Homer, [*The Odyssey*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Odyssey-Homer/dp/0140268863), trans. Robert Fagles (London: Viking Penguin, 1996)

Summary:

Over 2,700 years ago Homer constructed a tale of “waves and wars,” a quest following the epic feats of the Trojan War hero Odysseus. Whereas the *Iliad* deals with wrath, the *Odyssey* looks at wandering.

This epic poem translated by Robert Fagles into unrhymed verse has significant portions in first person, and two-thirds of the account is dialogue. It is a story that’s layered with stories, with speakers taking place over the decade following the Trojan War.

The *Odyssey* breaks from the epic norm and has characters from lower social classes, focuses on women, and tells a nonlinear story with the action occurring in multiple locations. Homer, mediated by Fagles, accomplishes the two functions of literature: to entertain and to preach.

Rather than reading the entire poem with a group, consider doing Books 9, 11, 19, and/or 23.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Fate. There is a complex balance between fate and human choice.
* Love & Loyalty. From the enduring love of Penelope to the actions of the loyal swineherd, individuals are fiercely dedicated to Odysseus.
* The Bed. “There’s our secret sign, I tell you, our life story.” Odysseus’ bed is built from the trunk of an olive tree and is immovable and enduring, like his relationship with Penelope.
* Temptation. Odysseus and other characters are faced with tests/temptations: the lotus, Circe, the cattle of the Sun, the Sirens’ song, and Penelope herself.
* Journey. The *Odyssey* is a story of a journey or quest, but more than one. Odysseus and Telemachus each have a parallel journey
* Fathers & Sons. Odysseus and Telemachus are only one father/son pair examined in the poem: Laertes and Odysseus, Poseidon and Polyphemus, Nestor and Pisistratus, Eupithes and Antinous are others.
* Disguises. Both Athena and Odysseus disguise themselves multiple times. Odysseus’ prideful revealing of his name to the Cyclops leads to Poseidon’s wrathful pursuit. Odysseus is also called a trickster, a “man of twists and turns.”
* Feasting. While humans enjoy many a feast, humans themselves (and cattle) are feasted upon.
* Hospitality. “Treat your guest and suppliant like a brother.” Perhaps the *Odyssey*’s primary theme is hospitality; it’s a study of how hospitality is properly shown as well as grossly violated.

Discussion Questions:

1. Choose a passage and compare the Fagles translation to those by Robert Fitzgerald and Richmond Lattimore.
2. Of those Odysseus spoke with in the underworld, which conversation made the deepest impression on you?
3. What is the effect of the *Odyssey’s* structure, such as Odysseus not appearing until Book V?
4. Most of the main characters lie. Is this deception presented as necessary?
5. In what ways could you relate Odysseus’ journey to the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert?
6. Odysseus achieves *nostos* (“homecoming”), but does he achieve *kleos* (“glory”)?
7. When, like Achilles, does Odysseus’ pride harm himself and/or others?
8. Is Athena’s intervention at the end a fitting conclusion?
9. Compare and contrast the opening sections of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. What do you notice?
10. What do you make of Fagles’ treatment of Penelope?