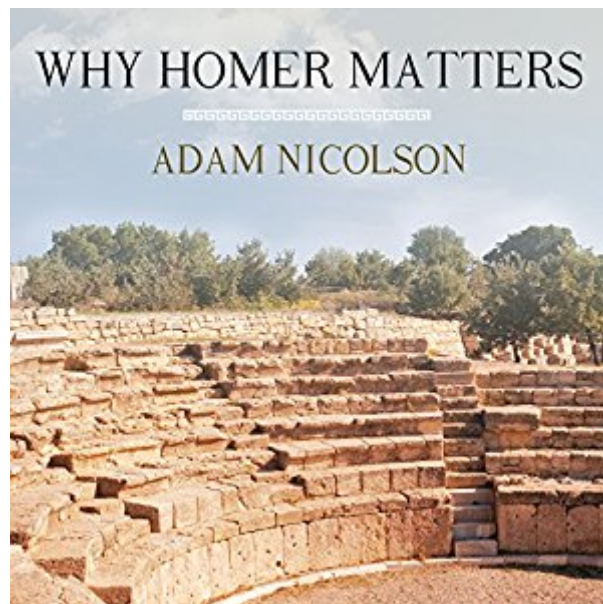


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# Why Homer Matters



## Synopsis

Adam Nicolson sees the Iliad and the Odyssey as the foundation myths of Greek - and our - consciousness, collapsing the passage of 4,000 years and making the distant past of the Mediterranean world as immediate to us as the events of our own time. Homer's poems occupy, as Adam Nicolson writes, "a third space" in the way we relate to the past: not as memory, which lasts no more than three generations, nor as the objective accounts of history, but as epic, invented after memory but before history, poetry that aims "to bind the wounds that time inflicts". The Homeric poems are among the oldest stories we have, drawing on deep roots in the Eurasian steppes beyond the Black Sea. These poems, which ask the eternal questions about the individual and the community, honor and service, love and war, tell us how we became who we are.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'Why Homer Matters' is a powerful book. It is impolite, manly, cosmic, wild, enormous. It is a three part dance of ancestral memory, the present moment, and the spoken word. For those of you who aspire to some form of artistic greatness, in the manner of your Proto-Indo European ancestors collectively known as Homer - to become 'the weaver of words' (the weaver of worlds), to master the elements - of creativity, poetic truth, and word magic - you really need to hear what Mr. Nicolson has to say about these matters in this book - if you dare. Nicolson reads like an improved version of Robert Graves - less arcane, less eccentric, less egotistical, more credible, clearer in meaning, and with the benefit of more years of accumulated archeological and historical insight. In other words, you are released from the need to keep fumbling through 'The White Goddess' for inspiration. What

you have been looking for in vain in those pages is all right here instead. Written with clarity. Lucidity. Intelligibility, and...Magical Prowess. Here is one excerpt from the book, having to do with Ocean, which should alleviate any doubts you may have about whether this work is meant for you: 'It is an experience all deep sea sailors will have had. You are out in a storm, the boat rolls and pitches, thirty degrees one way and then the other, the sea coming at you in a pattern you wish would end, the battering and shrieking of the wind unstoppable in your ear. Every surface is broken. The winds cannot leave the sea alone. What has already been plowed and folded is plowed and folded again. No structure in the sea remains whole. Not even a breaking wave is allowed to break, but the wind strips the spume from the wavetop and blows it in a half element, half air, half sea, wildly down and across the wind, as if the air were now clouded with cataracts or a sudden blast of winter. Inconstancy and capriciousness rule. There is no permanence. Nothing in a storm can be inherited from one moment to the next. But if there is one fact that a storm seems to impose - it is not physically or meteorologically true, but this is the experience - it is the sea's mysterious dominance from below. A storm-driven sea appears to acquire a vitality and viciousness, a desire to do damage, which has nothing to do with the wind but comes from inside its own enraged, destroying body. If you ever have that sensation, it is when you are meeting Poseidon.' This is the essence of what Nicolson illustrates for you - that the enduring greatness of Homer derives from his 'embedded vivid, the core of life made explicit.' A great read.

This fine book navigates between scholarly erudition and a personal encounter with the epics the way dapple-talented Odysseus made his way between Scylla and Charybdis "with undeniable success, but not without casualties. Nicolson's careful but confidently asserted claims about the dating and compositional history of the poems may spark debate among some readers, but they are ultimately not the point of this eloquent, tutelary invitation to Homer. The author's project is that of his subject, not to provide answers, but to "dramatize their reality." Recommended with enthusiasm.

If I had stopped reading "Why Homer Matters" after the first seven chapters, I would have given it five stars. The writing is excellent, the description and exposition are vivid, the subject matter is compelling, the details are solid, the conclusions are interesting. But two things happened in chapter eight: first, I began to feel like Nicolson's tangents and digressions were going way too far off course, even getting off topic -- and that continued into chapters nine and beyond "and he also included this weird out-of-nowhere story where he got raped by a guy he thought was leading him back to his hotel. I was already getting disgruntled with the tangents, but after the rape story, he lost

me. Trying to read subsequent chapters, I felt distracted by that disturbing turn and wondered how much longer he would ramble about the side-topics. In short, he lost me in the chapter eight. I did finish the book, and overall did enjoy Nicolson's style and content. But that shift in the middle pushed me quickly from a five-star review to a three-star review.

Never would I have imagined myself reading about Homer and his "wine dark", "unharvestable sea" while in Phuket, Thailand, sitting under a palm tree gazing over a lacquered Andaman Sea. During my biannual visits here, I usually immerse myself in "spirit of place" stories recounting island adventures such as those of Paul Gauguin or Captain Cook. But after reading Sarah Ruden's review of Adam Nicolson's *Why Homer Matters*, I heeded her urging "First, everybody read this book" --- and so downloaded *Why Homer Matters*. Before long I had surrendered to the spell of the book and found myself mesmerized as I turned its digital pages on my iPad. After a while, I began to wonder why the book seemed so compelling and then suddenly, with a vivid clarity, I knew the answer. Ten years ago tomorrow, on Boxing Day, December 26, 2004, this seemingly benign Andaman sea turned wild and roiling as the now infamous tsunami swept away everything on this shore, almost taking away the life of my son, who was on his way to go fishing. The usually benign sea he loved, and thought he knew, had turned, on that day, into a monster which might have "soaked" his heart through. On this Christmas day 2014, *Why Homer Matters* is the perfect present to welcome my son home from a five day fishing expedition on the same sea which he both loves and yet rightly fears. He has read Homer --yet even if he had not "this book is so engagingly written, so captivating that I am sure he, like me, would sail from chapter to chapter. As I reflect on it, perhaps it is not so strange to be reading about Odysseus and his voyage here, in Phuket. This is hardly Calypso's Island, but its exotic, languid, and hypnotic atmosphere is redolent of much that would have lured Odysseus. In the elegant simplicity of Adam Nicolson's beautiful, sometimes poetic prose, and by his convincing ideas rooted in history and bolstered by his intuition, *Why Homer Matters* is as profound and complex as the sea surrounding this little island. I am now inspired to download the Fagles translation of *The Odyssey* and know that I will savor it all the more -- besides, it's high time I read it again, And when I'm home in California I shall order a printed copy of *Why Homer Matters* to add to my "favorite book" shelf.

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