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Helen Of Troy: The Story Behind The Most Beautiful Woman In The World



Synopsis

For 3,000 years, the woman known as Helen of Troy has been both the ideal symbol of beauty and a reminder of the terrible power beauty can wield. In her search for the identity behind this mythic figure, acclaimed historian Bettany Hughes uses Homer's account of Helen's life to frame her own investigation. Tracing the cultural impact that Helen has had on both the ancient world and Western civilization, Hughes explores Helen's role and representations in literature and in art throughout the ages. This is a masterly work of historical inquiry about one of the world's most famous women.

Book Information

Paperback: 512 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (January 9, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1400076005

ISBN-13: 978-1400076000

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1.2 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Best Sellers Rank: #638,180 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #122 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Greece](#) #729 in [Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Greece](#) #2571 in [Books > History > World > Women in History](#)

Customer Reviews

Bettany Hughes' "Helen of Troy" might well have been called *Helen of Troy and What People Think About Her*, for both the historical Helen (if such a person actually existed) and people's reactions to the idea of Helen are at the heart of Ms. Hughes' tale. The author, an Oxford-trained historian, is also guest lecturer, writer, and the creator of PBS/BBC television specials, such as "The Spartans" and "Athens: Dawn of Democracy." In describing her "Helen," she says, "There is no single arterial route to the truth of Helen of Troy, but a number of paths that wind across time..." Her own quest begins by sifting through remaining Bronze Age shards and stories and then continues with a literate romp through evolving Western thought and opinion since that long ago time until our own. Ms. Hughes calls her work an "historia." Those whose words or images are woven into its tapestry include: Euripides, Goethe, Yeats, Rimbaud, Camus, Ovid, Dante, Sappho, Rupert Brooke, Dorothy Parker, William Blake and Christopher Marlowe. Her chronicler in chief, of course, is Homer. The

masterworks we attribute to him were created during a time when a pre-literate oral tradition of singers was giving way in Greece to the written word. She describes this as a "fault-line in the development of European Literature." Those amazingly apt words give some idea of Ms. Hughes own writing skill. She needs the skill. At 458 pages, "Helen" is stuffed text-book dense with facts, ideas and conjecture. As such, it could be a soporific far more potent than the largest turkey dinner. Instead, it's a joy to read. Even the notes are interesting. While Ms. Hughes writes about the past, her effort will, almost certainly, become the definitive "Helen" for the foreseeable future.

Troy has always fascinated people and the "cause" of the Trojan war, the Spartan princess Helen, is now perhaps only second to Cleopatra in the modern iconography of ancient women. Indeed, while we are not even sure that a real Helen existed, there certainly was a Troy and a Sparta, and their histories, although now obscured by the mists of time and lack of contemporary written record, had to have been quite turbulent. Through the writings of Homer and others, Helen has come down to us as intelligent, obviously beautiful, and as either victim or schemer, goddess or mortal, violated virgin or whore. In any case something very bad happened to Troy around the projected time of Helen's life, even if she really did not exist. Bettany Hughes in her lengthy (458 pp) "Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore" has covered the background of this period. Helen is part of a complex Greek mythology based on the early history of ancient Greece (including Magna Grecia - Modern Turkey, Crete, Cyprus etc.) The house of Atreus and the Tyndareids make modern dysfunctional families look tame, with cannibalism, incest, murder, torture, congress with gods, etc. commonplace. While Hughes concentrates on the story of Helen, these various behaviors occasionally come through, especially in regard to the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, Helen's half sister, and Orestes subsequent murder of his mother and her lover, and later of Helen herself (if the later was not wafted up to Olympus as Apollo is said to have done).

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