MM: When I was 13 I wrote, I had the bizarre experience where my wonderful 8th grade English teacher read us the last I guess it must be the last chapter, I think it's the last chapter of *The Once and Future King*. It was I think before Thanksgiving. I don't know why she decided to read this it was something fun. And I just – it was like electricity was running through my brain. And I ran home, it was the last class of the day and I ran home and I wrote a time capsule for myself to open 25 years later and I didn't look at it and then 25 years later I opened it and it was just a couple years ago now. And it said, "I want to be a writer, I'm going to be a writer." [Music]

JP: Brandeis University welcomes you to Recall This Book, a Public Books affiliate. Recall This Book is hosted today by the neuroscientist and omnivorous reader Gina Turrigiano and me John Plotz excitedly at work as podcast listeners will know on a history of science fiction and fantasy. Both of us are overjoyed today to torque our format a little bit. So normally we pick a topic and talk it through but today we are delighted to joined by a write we both love, Madeline Miller. She's the author of *The Son of Achilles* which won the Orange Prize for Fiction, that is the super prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction in 2011 and her most recent novel *Circe* 2018 is a sort of *Odyssey* from below or maybe you want to say *Odyssey* from the side a retelling of the story of one of the many women who have bit parts, crucial bit parts but still bit parts to play in Odysseus' rambling manly road trip. And in fact I say it's the story of one but no spoilers here, more than one of the women in the *Odyssey* does actually appear viewed from a very different vantage point in Miller's amazing novel.

So this is going to actually be an unusually long episode because we loved how the interview went and we hope that you will too. It's going to be almost twice as long as our ordinary episodes. It covers a ton of ground from Circe and the Me Too Movement to questions of canonicity, to Miller's own childhood immersion in Greek Myth, to the question of what it means to wall off one's own childhood when becoming a parent. For those who don't know the novel she also reads two passages aloud one right at the beginning of this interview. So without further ado let's jump into it.

MM This passage comes from towards the middle of the novel after Circe has already started turning men to pigs which is what she is most famous for in *The Odyssey*. And the "he" in this passage is Odysseus.

"He asked me once, 'Why pigs?' We were seated before my hearth in our usual chairs. He liked the one draped in cowhide with silver inlaid in its carvings. Sometimes he would rub the scrolling absently beneath his thumb. 'Why not?' I said. He gave me a bare smile. 'I mean it, I would like to know.' I knew he meant it. He was not a pious man but the seeking out of things hidden this was his highest worship. There were answers in me I felt them very deep as last years' bulbs growing fat. Their roots tangled with those moments I spent against the wall and my lions were gone and my spell shut up

inside me. After I changed a crew I would watch them scrabbling and crying in the sty falling over each other stupid with their horror. They hated it all their newly voluptuous flesh, their delicate split trotters, their swollen bellies dragging in the Earth's muck. It was a humiliation, a debasement. They were sick with longing for their hands those appendages men use to mitigate the world. 'Come,' I would say to them, 'it's not that bad you should appreciate a pig's advantages mud slick and swift they are hard to catch, low to the ground they cannot easily be knocked over. They are not like dogs they do not need your live. They can thrive anywhere on anything scraps and trash. They look witless and dull which lulls their enemies but they are clever they will remember your face.' They never listened the truth is men make terrible pigs."

JP: That's great. Thank you. So, Madeline Miller, welcome to Recall This Book it's great to have you. [Laughs] It's a pleasure. So actually do mind if I just step back and like ask you biographical framing questions like where you were born and grew up, and your education and all that stuff? So can we start with where you grew up?

MM: So I was born in Boston but when I was about a year old my parents moved to New York City so I grew up in New York City, in Manhattan and close enough that, you know, we could go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art which was a huge part of my growing up. My mom would take me sort of at least once a month and we would go and look at the Greek and Roman collections and the Egyptian collections as well. Those are my favorite. My poor mother I think she always wanted to go look at the Impressionists but I was very insistent. So that was a piece of it. And then we moved to Philadelphia for high school and that was where I found my wonderful Latin teacher who taught me Homeric Greek. And then I went off to college at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island and then stayed there for my master's as well.

JP: Wait, so I want to hear more about the Latin teacher who also taught you Greek. So was that on the side or was it –

MM: He saw that I was completely obsessed with these stories and he basically took me aside and said, "I can have you reading *The Iliad* in the original in about a year." And I said sign me up and so he did this small group meeting with me and a few other students and we met on early morning Saturdays and before school. And so for a teenager that's a like a really epic amount of effort but it was all worth it. It was wonderful. Those are some of my favorite classes and we did indeed get to start reading *The Iliad* so it was wonderful because I went into college already ready to read the literature courses in Greek which was really wonderful because it was always the literature that I loved most.

GT: That makes me wonder what besides *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* really inspired this story about Circe. There are a few lines about her in *The Odyssey* and you've spun this wonderful rich deep story with this incredible internal dialog going on.

MM: Well, there are four major sources about Circe and that's pretty much it. So one is Homer's *Odyssey*, another is Ovid, and Ovid features her in *The Metamorphoses* she's the Goddess of Transformations and *The Metamorphoses* are this great work about transformations. And that was the source of the love triangle between Scylla, Glaucous, and Circe. I've shaped it a little bit. In the Ovid it's much more – the portrait of Circe is much more kind of I would say flat figure. Ovid is really interested in her power and her magic and sort of her anger. He's not really interested in her psychology in the same way and so he makes her a very pathetic figure in that she falls in love with Glaucous and she's always falling in love with the wrong guy and then she gets angry and she lashes out. And so I wanted to give her much more of a psychological reason for doing what she does, for making this terrible mistake. And then more importantly I wanted to make her lives with it. And Ovid is just sort of it's over, on to the next transformation but I really wanted to hold her to that moment of what she's done. So that piece was important.

The meeting with her niece Medea the other great witch in ancient literature comes out of the Argonautica. Jason and Medea really do show up on Circe's island looking for absolution from their various crimes. And Medea does veil herself from Circe, hiding herself from Circe as she does in my book. But the meeting between them is totally imagined by me all the dialog and all of that.

And then the fourth piece that I was using doesn't even really exist it's lost to us. It's from an ancient epic like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* but lost. We only have it in summary it's called *The Telegony* and it's the story of Telegonous Circe's son with Odysseus growing up on the island of Aeaea going off to find his father, accidently killing his father. These are huge spoilers so my apologies but they are 3,000 year old stories so. Coming and then bringing his mother Penelope – oh, sorry, bringing his brother Telemachus and Penelope, Odysseus' wife back to the island of Aeaea. And that's just very bare boned. There's no meat on that it's like this happened, this happened, this happened that's all we have. So getting to animate that and imagine this meeting between Circe and Penelope and knowing that was sort of waiting for me in the last quarter of the book was incredibly exciting.

So those were the four myths that I had and everything else was me just kind of trying to figure out who this character was and who she would be. And there were some details within those texts that ended up being very important. Homer describes her as being the "Dread Goddess who speaks like a human." And he doesn't really explain that at all what it means to speak like a human. But that was if you've read the novel incredibly important to me in imagining her character that she is this character who already has a piece of her that doesn't quite fully belong to the world of gods. She's standing with a foot in two worlds. And then there was a very quick line in Ovid where he describes her as having an ingenium which is like a temperament that is more fitted for love. And he

means romantic love but I took it to mean something more like empathy that she is able to experience empathy which most gods who today would be sociopathic narcissists cannot experience. There are a few exceptions, Prometheus, but – so those two very quick little moments were important as well.

GT: Yeah, that's great that really helps kind of see the arc of the story.

JP: Can I sort of follow up on that in terms of the question of like what of the story – did you have sort of a sense of fidelity like you had to be in concert with those four texts or you had to – I mean like what did you think had to line up with those four texts or did you feel like if you needed to flip some of them it was okay to do that?

MM: I absolutely felt like I could flip some of them. And in fact there's another story about her turning this guy named Picus into a woodpecker in Ovid but I just left that out entirely. Didn't fit, it didn't speak to me, I was not interested in it at all. And in fact I sort of, I did flip the Ovid a little bit that she falls in love with Glaucous because Glaucous has come to her asking for a love potion to make Scylla fall in love with him and that's the first time she sees him and she falls in love with him immediately at first sight. It was very boring to me. And so I moved that, you know, I adjusted that. So I did feel that way and I think *The Odyssey* actually gave me the invitation to do that because the Circe section not only is it contained within kind of the traditional male heroic model but it is actually one of the parts of *The Odyssey* that is narrated by Odysseus himself telling the story to the Phaeacians. And if you look at it through that light it becomes an incredibly self-serving story that here's Odysseus, he shows up on the island of this terrifying witch, he defeats her, she throws herself on him and falls in love with him and invites him to stay and it's a story that makes him look really good and is designed to sort of be about his story looking good. And so I think that already was inviting me to say okay let's strip away Odysseus's self-aggrandizement you know, him burnishing his own legend, how might this look if it were from her perspective. And so I felt like I could push back and actually the ending of the novel, it's a huge push back against mythology because the *Telegony* ends with Circe, Penelope, Telemachus, and Telegonus all becoming immortal, she makes them all immortal and they live as gods on the island of Aeaea. And again that felt very, very uninteresting and unsatisfying and it just – that was never – I knew from the very beginning that that was not the arc I was following. So I did feel and I think I sort of worked out some of the anxiety about that during *Song of Achilles* and so by the time I got to Circe I was ready to just – I felt like this is my Playdough and I can do with it what I want.

GT: Yeah, I find that arc really interesting I mean there are a few things about it that – there's some sort of contradiction there in that Circe is the only immortal who actually already evolves and changes and learns and is in some way not just her voice but the evolution of her understanding of the world and herself is completely in contradiction to what the gods

are like. They're static, they never change, they have powers that they were bestowed upon them that they didn't have to discover, they didn't have to learn how to use and yet in your story she is undergoing the sort of inevitable movement towards becoming immortal even though in some ways she already has that property that makes mortality so interesting and beautiful. So why did you see it as being so important that she takes the last step?

MM: In that sense I really wanted her story to mirror *The Odyssey* and *The Odyssey* is this longing for nostos, that's the Greek word for homecoming and Odysseus is searching for his homecoming. Even once he gets to Ithaca he still sort of has to search for [unintelligible 0:14:58.6] to defeat the suitors and reestablish control over his household and reestablish his relationship to his wife. And I think Circe also spends a lot of the novel in her story longing for nostos. And so I wanted her to be looking for her family, her real family, her found family and the sort of home but she doesn't know where it is. It isn't like Ithaca, it doesn't exist geographically it's something she has to decide and create. And so in that sense I think she has all these qualities but she doesn't have a community. In order to have those qualities she has to live entirely alone. And so the one thing she still lacks is connection.

JP: So I was thinking more about this question of like I guess the fidelity retelling versus creating question. Like when you think about where this book, I mean both your books but especially *Circe* I mean where it fits --- I mean do you call it "world making," do you call it "retelling," do you call it "rediscover?" How do you think about it?

MM: I think about it as literary adaptation.

JP: Adaptation, okay.

MM: Also and sometimes I call the genre I write in mythological realism which is – but –

JP: Oh, I want to hear more about that because actually that was one of my questions.

MM: So first what I was going to say is that even though I said I feel very free to make changes the truth is I really like to write closely to the text because I like to be in conversation with the text and to be sort of responding to the text. And so even though I make these very deliberate changes I feel like I want them to always be interacting with the text in some way. And so for instance even just little moments like Circe is described in *The Odyssey* as having this beautifully braided hair and it's the moment that's meant to make her seem very attractive and very powerful and very sexy and therefore the fact that she wants to sleep with Odysseus that increases his status as well. And I wanted to sort of take those moments and then transform them and sort of think well why would her hair be braided, maybe it's because she's constantly in the woods and tromping around and that's just practical. You know, that's where it would be coming from, from her

perspective. And so I like interacting with the text that way and kind of taking little moments and trying to interrogate them, examine them why this has happened or what brings them together. The fact that in *The Odyssey* Circe is the one who tells Odysseus how to get past the sirens and she's the one who suggests that he tie himself to the mast and leave his ears free. That was an incredibly telling moment for me because to me that implied that they have a strong relationship she understands him, you know, that is exactly the sort of person he is. Of course he wants to hear with the siren's song is and then go home and tell everyone about it because he's the great storyteller.

JP: Is the adaptation like a corrective also? I mean you're so aware of power, of inequity and oppression mostly I mean I was thinking mostly like sort of the gender based stuff but obviously like the relationship of humans and gods is also this sort of power relationship that you're aware of and you see these previous stories that have, you know, I won't say cast – it's not like they cast villains in a favorable light but you know they show one side of people and then you take the story and you're rotating it. Do you think of that as a corrective or a rebuke or just is it augmentation? Do you know what I mean? Like in some way it does feel it has to be corrective.

MM: I do feel like it's a corrective in the sense of it's a balancing. That the text has been so bottom heavy and pulling really strongly in this one direction so not a corrective in the sense that I want to supplant the original, not that I could even if I did want to, but I never want to supplant the original I love these stories and I really cherish them. But to bring balance to the perspective. To say okay we've had 3,000 years of the male hero tradition can we just pull on that a little bit and bring the female voices up.

JP: Right. So this is going to sound snarky and I don't mean it to be snarky but why do you cherish them? I mean given the things that you've revealed about like the bottom heaviness of them or like what, yeah, so like why not just toss them out? I mean you know I'm obsessed with Ursula Le Guin and one of the things I like, one of the things I appreciate with Le Guin is that desire to say well maybe we could have been caught in like the wrong dream for 3,000 years, you know, we've been telling this one dream but actually what if I proposed a different dream?

MM: Yes. I mean I think it is that I still find – I like how much of a record they are of human nature and I think those are the parts that always speak to me are the very human parts. I mean I love that Odysseus and Achilles are complete disasters as heroes they made terrible mistakes, they're incredibly proud and angry and they reign destruction down on the people around them. The people that they love not just their enemies. And Achilles's name means likely, I mean there are a couple different etymologies for it but likely his name comes from grief to the people. And Odysseus's name is related etymologically for the word for, you know, to be hated. And so I don't even though they are this very traditional male centered perspective I think that they're also ways to look at them that

are built in that are saying, you know, Achilles is not who you would chose as an ideal hero necessarily, or Odysseus, you know? Or they're not a hero in the way we talk about heroes today as moral exemplars. They are these larger than life figures who make terrible mistakes like we all make mistakes and in sort of seeing their mistakes we connect with our own humanity and flawed nature. And so I love that part of it. I think that's what really speaks to me is the humanness of the story. And I think I just don't want it to be – and I connect to all the characters male and female and characters who are different from me and so I love that part. But I do, I mean I guess I would say that I do want it to be a corrective in that I want it to be out there as another strong version of the story.

JP: Um-hmm (yes).

GT: I reread *The Odyssey* just a couple months ago this new translation and was struck by exactly that. The humanity in these characters at the same time that their aspects of their relationships with the gods that you absolutely can't really relate to there is also this just human aspect of their vanity, their frailty, their uncertainty, their stupidity, their longing for the connection with their families it's sort of this remarkable thing that speaks to you through these many, many thousands of years, right? But I also remember when I was a kid the first time I read *The Odyssey* and being so disappointed that you only got these little glimpses of these stories through Odysseus's boastful storytelling, right? And I always wanted to know more about these characters and one of them was Circe. But also other characters like Polyphemus, I wanted to know what was his story. So I wonder where do you see yourself, I mean could you imagine wanting to tell more of these stories?

MM: Absolutely. And Polyphemus in particular you mentioned the Emily Wilson translation which I love and I think she is doing a lot of the same stuff kind of trying to provide a corrective to some of the traditions of interpretation as well as to the original and so she titles the Polyphemus chapter I think it's "A Pirate in a Shepherd's Cave" which is a real reversal of the way we look at this dynamic which I love. And I think I was looking at a similar thing with Odysseus which is that today we love – Odysseus is one of the most beloved heroes in – you know there's James Joyce and there's the Tennyson poem and we see him as this, you know, he's the smart one. But the ancients thought he was a very difficult and problematic character and usually he was the villain in most of the ancient pieces *The Odyssey* excepted. Sophocles made him the villain and he showed up as a very negative, lying deceitful corrupt character in a lot of the stories. And so that was another thing I wanted to kind of bring in. I wanted to bring in some of the darkness of his character which I think Emily Wilson also brings out. She doesn't soft pedal some of his more violent and frightening moments.

GT: Right. The two faces of the trickster character.

MM: Yes, yes.

JP: Do you ever get a version of the kind of, oh, stuffy old Western canon? Like in other words you're telling the stories that are – like I hear everything you're saying totally resonates with me and as someone who grew up with Mary Renault as well as reading the original stuff I love the world of like adaptation and re-understanding, but do you get a version of the question that says, well, yeah, but you're just doing the – these are just the stories that we've been kind of spoon-fed as part of our canon? So it's to stay within that world is to kind of buy in to a preexisting, yeah, whatever, privileged Western patriarchal canon.

MM: I mean I haven't gotten that very much but I understand if someone wanted to say that to me because I think that that is a totally valid perspective, you know, why aren't we bringing in new stories that have nothing to do with this history. And I think my answer is I want those stories too it's just these are the ones that I feel impelled to tell because I feel like I can do something with them where I can bring out those silenced voices within that. But I very much want there to be people working outside of them as well.

JP: Yeah. So that was actually the question I was kind of leading up to which is where you're thinking that your vision of your – like your vocation are you thinking of other corpora of stories or is this corpus big enough for you? Like this kind of Greco Roman myth structure that's world enough for you?

MM: I'm thinking a little bit outside. So I think I'm actually finished with Homer. These were the two stories that I really wanted to tell. Who knows, maybe I'll go back to Homer one day but these were the stories that I really felt I had something really passionate that I wanted to say and although I agree that I think there are a lot more opportunities, Calypso also I think is a really interesting character, Polyphemus I mean the maids as well. Margaret Atwood did a little bit of that in *The Penelopiad*.

JP: Yeah.

MM: There are so many characters but I am really drawn to *The Aeneid* right now for a bunch of different reasons and that's Greco-Roman but Virgil is so different from Homer that it feels like a whole other world.

JP: Yeah.

MM: I'm so interested in his politics and the way he is trying to speak to power. You know he was born in a republic and he died under a dictator, under an emperor, the first emperor and during that time in his life the way leaders interacted with poets really changed. You know you have Catullus writing nasty little poems about Cesare that's fine, no one cares. But then you have Augustus and Maecenas breathing down the neck of Horace and Virgil

for most of their careers. And how was he interacting with that, what was he trying to use *The Aeneid* to say? So I'm really interested in that tradition. And I would argue that I think he says that Aeneas ultimately fails that it ends on a moment of moral failure is where *The Aeneid* ends. So I love that and I want to work in that world. And then the other thing that I do is I direct Shakespeare plays and I would really like to in particular interact with *The Tempest*. I don't think there are very many other Shakespeare plays I would want to write it's really just *The Tempest* I'm interested in. So I would love to direct all the Shakespeare plays but the one I want to write about is *The Tempest*.

JP: Interesting. *The Tempest* has a huge post-colonial tradition of people responding to it, yeah.

MM: It does. And –

JP Right, I'm thinking of like Cesaire and Lamming and Menoni [ph. sp.] and people like that.

MM: Yes, yes all of whom I've been rereading in the last couple of months trying to sort of get all that in my mind. And I want to interact – I'm sort of still figuring out what I'm interested in but I'm certainly looking at pieces of that colonial interpretation with both Miranda and Caliban sort of living in this reality that's created by Prospero. And then what happens next.

GT: Could I circle back for a second to the piece of the text that you read this transformation of men into pigs which of course has this very interesting sort of modern feminist interpretation to it. but this sort of interfaces with this ambiguity in the book about whether Circe's transformations are really transforming things into their true nature or whether she is really imposing her will upon that transformation. So how do you see that in terms of this transformation of these horrible ravening pirates who are coming to her island and brutalizing, or trying to brutalize her and the nymphs who are with her?

MM: So I wanted that ambiguity to be in place. I wanted Circe to always be wrestling with that ambiguity and to not be sure herself and to sort of have different takes on it at different moments. So that was something that I kept deliberately – I tried to really keep that in play as a question for much of the book. In terms of the pigs I was actually interested in the fact that pigs have a very different meaning to us today than they did to the ancients. That we I think come out of the Judeo-Christian oftentimes aspect attitude towards pigs where pigs are seen as unclean or they are somehow dirtier, unpleasanter all those things and then of course the men are pigs meaning men are bad in kind of the modern sense. But in the ancient sense pigs were sacrificial animals. They were supposed to be sacrifices and they were often particularly associated with goddesses. The Goddess Dimeter, there was a ritual with piglets about the Goddess Dimeter while boars are associated with Aphrodite and the Adonis story. And so you see sort of them popping

up and I wanted there to be more mystery to it than just the idea that she is they're bad and pigs are bad and therefore they are pigs. I wanted to really bring in more of that transformative thinking.

GT: I really miss the association with sacrifice because I guess all the sacrifice I've heard of it's always a calf or a bull or, you know, but that's really interesting to think about.

JP: Yeah. Hey, maybe that's a good context to go back to your term of "mythological realism" did I get that right? Yeah. So can you like talk about that more? The Virgil example is really interesting because obviously if you're thinking about Virgil you're thinking about the story world that Virgil is creating which is like of Aeneas and the founding of Rome. But then you're also thinking more like the Robert Graves *I, Claudius* world of like what's actually going on in the Rome that he's writing in. So how do you think about like what you're doing? Is it inhabiting both those realms, is it only inhabiting a kind of story world?

MM: I mean I always want it to be inhabiting as many worlds as possible and I think these stories are very political and are very connected to things in history. I mean Homer himself I think what's interesting is the history of Homeric reception and the different ways that people have looked at the different characters and claim them or not claim them and I think that's very interesting. I was just talking with someone earlier today about how much the Nazis claimed Homer and that was a really disturbing – and all the Greeks and all the Greek philosophy and they just took that all.

JP: Yeah, those crazy German museums like the Pergamon I mean they're intense, they're monumental, yeah.

MM: Yes. And Virgil and *The Aeneid* in particular was huge during -- Mussolini loved –

JP: Mussolini, sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MM: And so I think that's interesting although I would argue that the texts particularly *The Aeneid* are really – that is a huge misunderstanding of *The Aeneid* to think that you can use for those purposes. Because I think its point is actually the opposite. But I came out of a tradition as a young person reading a lot of magical realism. I loved magical realism growing up not just mythology but I think I loved Isabel Allende and I loved Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Julia Alvarez and all these sort of magical realist writers. And they were books that I read again and again and so I think it just felt very natural to have those components in the story and I wanted them to be in the story because they are in the original and I think they're really doing something very interesting in the original and to, you know, Mary Renault does the opposite I think.

JP: Yes, she does the opposite, yeah.

MM: She takes them out and I think that can be very interesting too. But for me I always wanted them in because I think that like Ursula K. Le Guin I think that those dragons can really serve us, you know?

JP: Yeah.

MM: By putting them in the story.

JP: That's totally fascinating because I was thinking about how Renault pulls them out definitely, or Rosemary Sutcliff like gritty realism of Rome which is just like, you know, everyone very, very dirty, very, very cold. So when you keep them in there do you think – I guess this is kind of a question about belief or something like do you think of yourself as following along the same belief paths of the original poets or writers who were creators of the story? Because – and I'm not asking the question the right way but it's like what it means to believe that the gods can be real in the story like for you that's a conscious decision that you're going to have supernatural as well as realistic explanations for things. Do you understand yourself as doing the same things that the original poets also did? Do you think they too were like consciously crafting stories in which they put in super natural explanations or do you think they were just telling the world they saw?

MM: I mean for Homer I think it's really hard to tell but in Virgil's case he was an Epicurean, he definitely did not believe in the gods as he wrote them. And in fact I think that he uses the gods really as stand-ins he alludes to this in the *Eclogues* as stand-ins for political figures who are, you know, who have all this power and we're just ordinary mortals who are at their whim. And so I think he is making kind of an alchemical translation there from what the gods – I mean he really didn't believe in the gods at all that way. And so I feel like I'm coming out of that tradition where I'm using the gods to mean something but not necessarily what they would have meant to people who were religious in the ancient world.

JP: So if that's the case can you imagine writing mythological realism of the present day? Like would you imagine? I'm not saying *Percy Jackson* in which the gods go to summer camp but I mean could you imagine contemporary mythological realism?

MM: Absolutely. Absolutely. And in some sense I think that that is what – but I also almost don't think you need to even do that. I mean I think we've had narcissists in control of, you know, popping up and sort of making things all about them for millennia and that that story, those stories about abuse of power and wanting to draw all attention to yourself and define the narrative I mean those are things the ancients understood so I think you could absolutely translate it to modern times but I think that it's all there in the original too. And so you don't necessarily have to move it into the modern world to make the point.

JP: Yeah. So like your books have been, I mean especially *Circe* has made like this immense impression on readers, right? Do you understand that like when you talk to your readers, when you meet them at readings or whatever what do you think people are – like do you think it's that contemporary dimension that people are responding to? Like do you think they're seeing present day in these stories or do you think they like the distance that it creates? Like the ability to go back to those old stories?

MM: I think it's both. I think I hear from readers who are experiencing it both ways which makes me really happy because I wanted it to both sort of interrogate the original but also sort of say but look how it's still us, it's still people struggling with the same things. So I hope both and so far I hear from both. I mean I think I have always seen these stories and I think that is partially what was so gripping to me is I've always seen these stories as intensely modern because I think that they are about human emotions and human life and even in very little ways. Like this is a really silly example but there's a beautiful scene in *The Iliad* where Hector and Andromache, his wife, are talking and it's this very emotion scene about she doesn't' want him to go fight and he has to fight and he has to fight to say her and their little son is there and their little son Astyanax sees Hector with his big war helmet on and starts crying because his father's wearing this big scary war helmet and he doesn't recognize him. And then the other day I was with my husband and our little daughter and he put on this baseball cap for the first time she had never seen it before and she just lost it it was like he became a monster to her. And I was like this is it, you know, this is that moment, this is that domestic moment. And that domestic moment in *The Iliad* has all this great, you know, we know that Astyanax is going to be killed, we know that Andromache is going to be taken so it has a much darker – but it is also I think Homer also understands those very sort of sweet simple family person interactions and so I love that and I always want to bring those moments out.

JP: Yeah. Have people asked you to push it even more? Like have you have been asked to write like editorials about the Me Too Circle and the Me Too moment or anything like that? Like have you been asked to draw the explicit connections or –

MM: [Laughs]

JP: And do you resist?

MM: In fact, I'm working on one of these right now. I don't – I am a bad editorial writer because I have to feel completely passionate about what I'm saying. I can't just sort of – you know, and because I'm used to working from an academic background 1500 words feels grossly inadequate to me and I kind of can't like wrap it up with a bow in 1500 words. So I'm constantly like fighting my nature when I write those.

JP: Yeah. Okay, I really hope I'm getting the title right but I read your amazing short story, it's like a Kindle single it's *Galatea*, isn't it? Is that right? Okay, yeah. So that's pretty,

I mean that's not 1500 words but it's short and it's very point—it feels very pointed to me.

MM: Yes, it was and that – but that's okay because that was a fictional world and that was exactly the size of the world that I wanted. I never thought about making that a novel. That was it sort of came to me as a short story and that was just the size that I wanted for it. So in fiction I feel like I can work large or small but in nonfiction I always want to work large.

JP: Yeah. Hey, would this be an okay time to ask you to read that Prometheus section? Because I feel like Prometheus is an interesting character to think with. I think it actually relates to Gina's point about people who are on a path towards mortality I mean that Prometheus is her first indication of being this other world. Or this other way to be a god maybe or to be kind of a god and, you know?

MM: Yeah. Well, and this is going back to sort of the parts of the story that to me feel very modern. I think everyone's childhood is to some extent growing up in a cave underground or what we see as our family we take that for the whole world. And that at some point you leave the cave and you look back and you realize the ways that your family is different or strange or good or bad or whatever the way that they stand out and so I think Circe is in this state where she has started to feel alienated from her family but she doesn't really understand why because she doesn't know what the other options are. She can't imagine a life outside of them there's just this feeling of wrongness. And so Prometheus is very important because he is another character who was alienated who can sort of speak to that. and actually there's no myth about her meeting Prometheus in any of the original but Helios and Oceanus are incredibly important parts of Prometheus's story and so it sort of felt Helios is Circe's father and Oceanus is her grandfather and so it made sense for me. I was sort of looking for opportunities like where, you know, I didn't want this to be the Forrest Gump where bring in every myth that you know so I was trying to find very specific ways that made sense for her story to connect and of course Prometheus was that. So she sees Prometheus be punished this is his pre-punishment before he is sent to have his liver eaten every day by the eagle and he is sent to be whipped publically in front of the other Titans as a sort of way of being a lesson to them.

JP: Right.

MM: "The blindfold slipped from my uncle's face. His eyes were closed and his chin dropped on his chest. His back hung in gilded shreds. I had heard my uncle say that Zeus had given him the chance to beg on his knees for lesser punishment. He had refused. I was the only one left. A smell of ichor drenched the air thick as honey. The rivulets of molten blood were still tracing down his legs. My pulse struck in my veins. Did he

know I was there? I took a careful step towards him. His chest rose and fell with a soft rasping sound. 'Lord Prometheus,' my voice was thin in the echoing room. His head lifted to me. Open, his eyes were handsome, large and dark and long-lashed. His cheeks were smooth and beardless yet there was something about him that was as ancient as my grandfather. 'I could bring you nectar,' I said. His gaze rested on mine. 'I would thank you for that,' he said. His voice was resonate as aged wood it was the first time I had heard it. He had not cried out once in all his torment. I turned. My breaths came fast as I walked through the corridors to the feasting hall filled with laughing gods. Across the room the fury was toasting with an immense goblet embossed with a gorgon's leering face. She had not forbidden anyone to speak to Prometheus but that was nothing, her business was offense. I imagined her infernal voice howling out my name. I imagined manacles rattling on my wrist and the whip striking from the air but my mind could not imagine further than that. I had never felt a lash. I did not know the color of my blood. I trembled so much I had to carry the cup in two hands what would I say if someone stopped me. But the passageways were quiet as I walked back through them. In the great hall Prometheus was silent in his chains. His eyes had closed again and his wound shone in the torchlight. I hesitated. 'I do not sleep,' he said, 'will you lift the cup for me?' I flushed of course he could not hold it himself. I stepped forward so close that I could feel the heat rising from his shoulders. The ground was wet with his falling blood. I raised the cup to his lips and he drank. I watched his throat moving gently. His skin was beautiful the color of polished walnut. It smelled of green moss drenched with rain. 'You are the daughter of Helios, are you not?' he said when he had finished and I had stepped back. 'Yes.' The question stung. If had been a proper daughter he would not have had to ask I would have been perfect and gleaming with beauty poured straight from my father's source. 'Thank you for your kindness.' I did not know if I was kind I felt I did not know anything. He spoke carefully, almost tentatively yet his treason had been so brazen. My mind struggled with the contradiction bold action and bold men are not the same."

JP: I really like the point you're making there about the circle, like the circumscribed world giving way to a larger world. It just seems such a – like it's a just a very illuminating way to think about what you're doing in terms of opening up the different spaces here. And the only thing that I would love to hear you say more about that idea of the self-contained world in the context of the fact that Circe's island is also like deliberately walled off as such a world. In other words so she goes out into the big world. She's able to see beyond her like the godly house. I mean I actually was thinking a little bit about like the allegories of Buddha there, you know that you eventually have to leave – you grow up as a golden princess or prince and then eventually you have to leave and go out into the nasty world and realize that the world isn't like that goldenness. But then she walls herself in again.

MM: Yeah.

GT: But there is an interior transformation that she undergoes by virtue of the woods and the plants and – so I mean those walls are actually kind of essential for her to find her interior compass in some way.

MM: Yeah. And in this I was actually thinking of Virginia Wolfe and *A Room of One's Own* and the idea that in order to escape from this all-consuming society there has to be some of kind of retreat. And this I wanted to contrast this with her sister. You know her sister decides to live in the world. If you want to live in the world as a woman and have power then you have to make some choices that Pasiphae makes and she makes some really vicious choices to be just as scary as all the scary characters out there. Whereas Circe doesn't want that instead she sort of attempts to retreat. You know, can I live an ethical life maybe only in retreat, is that the only way?

JP: Right.

MM: And so absolutely that was something I – I feel like that retreat was actually really vital because it's the only place that she can turn off all the obligations that she is asked to fulfill when she is part of the world.

JP: Right. So then of course it becomes a site of all these other obligations I mean like jail I guess. And then also it's the place where she raises her own child and for him it becomes like the same thing, an enclosed world, right? So.

MM: Yes. And I think that there is – this is a very psychological thing that really doesn't have to do with the myth at all, but I think one of the things I've always been interested in is how parents – so often we hear this story that parents who have been abused as children either emotionally or physically they then grow up and become abusers as well. and it is often a very hard road I think for parents who have come from terrible or difficult families when they raise their own children if they want to take a better path they basically have to wall off their past from their child. That their past is something that they don't want to leak onto their child at all. And so they sort of have to become this past-less person and it's a very lonely way to raise a child but also very moral because she's trying to do the right thing and not pass it on. And so that really has nothing to do with the myth at all but I have found that – I find that such a moving thing, such a sacrifice that I think parents make who have come from these difficult backgrounds but who are trying to raise their child in a different world.

JP: Yeah. I mean I think that really resonates with me because when I think about – I hadn't really grasped that that was something I really like about the book but I like the way in which its world is, you know, it begins small even though in a very important place but it begins small and then it gets larger but then it also – the process of getting to adulthood

might make the world seem larger but the world can't get infinitely large like at some point the world does get small again. I mean you're constantly – you can only have so large a space of action. So, yeah, I think you're right I think that's a point that doesn't feel necessarily mythological it just feels like a novelistic point. It's sort of related to like Gina and I were talking earlier about the way in which your novel has, you know, it has kind of a 19th Century realism in it too. Like it had *Jane Eyre* you know the internal monologue where you know the world of the myths that you respond to is an amazing world but it doesn't really go in for depth psychology, you know, there's not a lot of the interiority like the gap between the event as it actually is versus the event as it's experienced that might be implicit in a lot of the stories that you're responding to but it's not there. Whereas in your story it's really there.

MM: And that is actually one of the main things that I think that I'm drawn to in both of these novels is I wanted to build that psychology and I wanted to take a character and have them – what happens in *Song of Achilles* a lot of people who pick up the novel, not everyone but a lot of people are going to know that it ends with them both dead at least with Achilles dead. And so what's important for me it's like directing a Shakespeare play most people know how *King Lear* ends if they're going to see it or they know how *Hamlet* ends not everybody but a lot of people in the audience know and so what matters is sort of the psychological evolution of the characters and how that journey happens and making sure that the end feels surprising and inevitable and new in some way. And that is exactly what I want to do is bring that psychological – I agree I think it's implied in a lot of ways. Like I think that the characters make sense psychologically but it's very bare bones and it's not internalized at all. You know I mean I think in writing *Song of Achilles* I took that moment in *The Iliad* when Achilles is over whelmed with grief for losing Patroclus and I said okay that's the end. So what's the beginning, how do I write to that moment setting that moment on my horizon? How do I tell the psychological story of how you get to that moment.

GT: Of course with Circe the ending isn't known in the same way. So did you also start with an ending in mind for her or did that evolve as you wrote it?

MM: That ending was there from the beginning. That was the whole project. Penelope's ending was not in my mind from the beginning. I knew that I wanted her story to end in a way that was not about who she was married to which is how *The Telegony* ends. She actually marries Telegonus in the story.

JP: What?

MM: Yeah.

JP: Really?

MM: Really. I know. It's like a [unintelligible 0:53:27.1] it's really disturbing and – yeah. [Laughter] I knew that was out. Because there's a competing myth about Telegonus that he goes off and founds an Italian city so I wanted that. And my Telegonus I never saw him as straight anyway. So he was going to go do that. And I wanted Penelope's story to be not about the man she was attached to I felt like that was really important but that's what *The Odyssey* is all about, is she with the suitors, is she with Odysseus, what does she look like when she's by herself when her son is not with her or her son is doing his own thing and she just finally gets to be herself without all this pressure. She gets her own island retreat moment and what does she want to do. And I didn't really know, I was sort of leaving it open and then when I got there the ending that I found for her just happened very organically.

JP: Hey, Madeline, if you were not a writer what would you be? A director, okay. But you, that's not fair because you are a director. So if you were not a writer nor a director what would you be?

MM: I guess teaching is also cheating 'cause I'm also a teacher. Okay, so if I couldn't be any of those three things, oh gosh, what do I want to do? I don't know that's really hard those are the three things I truly love and really feel passionately about. I would probably want to go and do – I mean I try and do this in a volunteer way but I would probably want to work with – I have a good friend who runs a wonderful organization that helps refugees and I feel like I would want to do that work.

JP: Cool. Hey, did you have a vocation moment like however defined like an on the Road to Damascus moment which about like this is what I want to do like --?

MM: Yes, I did. At least for directing and for teaching I did. For writing I was much more kind of backing into it only because I was – not because I didn't want to write since I was a child because I did. But I was afraid to claim it. Speaking of Greek mythology I had a lot of hubris fear when I was younger and you know I felt like I couldn't say it otherwise the lightning bolts would come down. But when I was 13 I wrote – I had this bizarre experience where my wonderful 8th grade English teacher read us the last – I guess it must be the last chapter, I think it was the last chapter of *The Once and Future King* it was the day before Thanksgiving I don't know why she decided to read this, it was something fun. And I just – it was like electricity was running through my brain. And I ran home, it was the last class of the day, ran home and I wrote a time capsule for myself to open 25 years later and I closed it up and I didn't look at it and then 25 years later I opened it, it was just a couple years ago now. And it said "I want to be a writer, I'm going to be a writer." But I had like hidden that from myself. I had put it –

JP: Wow, and so you didn't remember what it said? Like when you opened it up you didn't remember?

MM: And I was shocked to see myself claiming that at 13.

JP That's amazing.

GT: That's pretty funny.

JP: Wow. What if it had said I want to be fireman, would you –

MM: Start taking classes in firefighting.

JP: Hey, so, Madeline, one thing we do on the podcast is we have a little thing at the end we call Recallable Books where we basically ask people to talk about, you know, it would be related to the topic of the podcast if you want, but basically to talk about some kind of unjustly neglected book that we think everyone ought to read but nobody does read. Can I put you on the spot? Can you think of one?

MM: Let me think, let me think.

JP: And it cannot be the Theogonia—wait, what was it? *Telegony*, thank you.

MM: A neglected book, all right, let me think what's a neglected book that no one --. Well, hum, the "neglected" makes it tricky. I just read by Maryse Conde this summer *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* which I –

JP: Oh, wow, I didn't know that, yeah.

MM: It's terrific. It's really interesting and it's angry and it's such a powerful and potent character that she creates. And she's definitely pushing back against Arthur Miller but also using, doing lots of really interesting stuff with it.

JP: She did a version of *Wuthering Heights* too.

MM: Oh, she did?

JP Yes, she did *Windward Heights* I think it's called, yeah.

MM: That's so funny. Oh, that's really interesting. Now I have to read that. But I had never heard of *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* and I feel like it should always be paired with *The Crucible* –

JP: Yeah.

MM: -- basically. So anyway, I loved that and it's maybe 30 years old now but it's terrific. I mean I don't think he's really neglected but James Baldwin is one of my favorite writers of all time and I always would like to see more people reading James Baldwin.

JP: Yeah. He's definitely un-neglected right now. He's having – which is good, which is really good, yeah, yeah.

MM: He is. So, Virgil and Horace reclaimed the word "poetes" or "vates" which means a poet prophett. They sort of used it to mean poet profit. I feel like he's America's poet profit, he's our poetes.

JP: Yeah.

MM: I, let me think. You know what very few people read *Two Nobel Kinsmen* and I really like *Two Nobel Kinsmen* because it has this queer story in it. I feel like they all – it's very unusual, there's lot of sort of same sex men, male homosocial, homoerotic relationships in Shakespeare but *Two Nobel Kinsmen* has one between two women that's really interesting.

JP: Is there anything you'd want to ask say like a neuroscientist who is a fan of your work?

MM: I would want to ask about all the recent studies about empathy and how there's sort of the stuff about how the more power and privilege you have the more your empathy starts to drop which was actually completely in my mind as I was working on *Circe*. And it's possible to fight against it but you have to consciously fight against it. and so I would ask about that because that is certainly, you know, I feel like that's the story of *King Lear*, you know, no one has told King Lear no for 80 years and then – but he unlike the gods is able to go in a little bit of an arc and change and sort of come to a deeper understanding of himself and empathy and all that. Whereas the gods do not. So I would want to know more about that and sort of the idea of empathy studies and how to work with increasing or what are the things that help to bring it out more. Because to me empathy is really the project of storytelling and it is about being able to imagine yourself into someone else's life. And I think it is also, you know, it's the way that I feel like literature and storytelling can save the world because it can sneak past people's defenses in ways that if you just tell them you won't get any response. But I sort of – that's my secret desire is to sneak past people's defenses, you know, and to have them consider things that in their regular life if they read it in a nonfiction form they wouldn't think about or they wouldn't identify with.

GT: Yeah, I think that's a really nice idea. In general I think scientists are a little resistant to the notion that you have to tell a story to reach people but it actually is pretty clear that even if you want to do a good job of explaining your own particular data you can only do it through a story. The story has to reflect something real about the data but it's still a story.

PT: I think there's a good podcast in there actually. Like the logic of the parable or something like the relationship between particularity and universality or generalizability

that's a good topic. But come on, Gina, you're supposed to give us the hard science behind it.

GT: Well, I have to say that there isn't any so that's the problem right? Neuroscience can help with this but I do think that empathy is something that takes practice, that stories can – you're right, stories about other people and other ways of thinking about things can lead you to them and the converse of that is that the more distance you can put between yourself and other people the easier it is to think of them as "other" and as something that you can exploit.

JP: Yeah. You know what I was thinking about, you mentioned Lear but I was thinking about a Flannery O'Conner story "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Do you remember that the moral – the criminal at the end gives the moral and he said, "She would have been a good woman if there had been someone there to shoot every day of her life." Like once she gets shot in the stomach suddenly she becomes incredibly nice. [Laughter]

MM: Yeah, a sad fact is that I do think, not always, I think sometimes suffering is just suffering and it has no positive purpose and is only negative. But I think that it can also remind us of our shared humanity and allow you to have more empathy for other people.

JP: I think *Lincoln in the Bardo* is all about that. I don't know if you've read that the George Saunders book.

MM: No.

JP: Yeah.

GT: And then circling back to Prometheus of course that's his choice his perpetual suffering as a way of resisting.

JP: Yeah.

MM: Yeah. And that story I didn't find a way to work this in because it just didn't belong but the way one version of the Prometheus story the way it wraps up is that Zeus agrees to release him after centuries of torment if someone else will give up their immortality as sort of payment. And Chiron the Centaur who is a great teacher gives up his immortality so that Prometheus can go free. And that just feels completely right. It feels like yes, Chiron would, you know, the Chiron as I imagine him that inspired my portrait of him in *The Song of Achilles*.

JP: In *Song of Achilles*, yeah.

GT: Where is that story told? Sorry.

MM: That's a good question, where is that?

GT: I've never heard that I've always wondered if Prometheus ever escaped from his rock.

MM: Now I can't remember where that comes from.

JP: It sounds familiar to me like I know I read that in Edith Hamilton or something but I don't know where, yeah, yeah. Wow, that's really interesting. Yeah. Hey, Madeline, thank you so much especially for blocking out so much time and listening to all my annoying emails about microphones and things. I think the sound was great so.

MM: So much my pleasure thank you for such great questions.

GT: Yeah, this was super fun. It was really great to get a chance to talk to you about this book.

JP: Yeah. Totally. *Recall This Book* is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's affiliated with *Public Books* and is recorded and edited at Brandis University by Plotz, Ferry and a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston area and beyond. Our music comes from Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, sound editing is by Anil Tripathy and production assistance from Matthew Schratz, Mark Delello [ph. sp.] advises on technological matters and we appreciate the support of University librarian Matthew Sheehy [ph. sp.] and Dean Dorothy Hodgson. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticism, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us, contact us via Twitter, or reach us directly by our Facebook page or our website, recallthisbook.org where you'll also find links to the text discussed today and suggestions for further reading and listening. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes .