

# Long Paddock

**Emma Wortley**

S.D. Gentill, *Chasing Odysseus*

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Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* has inspired countless retellings and reimaginings, from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to the film *O Brother Where Are Thou?* (2000). In *Chasing Odysseus* – the first in a series called *The Hero Trilogy* – S.D. Gentill has created a young adult adventure novel in the tradition of 'in the wings' works such as Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966). Gentill retells the events of *The Odyssey* from the perspective of three teenage brothers – Machaon, Lycon and Cadmus – and their younger sister Hero. Rejected by the Amazons as children (the boys for being male, Hero for being weak), they have been raised as siblings by the Herdsman Agelaus. The Herdsmen are allies of Troy who live in the mountains beyond the city. After the fall of Troy, the Herdsmen tribe are accused of betraying Troy to the Greeks and Agelaus is killed. The siblings set out to discover the truth of how the city was taken (as yet unaware of the role of the mysterious giant horse) and clear the name of the Herdsmen by pursuing Odysseus as he undertakes his iconic journey.

One of the most pleasurable aspects of this kind of 'in the wings' work is the metafictional playfulness. Gentill plays with cause and effect and twists the reader's perception of Odysseus: he is recast as a somewhat buffoonish villain rather than a hero in this version of the tale. The 'in the wings' narrative is also a natural fit for the young adult genre. Young adult literature is preoccupied with themes of identity formation and growth, with young adult novels generally following an adolescent protagonist or protagonists as they orient themselves in relation to the adult or mainstream world. In *Chasing Odysseus*, Hero and her brothers lack power and have lost control of how they are perceived by the world. The youths must find a way to assert their own power, make their story heard over Odysseus's and gain control of their identity. For example, in *The Odyssey*, the god Hermes makes several appearances to help Odysseus. On the island of the witch Circe, for instance, Hermes appears to Odysseus in the guise of a

young man and gives him a drug to shield him from Circe's magic and potions. In *Chasing Odysseus*, a drunken, babbling Odysseus mistakes Machaon for Hermes and takes it upon himself to eat a flower that happens to be at the youth's feet. Machaon then intervenes to save Odysseus from Circe by replacing a poisoned bowl of food with a fresh one, but Odysseus assumes he has been magically protected. Odysseus is thus reimagined as a vain fool, while Machaon takes control of the situation. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is held captive by the lovesick goddess Calypso for seven years, until Hermes saves him by relaying Zeus's instructions to let Odysseus go so he may continue his fateful travels. In *Chasing Odysseus*, arrogant Odysseus is deluded in believing Calypso to be in love with him, when in truth she simply feels compelled to fulfil her obligations of hospitality to this "tedious lodger" (304). The brothers conspire with Calypso to fabricate Hermes' visit: the brothers thus exploit Odysseus's earlier mistake and assert power over him.

Although the brothers have a strong presence in the novel, Hero's growth is the main focus. Hero is a classic underdog: she is used to being protected by her brothers and father after being rejected by her powerful Amazon mother for her weakness, clumsiness and poor eyesight. However, her journey with her brothers forces her to find strength and rely on herself. When her brothers are captured by the Greeks, for example, she must sail on her own and ultimately save them from drowning when Zeus destroys the Greek ship. Afterwards, her growth is flagged explicitly:

Machaon looked carefully at his sister. She did not seem as small as she once had.

[...]

The sons of Agelaus regarded their sister a little differently. They had always protected her, but it was she who had saved them from the sea. [...] They had always loved her, but now they admired her. (296-299)

This overt preoccupation with personal development is typical of the young adult genre. The novel closes with the sense that there will be greater exploration of Hero's Amazon heritage in books to come. Faced with a new challenge once they have manipulated Odysseus into revealing the truth behind the fall of Troy to the world, the brothers react favourably to Hero's steely resolve: "The Herdsmen glanced knowingly at

each other. Their sister was after all an Amazon” (356). I expect the next two books to further explore Hero’s development of a sense of self, and would like to see the measure of Hero’s growth move away from her brothers’ perceptions of her.

My experience of the novel was necessarily coloured by my familiarity with the source text. I enjoyed Gentill’s playfulness and humour. For example, in *The Odyssey*, Calypso keeps Odysseus for seven years. In this version, Odysseus is with the goddess for only a week but exaggerates when telling the tale to subsequent hosts. Lycon wryly comments: “He makes it sound as though he was there for seven years rather than seven days” (338). I also liked Gentill’s evident love of the original. Epic verse has been replaced by third person narration, but Gentill draws heavily on the themes and language of Homer’s poem. For example, the novel explores the importance of hospitality, the concept of guile as a valuable form of heroism and the power of storytelling. Gentill also frequently echoes Homeric descriptions. For instance, the original contains repeated descriptions of Dawn or Eos and her ‘rose red fingers’. *Chasing Odysseus* includes at least fifteen such references to the goddess, such as: “The slim ruby fingers of Eos, the gleaming goddess of sunrise, stroked the eastern horizon and cast the world in a mantle of burning gold” (5).

Readers will experience the novel differently depending on their level of familiarity with *The Odyssey* and Greek mythology; from those who have read it to those who know nothing about it to those who have absorbed knowledge of it through that wonderful cultural osmosis that allows us to know the gist of a lot of canonical works we have never read. I believe the book will stand as a satisfying quest tale for those who are unfamiliar with the original tale and surrounding myths. These kinds of retellings and reimaginings also play a role in the process of cultural osmosis referred to above by introducing the reader to classic stories and perhaps inspiring them to seek out some of the source material. The second book in the trilogy, *Trying War*, was released earlier this year. I will definitely be reading it, in part to see how Gentill plays with other iconic stories and in part simply to be absorbed in the next instalment of a very readable adventure tale.