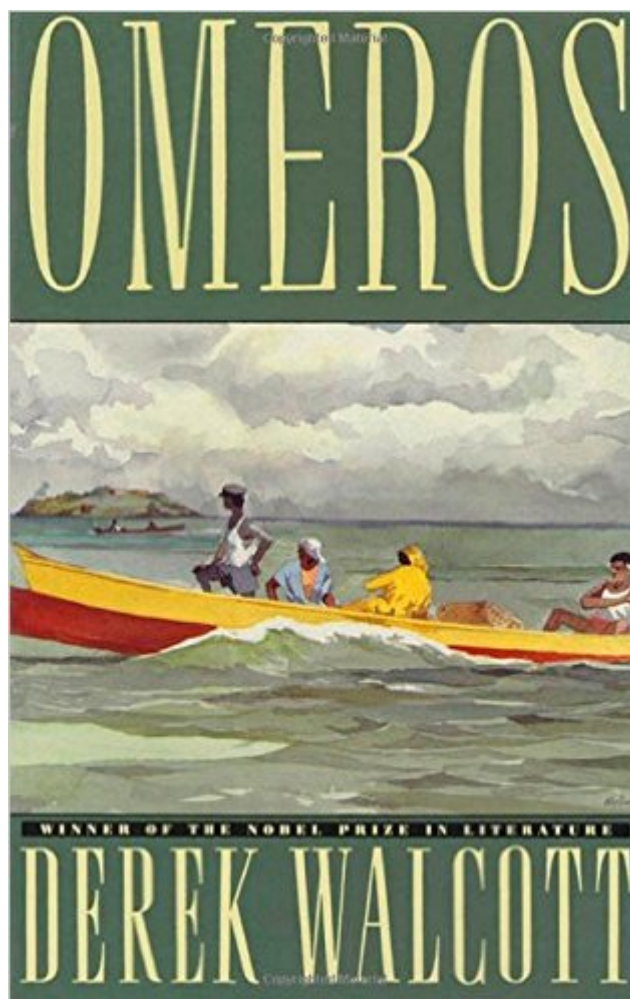


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Omeros



Synopsis

A poem in five books, of circular narrative design, titled with the Greek name for Homer, which simultaneously charts two currents of history: the visible history charted in events -- the tribal losses of the American Indian, the tragedy of African enslavement -- and the interior, unwritten epic fashioned from the suffering of the individual in exile.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Walcott confidently feels his way into epic form, borrowing the blind eyes of Homer and tropes from Homer's tales. Jam-packed with craft, OMEROS' Dantesque tercets make hairpin turns on the pinpoints of vowels and consonants. Walcott is nothing if not evocative, calling forth the spirits of breadfruit, waves, Plains Indians, sunken treasure, sea creatures and all his other muses with a music that is beyond sounds. For all the great poetry, what fans of the modern epic will miss in OMEROS is a narrative through-line. Structurally, it is more like William Carlos Williams' PATERSON or especially Hart Crane's THE BRIDGE, than like THE ILLIAD or THE ODYSSEY. The stories in the poem are given secondary importance to the ideas. While I will not disagree with other reviewers' characterizations of the characters as 'well-developed,' I will say that Walcott gives his characters very little to do. The greatest journey is the one taken by the un-named narrator (who seems to be prowling the University Poet circuit from the Caribbean to the U.S. to England). Those who want a story with their modern epic are directed to THE CHANGING LIGHT AT SANDOVER by James Merrill. What Walcott offers in place of narrative is recollections, meditations and essays on a

post-colonial world. Certain human motifs are bound to repeat, he says, and demonstrates with the story of fishermen Hector and Achille fighting for the island girl in the yellow dress, Helen. To me, *Omeros* is really a collection of poems in a similar form spiralling around similar themes, taking up each others' melodies in different keys. Like any symphony, it sometimes gets lost. But its individual passages are, more often than not, magnificent -- and beautiful to hear.

My review title shouldn't be construed as me claiming any knowledge re: Caribbean culture/history, or indeed -any- of the experiences of the disenfranchised peoples this book touches on. All I can say is that the glowing reviews here on are accurate. Walcott's poetry is supple almost beyond belief: so facile and brilliant that it would stand between the reader and the subject if Walcott himself didn't admit that, yes, he can be awfully facile and brilliant with the English language! The writer walks a dozen dangerous lines - among them, the could-be-precious placing of himself in his own poem - and walks away triumphant from every single challenge. If you are looking for a linear "story" in the tradition of Homer but transplanted to a Caribbean locale, this isn't it. If however you are looking for great poetry and the understanding of others (and yourself) that great poetry can bring, then it is right here. *OMEROS* is eminently worth your time.

OMEROS, the eight-thousand-line poem that undoubtedly clinched Derek Walcott's Nobel Prize in 1992, is a lithe glistening marvel. Like some mythological creature, it twists and turns before your eyes, seldom going straight, but shifting in space and time, sometimes terrible, sometimes almost familiar, always fascinating. Book-length poems (I am thinking of things like Byron's *DON JUAN*, Browning's *THE RING AND THE BOOK*, and Vikram Seth's *THE GOLDEN GATE*) might almost be thought of as novels in verse. Almost, but not quite. Most novels tell their story in more or less linear fashion, but poetry works not by explanation but by evocation -- and at that, Walcott is a master. And what does he evoke? First and foremost, the people and landscape of his native Caribbean island of St. Lucia. The watercolor on the cover, as though by a tropical Winslow Homer, is in fact by the poet himself. Google his paintings and you will see his extraordinary eye for character and color, qualities that shine equally clearly through his words. *Omeros* is the Greek spelling of Homer, and on one level the poem is a West Indies version of the *Iliad*, with two fishermen, Achille and Hector, fighting over the beauty of a local Helen, housemaid to a British expatriate couple. The poem begins in epic fashion with the building and naming of boats, and there are other Homeric allusions throughout its seven long sections. But much of its strength comes from the fact that it does not translate the *Iliad* into a petty local soap opera, but rather starts from the

reality of people and a place that Walcott knows well, and elevates it by evoking a classical ancestry. Furthermore, this story is only the armature around which many other histories may be spun. Some are stories of conflict, such as the great naval Battle of the Saints, fought between the British and the French in 1792 in the waters around the islands. One of the midshipmen in that battle may have been a distant relative of Major Plunkett, the retired soldier who has lived on the island for many years with his Irish wife Maud, employers of the beautiful Helen; the Major's own experiences in India and in the Western Desert are another part of the narrative. There is also St. Lucia's history as one of the points of arrival at the end of the Middle Passage in the slave trade, and in one of the most striking sections Achilles is led by a flying sea-swift back in space and time to rejoin his own ancestors in their river village in West Africa. Other sections of the poem deal with the exile, starvation, and massacre of the plains Indians in the 19th century, as seen through the eyes of contemporary activist and fellow artist Catherine Weldon. And behind all that is Walcott's lament for the loss of the original native inhabitants of the islands, the Aruac peoples. Though epic in structure and content, this is also a very personal poem. Walcott himself appears as a figure in it, in settings as diverse as Brookline, Massachusetts (where he wrote much of it), and cities such as Lisbon, Istanbul, London, and Dublin. He portrays himself as wounded in love, mourning his own lost Helen, and trying to understand his own biracial heritage and spiritual relationship to a father he hardly knew; it is not coincidental that the Wikipedia article on the poet includes a photograph of President Obama carrying one of Walcott's books. In the beautiful final section of the book, Homer himself takes the poet by the hand and leads him through the ashes of a volcano, like Virgil escorting Dante through the Inferno. Somehow all the many themes of the book get gathered into one, and three millennia of love and conflict, loss and inspiration, come together in this one place at this one time and in the mind of this one man.[For a note on the verse, see the first comment.]

An amazing poem, especially when read in an environmental context similar to St. Lucia. I attended a semester in the Bahamas, where our English class spent fifteen weeks reading and dissecting the poem. "Omeros" is stunning, elegantly written, subtle and outspoken at the same time. The mingling of Helen and Helen, of Mr. Walcott's personal history (or the history of the "phantom narrator," as we chose to call him) and that of his island are masterful. A challenging but very worthwhile read.

I didn't know the work of Derek Walcott until I ran into this book. What an amazing book it is ! I used to dislike epic poems - they usually just ramble on and on, preferably made to rhyme in the correct places but in such a way that all life is taken out of the lines. This book is different & its author is no

less than a genius. Sometimes I can't really grasp the meaning of a passage, but it doesn't really matter - each page in this book is so full of the most brilliant images & visions, that it almost seems like a book in itself. And although it's so impossibly rich in smells, colours & sounds, it never succumbs, thank God, to the kind of self-importance that sometimes overshadows the work of other truly great writers. Hans Wigman

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