

Sweet Muse of Madness: Book One in the Song of Greece Series

Anthony Giarmo

Chris Giarmo, Designer

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This dark, visceral, intriguing novel depicts life, war, and sex in the ancient Near East.

A dark and expansive tale that brings to life an ancient clash between indigenous religion and budding monotheism, Anthony Giarmo's *Sweet Muse of Madness* upends familiar mythologies, replacing them with lurid human dramas.

The novel first focuses on Phanes, Ilithyia, and their two daughters—residents of the Sacred Grove, who are treated as divine by the people of the Plain. Giarmo does a strong job of conveying the adamant devotion of the God-king and his wife, and of drawing out the competitive tensions between their two young daughters. Early on, the girls create nice dichotomy between innocence and ruthlessness, though these lines are blurred as the story progresses.

Plains mythology is introduced via hyper-descriptive instances of violence and sex, all rendered in connection to the Earth-Mother and birth and death cycles. Giarmo writes such scenes with intelligence, capturing the antiquated essence of earth-based mythologies. However, maintaining that diction throughout the many sex scenes sometimes gives them a campy quality. Euphemisms here—of snakes in gardens, vipers' nests, sweet seed, and grottoes—muddle the otherwise controlled tone.

Each night, Phanes, the God-King, runs the risk of being challenged for his divine kingship. His teenage daughters, meanwhile, are navigating their sexual awakenings. Into their narrow world comes a band of traders led by In-Shushinak, a lascivious priest. His internal struggles—between reverence and indulgence, between realms human and divine—are detailed. These explorations are extensive, though the author resists the introduction of either a moral or internal resolve. In-Shushinak and other characters often allow impulses to direct their spiritual sensibilities.

Hypsistos, In-Shushinak's alluring but dubious acolyte, has an encounter that borders on apotheosis, leading him to doubt his master's religious path. When the seductive daughters of the Godhead draw him into the Plains religion, he risks upending both worlds.

The Maddening, a night when anything goes, opens a space for death, destruction, and rebirth that is chronicled in a visceral way across several feverish, violent chapters and culminates in a loss of innocence for the novel's most virtuous characters. When the sun rises on a purged plain, it finds Hypsistos prepared to leave his benefactor behind—and to challenge Phanes for his divine seat.

From here, the novel moves quickly, focusing on power struggles, competition, and violence across the period in which the next generation emerges. It, too, is certain to face the same raw challenges of those before it. Curiously, a novel filled with ferocious events concludes with a sense of stasis.

Giarmo situates his novel in a largely prehistoric period and plays upon stories from the monotheistic canon. In-Shushinak, the fearsome but tortured priest, has connections to Abraham. Here, too, snakes in gardens lead to tenuous, even world-rending, situations. The competitive daughters of the God-King follow a path that evokes the

story of Rachel and Leah.

These connections deepen the novel's intrigue, though without abridging its own earthy and violent edge. The novel's most sympathetic characters prove subject to the brutality around them, and empathy may be hard to come by near the halfway point. *Sweet Muse of Madness* is an absorbing, if bleak, picture of life and religion in the ancient Near East.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November 10, 2013)

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