

95 and Not Dead Yet: Passion, War and a Runaway Lover in the Local Drug Store

by [Reg Green](#) (June 2024)



Enlèvement d'Hélène– Guido Reni, 1628-29

While waiting in line in the pharmacy one day this week, the

man behind me pointed at the library book I was carrying, *Helen of Troy*, and said "Be careful."

We both laughed and it was only when I thought about it later that I realized how unusual this was. Unlike my early years, people rarely talk to strangers these days about anything other than the blandest topics such as the weather—and then only if they tread carefully about global warming.

But this friendly man's willingness not to be bound by today's ever-changing rules was a confirmation of the theme that runs through Bettany Hughes' scholarly and imaginative book: that everyone knows, and has complex feelings about, a woman whose reckless elopement with her impassioned lover started the Trojan war and brought eternal fame or shame on the gods and mortals who became enmeshed in it. Hence the subtitle *Goddess, Princess, Whore*.

Echoes of the cruelty and fervor of this most bitter of mythical wars live on in the real world and, as any druggist will tell you, can still cause acid reflux in elderly gentlemen. As the prolific but now almost forgotten Anglo-Irish writer Lord Dunsany saw it:

*'And were you pleased?' they asked of Helen in hell.
'Pleased?' answered she 'when all Troy's towers fell
And dead were Priam's sons, and lost his throne?
And such a war was fought as none had known
And even the gods took part; and all because
of me alone! Pleased?
I should say I was!'*

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