

ZEST

REVIEW

# An ancient story of revenge, made new again

By Alyson Ward

Colm Tóibín's "House of Names" is full of betrayal and deception, rage and retaliation. It's an ancient Greek story of palace intrigue, but it feels as fresh as newly spilled blood.

The book retells the story of Agamemnon and his wife, Clytemnestra, who incite a loop of family infighting in which one killing leads to another, then another, destroying all.

The Irish author (he wrote "Brooklyn" and "Nora Webster") will be in Houston on Monday to discuss "House of Names," the final reading of the season in Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. The event is sold out, but a livestream is available.

First, a note to readers who don't know or care about Greek mythology: It doesn't matter. Tóibín said he intended to write a novel that wouldn't require background knowledge of the ancient Greek stories. "You don't have to say, 'Oh my god, I don't know anything about this story — how can I read this book?'"

He started with the

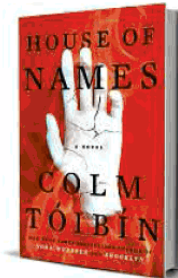
original texts — Aeschylus' "The Oresteia," the plays of Sophocles and Euripides — but Tóibín added some of his own characters, motives and relationships to the basic narrative. His story is simultaneously classic and new.

From the beginning, "House of Names" is urgent and violent: It starts with an account from Clytemnestra herself.

"I have been acquainted with the smell of death," she announces, then launches into her story, a 70-page fountain of bile that is, ultimately, the most arresting section of the book.

Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, summoned Clytemnestra and their daughter Iphigenia, telling them he had arranged for Iphigenia to marry the handsome warrior Achilles. When mother and daughter arrived, ready for a wedding, they discovered they'd been tricked: Agamemnon was actually planning to sacrifice his daughter so the winds would change direction and the Greek army could set sail for Troy.

As Iphigenia dies before a chanting crowd, Clytemnestra is so filled with rage



**'House of Names'**

By Colm Tóibín  
Scribner, 288 pp., \$26

**Author appearance**

Colm Tóibín will discuss and sign "House of Names" as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Ave. Tickets are sold out; watch a livestream at [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org).

that she vows revenge — and, in fact, when Agamemnon returns from war, she's waiting with a knife to slit her husband's throat.

"I would be waiting for him, all smiles," she says. "The gurgling sound he

would make when I cut his throat became an obsession."

Clytemnestra turns her anger into a cool resolve, taking palace prisoner Aegisthus as her lover and co-conspirator. Her remaining children, daughter Electra and son Orestes, soon learn that her anger is not merely righteous; she is not to be trusted.

Tóibín presents the story from alternating viewpoints: When Clytemnestra is quiet, we learn the story of Orestes, who is kidnapped and taken from the palace to live in exile. We then hear from Electra, who plots her own course with the grim knowledge that her mother and Aegisthus are her enemies.

"I should have had her join me in my rage," Clytemnestra reflects later. "Instead, I left her free to have her own rage, much of it now directed against me."

The design of this web is both clean and complicated; the only certain knowledge is that no one in the family should get too comfortable or certain. One begins to think that Iphigenia, who died quickly after merely one betrayal, might have had it easy.

"The mother thinks she's powerful," Tóibín said of his

Clytemnestra. "The mother thinks she's the one who is running things around here — without realizing that, in fact, her daughter is strategic and her son will do anything. That's a lethal combination."

The story may be ancient, but Tóibín was inspired to write "House of Names" by events of the 21st century. Civil war in Syria, Libya and elsewhere — not to mention the ever-roiling Israeli-Palestinian conflict — has made him think about "the idea of violence as a spiral," an unending cycle in which each deadly act is retaliation for something else.

"If I'd been writing this novel in the aftermath of the second World War, I think it would be a different book," he said. But today, in spots around the world, he sees that ancient rhythm of spite and revenge that never ceases.

"It's very much a novel of civil war," Tóibín said. "It doesn't deal with the Trojan War. It deals with the intimate business of what happened at home, when they started to murder each other."

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