

An 'Odyssey' For You And Me

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

On the paging list the other day, I crossed off everything but “The Odyssey.” Churned from the printer each morning, the list tells us what books, movies and so forth have been requested from our collection by library patrons across the Cape, and while searching the stacks I’d found six versions of the epic. Four were translations in verse — by Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Fagles and Emily Wilson — and two were in prose.

The abstract on the paging list gave me nothing more to go on than “Odyssey” and “Homer,” so I had to haul all the copies over to the computer at circ to find out which one needed to be packed up and sent off. Minor project; Greek poet jamming the desk up for a few minutes. Wilson’s 2017 translation was summoned up-Cape.

The rest of the books were piled back onto the cart. One of them I lingered over, a little wistfully. It was Barbara Leone Picard’s retelling of “The Odyssey” for children, first published by Oxford University Press in 1952. I’m familiar with it because I read it to my kids last year over a period of about four months, on and off. The reading itself was an odyssey; we carried the book around with us from here to there, from home to the children’s grandparents’ house, on car rides up and down Route 6, and sometimes to a shack on the dunes in Provincetown. It was on our first night in the shack that we reached the part where Odysseus and his men are shipwrecked on Calypso’s island, and through the building of his raft and his setting to sea again and his washing ashore in Phaeacia, we read by candle-light to the constant sound of surf on the beach. The setting, I think, helped the story sink in. Back home about a week later, at the part where Odysseus returns to Ithaca, my 8-year-old interrupted our reading to inform me that she had disposed of a certain late pet according to the custom of the ancient Greeks.

“By the way, Mom,” she said cheerily, “I buried Mr. Cricket in the dunes. I made up my own funeral song for him, and I even prayed that he would have a good life in the Underworld.”

I like that a child of the 21st century can be seized by a story that was made up 2,700 years ago. Why shouldn’t she? It has monsters, witches, ghosts,

augury, people who are turned into pigs, gods that throw tantrums and thunderbolts, and a hero who wants only to get home to his wife and son. A narrative that implies a sense of order to the universe: patience, wisdom and temperance are rewarded, thieves and villains get their due. Add meter,

imagery and the other grandeurs of verse and the story becomes hard to forget. Passing the cart loaded with returns just this morning, I noticed another “Odyssey” logjam. No wonder.

A new book, “Hearing Homer’s Song: The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry” by Robert Kanigel (now available in CLAMS), may also be rekindling interest in the “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey.” In it Kanigel chronicles the labors of a young scholar in the 1930s who proved that the thousands of lines of richly textured poetry that make up Homer’s epics were probably crafted over generations by a series of Greek bards who were carrying on an oral tradition of storytelling. In other words, the stories weren’t written; they were sung. The individual known as Homer factored in somewhere — the theory goes — perhaps as an especially brilliant performer of them, perhaps as the person responsible for finally preserving them on sheets of papyrus.

Today’s bards, in the form of Classicists like Fagles and Wilson, the first woman to translate “The Odyssey” in English, continue the retelling through interpretations infused with their own imaginations and preoccupations. Artists Gareth Hinds and Seymour Chwast have reinvented the tales of Odysseus and Achilles as graphic novels, published in 2010, 2012 and 2019. In a way, even you and I, reading these stories aloud to our children, become links in the storytelling chain, flawed performers though we may be. “Sing to me, O Muse . . .” the Odyssey begins. The command is there in every age, and so are the listeners — even on a beach on Cape Cod in 2021. Is there a time when storytelling isn’t timely?

Kaimi Rose Lum is assistant director at Snow Library in Orleans. In addition to the six translations of “The Odyssey” offered at Snow Library, there are at least seven more translations available in CLAMS, along with numerous picture book versions for children.

