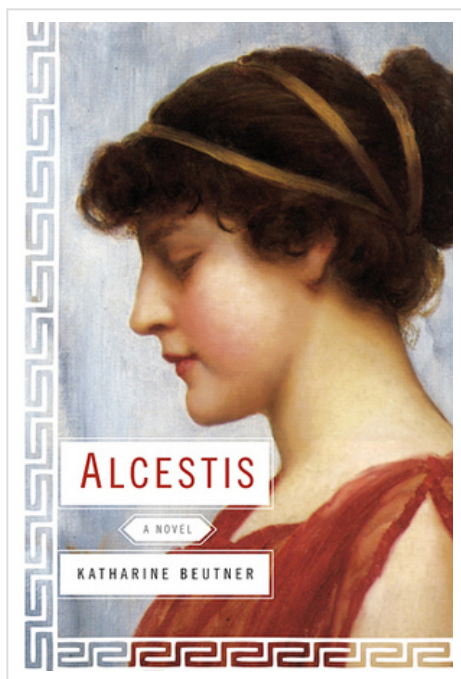


"Alcestis" explores unknown story of character in Greek mythology

Posted on **January 12, 2010** by **Alicia Dietrich**



Katharine Beutner, a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and a former graduate intern at the Harry Ransom Center, has just published her first novel, "**Alcestis**" (SoHo, 2010).

In Greek myth, Alcestis is known as the ideal good wife; she loved her husband so much that she died to save his life and was sent to the underworld in his place. In this poetic and vividly-imagined debut, Beutner gives voice to the woman behind the ideal, bringing to life the world of Mycenaean Greece, a world peopled by capricious gods, where royal women are confined to the palace grounds and passed as possessions from father to husband.

Alcestis tells of a childhood spent with her sisters in the bedchamber where her mother died giving birth to her and of her marriage at the age of fifteen to Admetus, the young king of Pherae, a man she barely knows, who is kind but whose heart belongs to a god. She also tells the part of the story that's never been told: What happened to Alcestis in the three days she spent in the underworld before being rescued by Heracles? In the realm of the dead, Alcestis falls in love with the goddess Persephone and discovers the true horror and beauty of death.



— Photo of Katharine Beutner by Wylie Maercklein

Beutner grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in classical studies from Smith College, and a master's degree in creative writing from The University of Texas at Austin, where she is currently working on her doctorate in eighteenth-century British literature. Her work has appeared in "Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet."

A book release event and signing will be held at BookPeople at 3 p.m., Sunday, Feb. 7.

Beutner answers a few questions about her book:

What inspired you to write a novel about this character? What was it about Alcestis that made you want to flesh out her story?

My first inspiration for the book came from **Rainer Maria Rilke's poem** about Alcestis, which I read in Stephen Mitchell's lovely translation.

I found the end of the poem really striking. The basic plot of Alcestis's story is that she chooses to go to the underworld in her husband's place, in order to save his life. Rilke writes that her husband Admetus hides his face when Alcestis disappears "in order to see nothing but that smile" as she goes. That stuck in my mind. Then, in 2004, I read Euripides' "Alcestis," which ends very differently.

Admetus' friend Heracles shows up, figures out what's going on, and goes to the underworld to rescue Alcestis. He brings her back, and she's alive, but silent. It's supposed to be a happy ending, but I was so irritated — I love Euripides because he's the most psychologically astute of the Greek tragedians, but he gives Alcestis no inner life at all. I wanted to write a version of her story that would allow readers to follow her into the underworld and see how she experiences it.

Have you always had an interest in mythology?

Yes, Greek mythology in particular. My parents gave me the **D'Aulaires' books** of Greek mythology

and Norse mythology when I was little and I read the Greek myths book to pieces while the Norse book got maybe two or three reads. I remember writing at least one story about Greek gods when I was in middle school, though I'm pretty sure the evidence has been destroyed. When I went to college, I worked as a research assistant for a classics professor, and ended up majoring in classical studies, which included studying ancient Greek. (I continued Greek while I was studying abroad in Ireland, where I got teased for my accent when reading Greek out loud). I now study eighteenth-century British literature — the neoclassical period, of course.

Did you start this project with the intention of writing a novel?

I did. I started writing this novel the summer before I came to UT to attend the MA program in creative writing and finished it as my thesis in that program. I'd written a different novel the year before, one that had totally snuck up on me — I thought it was a long short story, until I hit thirty thousand words and had to reassess. *Alcestis* was mapped out in advance. I'm kind of a structure geek, so I have to admit that I find outlining to be one of the most enjoyable parts of writing. When I was a kid, my favorite board game was, not surprisingly, *The Amaze-ing Labyrinth* (no connection to David Bowie in Spandex). Refining a novel in outline is a bit like that. You shift one piece and the whole layout changes.

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About Alicia Dietrich

Dietrich edited the biannual print newsletter Ransom Edition and monthly email newsletter eNews; promoted exhibitions and public programs; produced press releases; and worked with media.

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3 THOUGHTS ON "ALCESTIS" EXPLORES UNKNOWN STORY OF CHARACTER IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY"



other lisa

on **January 12, 2010 at 3:49 pm** said:

This sounds like a wonderful book — on my list! Thanks for the interview.



shiyar_2012

on **September 29, 2010 at 4:12 am** said:

its great



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on **April 19, 2011 at 6:23 pm** said:

Alcestis explores unknown story of character in greek mythology.. May I repost it? 😊

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