

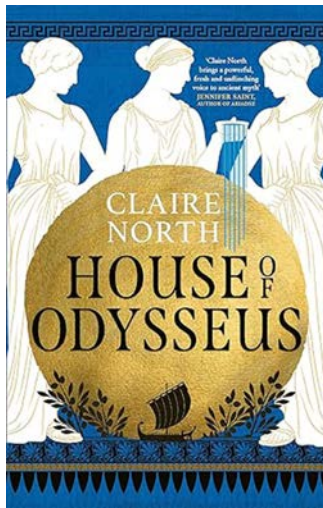
## Book Review

### House of Odysseus

North (C.) Pp. viii + 420, London: Orbit, 2023.  
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This is the second of Clare North's brilliant trilogy about the family of Odysseus. It follows on from where we left off in the first book *Ithaca*. This is not to say that it is necessary to read the first in the trilogy before this book. It is a self-contained story, but many of the same themes are here – Penelope still lies waiting for her husband, but is really in control of the island through clever use of a web of an army of women. The women's weapons are not just swords and spears, but seduction and surreptitious surveillance. Like *Ithaca*, the stories of the House of Odysseus and that of

the House of Atreus are woven together. In this book, Orestes, driven to madness by killing his mother, arrives with Pylades and Electra in the palace on Ithaca. This new, emotionally disturbed King of Mycenae, Orestes, has to be hidden from Uncle Menelaus who feigns concern for his welfare, but is really after his throne and, for a while, takes over Ithaca too – just to protect it, of course! To prevent a full take-over, Penelope must enter an unholy alliance with Antinous, Eurymachus and other suitors to escape Menelaus' clutches. Penelope is forced to flee to nearby Kephallonia to be hunted by Menelaus' son Nicostratus. As ever, she is protected by the women who remain loyal to their queen.

We have been sailing with these characters for over 2000 years and the landscape is very familiar. Clare North is a huge talent and blows a fresh wind, filling our sails with endless possibilities and takes these characters in new and unexpected directions: Menelaus, a genial bully who has a deadly obsession with the harmony of the family unit; Laertes, a great hero who hasn't fully withdrawn from the cut and thrust of Ithacan politics; Helen, as manipulative as ever. In this story, no one is to be trusted, not even Penelope who becomes unsure of herself as she finds herself falling for one of the

suitors, encouraged by the narrator of the book, Aphrodite. We think we know these characters and this terrain. They are both familiar and, like Proteus wrestling with water, we can never quite grasp them, even though we try. These are characters who never stay in shape, never stand still. That is why we constantly need retellings of the stories of Troy. The waves of these myths wash over us again and again, each wave different, shaping our subconscious expanse.

As expected, there is also a deliberate imitation of epic poetry in this novel – gods like Athena or Aphrodite watch mortals and interfere in their realm, they play favourites and squabble amongst themselves. Heroes are full of egoism and bravado, the suitors are driven to act in the way that they do to prove themselves to their fathers, they are men-children. Clare North weaves pieces of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seamlessly into a beautifully articulated story – what would it be like if Menelaus and Helen turned up in Ithaca and told Penelope that they had hosted Telemachus, but his mother hadn't seen or heard from him in half a year? Her descriptions of her characters are masterful – Electra 'wears her ashes of mourning like a fashion item.' On Helen's wedding night, Menelaus lays siege to her and conquers her like an enemy city, leaving Helen yearning for real love, something Aphrodite is only too pleased to encourage with Paris. As in Aeschylus' tragedy, Orestes is haunted by the guilt of killing his mother and pursued by the Furies, and only the intervention of Athena can save him. There is far more in this book than epic or tragedy. Penelope is forced to play the detective on more than one occasion. This novel is an eclectic feast and transcends genre.

Some critics have found that some of the sentences in the book are complex. There is plenty of action within the chapters, but I occasionally found myself getting swept up in long descriptions or elaborate asides. It is easy to follow in audiobook form, read in tones as smooth as a gentle sea breeze by Catrin Walker Booth.

This year, our students are studying the *Odyssey*. As a supplement, our Learning Resource Centre has many fiction books based on myths and legends for students to read. The *Songs of Penelope* trilogy will be a staple. Teachers need to be aware that there are a few four-letter words uttered by characters in the text, but these reveal more about the characters and are certainly not gratuitous. Helpfully, Clare North has organised some chapters which could be set as supplementary reading when classes are initially learning background myths to the *Odyssey*. There is a whole chapter based around the way Hera, Athene and Aphrodite react to Zeus' treatment of them in the Judgement of Paris, for example.

The *House of Odysseus* is a fresh perspective on well-known characters and stories. Clare North's prose, while occasionally dense, is rich with detail and depth, providing a narrative that is both engaging and thought-provoking. It is a delight for those who know the *Odyssey* well and those who are just landing in Ithaca. The trilogy was completed in June 2024 with *The Last Songs of Penelope* – it's already sitting on my bookshelf, waiting for me to return – hopefully I won't take as long as Odysseus!

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