

Reading Group Guide

Alcestis

by Katharine Beutner

1. Were you familiar with the myth of Alcestis before reading this novel? If so, what version of the story had you encountered before? Did knowing—or not knowing—Alcestis’s story in advance affect how you read the book?
2. How do the characters of Apollo, Hermes, Persephone, and Hades seem similar to or different from other portrayals of the Olympian gods?
3. What does religion mean to the human characters in the novel? Consider Alcestis’s statement that “Gods did as they liked, and mortals struck or kissed or killed each other without knowing why then sat in the dust of battle and talked until they were hoarse, trying to explain the actions of Olympians” (p. 114). Do all Achaeans seem to feel the same way Alcestis does, or not?
4. If you were to draw a diagram of the novel’s structure, how might you do it? How does Alcestis’s journey to the underworld resemble the journeys of Odysseus, Aeneas, or Orpheus—or of stories to the underworld in other mythical traditions? In what ways is it different?
5. How do relationships between men and women work in Achaean society? What about relationships between women, or between men? Is Alcestis a good wife to Admetus? Why or why not?
6. Alcestis and her sister Pisidice have a contentious relationship. What do you see as the sources of friction in their relationship? Why do you think Alcestis gets along so much better with Hippothoe than with Pisidice?
7. What does Alcestis fear most as a young girl? What does she fear most during her time in the underworld? What do these fears suggest to you about her culture and her own identity within that culture? How do you think her time in the underworld has changed or affected her fears?
8. Alcestis finds herself unable to resist Persephone. Many other human characters in Greek mythology have similar problems resisting the wiles of gods or goddesses. How do you think the behavior of humans who are seduced by gods should be judged? Are they responsible for their actions? Or, as one of the author’s teachers once said, should humans simply accept that “goddesses happen”?
9. This novel features the death of Alcestis’s sister Hippothoe, a troubled marriage, and a romance set in the underworld. Do you find the novel dark, or not? If not, what elements of the book prevent it from feeling depressing?
10. What do you think of Hades’s reaction to Persephone’s pursuit of Alcestis? Why might he react this way?

11. What sort of future do you project for Alcestis and Admetus? For Alcestis and Persephone? How does the epilogue complicate their futures? What was your reaction to learning about Alcestis's ties to figures in other myths, such as the warriors who invaded Troy?

12. The novel offers its account of Alcestis's life as an alternative to the traditional mythical representation of her. What do you think the novel is trying to say about myth and truth, or about the different ways mythological stories are interpreted? What responsibility do you think authors have to be truthful when writing fiction? What forces do you think affect the development and dissemination of myths?