

### Further Reading after *Fireborne*: Plato's *Republic*

The revolutionary regime in *Fireborne* is inspired by the theoretical “Just City” imagined in Plato’s *Republic*. Dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., the *Republic* is the most famous of Plato’s dialogues about his teacher Socrates, discussing everything from psychology to political theory to the purpose of art. Most importantly for this guide, the *Republic* is also about worldbuilding: Socrates and his buddies get together to brainstorm the themes and set-up for a perfect society, almost as if they were planning a sci fi novel. The theme they want to explore is justice, but the worldbuilding they do for their imaginary city is *crazy*. Though they think they’re planning a utopia, pretty soon it starts to sound more like a dystopian YA novel.

This reading guide will explain the framework of the *Republic*, then look at key elements that have a counterpart in *Fireborne*’s Guardians, metal-coded class structure, and artistic censorship, particularly of epic poetry. Specific passages in the *Republic* will be referred to in the footnotes for those interested in closer reading.

#### Set up (Books 1-2)

Socrates runs into some buddies on his way home to Athens and they start arguing about what is justice. A couple of different definitions are proposed but all of them are

shot down by the pesky Socrates. Eventually someone gives up and points out that it's better to be unjust, anyway. The group of friends challenges Socrates to prove him wrong, and prove not only that it's better to be just – but that it's better to be just regardless of whether or not you get rewarded for it.

This prompts Socrates to introduce the analogy central to the *Republic*, comparing the human soul to a city. To study justice in the *soul*, Socrates decides, one must study justice in the *city* – so, he says, let's imagine a perfectly just city. That's when the moral philosophy transforms into political theory and the sci fi worldbuilding begins.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Guardians**

The first unusual element Socrates and his friends add to their imaginary city is *guardians*, who must be *spirited* warriors but also deeply *philosophical*. They should be trained from a young age, their education carefully monitored so that they excel physically and mentally, and they should be taught moderation in all things. They shouldn't be allowed or desire private possessions or money. And – most revolutionary of all, as far as Socrates' friends are concerned – Socrates decides that women should be allowed to be guardians, too. As their training progresses, the most excellent of these guardians will be further culled and prepared, not only to defend their city, but to rule it. These ruler-guardians, who spurn worldly pleasures, love justice, and guide the City with their reason, are also called *philosopher kings*.<sup>2</sup>

A noted difference between Plato's guardian program and the one in *Fireborne* is that, while in both cases guardians forswear families, the *Republic* also assigns them sexual partners on a rotating basis in what seems to be a proto-eugenics program, authorizes them to copulate only on specific holidays, and has them raise all offspring in common.<sup>3</sup>

### **Myth of the Metals, Testing, and Propaganda**

In order to ensure that the best and brightest become guardians, but no one else feels bad about the lot assigned to them in the city, Socrates argues that a mythology will have to be created to justify the class structure. They'll tell everybody that they're born with a different kind of metal inside them. Guardians have silver and gold inside them,

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<sup>1</sup> For the city-soul analogy, see 368d-e. (Stephanus reference numbers should work with most translations.)

<sup>2</sup> Guardians must be spirited and philosophical: 374e-376c.

Moderation: 402e-404.

No private property or money: 416d-417b.

Female guardians: 456a-457b

Ruler-guardians: 413c-414b.

Philosopher kings: 473d-e.

<sup>3</sup> The really weird parts of the guardian program are all in Book 5.

Sexual communism: 457c-458b.

Eugenics program & holiday-sanctioned sex: 459a-460b.

All offspring raised in common: 460b-461e

craftsmen and farmers have iron or bronze, etc. Children are tested to see what kind of metal they have inside them, so that a gold child can be found in a bronze family, and vice versa – ensuring that ability always matches station. The details of this testing are never elaborated. Socrates refers to the useful propaganda about metals as a *noble lie*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Censorship of Art**

From as early as book 2, Socrates zeroes in on the idea that art should be engineered to promote virtue in the City. Poetry that models unvirtuous behavior, or depicts bad people being rewarded, should be banned so that it doesn't corrupt its readers. But then he takes the argument one step further. *All* imitative poetry should be banned because, being imitative, it's a step removed from reality – in other words, lies. Socrates regretfully decides that the poets should be sent out of the City, even though he admits to have grown up loving Homer (and quotes it throughout the *Republic*). Poetry will be let back in as soon as someone can make a case that it's not only pleasurable but *beneficial*.<sup>5</sup>

As you might expect, these arguments for artistic censorship have long been some of the most controversial elements of the *Republic*. They tend not to sit well with artists or anyone who would argue that the job of art is, in some way, to depict truth, good and bad, rather than to instruct morality.<sup>6</sup> There is also a certain mystery around Plato's level of seriousness about these arguments and his own feelings about art. On the one hand, legend has it that as a young man, Plato wanted to be a playwright until he met Socrates and burned all his plays. And yet, the way he chose to record his teacher's wisdom was as dialogues, itself an imitative art – and by the logic of the *Republic*, deserving to be banned.

### **Fictional adaptations of the *Republic***

Ironically, for its condemnation of the literary arts, the *Republic* has been inspiring fiction for centuries. Most recently, its influence can be seen in science fiction ranging from episodes of *Star Trek* to Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* the novels of Pierce Brown. Few of these concern themselves with how such a regime would come into being in the first place; a notable exception is Jo Walton's *The Just City*, which takes literally Socrates' suggestion of gathering a bunch of ten year olds on an island and starting from scratch.<sup>7</sup> *Fireborne* makes a less literal interpretation, but is likewise concerned with what the first generation would make of such a regime shift.

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<sup>4</sup> Noble lie: 414c.

Myth of the metals: 414d-415d.

<sup>5</sup> Moral censorship of poetry: 377c-392b.

"Imitative art" defined: 392d-394c.

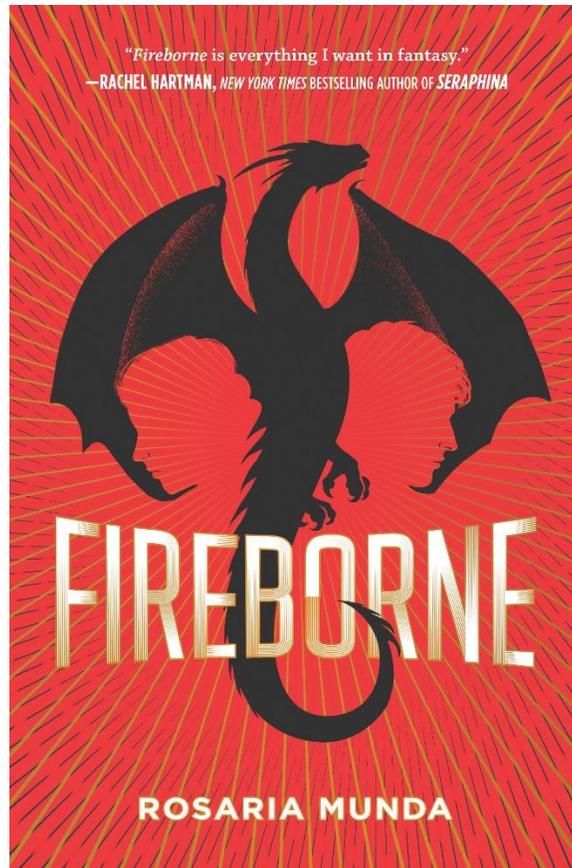
Poetry as removed from truth: 598b-c.

Expulsion of the poets: 398a-b; 606e-607c.

Defense of poetry called for: 607d.

<sup>6</sup> A notable example of such a counterpoint can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where Aristotle argues that poetry speaks to universal truths. Aristotle was Plato's student.

<sup>7</sup> Starting from scratch with ten-year-olds: 541a.



### Further reading after *Fireborne*: Virgil's *Aeneid*

Lee, Annie and others make frequent references in *Fireborne* to their city's cherished ancient epic known as the *Aurelian Cycle*. The majority of these references are adapted from lines in Virgil's *Aeneid*, a Latin epic from the first century B.C.E. about a surviving hero from the losing side of the Trojan War. This reading guide is intended for readers curious about the *Aeneid* and the connections between it and *Fireborne*, highlighting the lines shared between them. In footnotes, context is provided for each line in *Fireborne*, the Latin citation, and the citation in the Fagles translation.

#### Book 1

Aeneas and his comrades, Trojans who survived the fall of Troy, are shipwrecked in a storm after seven years of wandering. Aeneas is visited by his mother Venus, disguised, who takes him to Carthage and only reveals her true form as she departs — “*And as she turned, it was revealed by her tread that she was a goddess.*”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 6 of *Fireborne*, Annie's Dragontongue class gives her a good-luck card before her match with Power with the line: “*And as she turned, it was revealed by her tread that she was fireborne*” (143).

Latin: *Et vera incessu patuit dea* I.405

Fagles: “and her stride alone revealed her as a goddess” I.491

In the court of the Carthaginians, Aeneas meets Queen Dido, with whom he will have an ill-fated and short-lived love affair. Struck by the sorrows he has endured, Dido tells him at their first meeting: “By my own pain’s knowledge have I learned to comfort the sufferings of men.”<sup>2</sup> She then begs him to tell her the story of the fall of Troy and, reluctantly, he does.

## Book 2

Aeneas recounts the sacking of Troy, starting with the Trojans’ dubious decision to bring a giant wooden horse built by the Greeks inside their walls, and then describing the ambush that began in the night when the Greeks hiding inside the horse emerged and sacked the city. Aeneas survives because Hector, recently slain by Achilles, appears to him in his dream, urging him to flee. “Alas, flee, goddess-born, you and your family. Flee from the flames. The enemy has your walls, Troy falls in ruin from its height.”<sup>3</sup>

Aeneas goes on to recount his harrowing flight through the city as it is destroyed. In a particularly haunting section, Aeneas pauses in his narrative to address the ashes of the fallen Trojans directly, telling them that he would have earned his death alongside them, if the fates had let him have it. “To you, Trojan ashes and final flames of my own, I stand witness, I who have escaped neither arms nor any perils of the Greeks in your destruction, and if the fates had been such that I die, I testify I had earned this by my own hand.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 5, Julia tells Lee: “By my own pain’s knowledge will I comfort the sufferings of men” (131).

Latin: *Non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco* I.630

Fagles: “Schooled in suffering, now I learn to comfort those who suffer too” I.751-2

<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 10, the line from the *Aurelian Cycle* that Lee refuses to translate for Tyndale is: “Alas, flee, dragonborn, you and your family. Flee from the flames. The enemy has your walls, the City falls in ruin from its height” (265).

Latin: “*Heu fuge, nate dea, teque his,*” ait, “*eripe flammis. / Hostis habet muros; ruit alto a culmine Troja.*” II.289-290.

Fagles: “Escape, son of the goddess, tear yourself from the flames! / The enemy hold our walls. Troy is toppling from her heights.” II.364-5.

<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 12, when the *Aurelian Cycle* is burned, Lee remembers the lines:

“To you, ashes and final flames of my own, I stand witness  
I who have escaped neither peril nor pain in your destruction  
If it is our fate to die, then by my own hand let me earn it” (295).

Latin (II.431-434):

*Iliaci cineres et flamma extrema meorum,  
testor, in occasu vestro nec tela nec ullas  
vitavisse vices Danaum et, si fata fuissent  
ut caderem, meruisse manu.*

Fagles (II.538-41):

“Ashes of Ilium, last flames that engulfed my world—

### Subsequent Books

Aeneas' ill-fated love affair with Queen Dido spans books 3-4; his forward march to Rome, which he has been chosen by the gods to found, resumes in Book 5 and continues, despite various setbacks, through to the end of the epic. One of the most memorable of these later books is Book 6, where Aeneas goes down into the Underworld to meet the fallen heroes of the Trojan War and learn what the future has in store for his descendants and the Roman people. On the way, asking for directions from a seer, he is told that the famous words that the descent to Hades is easy, the return difficult – but that “*this is the work, this is the labor.*”<sup>5</sup>

### Additional quotation: The *Odyssey*

In chapter 18 of *Fireborne*, Lee tells Annie, “You have given life to me” (402). This is the only quotation in *Fireborne* intended as a reference to Homer rather than Virgil. These are the parting words that Odysseus gives Nausikaa, a princess who saves his life during his journey home. A play on words lost in English is that, while she refers to his life as “zoē,” he changes the root to “bios”, implying that she has not only saved his life – she gave him *human life*.

Greek: σὸ γὰρ μ' ἐβιώσαο, κοῦρη. VIII.468

Fagles' *Odyssey*: “You saved my life, dear girl” VIII.526

### Sources

Virgil, *The Aeneid*. Translation by Robert Fagles.

Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translation by Robert Fagles.

Munda, Rosaria. *Fireborne*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2019.

Original texts accessed on the Perseus Digital Library: [www.perseus.tufts.edu/](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/)

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I swear by you that in your last hour I never shrank  
from the Greek spears, from any startling hazard of war  
if Fate had struck me down, my sword-arm earned it all.”

<sup>5</sup> In chapter 8, at the Lycean Ball, when Dora Mithrides challenges Lee's knowledge of Dragontongue literature, he replies with a quote from the *Aurelian Cycle*: “This is our work; this is our labor” (207).

Latin: *Hoc opus, hic labor est* VI.129

Fagles: “there the struggle, there the labor lies” VI.152