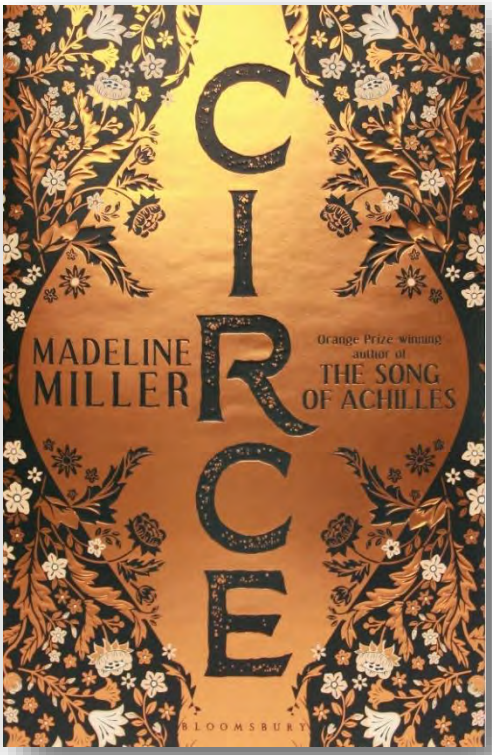
BLOOMSBURY

Reading Group Guide

CIRCE

MADELINE MILLER



In brief

From the Orange Prize-winning, internationally bestselling author of *The Song of Achilles* comes the powerful story of the mythological witch Circe, inspired by Homer's Odyssey

In detail

In the house of Helios, god of the sun and mightiest of the Titans, a daughter is born. But Circe has neither the look nor the voice of divinity, and is scorned and rejected by her kin. Increasingly isolated, she turns to mortals for companionship, leading her to discover a power forbidden to the gods: witchcraft.

When love drives Circe to cast a dark spell, wrathful Zeus banishes her to the remote island of Aiaia. There she learns to harness her occult craft, drawing strength from nature. But she will not always be alone; many are destined to pass through Circe's place of exile, entwining their fates with hers. The messenger god, Hermes. The craftsman, Daedalus. A ship bearing a golden fleece. And wily Odysseus, on his epic voyage home.

There is danger for a solitary woman in this world, and Circe's independence draws the wrath of men and gods alike. To protect what she holds dear, Circe must decide whether she belongs with the deities she is born from, or the mortals she has come to love.

Breathing life into the ancient world, Madeline Miller weaves an intoxicating tale of gods and heroes, magic and monsters, survival and transformation.

Questions

1. Circe struggles to find a place for herself as a woman in a man's world. What parts of her experience resonate with modern day challenges that women face?

2. A central theme of Homer's Odyssey is a longing for *'nostos'*—homecoming. In what way does that theme resonate with Circe's story?

3. How does Circe's encounter with Prometheus change her? How does it continue to affect her actions?

4. Throughout the novel Circe draws distinctions between gods and mortals. How are each of them portrayed? How does Glaucus change when he becomes a god?

5. Circe wonders if parents can ever see their children clearly. She notes that so often when looking at our children *'we see only the mirror of our own faults.'* What parts of herself does she see when she looks at Telegonus? What are her strengths and weaknesses as a parent to him?

6. Circe's sister Pasiphaë begins the novel as a major antagonist. How does our perspective of her change after Circe's visit to Crete?

7. How does her time with Daedalus affect Circe?

8. Circe begins the novel feeling very close to her baby brother Aeëtes. Why do their paths diverge so wildly? Why do you think he make the choices he does?

9. Circe tells us that she recognizes parts of herself in Medea. In what ways are the two women similar? In what ways are they different?

10. Circe says to Telemachus *'Do not try to take my regret from me.'* What does she mean by that? How has her regret shaped her?

11. Circe says that when she first meets Odysseus he seems *'nearly familiar'* to her. Why does she say that? Who, if anyone, does he remind her of?

12. What is the significance of Circe's meeting with Trygon? How does it impact her emotional journey?

13. There are numerous references to crafts in the novel, including weaving, carpentry and metal-working. What role does craft play in Circe's story?

14. Circe is interested in Penelope from the moment she hears about her from Odysseus. What draws her to Penelope? Does this change over time?

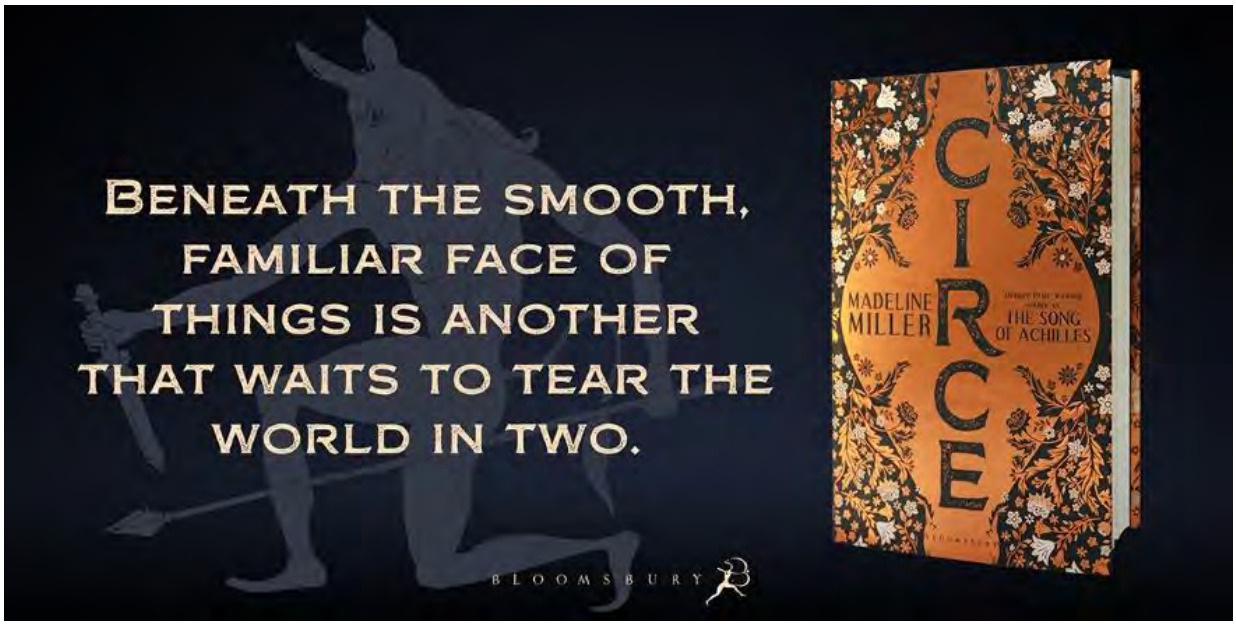
15. Were you surprised when Telemachus refused Athena? Why or why not?

16. Circe encounters several famous figures from Greek myth. Were any of their portrayals surprising?

17. How does Circe's relationship with her father change over the course of the book? What do you make of their final conversation?

18. We see numerous powerful characters abusing their positions throughout the story. Are power and abuse necessarily connected? Are there any models for power without cruelty?

19. Circe's gift is transformation. How does she transform from the beginning of the novel to the end? Why does she ultimately choose the path she does?



Further Reading

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

The Odyssey by Homer

The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood

Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson

Author biography

Madeline Miller is the author of *The Song of Achilles*, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction 2012, was shortlisted for the Stonewall Writer of the Year 2012, was an instant New York Times bestseller, and was translated into twenty-five languages. Madeline holds an MA in Classics from Brown University, and she taught Latin, Greek and Shakespeare to high school students for over a decade. She has also studied at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, and at Yale School of Drama, where she focused on the adaptation of classical texts to modern forms. Her essays have appeared in publications including the *Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Lapham's Quarterly* and NPR.org. She lives in Pennsylvania.

Check out the *Circe* book trailer here.