

# Fireside Book Chats: Winter 2019

## Alyssa's List of Old Tales, New Voices



Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*, (2005). In Homer's account of *The Odyssey*, Penelope - wife of Odysseus and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy - is portrayed as the faithful, patient wife, her name becoming synonymous with fidelity. In Atwood's playful retelling, she gives Penelope and her handmaids the chance to tell their story, one in which they are the main characters with unique desires, hardships and voices.

Barker, Pat. *The Silence of the Girls*, (2018). Set during the Trojan War, this story gives a voice to Achilles' concubine, Briseis. Through her eyes, readers are afforded a unique view into Greek camp life and offers vivid new portraits of the Trojan War's main players. Most importantly, Briseis is given the depth and agency she was never afforded in other retellings.

Headley, Maria Dahvana. *The Mere Wife*, (2018). This adaptation of *Beowulf* is set in the present-day U.S. and is primarily told through the eyes of two very different women. Gren and his mother live a solitary life, hiding in the mountain above a wealthy suburb. When Gren secretly becomes friends with a rich, young boy, the lives of their mothers collide with deadly consequences. A modern-day epic with powerful characterization and poetic writing.

Johnson, Daisy. *Everything Under*, (2018). A modern reworking of the Oedipus myth set on the canals of Oxfordshire, on a rusted houseboat. Johnson brings her characters to life, unrestrained by traditional gender roles, each with a presence that's utterly unique. The book masterfully builds an eerie tension while still offering moments of quiet and humor and love. Johnson's intensely precise writing makes this book a timeless and magical read. Highly recommended for all readers.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Lavinia*, (2008). In *The Aeneid*, Virgil's hero fights to claim the king's daughter, Lavinia, with whom he is destined to found an empire. Lavinia herself never speaks a word. Now, Le Guin takes us back to the half-wild world of ancient Italy, when Rome was a muddy village near seven hills, and tells us what Virgil did not: the story of her life, and of the love of her life.

McKinney, L. L. *A Blade So Black*, (2018). Alice spends her time in two distinct worlds: in one life, she's a student in Atlanta with an overprotective mom and a slipping GPA; in the other, she's battling monstrous creatures in a dream-realm called Wonderland. Alice is forced to balance both of her worlds, saving her mentor in Wonderland while making sure to come home before curfew.

Miller, Madeline. *Circe*, (2018). If you enjoy complex, female characters and lyrical writing, Madeline Miller's *Circe* is a must-read. In Greek mythology, Circe is the daughter of the sun god, Helios, and is best-known for her relationship with Odysseus and her abilities of sorcery and metamorphosis. Using this fascinating mythological character, Miller is able to make important statements on feminism, power, and motherhood.



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Obiona, Chigozie. *An Orchestra of Minorities*, (2019). A contemporary twist on the Odyssey, this book is narrated by the spirit of a young poultry farmer named Chinonso. Chinonso falls in love with Ndali, but she is from an educated and wealthy family. To become worthy, Chinonso sells most of his possessions but soon discovers that he has been swindled. A heart-wrenching epic.

Ortberg, Mallory (Daniel). *The Merry Spinster*, (2018). This collection of stories incorporates an eclectic mix of source material including "Cinderella," the Book of Genesis, and *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. Ortberg's curiosity about religion, gender, and human relationships provides themes that run through the stories. The fairy tale roles - wife, princess, king - are all detached from gender, so we are able to see them more clearly as distinct tropes. An eerie and modern delight!

Oyeyemi, Helen. *Boy, Snow, Bird*, (2015). Set in 1950s New England, this book can very loosely be described as Snow White from the perspective of the stepmother. However, don't expect any poisonous apple or awakening kiss. Instead, Oyeyemi makes this story completely her own. She focuses on women of all ages, races, and motives, who must rely on their own wits and courage to navigate the racial and gender inequalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A challenging yet rewarding read.

Shamsie, Kamila. *Home Fire*, (2017). The suspenseful and heartbreaking story of an immigrant family driven to pit love against family loyalty and political allegiance. Based on Antigone, three siblings navigate their diverging fates as British Muslims in a time of escalating racial and religious divides. In just over 250 pages, this short book still feels like an epic. A great read for a book club.

Novik, Naomi. *Spinning Silver*, (2018). A pastoral fairy tale, filled with atmospheric descriptions of country life and magic, this book is loosely based on Rumpelstiltskin. Miryem is the daughter of the town's moneylender, but she takes over her father's job when he repeatedly fails to collect their debts. A complex plot told through multiple perspectives.

Shields, Sharma. *The Cassandra*, (2019). This book follows a woman who goes to work in a top secret research facility during WWII, only to be tormented by visions of what the mission will mean for humankind. A well-written and superbly-paced novel with a harrowing storyline.

Yolen, Jane. *How to Fracture a Fairy Tale*, (2018). Fantasy legend Jane Yolen presents a wide-ranging offering of fractured and transformed fairy tales. The short stories include a spinner of straw into gold who becomes a money-changer and the big bad wolf retired to a nursing home. The set also includes Japanese, Scottish and Native American folklore, rewritten within the modern world.

