



Athena: A Biography

By Lee Hall

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Author Lee Hall takes the unusual tack of melding the hypothetical “life” of one mythological being—the goddess Athena—into a single, chronological narrative. By drawing upon the richness of ancient history, archaeology, and classical art and literature, she follows the metamorphosis of Athena's identity, tracing through it not only the origins of our concepts of justice and revenge, our attitudes toward wisdom and the useful arts, but the disturbing mistrust of women inherited from the ancient world, as well as the struggle between male and female that attended the very birth of western culture. Hall traces the earliest vestiges of Athena back to the fertility and survival rituals of prehistoric Crete. She then follows this deity associated with the “mother goddess” as she migrates to the mainland. But once there, Hall finds, Athena becomes an “honorary male,” complete with helmet, spear, and shield. The goddess once associated with rituals of nurturing and fecundity now relishes the savagery of war, even masterminds the triumph of the Greeks over the Trojans in Homer's Iliad. Athena forsakes her elemental female virtues and identity as she is co-opted by the male-dominated warrior culture of the Mycenaeans. The third distinctive phase of Athena's career is as the special deity of Athens, where she makes herself felt in the great festivals, art, and architecture of her city, but here too she must betray her gender as the price of civilization. In completing the transition to urban life, one of her last acts is to drive underground the Furies, trapping and containing the ancient and angry female energy. Athena is thus a profound and often troubling exploration of the changes in human consciousness—especially with regard to gender and power—that brought humanity from fertility cults to the Age of Heroes to a time that embraced civic order and the search for wisdom and beauty. A fascinating story, it is also a boon to anyone looking for an entertaining and comprehensible narrative that effectively weaves together the Homeric epics, Greek drama, and modern archaeological discoveries.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

The assumption of Athena to the pantheon of Greek mythology signaled an upset of the old order: "Born," fully armed, from the head of Zeus, her father, and without benefit of a mother, she was fiercely chaste and could, through her warrior zeal and cunning, rival Zeus's own power while still being his favorite. Perhaps a transmutation of a Cretan matriarchal goddess, appropriated by the warlike Mycenaeans for their own purposes, Athena ushered in the rule of civilization over barbarity. Hall (Olmsted's America, LJ 5/1/95), who might better have approached this "biography" as an academic study or a novel, capitulates in assigning Athena a place in present-day culture wars, i.e., as a "poster god" for the feminists or the ethnocentrists, because of the goddess's own ferociously masculine ways in a beguilingly feminine shape. As a result, Hall's work cannot decide if it's a literary history, handbook of mythology, or Monarch Notes retelling of the Trojan War. The attribution of sources is uneven, the bibliography skimpy, and sentences starting with "Everyone knows" patronizing even for YA readers. Best to stick with Homer. ?Amy Boaz, "Library Journal" Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Kirkus Reviews

A spirited if sometimes familiar retelling of Athena myth and lore that unveils the goddess as a complex, changing personality and object of worship. Hall, former president of the Rhode Island School of Design and author of a biography of the de Koonings (Elaine and Bill: Portrait of a Marriage, 1993), is not a classical scholar, and her book seems aimed more at a popular than scholarly audience. The opening chapter on Athena's prehistoric origins offers a clichéd account of the evolution of religion from hunting ritual and embraces too easily the pleasing story of the ancient Great-Goddess-worshipping matriarchies. The bulk of the book, however, consists of Hall's vivid retellings of the Athena myth. While not eclipsing Robert Graves or Edith Hamilton, Hall does contribute her own novelistic flair, as when Zeus wakes up "from a snooze" to give birth to his daughter, who is pounding "the inside of the expectant father's cranium." More important, by focusing on Athena, the author transforms the goddess from a supporting character to the star she once was. In some cases, the method falters: The retelling of Homer's familiar epics gets tiresome. But many stories come off as both fresh and revealing, whether they concern Athena directly or indirectly (for example, how Hera's breast spewed out the Milky Way). Given the welter of contradictory myths, the "biographical" approach is at best a conceit: Athena's evolution from crafty, vengeful warrior to emblem of wisdom and justice makes sense not as an account of an individual's development but as a reflection of the changing times in which her worshipers lived. However, Hall succeeds in making those connections clear, right up through the religious practices of classical Athens and Athena's incorporation into Neoplatonic doctrine. Bringing out a full-bodied Athena, Hall leaves one wanting to reread the ancients and think again about the gods. (b&w photos, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Banks:

This Athena: A Biography book is simply not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you obtain by reading this book is actually information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper anyone read a lot of information you will get. This particular Athena: A Biography without we realize teach the one who looking at it become critical in imagining and

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Alexander Ray:

A lot of people always spent their free time to vacation as well as go to the outside with them family members or their friend. Do you realize? Many a lot of people spent they free time just watching TV, as well as playing video games all day long. If you would like try to find a new activity that's look different you can read a book. It is really fun to suit your needs. If you enjoy the book that you read you can spent all day every day to reading a e-book. The book Athena: A Biography it is quite good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. These folks were enjoying reading this book. In case you did not have enough space to create this book you can buy often the e-book. You can m0ore simply to read this book from the smart phone. The price is not very costly but this book provides high quality.

Walter Pyle:

What is your hobby? Have you heard that question when you got students? We believe that that problem was given by teacher with their students. Many kinds of hobby, Everyone has different hobby. So you know that little person such as reading or as reading through become their hobby. You must know that reading is very important in addition to book as to be the issue. Book is important thing to include you knowledge, except your personal teacher or lecturer. You discover good news or update about something by book. Numerous books that can you choose to use be your object. One of them are these claims Athena: A Biography.

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