

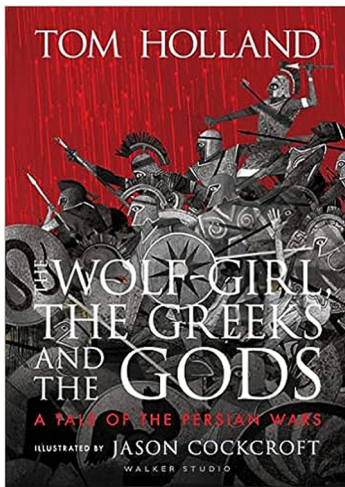
Book Review

The Wolf Girl, The Greeks and the Gods. A Tale of the Persian Wars

Holland (T.), Pp. 209, b/w & colour ill's, colour map, London: Walker Books, 2023. Cased, £25. ISBN: 978-104063-9474-0

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Tom Holland is one of the most recognisable names when it comes to books on the ancient world. This is his first book written for children, even though many have been introduced to history through his podcasts with Dominic Sandbrook *The Rest is History*. Holland has the ability to make the past highly accessible and this book is no different. It is a delight from the minute you receive a copy – sumptuous illustrations by Jason Cockcroft perfectly complement the story. A lot of care and attention has gone

into the binding of the book, just as it should be – we all have beloved children's books on our shelves that last well into adulthood. This one will be a keeper.

The story revolves around Gorgo, a Spartan princess whose mother dies in the first chapter of the book uttering the mysterious words 'The Persians are coming.' The rest of the book is about the unfolding of that prophecy and the subsequent battles against the Persians. It is a book in two parts. In the first part, Gorgo is a young girl who is told myths and legends by her nurse, Lampito. She lives in a world where the world of gods and mortals is interwoven masterfully. At one point, Lampito tells the story of Actaeon and Artemis and a deer darts out of the woods near Gorgo – clearly a sign that the gods are present and watch the world of humans. We hear about the origins of the worship of Artemis at Brauron and how Athenian girls 'turn into bears' or Spartans into wolves. This mix of the world of the divine, mortal and supernatural gives this book the feel of an ancient epic poem. At the end of the first part of

the book, we are told of how the Greeks and Trojans fought in Troy and how those descended from the Trojans are seeking revenge. Again, myth is linked to mortal life. The Persians are coming...

But this is more than a book where a nurse tells a child a mythical story – a brilliant ruse, I imagine of plenty of parents reading this book at bedtime – a girl must grow up. The second half of the book is told six years later. In the latter half of the first part of the book, the Athenian Themistocles turns up to meet Gorgo's father and makes friends with her. It is Themistocles who tells her of the Trojan war. Only Gorgo and Themistocles believe that the Persians are coming. Gorgo's house seems to be a magnet for famous figures from Ancient History – her father is the Spartan King Cleomenes who once led a Spartan expedition to Athens and expelled the Athenian tyrant Hippias. Hippias fled to Persia and persuades the Great King to attack. Cleomenes often has visitors in his house – Aristagoras turns up to ask Cleomenes to back the Ionian revolt against the Persians and he only turns to the Athenians when Cleomenes refuses. Philippides the runner turns up to ask the Spartans to help against the Persians at Marathon, but they refuse. The idea of so many famous people from Greek History turning up at the house of Cleomenes can seem a bit of a stretch at times but is a clever way to get information to the reader.

Gorgo is the narrator of the events of the Persian Wars – she hears the story of Marathon from Themistocles who was present at the battle. The Athenians are told how to find the silver mines at Mount Laurion because Gorgo is told by a nymph. She tells the story of Thermopylae because she is the wife of Leonidas. It reminds me very much of Forrest Gump – she seems to be present at all the major events in the Greco-Persian Wars! However, the narrative of the wars themselves briefly talks about the tactics and what is known about the battles from the historians. Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis are covered in some detail, but Plataea is mentioned only very briefly. On occasions the gods intervene in the story – Poseidon sends a storm to destroy the Persian fleet, and Athene appears at Salamis. This elevates the events of the Persian Wars to the level of the great wars of the mythical past. The characters themselves are carefully written too. Themistocles is as mysteriously duplicitous as some Greeks found him! Gorgo remains as emotionally unattached to the death of her husband at Thermopylae as a Spartan woman should be.

In all, this is a book which covers a huge amount of material extremely well. It covers many myths and legends of the Greeks, the culture of Sparta and Athens and many of the famous events and figures of the Persian Wars. As a book for children, it is definitely something that parents could read at night – chapters are short and leave the reader in suspense at the end. As a book that children would read, I think it is highly enjoyable and for the more experienced reader. The high price reflects the excellent quality of the volume and this is definitely the sort of book that will last and serve to introduce new readers to the world of Greece. I look forward to his next book for children.

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