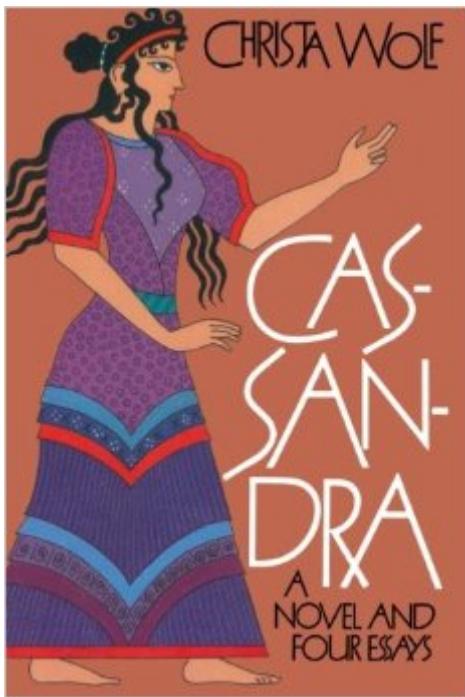


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Cassandra: A Novel And Four Essays



Synopsis

In this volume, the distinguished East German writer Christa Wolf retells the story of the fall of Troy, but from the point of view of the woman whose visionary powers earned her contempt and scorn. Written as a result of the author's Greek travels and studies, Cassandra speaks to us in a pressing monologue whose inner focal points are patriarchy and war. In the four accompanying pieces, which take the form of travel reports, journal entries, and a letter, Wolf describes the novel's genesis. Incisive and intelligent, the entire volume represents an urgent call to examine the past in order to insure a future.

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Customer Reviews

This is one of those books I've picked up and put down for more than 12 years, and now that I've read it through, I can't imagine why. The retelling of the story of Cassandra--really of the Iliad, from Cassandra's perspective--is completely compelling and provocative, raising questions about what history is and how it's made, and offering an alternate and completely reasonable view of how the Iliad's events could have happened. Bonus: this volume offers essays providing background on how Christa Wolf came to write the novel--pure gravy for writers, or anyone interested in how stories get born.

At the risk of sounding somewhat elitist (if a high school student may call himself that), I have the distinct feeling that many highly critical reviewers of Cassandra have either (1) failed to appreciate the intensely literary nature of the novel, (2) become so fixated on the "apparent" aspects of Wolf's

message to notice the infinite subtleties, or (3) been guilty of the most heinous form of reductionism. Admittedly, Cassandra is not an easy read; 138 pages (the story itself) of streaming consciousness is not for the casual reader. Nevertheless, it is precisely this stream of consciousness--one of the most capably written of its form--that unifies the myriad thematic commentaries of the novel into a coherent and powerful message. Also missed are the subtleties behind Wolf's supposedly hyper-feminist message. Wolf is careful to point to the mutability of sexual roles (Anchises and Penthesilea offer superb examples) and the significance of a dualistic appreciation of culturally-derived gender tendencies. Numerous readers are also prone to missing the point of Wolf's revisionist mythology; in doing so they are no less guilty than Wilhem Girnus (DDR editor of *Sinn und Form*) of fixating upon the "crime" of creating new life in previously established literature. It may be unpleasant to see our heroic figure of Achilles portrayed in a cripplingly negative light, but Wolf's very insistence upon doing so exposes the greatest fallacies of our victory-fixated Western outlook. Cassandra may be too literary for some, too complex for a reader interested in a quick fireside jaunt into Literature Lite, but its immense artistry as a novel may not be so easily ignored.

For about five years I have read, reread and taught (to eleventh graders) Cassandra, and each time I have groped deeper into its human and literary liklihoods. It's still compelling to me for it myriad facets of content and form, but I can't help wondering about the real-politics of Ms Wolf's life and the masculine-feminine politics of our time. There is great learning in it and cause for great deliberation--by a woman awaiting violent death: Would what we call civilization be differently composed if even half our history, philosophy, psychology, politics, art had been penned by women? How was human prehistory ordered? Why is God-presence so matter of fact, and goddess-presence so contentious, if admitted? Who/What is Cybele, really? I can't wait to read Medea.

Anyone so fixated on this narrative that they don't spend the entire time picking apart the metaphor only proves how engrossing this story really is. How can anyone miss the allusion to communist East Germany in Wolf's use of Troy, which Homer called the walled-city? How can anyone fail to see Wolf herself as the real Cassandra who published this novel BEFORE the fall of the Berlin Wall? How can anyone who reads the opening passage not be unnerved by Cassandra's last prophecy that her captor, Agamemnon, will find his own end when he finally returns home (especially anyone who follows the news of increasing right-wing violence in the reunified Germany)? Yes, there is something of a dispassionate voice in the narrator, but this is the voice of

disheartened resignation, knowing she can see all, yet influence nothing.

Christa Wolf retells a myth from the perspective of a woman who was only given a few lines in Euripides' Agamemnon (and mentioned once or twice in the Iliad.) What's gripping about this story is not the fact that it's another variation of the sack of Troy, but the fact that someone had the guts to write it in Cassandra's words. Cassandra, whom the Greeks and Trojans call a crazy witch is the only person to oppose corruption when she sees it. She is strong and honest and powerful and intelligent, but Troy and Greece deny her a voice because she is a woman. Some people insist that Christa Wolf grabs this fact (that she's another alienated woman) and runs on a feminist spree. Others insist that she addresses those oh-so-common themes in feminist literature: having no voice and lacking an identity in a patriarchal culture. But FRIENDS, these themes aren't only reserved for women, men also struggle with these issues. Look at Kleist and Murakami, these authors also express an inner turmoil because of the lack of an individual identity or the existence of a collective cultural one that alienates its members. Cassandra isn't an overly feminine, esoteric, and hard-to-read piece of literature. It's beautiful not only for its content but the stream of consciousness that takes you into the very black and white core of Troy. It's honest and funny and sad and aggressive and beautiful and powerful and dark. It's one of those "good" books your brain craves for after reading every James Patterson and Linda Howard novel you might have bought from the Shoprite book aisle. :)

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