the warriors don't feel for the people they're hurting.

I was unable to enjoy this story emotionally, but I can see what emotions are supposed to be inspired where and understand the how clever and well written this book is. It's deep, don't comment if you didn't try to understand it.

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### Jane says

An evocative retelling of the story of Achilles. It begins with him in Hades then tells his story from birth to death and beyond. The novella was a glorious, intense prose-poem. I especially liked the childhood of Helen; episode of Chiron, the wounded centaur and healer making Achilles' ash spear; and the meeting of Achilles and Priam. I thought any connection of Keats with the story was tenuous at best and did not see why the author even included it. Did I miss something?

Recommended but for the Keats episode tacked on.

## Sarah says

The final chapter on Keats ties it all together; this is about early death and about immortality, poetic and otherwise, and in that context it's really sad and really touching. Up to then it had been a somewhat disjointed retelling of Achilles's life and death and others' reactions to that, with some slightly awkward phrases but a remarkable and lovely sympathy and generosity towards Thetis, Deidameia, Penthesileia, Briseis, Iphigeneia and Helen. (it's so nice to see something which doesn't vilify or erase the women in Achilles's life in order to exalt his love for Patroclus.)

Even though I think it would get much better on a second reading, once you understand what it's trying to do, I've given it two stars because it does seem disjointed and I'm not sure how much it illuminates what's in Homer, beyond its musings on Achilles' choice. (the chapter on Helen is fascinating, but e.g. the one where Priam reclaims Hector's body doesn't add anything to the original.) If you love everything to do with the Iliad, I'd read it, but if you're a casual fan I'd go for other retellings first.

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## Terence says

The first part of this novella (107 pages in my edition) almost - *almost* - had me sympathizing with Achilles, and then he goes and murders and rapes Penthesileia:

*"Now he pins her down, all his hurt, unmet tenderness turned to indignation. He bends back her fingers to make her release the flint and she makes those fingers her weapons, tearing his face, stabbing at eyes. His knee bent across her ribs, holding her down, he covers her face with one hand, the heel of the other hand cradling the back of her skull, and pushes. He feels her body trying to arch beneath him, the resistance of her head as she struggles to free it. He pushes on. Pushes and then, with practised economy, twists. He holds her a little longer. Waiting for the turmoil of the body to quieten. Waiting for it to be over." (p. 53)*

With one exception, *all* of the sexual encounters in the book are rape scenes: Peleus and Thetis, Achilles and Penthesileia, Helen and Theseus (and, by implication, all of her lovers). The one exception is when Achilles is hiding at the court of Lycomedes as a girl (Pyrrha), and he and Deidamia, Lycomedes' daughter, carry on an affair. It's the one encounter where there is mutual tenderness.

I'm free associating here, but that just now brings up the absence of any homosexual relationships. Explicit ones, anyway. Achilles' great love for Patroclus is evident but any sexual element is buried fairly deep in the prose.

Perhaps there's a message here that sex/love between equals (man-to-man, woman-to-pretend-woman) is tender, giving, etc. - all the things modern Western idealism makes it out to be - and that sex between unequals (man-to-woman) is inherently violent rape?

The third part of the book takes a radical departure from the first two parts. The first part sketches the life of Achilles until he's killed by Paris; the second part tells about the aftermath - primarily the slaughter of the Trojans. Part three takes us to the life of John Keats as he contemplates the life of Achilles and his death.

When I first read this part, I was nonplussed. What in the world was Cook doing? But in reading some of the other GR reviews, I think I see what the purpose may have been: Keats as a modern-day Achilles; a kinder, gentler hero whose star burned bright and brief but whose relative immortality is assured.

Chalk it up to my prosaic mind but I wasn't bothered by Cook's occasional resort to crudity or mundanity (as were other GR reviewers). In fact, I consider that some of the best parts of the novella:

*"Ajax and Menelaus have rescued the poor, heavy, mangled body.... Achilles washes the dear flesh. He tells Patroclus he will not sleep till Hector is dead. Nor will he eat.*

*Achilles of the loud war cry lets out his war cry...*

*and the Achaeans regroup. Each man of them merry and agile for war.*

*The Trojans shit themselves. (p. 33)*

Or the scene where Thetis is collecting Achilles' bones and she's forced to balance his skull with her chin, like someone carrying a large load of laundry or a pile of books:

*"It is Machaon, the surgeon, who follows Thetis into the heart of the ash-field, who lifts the skull of Achilles from the dust. He wipes the dust from it and gazes with humble reverence into the dark hollows that housed the eye-pits. He walks over to Thetis. Gently he sets the skull down at the top of her bundle of bones.*

*Like the jar which Hephaestus gave her she has to hold it in place with her chin to keep it from rolling off." (p. 69)*

I give it but two stars because, while I liked it well enough, it was passionless for me. Too dry. An academic exercise more than a novel written from the heart.

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## **Susan says**

Poetic is exactly the word I would use to describe Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* - it is very easy to see her background in poetry shining through her words. Cook has boiled down the life of the greatest of Homer's heroes to just over 100 pages, each word and phrase weighted with marvelous spirit and meaning.

For the most part, *Achilles* is a beautifully written and bewitching read. There are however a few pieces of literary oddities. Cook tends to follow a beautiful turn of phrase with vulgarity that spoils the entire thing. Case in point:

"Achilles of the loud war cry lets out his war cry...

and the Achaeans regroup. Each man of them merry and agile for war.

The Trojans shit themselves."

I understand what she was trying to do here, but that last bit ruined it for me. The overt crudity in some parts of the story stopped *Achilles* from being an otherwise seamlessly captivating novella. Luckily there are only a couple of these unsightly blemishes to spoil the story.

My other issue with *Achilles* is that the end is disjointed, jumping from the days of Troy to the time of John Keates. The idea had real possibilities but was poorly executed. The novella went from well-formed to weird in just a turn of the page. If I had it to do over again, I would have simply skipped the last chapter and ended my journey in Troy.

My overall impression of Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* is that it is an imperfect adaptation of life of Achilles. The writing is dramatic and worthy of the epic, but there are a few choice phrases that come together to really damage the whole. My advice is to read *Achilles* for Cook's poetic interpretation of the life of Achilles, and try to ignore the offensive parts.

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### **Collin says**

So much sexual assault/rape. Why? I mean, Thetis and Peleus - okay, I get it, it's a story about Achilles and that's where he started. Okay. Fine. It was still disturbing but go ahead, it's your book.

But so much uncomfortable violation that wasn't necessary. I enjoyed it mildly but I kept getting yanked out of the story by wondering when the next rape scene would be sprung on me. I just... why?

I'm doomed to overly artistic Achilles wordage from authors who think they're the literary lovechild of T.S. Eliot and Kurt Vonnegut. It makes me sad. I want a good, meaty story like the Iliad deserves, not lace and metaphors and the occasional "shit" thrown in for shock value. Honestly, all three that I've read so far - TSoA, Ransom, and now Achilles - they all remind me of Eliza Doolittle at Ascot. They look nice and you think maybe they won't let you down and then they open their mouths and they just sound ridiculous. And you're wondering what's wrong with addlebrained Freddy Eynsford-Hill over there and my metaphor got away from me. Where's the kind of Iliad story that looks fabulous while singing "Without You" equally fabulously?

Anyway.

Like Ransom, there were really nice things about this, enough to nudge the rating up, but there's so much uncomfortableness, both in subject matter and in writing style, that keeps it to a high 2.something.

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### **Tamara says**

It was a fun read. It was a little short and I wish there were more details about Achilles' life. Apart from that, I enjoyed the book and the style of writing the author used.

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### **Anka says**

This book is gorgeously written, and the amount of unnecessary rape scenes would make GoT writers blush. I would love to recommend it to everyone who is into poetic prose, but at the same time it is triggering as hell so please proceed with extreme caution.

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### **J. says**

The first "chapter" was beyond amazing; poetic, sad, fragile in many ways...it was perfect, and I fell in love with it. However, the second Achilles is revealed to be a boy, the writing changes and becomes more brutal, less magic. The dilemma is, of course, is that on purpose or not (writing becoming masculine as the child goes from occupying a space between the genders to being set as male)? Even if it was a conscious decision, it still mars the book in many ways, I feel. The Keats "chapter" is interesting, and if I felt more warmth towards Keats, I think I would have liked it more, but to be honest he's never been one of my favorites. So, the concept here is amazing, and kudos to Cook for having the bravery to do a project like this...unfortunately it falls short of the potential.

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### **Melaniekiara says**

Eeehhh. Nah.

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### **Cas Sweeney says**

Had some very interesting ways of interpreting Ancient Greek mythology, especially Achilles and Iphigenia's relationship, but had a lot of references to sexual assault, so I decided not to finish it.

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### **Drienne says**

A poetic retelling of the story of Achilles. I \*really\* liked the first 4/5 of this beautifully written work, which opens with Achilles being called up out of the underworld by Odysseus. The language was beautiful, and it had some really interesting insights into the characters. I was, however, quite put off by the end section, which is about Keats. Yes. For one thing, I didn't know anything about Keats, and had no idea why that section was there; for another, I think it's simply distracting. But other than that, I really liked this work. However. It's unsuitable -- again! -- for the Kinder, since it has graphic sex scenes and use of primary obscenities. (I wish I knew for certain what school policy was about things like that.) Still, I highly recommend this for adults, though I suggest reviewing something about Keats before you get to that last section, lest it be as incomprehensible to you as it was to me on first read.

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### **Madeline says**

I'm giving this four stars more because I found *Achilles* so unusual and *interesting* than because I thought it accomplished all its goals. Like most modern readers (probably?), I prefer Odysseus to Achilles: it's easier to deal with selfishness and cruelty when accompanied by cunning and an actual goal (and IIRC, everyone

Odysseus has sex with wants to have sex with him? not true of Achilles!). But Achilles is iconic, and I'm interested in works exploring this. It seems unlikely that there is another work so ... experimental and unexpected as this one out there. It's the kind of novel that asks more questions than it answers - and that's fine with me.

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## **Amalia Gavea says**

*"We honoured you like a god while you were alive. No one could match you. Now that you're dead we still speak of you as one who will never be surpassed."*

Achilles. A name loaded with myths and History, a man who became a legend. Fictional or not, Achilles became the first hero- or anti-hero, in my opinion- a man admired and worshipped by Alexander the Great, the greatest of men, whom legend wants to sleep with Homer's Iliad under his pillow. Achilles. A mortal, born of a sea goddess, and as ferocious and unpredictable as the dwelling of his mother. A man worthy of love and hate, admiration and fear. Brought down by a coward as a punishment for his terrible hubris. He has fallen victim to many a writer who tried to project their views on him, turning him into a monster or a romantic hero. Even Shakespeare got him wrong in his horrible Troilus and Cressida. (Sorry, Will...) Many productions butchered him to pieces, without mercy. This work by Elizabeth Cook is the only one that can find itself side by side with Homer's epic of epics, painting an image of Achilles that does full justice to his visceral, contradictory character.

*"Milk, honey, wine, water."*

Odysseus's offers to the dead souls in Hades aim in helping him find his way home as dictated by Circe. One of those that respond is Achilles, shocked and relieved to see his friend still alive. However, he is displeased with Odysseus' s elegy on his name. He has no illusions, the king of the Myrmidons sees everything clear now that he dwells in the Underworld and he retreats in his shadow home. This is the beginning of his story, told by Cook in exquisite writing, in an elegy that is neither a poem nor a novel but a passage to an era when valour and violence walked hand in hand.

Cook forgets nothing. Every famous moment associated with Achilles is here, told in vivid, haunting details. His anger for the trap set by Agamemnon with Iphigenia as the victim of a mad war still burns in his dead heart. We gain insight into the characters of Peleus and Thetis with their erotic tour-de-force and of Chiron, the Centaur who shaped Achilles 's mentality. Deidamia, his female lover and mother of Neoptolemus, the noble Hector, the abominable Agamemnon, Helen, Cassandra, the tragic Priam, the disgusting Paris, the cunning Odysseus, the heroic Penthesilea, the doomed Polyxena, Briseis and Patroclus, the gods and goddesses who dictate the fate of the heroes parade before our eyes in a tragic performance, echoing all the strengths and weaknesses of the human nature.

The legendary moments are many, exquisitely narrated. There's a glorious scene of Achilles's grief for Patroclus, expressed against the River Scamander, the symbol of Troy. The dwell between him and Hector is always harrowing to read, especially if you've always sided with the Trojans, like I have. The meeting between Achilles and Priam is one of the saddest, most tragic moments in Literature. Thetis's lament over the loss of her son is a raw, nightmarish scene.

*"She thinks, 'I am the loneliest person on earth.'"*

Then, Crook does something extremely powerful. Following Achilles' s death, Helen becomes the narrator. The dark scenes of the fall of Troy are seen through her eyes, as she contemplates what would have

happened if Achilles had been her husband (even though he never claimed her, safely hidden in the island of Skyros), the loss of Hector, the only man she appreciated, the cowardly nature of Paris, the monster that was Theseus. The last word belongs to John Keats and his musings on mortality, vanity and the often meagre significance of our existence.

Now, time for a rant. There are certain traces of implied rape in the story. Obviously. If one is familiar with the tale of the Trojan War (and I mean The Iliad, not the atrocious Hollywood films and TV productions that constantly violate myths and History), then the version of the encounter between Achilles and Penthesilea shouldn't come as a surprise. The fact that this event was added to the Trojan cycle during late antiquity lends little credit to whether it took place or not. Homer mentions nothing related to supposed necrophilia. Anyway, if one cannot handle it, it's fine and understandable. However, criticizing Cook for including innuendos in this work shows frightful ignorance, extremely poor perception and a vision that would be conservative even for the 17th century Puritans. Why bother with a war epic, then? Do these readers believe those men fought with flowers and savoir vivre? Well, there's Hallmark channel to feast their sensitive hearts. We need to understand that Historical Fiction cannot be judged according to modern values but based on the reality of the particular era.

I will break my personal rule and I will ask you not to pay any attention to the negative reviews on Achilles. Some people need to do some basic research before they write. After all, the articles in the Guardian, the Times and the numerous literary awards speak for themselves. We won't find a more rounded, mature, free from horrible YA phantasies portrait of the man who shaped the Hero's image and archetype for centuries, a man who still fascinates and terrifies us.

...and repeat after me, Achilles was NOT alive when Troy fell....

***"Two destinies, Thetis said. You can choose. Stay in the fight and be known-for ever- as the greatest warrior on earth, and your life will be short as the beat of that wing."***

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.word...>

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