Sirena Short Guide

Sirena by Donna Jo Napoli

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

In Sirena, Napoli weaves the legends of the Trojan War with the myths of the Sirens and centuries-old lore about mermaids into a beautiful story of young love, with all its wonders and fluctuations. Sirena is one of ten mermaid sisters inhabiting the waters of the Ancient World. The school of ten fish-tailed beauties is matched by another four groups with ten young mermaids, just turned seventeen. Their goal in life is to attain immortality by having a human man fall in love with them. It is to this end that they have learned their song, given to them by Mother Dora, wife of Nerius, daughter of Oceanus, when she saved them from a certain death. They would have been swallowed by the nymph Rodophe after Eros had sexual relations with their mother, the parrot fish, Iris, kept as a pet by Rodophe.

When a ship is sighted nearing their rocks, the sisters sing sweet and clear, causing the ship to be tossed onto their rocks, throwing the sailors, many of whom cannot swim, into the sea. Many men are drowned, and the others swim to an island, where they starve on the barren shore, whose only vegetation consists of beautiful but inedible plants.

Sirena sees her siblings cursed by the men. She swims away in confusion. If a mermaid's immortality must be bought at the price of a human's death Sirena cannot bear to fulfill her destiny. She swims to the isle of Lemnos, long ago deserted when its women killed its men and put their king adrift at sea. It is there that fate allows her to watch as a ship puts into harbor and men abandon one of their number on shore.

On Lemnos, Sirena first sees Philoctetes, protege and inheritor of the quiver and arrows of Heracles. He has been marooned and left to die on the island by his companions after suffering a leg wound caused by a serpent sent by the goddess Hera, who hates Philoctetes because of his love for Heracles, illegitimate son of her husband, Zeus.

Sirena is attracted to Philoctetes by his beauty, his humanity, and his sense of humor. She immediately falls in love with him and determines to save him from a poisonous death. She wants him to love her, not for the gift of immortality that his love will bring her, but for herself. She vows never to use her song to ensnare his love. Philoctetes in turn is fascinated by the mermaid. It-is she who saved his life by her ministrations.

Her beauty, naivete, and intelligence cheer him. He delights in her ability to listen to his stories and to challenge them with her own version of the tales.

The young Philoctetes and Sirena become friends. Although she has vowed never to use song to entice him, Philoctetes nevertheless hears her when she sings to an attacking bear in order to save her own life.

When he understands that his love for her may be part of an enchantment, Philoctetes reassures Sirena that "we are all of little pieces .. . all part of this and that .. . air, water, fire and dirt, but she is more, much more .. . she is Sirena." With his avowal, their love is consummated.

Napoli uses in Sirena, as she did in The Song of the Magdalene, The Magic Circle, and Zel, the powerful suggestion of supposition. In other words, she asks her readers to wonder "what if?" Her ability to take fairy tales, Biblical accounts, and, in this case, myth and transform it with an entirely new approach is beyond peer. Literate readers know of the Sirens, women-fish hybrids, who lured sailors to their death, and the stories of the mermaids of Hans Christian Andersen. In Sirena, Napoli's mermaid has a soul, and so her story is new.

Sirena's idyllic life with Philoctetes is always threatened by the fear that his love may be the result of his enchantment. His removal of himself to the inside of the island—to the remains of the city or to his cave high on a hill—speak to the difference in their beings. In their love, the young couple strive to make each other happy.

She watches him build a boat and helps him launch it, though she is delighted when it sinks and they must return home. He restores a temple and lines it with the mosaics she once glimpsed in wonder, but stronger forces threaten their love. Sirena is called by the biorhythms of the sea. She leaves the island periodically to swim with the porpoises as they push forth new life—fulfilling their destiny in the water world.

Philoctetes needs to build and harbor the hope to fight as a warrior once more. His arms ache to hold the bow of Heracles—to avenge Heracles' death by vanquishing Paris. Neither of the young lovers can give voice to their deepest desires.

It is a small discovery that sets the story spinning towards its inexorable end. Sirena notices a gray hair in Philoctetes' head. This discovery makes her leave Philoctetes and race to Mother Dora in an effort to buy his immortality with her love. She even begs help from Oenore, the sea nymph Paris had loved before he left her for Helen—finally offering her own immortality to share life with Philoctetes as long as he might live.

But the gods have already decreed their future. Despite true love and their years of happiness together, not even Napoli's skilled storytelling can save Paris from Philoctetes' arrow. And so the lovers must part—each to take part in the settings history and myth have decreed for them—leaving the reader with a tear and a sigh.

About the Author

Born in Miami, Florida, in 1948, Donna Jo Napoli was the youngest of four children of a building contractor and a housewife, both of whom were children of Italian immigrants. In many respects Napoli's success is the culmination of the American dream. She recalls, in an autobiographical essay in Something about the Author Autobiography Series, that there were never any books in her home. Yet by second grade she had discovered the school library, where she soon got the librarian to allow her to visit twice a week in order to read more than the allowed two books per week, thus beginning a lifelong affair with words. The nature of her father's business—building a house, selling it, then moving to another site nearby—led to Napoli's feeling of not belonging. Always the quiet tomboy, she retreated deeper into the world of imagination as she read.

Napoli had been born and baptized Catholic and made her First Holy Communion, but in an age when it was "cool" to stop going to church at the age of twelve, Napoli remained deeply religious. This love of religion would be manifested in her novel Song of the Magdalene, which also reflects Napoli's own questioning of religious authority as a young woman.

In addition, Napoli's vision deteriorated early on, until hard contact lenses opened the world even more fully to her. She then began to excel in a variety of subjects. She won many awards during her junior high and high school years, culminating in a scholarship to Radcliffe, then the women's college of Harvard University. At Harvard, she majored in mathematics, the precision of which would prefigure her love of linguistics, and took many courses in modern dance, a vehicle that allowed her mind and body to soar.

Sirena 399 It was while at Harvard that she met and married Barry Furrow, another scholarship recipient, himself a poor boy from South Dakota whom she describes as "radically left-wing, radically anti-clerical and wonderfully sweet." Together they excelled academically and in their roles as parents.

Napoli earned a doctorate in linguistics from Harvard and attained success as a writer and poet. Furrow excelled as a law professor at Weidener University. They have been married for thirty years and have five children.

Napoli's family life inspired some of her books for children, while others developed from the Napoli children's curious questions and her own propensity to take everything seriously, a characteristic she developed over a lifetime of being a worrier— about her family, herself, and the whole world. Her concern led to her involvement in many areas of social justice, including activism on behalf of the poor, women, and minorities. While at Harvard, Napoli discovered the Boston City Missionary Society and worked at its summer camps in New Hampshire with children who were wards of the State of Massachusetts. After college, she worked as a counselor for teens in the Neighborhood Youth Corps.

Upon marrying Barry Furrow, Napoli focused on her roles as wife and mother. Events in her children's lives and their irrepressible spirits fueled her writing. She and husband Barry worked and parented together while she taught at Smith, Georgetown, and the University of Michigan. Sickened by the sexism she encountered in much of academe, Napoli moved at last to Swarthmore College, where she became the chair of the linguistics department.

Napoli began writing for children many years ago, but it was not until 1984 that her first book was accepted, and even then The Hero of Barletta did not arrive in print until 1988. The acceptance of her retelling of an Italian folktale gave Napoli pause, for she wondered if her original work had any value in the marketplace. Although the field of linguistics is her academic forte, Napoli feels compelled to write, not only in her field where she is widely published, but also of her experiences as a parent and her own quest for truth. Many of her novels for elementary and middle-grade children reflect events and dilemmas in the life of her own children. The 1991 title Soccer Shock was named to the Hall of Fame Sports Books for Kids in 1996 by the Free Library of Philadelphia and was nominated for the Nutmeg Children's Book Award by the Connecticut Library Association in 1994 and 1995. When the Water Closes Over My Head was named to the Bank Street's 1995 "Book of the Year" list; Shark Shock (1994) received commendations as did On Guard (1997), a book that reflects one son's interest in fencing. The Bravest Thing (1995) was inspired by a daughter's love of animals.

A fantasy takeoff on the tale of the Frog Prince, The Prince of the Pond (1992), grew out of Napoli's serious reasoning that a prince turned into a frog could never have survived without the help of a real frog knowledgeable in the ways of pond life.

The success of that story led young readers to demand a sequel detailing the life of Jimmy, the frog prince's son. Jimmy the Pickpocket of the Palace (1996) is the result of their inquiries. Trouble on the Tracks (1997) is set in Australia, a spot visited by Napoli in recent years.

Napoli's skills are evident in her 1997 telling of a World War II story about two Italian boys, one Catholic and the other Jewish, who are forcibly taken, along with other Italian boys, to build airstrips for the German army in the Ukraine. Stones in Water is a historical novel that tugs the heartstrings and uncovers a side of the war not usually revealed. The story has already garnered acclaim, including the "Golden Kite Award" for 1997 from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and, like other of her works, will be translated into Dutch and German.

In the mid-1990s, Napoli was inspired to write for young adults. After her daughter questioned the plethora of evil women in folklore, Napoli wrote The Magic Circle to retell the story of the most wicked woman in fairy tales—the witch in "Hansel and Gretel." Zel is her rendition of the Rapunzel tale in which she cast the mother as the witch. In Song of the Magdalene, Napoli was inspired by her daughter's love of the character in the play Jesus Christ Superstar to portray the adolescent Mary Magdalene.

During this time, Napoli was awarded grants by the American Association of University Women and the Leeway Foundation to research her work. Napoli has chosen teens as the main characters in a 1998 release, For the Love of Venice, which features an American teenaged tourist and a lovely Italian girl who is alarmed by the damage tourism is doing to her beloved city.

Napoli continues to be a force in young adult literature. In 1999, she coauthored with Richard Tchen another suppositional novel, Spinner about Rumpelstiltskin. She also created her own version of the beanstalk story, Crazy Jack. Napoli often speaks at children's literature symposia and conferences and continues her work in linguistics at Swarthmore College.

Setting

Sirena takes place in the amorphous world of Greek mythology, linked with the reality of real places—the Aegean Sea and legendary Troy, whose once proud walls have been unearthed in recent years beneath centuries of ruins in Asia Minor. Napoli's readers will find some names and places that jar the memory—the lessons of Mythology— Zeus, Hera, Heracles, Poseidon, and more.

Latin scholars and students of the ancient world will remember names from their lessons—Troy, Paris, and Philoctetes. Modernists will find similarities between the mermaids of Andersen and Disney and be able to relate to that world under the sea, substituting Mother Dana and the nymphs for the mermaids of story and song.

Sirena's world of the sea and world of the humans merge when Philoctetes is forced to leave the safety of his companions and their ship. The beach becomes their world—where each is partially out of their element.

It becomes the place where the two can meet, play in the shallows, and love.

From the beginning, forces attack their efforts to be together. The rough ground inland tears at Sirena's flesh as she maneuvers to and fro in an effort to bring Philoctetes fresh water and food. Her body is clumsy and heavy without legs, slow to escape predators like the bear. Her idyllic life with Philoctetes is always marred by the fear that his love may be the result of his enchantment. His removal of himself to the inside of the island or to his cave high on a hill speak to the differences in their beings.

The beach and the shallow sea are their only true meeting grounds. It is difficult for one or the other to be completely at home on land or in the sea. Philoctetes' wound fills daily with infection and must be opened and rinsed each day. Sirena even lances it with the heated tip of a horseshoe crab's tail but to no avail. Hera's poison is only held at bay by Sirena's ministrations.

When the sea calls to Sirena, and Philoctetes cannot swim, she teaches him the leg thrusts of the frog, enabling him to partially share her water world. They share the beneficence of the land and of the sea, creating a world of their own on Lemnos' shore.

Napoli's description of Lemnos warns the reader of disquieting events to come.

Philoctetes finds comfort in the interior of the island, where once a human city flourished and in a cave far above the waters, where he keeps lookout for ships that mean rescue. Sirena must return to the waters from which she came—to answer its cyclic call to rebirth with the seasons. Her very body, unable to create new life, rails at her despite, or, because of, the couple's love.

By their very creation, Napoli's protagonists are constrained. To be true to their characters, they must share the literary burden of mythology. With her masterful

storytelling, Napoli places two young lovers in their ordained worlds and yet creates for them a fairy tale romance.

The artful placement of Sirena's portrait gracing the pages preceding each of the book's five sections creates a vivid portrait for the observant reader. Sirena's fish tail slowly disappears below the page in each successive section, until at novel's end she seems no longer fish—a wonderful conceit.

Social Sensitivity

Napoli divides her novel into five parts, each describing Sirena's moral growth. Deception, Honesty, the Years, Immortality, and Choices chronicle Sirena's struggle to best her destiny.

As an adolescent imagining her future, preparing to follow the path all Sirens must take to attain immortality, Sirena, like her sisters, thought nothing of the consequences that might accompany her bid for immortality. When she realizes that by her action others, innocents, might die, she makes the conscious choice to deny herself. She chooses to live alone, rather than lose her soul. Her years with Philoctetes bring happiness but an awareness that love may not be forever.

When she offers her own immortality for that of her love and finally must bow to the forces that are stronger than her love for Philoctetes, Sirena moves beyond herself into legend.

The struggles of young adults to make the right choices, no matter what the consequences, are given voice in Sirena. In a world where selfishness seems the norm, a lesson from the depths of the sea promises inspiration.

Literary Qualities

Always a master of language, Napoli's prose offers much imagery. Early on readers are told of Sirena's fascination with the "cunning squid, who are transported in bliss when they shot up into the air, letting off an internal light." The reader feels Sirena's passion at the squid's rush of what seems to be emotion, an emotion she shares as she strives to be as free.

The passages that describe her swim toward a pod of frolicking porpoises—her play with them as she indulges her fish persona, playful, mischievous, familiar— evoke her loneliness without her sisters, her school. When she witnesses the porpoise birth and rises with them to push their baby to the surface for its first breath of air, the reader will imagine Sirena's own body straining to give new life—something that will always be impossible for her.

Sirena is even more constrained in her love for Philoctetes than was Zel in her castle for her Prince, or Miriam of Magdala for her crippled love. Napoli gives voice to the passions of the young. With her suppositions, she tells their stories in a way to be believed.

Sirena is rife with literary allusions. Mythology is the stuff of the story, intertwined with references to the Trojan War, which is the force that brings these two lovers together, only to cause their eventual separation. Philoctetes' attempt to quiet Sirena's insecurities as a mermaid, a hybrid, when he tells her of Glaucus, the merman, who loved Scylla, and the young man's enshrining of that story in the mosaics in the Temple of Zeus on the island, foreshadows their own ill-fated love.

Themes and Characters

Sirena is the heroine of Napoli's novel.

From the beginning of the story, she separates herself from the mindset of her sisters—to seek immortality from the love of a human, no matter what the cost. In her naivete, she sings with her sisters to lure ships to crash upon their rocks, but is horrified when her actions, and those of her sisters, cause the deaths of many Greek sailors.

Sirena swims away to escape her power to cause men's deaths, determined to inhabit deserted Lemnos in solitude. In her youth, she finds pleasure in her surroundings, a veritable Eden. Philoctetes' arrival brings with it the challenge to love and be loved in return without using the lure of her mermaid's song. Sirena does sing, though, to calm the giant bear that threatens her while she is foraging inland. She sings to tell Ursa that she is more than a giant fish to be greedily consumed. Philoctetes overhears her song, becoming entranced, and falls in love with her. The consummation of their love brings her the immortality she once craved—but, more importantly, true love.

Throughout the story it is Sirena's love that is the most strong. She will endure much, even offer her own immortality in return for Philoctetes'. She returns to the sea to offer herself to Mother Dora but the Fates deem otherwise. At the story's end, Sirena must accept two truths—that Philoctetes must leave to fulfill his own destiny and, despite her unending love, she must accept her own.

Philoctetes' love, while genuine, suffers somewhat by his humanity. Trained to be a warrior/hero, he always feels the call to avenge Heracles' death—for he feels that by lighting his mentor's funeral pyre he helped kill him. Although he felt the beginnings of love for Sirena, it took the siren's song to the bear, inadvertently heard, to unleash his emotion. Philoctetes treasures Sirena. He knows of her struggles with her fish identity and lovingly tells her of Glaucus the merman and his love for Scylla. With the passage of years, his love for Sirena is tempered by his need to return home. When the opportunity comes to sail to Troy and seek revenge on Paris, he needs little encouragement to pick up the pieces of his warrior life. The promise of battle is stronger than the bonds of love.

The eternal triangle of man, woman, and war finds retelling in Sirena. The interference of the gods in the lives of mortals and their influence on the inhabitants of their world is cunningly told. Napoli's words play well in the ears of young adult readers.

A blend of myth, legend, literature and young love make for satisfying reading.

Characters such as Mother Dora, the Sirens' "godmother" of sorts, and Oenone, the onceloved nymph, set the stage for Sirena's story. Comparisons with her sisters, vain and proud of their lacrimal glands—which allow them to cry unlike the fish they swim with—and concerned to find immortality whatever the costs to others, make Sirena even more real. It is only Sirena that has redeeming human qualities. It is she who grows

because she loves and who is able to give up that love to the fate that predestines her life.

Topics for Discussion

1. How can the modern teen find relevance in the story of a mermaid like Sirena?

2. Why is Sirena the only mermaid to discover her soul?

3. Why did Philoctetes' companions desert him in his hour of need? Would modern counterparts do the same?

4. Do young men and women feel the same commitment to a relationship?

5. Is there much to be taught from mythology or is it just storytelling?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the literature for different versions of the story of the Sirens.

2. Compare and contrast the Sirens of mythology with Napoli's Sirena.

3. Find Philoctetes in the story of Heracles.

Does the character from mythology fit Napoli's version?

4. Reread the death of Paris in the story of the Trojan War. Does the account give credence to Napoli's telling?

5. Find Glaucus in books on Greek Mythology. Trace his relationship with Scylla.

For Further Reference

"Donna Jo Napoli." In Children's Literature Review, Volume 51. Edited by Deborah J. Morad. Detroit: Gale, 1999, pp. 152-68.

Reprints excerpts from reviews and other commentary on Napoli's books. An introductory essay offers an overview of the author's life, major works, awards, and critical reputation.

DeCandido, GraceAnne A. Review of Sirena.

Booklist 25 (September 15, 1998): 221. The critic states: "This is a troublesome story that takes some time to get off the ground; but even flawed, Napoli's tale is rich in insight, fine language, and a look at truth told aslant."

Jones, J. Sydney. "Donna Jo Napoli." In Something about the Author, Volume 92.

Edited by Alan Hedblad. Detroit: Gale, 1997, pp. 161-66. A biography of Napoli featuring comments from the author and a sampling of reviewers' assessment of her work.

Review of Sirena. Publishers Weekly (November 2, 1998): 84. The commentator asserts: "Like its mermaid heroine, this uneven novel is something of a hybrid: a romantic fantasy imposed atop a classical legend."

Related Titles

Napoli's talent for delving into the characters of myth and fairytale and endowing them with the human dimension has received much acclaim from critics. In Sirena, as in Zel, and even with the Biblical Magdalene, names from childhood breathe with the impassioned urgencies of adolescence, making their stories wonderfully real for young adult readers. Intergenerational conflicts such as those of Rapunzel and her mother, Miriam and her father, and Sirena and Mother Dora give voice to the angst teens experience when they feel smothered by adult love. As a daughter and mother, but particularly as a daughter, Napoli is able to reach back into her consciousness, as all daughters do, but few are able to express. Featuring a powerful use of language, Napoli's young adult novels have found a wide, receptive audience.

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