



Alcestis

Katharine Beutner

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In Greek myth, Alcestis is known as the ideal wife; she loved her husband so much that she died and went to the underworld in his place. In this vividly-imagined debut, Katharine Beutner gives voice to the woman behind the ideal and reveals the part of the story that's never been told: What happened to Alcestis in the three days she spent in the underworld?

Alcestis Details

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From Reader Review Alcestis for online ebook

Sam says

This book sucked me in real quick. I read it in one night.

Kogiopsis says

This book reminded me quite a bit of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace Of Illusions* and that's good, because that book is what all myth retellings have to live up to in my mind.

Now, bear in mind that I'm not familiar with the original myth of Alcestis.

That being said, this book was gorgeous. The writing might seem overwrought to some readers, but I found it lyrical, visceral, and intense. Alcestis is very much a woman of her times and culture, not a feminist insert put there to challenge the world around her. And yet, even as she is quiet and passive, she is an intensely feminist narrator. She's a lot like Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale*, actually: while neither really speaks up or does much to break their bonds, their plain description of their lives is in and of itself subversive. Alcestis grows from sheltered girl to jaded wife, and the transition is elegant and a tiny bit chilling. When she goes to the underworld in her husband's place, it is not an emotional impulsive choice but a calculated decision, just this side of cold. It's almost suicide, actually.

The days she spends in the underworld have a dreamlike air to them, and the emotions she has for Persephone are equally hazy and strange. Persephone herself gave me the willies. She was so very inhuman it was terrifying; she was capricious, emotional, dishonest, and impulsive. She was cruel, sometimes without meaning to, sometimes just acting as she had learned from the other gods. I never doubted that she didn't play by mortal rules, and that was scary. While she was the most present member of the pantheon, her stories and the stories of humans showed the other gods to be just as inhuman. I've read a lot of reviews complaining that new Greek mythology-inspired novels whitewash the gods. This one certainly doesn't.

Reading Alcestis was an intense experience. Beutner's writing and voice drew me in, and her story was deeply emotional and beautiful. I loved, loved, loved that the conflict of Alcestis and Persephone's relationship was not that they were both women but that they were married women, and yet at the same time that Alcestis was aware of her husband's infidelity - that through her very complacency, not through speaking out, she highlighted the cultural misogyny to which she was subjected.

I received this book through the First Reads program and I'm so very glad I did.

Ksenia says

So the book follows this myth very closely. I wasn't totally familiar with the original myth so I had to go and read about it. The part that the author focuses on during the last part of the book is Alcestis' time in the Underworld. Now, I was wholly enjoying everything about the book while I was reading it, but when it got to those three days spent in the Underworld, I felt a slight disconnect. But first....

I really liked the fact that the gods were part of the mortal world, and that they weren't just some deities that people worshiped and you never got to see them as being living and breathing beings. Here, the gods are real. Alcestis' grandfather is actually Poseidon and the god that Admetus loves so much? That would be Apollo. And who takes Alcestis down to the underworld? That would be Hermes.

The author did a wonderful job of describing the Underworld by having Alcestis explore it while trying to find her sister that she loved, and who had died years earlier.

So what was my disconnect in the Underworld? Mainly it was the relationship between Alcestis and Persephone. I just didn't get it. I didn't see it. I couldn't fathom why Alcestis would fall in love with the Queen of the Underworld. Was I missing something? Cause I thought there was something missing there! Persephone came off as very manipulating at times. I could understand why she was very hesitant to tell Alcestis where her sister was (since she knew that the sister would never recognize Alcestis, and it would be too painful for Alcestis to witness). But that still didn't make me like her.

And Hades? I couldn't get him either. It was like he was Persephone's lapdog or something. And not the all-powerful Lord of the Underworld I had imagined him to be.

Despite this, if the author does write another book though, I think I will check it out anyway, especially if it deals with another little-known myth.

Iset says

This is definitely one of those books where I have to honestly tell my fellow reader: Alcestis is a very subjective book, and I can equally see someone hating it as loving it.

I wasn't too interested in it myself at first, and struggled my way through the tedium of early chapters, which, if anything, struck me as very Young Adult. What I mean by that statement is that I've read a lot of Greek myth novels in recent years which usually attempt to retell the tale from a young female character's perspective, eliminate the fantasy elements in favour of something more plausibly historical, but which usually end up far too simplistic and fluffy, shying away from the full impact of the horrors these ancient myths could contain and reducing the complex humanity of the characters to teenage girls either stamping their foot at their arranged marriage (decidedly anachronistically, for bronze age Greece) or mooning over their suitors. I felt like I'd stepped into another of those novels, and my interest was waning.

My first clue that this was something different was the fact that the gods make appearances. So this wasn't another novel trying to do a historical retelling. However the fantasy elements remained on the fringe until halfway in, when a certain event sets everything in motion. Suddenly, it felt like I was transported into a completely different sort of story. The writing becomes almost lyrical, the setting and characters alien and utterly mesmerising. I was transfixed. I think you could justifiably say that this book has a dark romance at its core, one that pulls on you just as much as it repels. Again – I warn my fellow readers that one's reaction to this really will vary. I can clearly see, from some of the other reviewers, that some people were switched off completely by this. I don't condone (view spoiler) but I don't condemn the book either: to me, it seemed plain that the author intended to create an outlandish experience rife with emotion, something that is supposed to be thought-provoking and get us to consider how repulsion and attraction mix, dread and desire. I can't say her gods are exactly as I have imagined the Greek pantheon over the years, but what Beutner does

do successfully in my opinion, is bring to life beings who are not familiar in their humanity at all, but instead fascinatingly and terrifyingly alien – and then loop it back round to us by exploring the aspects of ourselves we'd rather not think of as human at all, but if we're honest with ourselves, are just as much a part of our make up as the traits we trumpet so proudly.

I'll be thinking about this story for some time.

8 out of 10

Kelly says

The ancient Greeks held up Alcestis as a model of wifely devotion. Her husband, Admetus, was spared from death on the condition that someone else die in his place. When Admetus' relatives and friends refused, Alcestis volunteered herself and made the journey to the underworld, but was later rescued by Heracles. In her debut novel, a poignant literary fantasy, Katharine Beutner fleshes out the figure of Alcestis, and gives her a backstory that helps explain her willingness to sacrifice herself.

Beutner's Alcestis has always lived in the shadow of death, starting with her mother's death in childbirth. Then, as a child, Alcestis loses her favorite sister, Hippothoe, to asthma. When her father remarries, Alcestis forges a bond with her new stepmother and later with her half-sisters, but she still misses Hippothoe terribly and sneaks out of the palace to visit her grave whenever she can. Later, Alcestis marries her cousin Admetus, but their wedding night is marred by a near-fatal encounter with poisonous snakes. Admetus is spooked, and between that and his love for the god Apollo, he's a little distant from his wife. Yet Alcestis has never seen any reason to hope for more from a marriage.

Beutner paints a vivid picture of a world where women have few rights. This is not done in a heavy-handed way; Beutner's portrayal of ancient Greek misogyny is all the more horrifying because of the matter-of-fact way it is presented. A wedding celebration that continues in its merry dancing even when an unmistakable scream pierces through the music; a father praying for his newborn child but never bothering to name the wife who just bore the child, and pointedly not mentioning to the gods that the baby is female; these things serve to remind us that Alcestis' world is not our own. And Alcestis is a product of her times. She knows she is considered property to be handed from one man to another, and she doesn't like it, but she doesn't develop an anachronistic grrl-power attitude.

This is also a world where gods walk among men and women. Alcestis herself is the granddaughter of Poseidon, whom she has met only once: *"Mostly I remembered Poseidon's thick sea-clogged smell, and the way his black hair lay dull and damp against his skull, and the pattern of drips he'd left on the floors, like stories marked out in the stars."* Gods drift in and out of human lives, siring children and breaking hearts, not knowing (or not caring) what havoc they wreak.

When Alcestis descends into the underworld, she too is swept into a divine love affair, but an unusual one; she becomes the plaything of the goddess Persephone. Persephone is not likable, but I think that's the whole point. You can love gods, and fear them, but you don't do anything so cozy and mundane as *like* them.

I also think, though I may be stretching, that Persephone's mercurial personality may be a reflection on the nature of storytelling. Persephone is sometimes said to have been claimed by Hades against her will, but

sometimes it's said that she loved him, and sometimes that she was the dominant one in the relationship, and so Beutner's Persephone is made up of all these different versions of herself.

Beutner's underworld is haunting. She does a great job of incorporating the existing mythology and of using her prose to set a scene both beautiful and utterly alien: "*We flew, the god and I, wrapped in his fluttering cloak. The space around us was uniform as a cloud, but I saw shapes and patterns below us, patches of darkness, ribbons of gloom, glints of metal or stone. Lines of strange-colored light. I felt as if I were trying to make out the floor of the sea by looking through deep water.*" Later, when Alcestis meets some of the shades who live in the underworld, there are some moments that will break your heart.

Speaking of heartbreak, *Alcestis* left me with a mixture of pensiveness and sadness. Despite the sadness, I was glad to have followed her on her journey, and to feel like I "knew" this mythological character better than I did before. I do wish Beutner had written more about Alcestis' daughter, though! I did some poking around after finishing the book, and there isn't really anything known about this girl, but I wanted to see Beutner flesh her out and show how she lived up to what Persephone said about her. (Maybe in a later book? Please?)

I think anyone who liked Jo Graham's *Black Ships* will find *Alcestis* rewarding, and so will anyone who liked Ursula K. LeGuin's *Lavinia*. *Alcestis* seems to exist in a middle ground between these two novels in terms of abstractness; I'd say it's more abstract than Graham's work and less abstract than LeGuin's. I recommend it to readers who enjoy retellings of myth from the female perspective, and readers who are looking for a blend of fantasy and literary fiction.

Hannah says

Perhaps I didn't read closely enough, but it took me a few chapters to realize that the gods Alcestis spoke of were actually real and not metaphorical. A lot of things described in the book were hard for me to imagine for some reason. Not a lot of action happens, but Alcestis thinks a lot about the things going on around her and has a strange obsession with her sister.

I didn't know the myth of Alcestis, so about 2/3s through the book, I thought *Whoa, this can't be right*. When I looked up the myth, I noticed that the author did take some liberties with Alcestis's myth, especially the underworld part. And it was at the underworld part that my brain reacted with "WTF just happened. Nope. NOPE. NOPE. NOPE. NOPE. NOPE. NOPE."

This is the type of book that you read to people and then discuss with them afterwards. You make it very clear that Persephone behavior is unacceptable. She is an abuser and should be left and/or sent to therapy. I don't care if she is a goddess. I don't care if she is a woman. Persephone's behavior is unacceptable.

Some people may think, "Oh, it's so sweet that she wanted to show her love before Alcestis turned into a shade. Oh, it's so touching Persephone will always remember even though Alcestis forgets." Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Can we go back to the part where Persephone pretty much rapes her and abuses her power to take advantage of Alcestis and keeps secrets from her? 'Cause I really just can't deal with that part. That's the absolute reason why I rated this book as a one-star book. There is nothing romantic about someone who violates your will. There is nothing loving about someone holding her power over your head. This is just not ok.

Alcestis even claims that she could've refused Persephone. Yeah, but I don't think Persephone would've stopped if Alcestis refused. I think the fact that Persephone pins down Alcestis arms shows that Persephone didn't plan to stop.

The fact that Alcestis calls this "love" is what makes me really angry. When someone nearly rapes you, that's not love. That's oppression and a violation of your self. I don't care if it's man-man, man-female, or female-female, rape is rape, and it's not ok. It's *really* unfortunate that Alcestis couldn't find someone better than Persephone. Whether they're dating men or other women, women need healthier relationships than those displayed in this book.

Lisa says

I'm loving the books I'm reading about women in mythology telling their "own" stories, first Lavinia and now Alcestis. Alcestis is the archetypical good and loyal wife, famous for sacrificing herself so her husband wouldn't die. In this version Alcestis is a very complex character, driven not so much by love for her husband but other reasons, including wanting to see her long dead sister. While she is in the underworld, she also falls for the goddess Persephone, Queen of the underworld. A very interesting read.

Sheila says

I just received an autographed copy of this from the author through Goodreads First Reads. Thank you Katharine!

I entered to win this book because I love reading about Greek mythology. But as much as I enjoy learning the stories of the gods and the mortals, usually the writing of Greek mythology is very dry, and often hard to follow. I enjoy learning, but often have to force myself to actually read it.

But then comes Katharine Beutner's Alcestis. Greek mythology written as a thoroughly enjoyable, easily readable, and totally believeable novel! What a great idea! Since Alcestis is a bit of a lesser character in mythology, I was not aware of her story ahead of time. But I did look her up on Google, and got the one paragraph synopsis of her tale. But this book fleshes the whole story out wonderfully. And Ms. Beutner's writing style makes all of the characters, both the mortals and the gods, come to life! When Apollo makes an appearance, you actually believe this god could just be appearing in the room, as the story leading up to it was so believable and real life. Even Alcestis' 3 days spent in the underworld with Hades and Persephone is facinating. I've never really spent time imagining what the underworld of Greek mythology is really like, but this is a huge, detailed part of this story, and it is told and described wonderfully.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys learning about Greek mythology, and also to anyone who enjoys a good historical novel. And I hope Ms. Beutner will consider writing more books of this genre. If other characters from Greek myths could have their stories written as novels, I would definately read them.

Liza Gilbert says

The beginning of this Greek myth of 16 year-old Alcestis, who dies in order to save her husband, is enjoyably visceral. In some ways, I was reminded of HBO's Rome. Beunter did a nice job with the historical details, and I felt fairly sunk into the story early on. Descriptions of food, place, smells, and touch were placed throughout the text without going overboard.

I enjoyed the first half of the book, but then things started to unravel and the quality of the writing went downhill. Beutner's depiction of the underworld was distressingly forgettable, and I have some serious qualms about how Hades, Persephone, and other gods were portrayed. Usually when I think of Persephone, I don't immediately think psychopathic sex-maniac. Heracles (Hercules), who plays a heroic role in the tale, is described as "meek and ponderous as a cow" (pg. 248).

For an author who did a fair amount of research to get the history "right," I find the treatment of some of the other deities to be off. If she had wanted to tell an alternative history, that would have been one thing. But the vast majority of the tale is told from a "straight" history perspective, and then, suddenly, Heracles of the Twelves Labors of Heracles is portrayed as "meek and ponderous as a cow." Blech.

After Alcestis hits the underworld, her character changes severely. Granted, death will do that to a person, but the rest of the tale falls apart because Alcestis doesn't really have a core.

To top it all off, the novel has one of the more disappointingly abrupt endings I have read in a while. I felt like I put all this work into reading the book only to have the ending fail to, well, end.

Lastly, and this is my own personal beef with Soho Press ~

Some of us actually do know a little bit about Classicist painters. If Soho Press doesn't want to give credit for the art on the cover, that's their own issue, but some of us will recognize it as a John William Godward called Ophelia. If you're going to use a painting of a famous woman in literature on the cover of a book about a famous woman in literature, you might want to make sure that they are 1) actually the same woman, or 2) similar in theme. Granted, a proper discussion of the similarities and differences between Alcestis and Ophelia would take a bigger forum than this, but it's a bit off-putting from the beginning of the book to think Soho Press would assume that all readers don't know their art AND don't know their literature.

Jane says

Started out great, giving Alcestis' backstory while growing up and was good through her marriage, but I lost her when we got to Hades and her adventures there. I skimmed most of it set in Hades, then finished up. Her dealings with Persephone were not believable and made me uncomfortable. I enjoyed most the author's comments at the back. Cover misled me; such an atmospheric cover made me eager to read the story.

Tara Chevrestt says

This falls into the fantasy genre, I think. I normally read historical fiction, but my interest in Greek mythology caused me to pick this up. I have kept my personal tastes in mind while writing this review.

The first half of this novel is wonderful. Readers meet Alcestis, grand daughter of Poseidon, god of the sea. Alcestis's mother died birthing her and her father is a cruel man who really has nothing to do with his daughters. Therefore, Alcestis grows attached to her sisters, and one in particular, Hippothoe. When Hippothoe dies of what nowdays would be called an asthma attack, Alcestis must overcome her grief and while doing so, she comes of age for marriage. A persistant suitor wins her hand thanks to the god Apollo.

Alcestis marries and discovers her husband and Apollo, the sun god, have more than a mere god and mortal relationship. An even bigger surprise is in store for her when Hermes comes to take her husband to the Underworld (land of the dead) and Alcestis goes in his place.

The second half takes place in the Underworld, the land of three headed dogs and gates with minds of their own. Here, Alcestis begins a cat and mouse game with Persophone, goddess of the Underworld. They begin a lusty and often hateful relationship. What I did not like about the last half of the book is everyone begins speaking in riddles. It takes poor Alcestis forever to find her dead sister. Or will she find her at all?

A good debut.

Tjaša says

Beautiful.

Emeline says

Well, this certainly stirred some... mixed reactions from me, to say the least.

This book starts off very sweet. I love seeing the depth and intensity of Alcestis' relationships with each of her sisters, how their care for each other differs but they still all feel like nuanced and real enough characters to really fit together as a family. That alone was a really great part of the book.

I'll admit, though, from the start the book was a slow one. Slow to the point of me putting the book aside and not going back to it for *days*. Every time I saw it lying there on my shelf, I was torn between knowing it was a WLW read and knowing it was taking an agonizingly long time to get to the real action of the story!

But then, finally, I did go back. And you know what?

It really picked up.

Pace-wise, yes the book does span years, from Alcestis' childhood through to her being a young woman, but the tone of the writing really seemed to improve after the first couple of chapters, and as much as I'm conflicted over the rest of the book, I can't deny that it certainly kept me turning pages. Weak beginning, sure, but the writing does get better.

Alcestis is also a really interesting character. As a kid, it's hard to really get a read on her, to get what she's like, but over time, she just becomes this... sorta quietly powerful woman. If that makes sense? Living in a majorly restrictive society, it would have been very difficult for her to *really* rebel, but she found a kind of

power in the life she had. And I really admire that.

Her entire wedding scene was also gorgeously written. Really, there are some gems in this book, and that scene was absolutely one of them. I love, as well, that her husband turned out to be this gentle, shy, forgetful man who's flawed, yes, but very human and very natural feeling. I actually find it pretty sad that for me, the most compelling relationship in this book *by far* was that between Admetus and Apollo! I pick up this book on the basis of queer women love, only to find that Alcestis' husband is bisexual and in love with a god, and honestly, I'd read miles of that love. I don't even have the words for what it was, it was just so beautiful and tragic to read about.

Sad, because compared to Admetus and Apollo, Alcestis and Persephone's relationship was downright disturbing. It was *horrifying*. And yet only ever framed as some dark, alluring, ultimately amazing and beautiful love! I'm sorry, but WHAT??! In what fucked up universe is their love - if it can even be called that, I'm sorry, but I'm calling bullshit on that front - something to be celebrated?!

Okay. As fucked up as Persephone is, I was all about her dynamic with Hades. That was amazingly done, and I love how the author treated their relationship. It was a thousand times fucked up, but like, actually *acknowledged* as fucked up, and fucked up in the kind of way that you can read and not feel like you've been tainted at the end.

Because Persephone's interest in *Alcestis*? SO. GROSSLY. FUCKED. UP.

Bearing in mind that these two only know each other for THREE DAYS, that should already be a sign that any affection they have for each other is unlikely to actually be as amazing and earth-shattering as this book would like to make out. Next, Persephone really doesn't seem to have any real reason for her interest. Literally, she seems to base her attraction solely on "i dunno, you're pretty" and "DESTINY!!". She never actually explains that destiny, just throws the word in like it sounds suitably romantic, and moves on.

Like. I'm sorry, I know love at first sight is real (in very few cases, but all the same), but "idk" is the weakest lame-ass excuse for love or even lust that I've ever heard. If you're going for love at first sight, then bloody well put the work in. Don't be so astoundingly lazy as to literally have neither character even KNOW what's pulling them together. You want to make it destiny? *Explain* that destiny. For god's sake, that shouldn't have to be said.

And that's not even the worst of it. Not only is their initial attraction based in practically nothing, but their actual 'love'? As this book would choose to see it? Is founded in Persephone literally *raping* Alcestis. Trapping her in some garden prison that Alcestis literally cannot turn away from or exit once she's inside, and then Persephone pins her down with magic and rapes her.

And then they're in love.

That is just... It's so profoundly disturbing I don't even know how to describe it. I just. I can't.

Like... Somehow it's okay because Alcestis enjoys it? And then the author literally ignores her own canon, as Alcestis later thinks to herself that she "could have" tried to fight Persephone off but she didn't. And I just. I.

SHE DID! SHE LITERALLY DID! SHE YELLED AT PERSEPHONE TO STOP, AND SHE WAS PHYSICALLY INCAPABLE OF STRUGGLING BECAUSE PERSEPHONE WAS ON TOP OF HER AND HOLDING HER DOWN WITH MAGIC.

JUST BECAUSE SHE CAN'T FIGHT, OR DOESN'T FIGHT, THAT DOES NOT MEAN SHE WANTED IT. DOES VERBAL DENIAL OF CONSENT NOT FUCKING COUNT ANYMORE? DOES A NATURAL BODILY REACTION STOP IT BEING RAPE?

I should have stopped reading at that point. But I thought the book was going to have Alcestis recognize Persephone for the emotionally manipulative, literal rapist and abuser that she was. And that never happened. No, instead, they just ultimately turn out to be in ~absolute, amazing soulmate love~ and they cry in each other's arms when Hercules has the audacity to want to rescue Alcestis.

And *then*, the book tries to make off like Alcestis has become empowered by the assault. That, because her husband couldn't please her that much, it was perfectly fine that a woman raped her and made her think that the abuse was love. The entire ending of the book is thoroughly ruined by what led to it. Alcestis finds real power when she returns to Admetus, and it could have been such a powerful ending, such a *moving* development for her character. But no, the author just had to go and kill all that with trying to pass off violent assault and abuse as true love, just because they're two women.

Fuck that. Women deserve so much better than that.

Nikki says

I'm torn on this one. It was spellbinding, but in a soft, dusty way -- Alcestis as a character is too obedient for most of her life to have any colour to her. The bit in the Underworld is still quite colourless, quite literally, except for Persephone. I was actually more interested in the relationship between Hades and Persephone than that between Persephone and Alcestis. I wanted to understand them, what made them tick, what made them volatile.

I understand that there's actually a degree of historical accuracy here to way a real Alcestis would've lived, just with the gods treated as a rational part of everyday life as well, but she seems so meek and resigned -- until she's in the Underworld. I can appreciate the liberation of a female character from a stifling traditional role that must have been so flattering to the men in that male dominated world, and it makes sense it could happen in the Underworld, where the rules of life don't apply.

I guess in summary, I just didn't fall for it. There were some lovely sections, gorgeous imagery, and there was some interesting interplay between characters, but all in all it didn't work for me.

Mely says

From <http://coffeeandink.dreamwidth.org/10...>

Review copy provided by the agent.

For years I've loved the historical novels of Mary Renault, and for almost as many years I've longed for versions of them that centered on women. The apparent effortlessness of the world-building in Renault's rich recreations of Classical Greece is matched only by the elegance of her prose and the fascinating obliquity of her characterization; she is one of English's great masters of textual negative space. In her books, what isn't

said or what's almost said is as significant as what is. Her major flaw as a writer -- as great, unfortunately, as any of her virtues -- is her extraordinary misogyny. Most of her early contemporary novels from the 1930s and 1940s are unsettling and subversive takes on the "nurse romance": the work is hard if sometimes worthwhile; the hospitals are full of internal politicking and bullying, sexual and otherwise; there is an uneasy struggle with sexuality and Platonism, in which erotic love appears (as it would in the historical novels) as a degradation from a purer and unconsummated affection. Women are sometimes goddesses and sometimes monsters and occasionally helpmeets to male geniuses; they can never hope to match male ambition or accomplishment. Male and female homosexuality are both depicted sympathetically, but the relationships between men always trump the relationships between men and women, as the relationships between men and women always trump the relationships between women; many critics have described *The Friendly Young Ladies/The Middle Mists* as an account of a lesbian couple, a reading which unfortunately ignores that the majority of the book concerns the relationship between one of the women and her male mentor/hero/crush. He is, of course, a better a writer than she could ever hope to be. On the whole, I prefer the historicals, where women are more or less invisible.

So I can't be particularly objective about Katharine Beutner's first novel, *Alcestis*, in which the ideal wife of Greek myth, who loves her husband so much she agrees to take his die in his place, becomes the lover of Persephone for the three days she dwells as a shade in the Underworld. It is so exactly what I have always wanted some book to be.

In Beutner's retelling, Alcestis has been familiar with death since birth, and yet its sting never grows less: her mother dies giving birth to her, her beloved elder sister dies in childhood, her stepmother risks death with every pregnancy, her brothers risk death with every journey. Life is a series of losses, even if not fatal ones: another sister is traded off in marriage, never to be seen again, a future Alcestis knows awaits her. All that Alcestis can keep is her secrets, and even those are a kind of lack, a forced hiding from power: "I would marry, but I could never reveal to a man what was damp and hungry in me, not like these girls, these laughing children, destined to be shepherds' wives or sailors' mistresses, to die bearing or beaten or old. I leaned against the wall and I felt the skin of my inner thighs brush, the dry slide of hot skin and tiny hairs." (p. 37) Alcestis sees, sometimes, brief chances to escape the limitations or fulfill the losses of her life: the love of her kind and handsome husband Admetus, the seduction by glorious Persephone, the chance to meet again with her sister Hippothoe in the lands of the dead. But these all prove illusory, the gods selfish and violent beyond human understanding, and death a chasm that can't be crossed even by the dead.

The book is beautifully and thoroughly centered in women's experiences, with particular attention to the bonds between women: between sisters, between daughters and mothers and stepdaughters and stepmothers, and between mortal women and immortal goddesses. Both the rich and rivalrous bond between Alcestis and her sister Pisidice and the strong and sweet bond between Alcestis and her sister Hippothoe are echoed in various ways in Alcestis' relationship with Persephone; Alcestis can see her future in her stepmother's treatment, in her husband's fearful and enthralled love of the god Apollo. She is most like and most unlike Persephone, who rules in Hell the way no human woman rules in Greece; except, perhaps, in moments of desire or strength of will, and even those human women pay for in the end, when women's strength is taken as the weakness and shame of men.

I've focused on what Adrienne Rich would call the continuum of lesbian existence in the book (cf. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"), but *Alcestis* also explores a gorgeous sexual fluidity: Alcestis' desire for Admetus is real, perhaps realer than any other connection they have with each other. If it's not unaffected by their fears and their social roles, it is at least something like a feast of misrule, where they can reverse the usual rules if not escape them.

If I have any complaint, it's that the overall tone of the book is so cool. Alcestis is so predisposed to mourning that it sometimes feels like loss cannot actually touch her, as if all her emotions are separated from her by a layer of grey cotton or the knowledge of death. But it's hard to call that a flaw when it may very well be deliberate; this is a tale, after all, told from beyond the Styx.
