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The beauty of the Greek alphabet: gold ring with Greek inscription to Hera, ca. 575 BC.

WHAT HUMANS MOST NEED TO KNOW

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is enchanted by one writer's journey to learn – and love – the Greek language

Mary Norris, *Greek To Me*. New York: W.W. Norton 2019. Pp. 227. £14.99. ISBN 9781324001270

Mary Norris, in her debut book *Between You & Me*, made proofreading and editing seem as sexy and glamorous as fashion and world travel. For her second book, *Greek To Me*, she embarks on several real journeys and a torrid affair with all things Greek (including a sailor or two). The result is a work in which etymological examinations appear almost as delightful as a playful lover's pillow talk.

Norris brings a wry wit and tone to this book from the very beginning. She opens it, in proper epic fashion,

with an invocation of the Muse: 'Sing in me, O Muse, of all things Greek that excite the imagination and delight the senses' – a fair summary of what Norris hopes – and manages – to convey in her writing. She closes her opening paragraph with a sassy twist:

things that have survived three thousand years and more, since the time before the time of Homer, things that were old then and are new now – you know, the eternal. If that's not too much to ask, Muse. Please?

This invocation is rendered in the voice of a wise-acre, a New York wise-cracking voice by way, as we learn in reading, of a youth in Ohio. Norris might be channelling her inner Woody Allen.

This opening invocation also demonstrates Norris' frequently riveting writerly moves. She succinctly balances her clause: 'things that were old then and are new now' by closing with alliteration. There is, as well, the lovely repetition of *time*: 'since the time before the time of Homer' – a

cadence or rhythm that pleases. *Greek To Me* abounds in these small pleasures.

Norris describes in some depth her childhood and school experiences, including her inability to study Latin in fifth grade as a result of her father's refusal to allow her to attend a Saturday class offering. In high school and for a year in college, she studies French, but then switches to German. Watching Sean Connery play Agamemnon in Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits* sparks her interest in Greece, and the resources available at *The New Yorker* (colleague recommendations and paid opportunities to study Greek), where she finds work as a writer and copy-editor, lead her to study the language and prepare the stage for her travel adventures: Lesbos, Sparta, Naxos, Athens, Cyprus. We read here of her skinny-dipping experiences; she may not emerge as Aphrodite from sea foam, but Norris does grow in self-confidence and self-awareness. Travels, as Emerson suggests, lead her back into her own self, and Norris seems the stronger for them.

Norris educates as much as she elates. Her intimacy with the language, culture and place steadily deepen her passion into wisdom. One of the first Greek words she learns (*ilios*; 'sun') prompts her to consider the Greek in association with English:

the Greek ilios had come into English as Helios. What in English is the sun god is, in Greek, the everyday word for the sun. Greek seemed to exalt the everyday.

This exaltation of the daily extends, for Norris, into

the way the Greeks have squeezed so much out of everything they have: oil from the olive, wine from the grape ... mosaics from pebbles, temples from stone. It is not a rich land, but they have made it rich in ways that transcend a country's gross national product.

Greek To Me is an extended tribute to Norris' belief in the Greek ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Norris loves language. Hers is a love that she manages, as well, to trace to the Greek: *alphabet* arrives from the Greek, and 'Anyone who loves language loves the alphabet.' Norris describes reverently and rapturously her childhood classrooms: the 'frieze' of letters in elementary classrooms, 'each capital [letter] paired with its offspring. I used to think of them as mothers and babies.' Indeed, words for Norris have 'a spark of the divine'. (*Greek To Me* concludes with an appendix of the Greek alphabet. A map tracing Norris' various trips and journeys to Troy and elsewhere would have aided the reader further.)

Norris manages to examine various mythological figures and events, from Athena to the Trojan War. She ponders the various sites and ruins: the Sacred Way and Eleusinian Mysteries, the Acropolis. She describes her studies of Greek and her performances in staged productions of Greek tragedies: a chorus role in *Electra* and the role of Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*. Her curiosity about the Parthenon takes her from Athens to Nashville, Tennessee, and a lengthy descrip-

tion of the Nashville Athena, 'four stories tall' – both the process of construction and the human models to counterfeit the goddess.

In writing about Edith Hamilton, author of the classics *Mythology* and *The Greek Way*, Norris demonstrates her associative technique and connective process: she moves from mentioning Edith Hamilton to writing about Margaret Hamilton, 'who played the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*.' Both, notes Norris, 'lived on Gramercy Park for a while.' Norris doesn't stop here. She then describes Margaret Hamilton's features: 'famous thin face and sharp chin and dark eyebrows (and, in the movie, a green complexion).' Norris then returns to her story about Edith Hamilton and makes a case for the popularizers of Greek and Roman culture:

these writers with the common touch are introducing mythology to people who may fall in love with it and go on to read Hesiod in Greek and Ovid in Latin.

Hamilton provides the epigraph to the book:

though the outside of human life changes much, the inside changes little, and the lesson-book we cannot graduate from is human experience.

And while studying her lines to play her chorus role in the production of *Electra*, Norris perceives 'that ancient Greek is like the Bible ...: records of the past that preserve the things that humans most need to know.'

Norris ends by tracing her way to Patrick Leigh Fermor's adopted home in Kardamyli, where she encounters swarms of magical yellow butterflies and tours Fermor's house. It's here that she takes a swim in the nude, after which a metamorphosis seems to occur: her 'intimates', placed in her hat while she walks back to her hotel from the not-so-private cove, produce a beautiful yellow butterfly.

