

The Gods Behaving Badly

Review of the book by Marie Philips

The Olympians are immortal: this we all know. But it's taken Marie Philips' wit to put them back where they belong – in to a decrepit, 21st century North London bed-sit. What with the dark days of Christianity and pandemic secularism Hera, Apollo and co. aren't adored as they once were. But, (of course), they are still with us, and still bickering, boozing, fucking, slaughtering just as they have been for close on 3000 years.

It is Apollo who first behaves badly. He's just asked a mortal (Kate, 'in mergers and Acquisitions at Goldman Sachs') on her sandwich-break to give him a blow-job. Not surprisingly she refuses. In a fit of pique he turns her into a tree.

Although their power seems to be running out (Tinkerbell's problem; very few burnt sacrifices these days, the god of money gets all the attention) the divinities can't stop themselves. Ares, god of war agitates a spot of bother in Central Africa; mad old Zeus leaves his sick bed ('the air unstirred for years') to hurl a fatal thunderbolt.

It sounds like the device would tire, but it is all very, very funny. The plot (predicated on the difficulty of getting a good cleaner in London) follows the most unlikely hero and heroine; painfully shy would-be lovers - nose-hairy Neil and neat Alice whose unspoken love becomes a plaything of the immortals' relentless pursuit of self-gratification.

The cleverness of this book is that Phillips does with Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo et al precisely what the Greeks did. They become many-times-magnified and microscopic versions of us. Immortals were all about the trouble with mortality after all. There are oracular observations too: we fuss, and in some distant land a storm breaks. The immortals are bored of endless life: when Demeter announces she thinks she might be dying there is a judder of jealousy.

Phillips studied archaeology so many of the classical references are spot on.

During a TV reality show, Apollo is (really) prophesying with the help of sybils to a delighted studio-audience, and gets the most enormous erection. Detumescence only comes when he thinks... 'about his stepmother Hera and what she had done to their former male neighbour when they'd had a dispute about the precise boundary between their two gardens. That's their former neighbour who had also, formerly, been male.'

Phillips also gets something about ancient Greece. The nonchalance of Apollo and Aphrodite's squabbles and love-making is deceptive. The Greeks recognised the innate extra-ordinary, ordinary-oddness of life and articulated that in their myth-stories of the Olympian dynasty.

A 5th century BC philosopher posited that the divine is a mirror of man's own world. Philip's 21st century Aphrodite lives by hot phone-sex, Bacchus runs a

debauched night club in Kings Cross. In this Underworld mothers fruitlessly try to scoop up their children in formless arms. The fixtures and fittings of Hades are created only by the driven imaginations of the dead. What a desperate and wonderful thought: one of the many moments where the book charms and provokes in a paragraph. I write this in Delphi, dangling my feet in Apollo's sacred spring: the water is said to bring the muse. Philips clearly already has a bottle on her desk.