



Orrie's Story

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As a retelling of Greek myth, ORRIE'S STORY, Thomas Berger's eighteenth novel, ranks with the very best of his parodic fiction. The story of Agamemnon, first told in the ILIAD, then expanded in the ODYSSEY, was entirely reconsidered by Aeschylus in the ORESTEIA, where the focus shifts from Agamemnon as victim to Clytemnestra, Orestes, and the Furies as avengers. Among twentieth century writers, T.S. Eliot adapted the Agamemnon myth to his own modernist purposes and Eugene O'Neill transformed it into Freudian melodrama. Following Aeschylus' and O'Neill's three-part structure, Berger gives the myth a postmodern twist in a novel that manages to be both disturbing and blackly humorous.

Berger's Agamemnon is forty-two-year-old Augie Mencken, a returning war hero who has never been to war (having spent the past three and a half years working at a defense plant in the South). A failure as husband, father, and businessman, Augie succeeds for a time as storyteller, artificer of his autobiographical tall tale. Hailed by the gang (Aeschylus' chorus) at the Idle Hours bar, he returns seeking not praise but the divorce which will enable him to marry nineteen-year-old Cassie (myth's Cassandra). Meanwhile, his wife Esther (Clytemnestra) and her lover (his cousin) Erle, or E.G. (Aegisthus), plot his murder: she for the army insurance that will free her of the abusive lover on whom she is financially dependent, and he to draw closer to Orrie (Orestes), whom he believes to be his son. Of course, Esther and Erle bungle the murder: Quick death by electrocution turns into drawn out but ultimately fatal farce. Returning home with his friend Paul Leeds (Pylades), Orrie, goaded by his sister Ellie (Electra), will kill Erle and, accidentally, Esther, be tried and acquitted (sentenced to life, as Orrie points out over his mother's grave).

Beset by a prosecutor named Bernard J. Furie and even more by the self-doubts and self-loathing instilled in him by his sister, father, and especially his mother, Orrie is Orestes in his most up-to-date guise. He is the "or" in "story," sentenced to a lifetime of postmodern indeterminacy, uncertain of his identity. The novel's open-ended conclusion leaves Orrie on the verge of ambiguous manhood, willing to adopt the role of male protector for which he, like Augie and even Erle, is so poorly prepared.

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