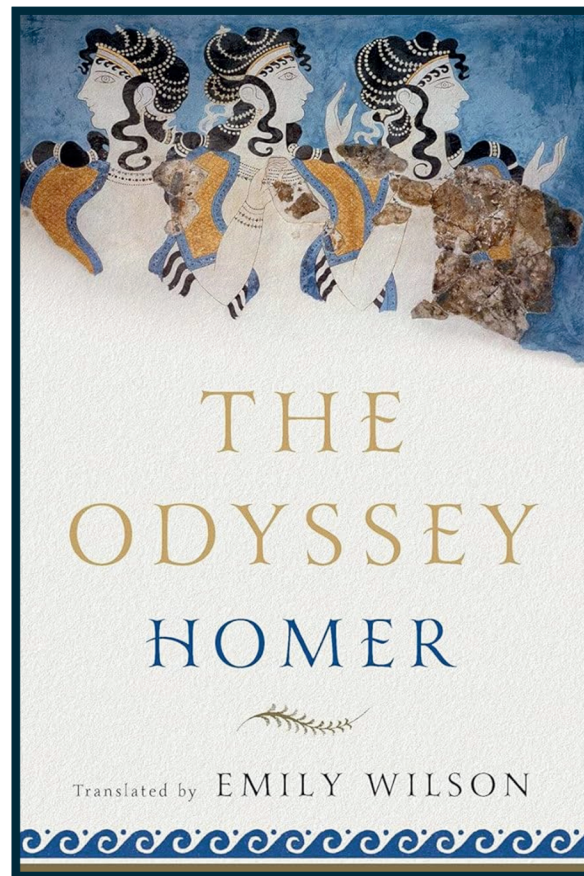


# **2025 BIG BOOK CHALLENGE**

## **OUR GUIDE TO**



# **THE ODYSSEY**

**TRANSLATED BY EMILY WILSON**

ADULT SUMMER READING AT UNIVERSITY CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY  
MAY 28-AUGUST 27, 2025 • [WWW.UCITYLIBRARY.ORG](http://WWW.UCITYLIBRARY.ORG)

# OUR SUMMER ODYSSEY

Welcome to the 2025 Adult Summer Reading Big Book Challenge! This summer, we're focusing on *The Odyssey*, translated by Emily Wilson. While it's far from the longest book we've tackled, the epic Greek poem is one of the most enduring stories in western literature, and Wilson's 2018 translation is the first English translation by a woman, giving new insight into *The Odyssey* nearly 3,000 years after its inception.

Truly epic in both the classic and modern sense of the word, the 12,000-line poem features monsters, gods, and feats of strength and cunning. But at its heart, *The Odyssey* is “the story of a man whose grand adventure is simply to go back to his own home,”<sup>1</sup> as relatable an adventure as ever there was. It is this, perhaps, that has made *The Odyssey* so enduring.

Over the summer, we'll explore this foundational tale in monthly discussions, supplemented by a fantastic line-up of lectures and cultural programming. Our program kicks off at 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 28, when participants can pick up books and reading guides. Additional programs include a keynote address from Washington University Senior Lecturer in Classics Dr. Kate Wilson on Wednesday, June 11; a field trip to explore the era and themes of *The Odyssey* through art at the St. Louis Art Museum on July 9; a performance of traditional Greek dance by the St. Nicholas Greek Dance Troupe on July 16; and a film screening of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coen Brothers' satirical take on *The Odyssey* on Aug. 6.

Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't add our thanks to the Library Services and Technology Act, which is appropriated by Congress and administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Missouri Secretary of State, which makes this program possible. We can't wait to read with you!

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Emily. “Introduction.” *The Odyssey*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, New York, NY, 2018.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## EMILY WILSON

Emily Wilson is Department Chair and Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, holding the College for Women Class of 1963 Term Professor in the Humanities. Wilson attended Oxford University (Balliol College B.A. in Classics and Corpus Christi College M.Phil. in Renaissance English Literature) and Yale University (Ph.D. in Classics and Comparative Literature).

She has been named a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome in Renaissance & Early Modern scholarship, a MacArthur Fellow, and a Guggenheim Fellow. She lives in Philadelphia with her family and pets.

Follow Professor Wilson on Substack @EmilyRCWilson. Professor Wilson frequently posts about Homer and translation.<sup>1</sup>



## WHAT ABOUT HOMER?

According to Emily Wilson's introduction to *The Odyssey*, when the Homeric poems were rediscovered in Europe during the Renaissance, scholars assumed that "Homer" was a writer, similar to Virgil or Dante. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, some began to poke holes in that theory, arguing that the Homeric poems were "incoherent, immoral, and tasteless poems, cobbled together out of an oral folk tradition," and applying historical and linguistic analysis to the poems. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, scholars broke into the Unitarian (single author) and Analytic (multiple authors) schools of thought, and today there is still much debate over whether *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were created by a single person, by an oral storyteller dictating to a literate scribe, several storytellers, or some other configuration entirely. As Wilson puts it, "it is difficult to adjudicate between these various possibilities, in the absence of any solid evidence, or a time machine."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From <https://www.emilyrcwilson.com/about-wilson>

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Emily. "Introduction." *The Odyssey*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, New York, NY, 2018.



# THEMES

## The Stranger

Travel is constant in *The Odyssey* (and it's not just Odysseus who's doing the traveling), so characters are continually interacting with strangers. How they respond to a stranger tells the reader a lot about their values. How do you treat a stranger who washes up on your shores? *Xenia* is the Greek concept of a host-guest relationship, and it's an extremely important part of the Homeric Greek culture that this poem was composed within. Every encounter with a stranger is a chance to demonstrate your *xenia* or to violate it.

## Home

While many of the most famous moments in *The Odyssey* center on Odysseus's adventures, they're simply diversions, as he spends the entire poem trying to get to his house on Ithaca. However, it's not always a geographical journey. The question of how and what exactly his home is, and how he finally gets there, is an ongoing concern. In fact, this type of myth is called a *nostos*, meaning "a journey home."

## Food

Related to the other themes listed here, food is an important recurring theme in *The Odyssey*. The cultural ideas of what is food, what isn't food, and what happens when you get that wrong runs through the whole poem. No matter where you are in *The Odyssey*, someone is eating, and what they are eating tells you a lot about them as a person.



# ORAL TRADITION

In her introduction to *The Odyssey*, Emily Wilson notes that between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE (the period in which the poem was likely conceived) Greece was illiterate, leading to the development of the oral tradition in which the Homeric poems — *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* — were created. Many of the stories and myths of that era were told by a singer (*aoidos*) or rhapsode (“song-stitcher”), and to help with the telling, stories often featured the repetitive elements that appear in translations of Homeric poems nearly 3,000 years later.

“[M]any types of scene follow a certain predictable pattern. There is a fixed sequence of events described, with variations, whenever someone gets dressed or puts on armor, whenever a meal is prepared, or whenever a person is killed. Through its formulaic mode, *The Odyssey* assures us that, once we know the patterns, the world will follow a predictable rhythm. This feature of the Homeric poems is a mark of their debt to a Greek oral tradition of poetic song that extends back hundreds of years before the poems in their current forms came into existence.”

According to Wilson, these formulaic features “enable the oral poet to compose at the speed of speech,” as they don’t have time to ponder word choices, yet must maintain fluency. However, she also explains that it would be misleading to call *The Odyssey* an “oral” poem; instead she defines it as “a written text based on an oral tradition,” noting that, at more than 12,000 lines long, it is far too long for any individual to hold in memory without the use of writing to aid in their recitation.

So while you read *The Odyssey* this summer, consider how the oral tradition of ancient Greece led to the creation of the book we’re reading and discussing nearly 3,000 years later.

# FURTHER READING

## BOOKS

- *1177 B.C.* by Eric Cline **ON ORDER** & on Hoopla
- *Aenid* by Virgil 873 VIR
- *After 1177 B.C.* by Eric Cline 973.01 CLI
- *Argonautica* by Rhodius Apollonius 883.01 RHO & on Hoopla
- *Circe* by Madeline Miller F MILLER
- *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays* by George Steiner 883 STE
- *The Iliad* translated by Emily Wilson 883 HOM
- *Metamorphoses* by Ovid 871.1 OVI
- *Omeros* by Derek Walcott 811.54 WAL
- *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* by Natalie Haynes 292.211 HAY
- *Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood F ATWOOD
- *Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic* by Andrew Dalby 883.01 DAL
- *Why Homer Matters* by Adam Nicolson 883.01 NIC
- *The World of Odysseus* by Moses Finley 883.01 FIN

## ONLINE RESOURCES

- "Homer's The Odyssey translated by Emily Wilson," discussion at the Hay Festival. Aug. 28, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/58ykh6t3>
- "Odyssey-A-Day," dramatic readings by Emily Wilson. 2020. <https://www.emilyrcwilson.com/odyssey-a-day>
- Wilson, Emily. "Translating the Odyssey: How and Why," speech at The University of Scranton. Dec. 18, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/56n8hrnn>



# SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Kickoff and Book Pickup  
6 p.m. Wednesday, May 28

Keynote presentation with Dr. Kate Wilson  
7 p.m. Wednesday, June 11

Book Discussion: *The Odyssey*, books 1-8  
7 p.m. Wednesday, June 25

Field trip: St. Louis Art Museum  
Wednesday, July 9  
Bus leaves at 2 p.m. from Municipal Lot #4  
\*Advance Registration Required\*

St. Nicholas Greek Dance Troupe performance  
6:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 16

Book Discussion: *The Odyssey*, books 9-16  
7 p.m. Wednesday, July 23

Movie Night: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*  
6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 6

Book Discussion: *The Odyssey*, books 17-24  
7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 27

All events take place in the UCPL auditorium, unless otherwise noted.

## CONNECT WITH US ONLINE!



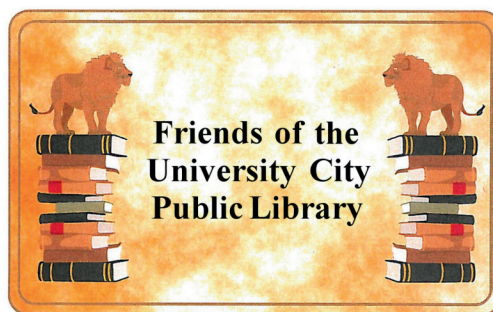
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