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## **Remarkable New Novel Explores Women Warriors Descended from the Ancient Amazons**

*In AKMARAL, a nomad woman warrior of the ancient Asian steppes must  
make peace with making war.*

**WEST ORANGE, NJ** – Author Judith Lindbergh unearths the forgotten past in her latest novel, *Akmaral*, about a powerful woman who leads her people into battle on the ancient Eurasian steppes. The titular character Akmaral grows from an orphan in an isolated clan to the imposing leader of a great confederacy. But Akmaral is no fragile flower who must learn to toughen up. Like her ancestors, the legendary Amazon women of Greek mythology, she is destined for the battlefield from the day she is born.

Inspired by archaeological discoveries made across Central Asia from Ukraine to Mongolia and Siberia, *Akmaral* brings to life a time and people lost to history and breathes humanity into the provocative image of the woman warrior. At the same time, *Akmaral* is a deeply human story about a woman who struggles through tangled obligations of love and loyalty to her people.

“*Akmaral* grew out of one question,” Lindbergh says. “What would a woman like me fight and die for? The answer was clear: she would fight to protect her family.”

Lindbergh’s critically acclaimed first novel *The Thrall’s Tale*, about women in Viking Age Greenland, was called “historical fiction at its best” by The Philadelphia Inquirer and praised by Pulitzer Prize winners Geraldine Brooks and Robert Olen Butler.

“My passion is exploring wild, invincible landscapes and the people who lived in them. Whether it’s the Norse in Greenland or the Scythians of Central Asia, these cultures and traditions epitomize the resilience of the human spirit. They have important stories to tell, even though most people have never heard of them,” she says.

Lindbergh spent years diving deep into archaeology and history to uncover this extraordinary story of a matriarchal culture where women rode side by side into battle with men.

“Women really did ride and fight on the ancient Asian steppes. Archaeology proves that they died of battle wounds and were buried with daggers, arrows, and other weaponry. But I wanted to go beyond a study of artifacts and bones. I wanted to understand these women’s lives.”

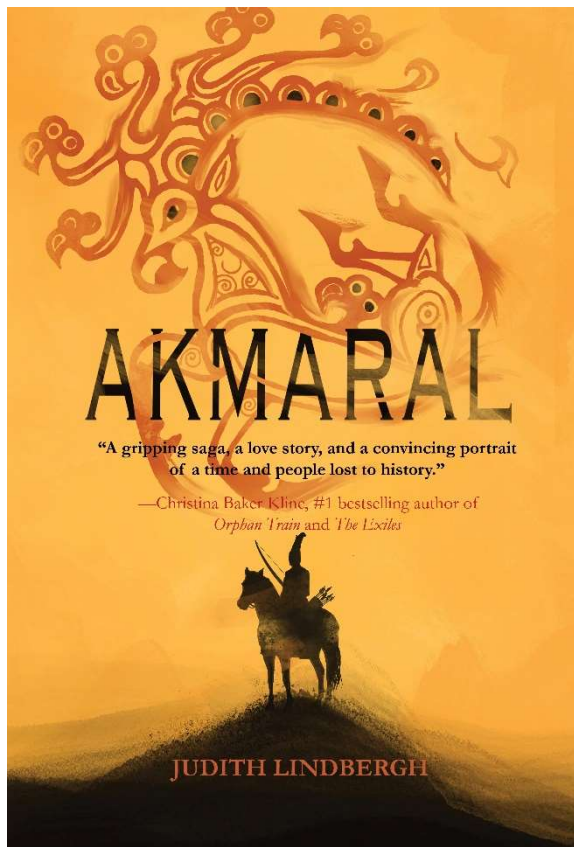
*Akmaral* is her answer to those questions.

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**Judith Lindbergh's** new novel, *Akmaral*, about a nomad woman warrior on the ancient Central Asian steppes, is forthcoming from Regal House Publishing on May 7, 2024. Her debut novel, *The Thrall's Tale*, about three women in the first Viking Age settlement in Greenland, was an IndieBound Pick, a Borders Original Voices Selection, and praised by Pulitzer Prize winners Geraldine Brooks and Robert Olen Butler. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including in Newsweek, Zibby Magazine, Next Avenue, Writer's Digest, Edible Jersey, Literary Mama, Archaeology Magazine, Other Voices, and *UP HERE: The North at the Center of the World* published by University of Washington Press. She also contributed to the Smithsonian Institution's

exhibition Vikings: The Norse Atlantic Saga and provided expert commentary on two documentary series for The History Channel. Judith received a 2024 Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. She is the Founder/Director of The Writers Circle, a New Jersey-based creative writing center where she teaches aspiring and accomplished writers from ages 8-80. <https://judithlindbergh.com/>



## **Akmaral**

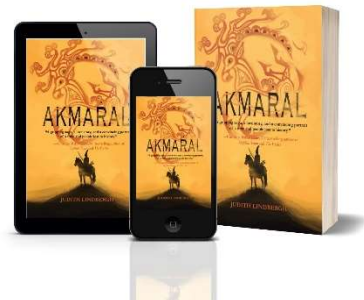
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Literary Historical Fiction



## Praise for *Akmaral*:



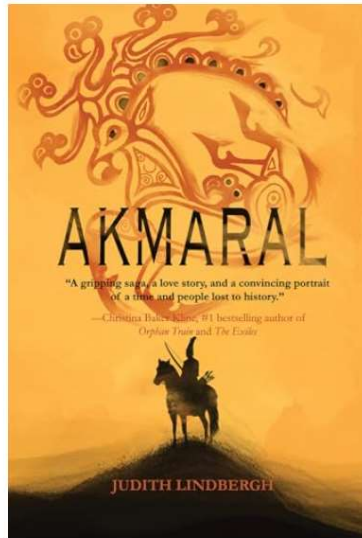
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### Akmaral

Judith Lindbergh. Regal House, \$19.95 trade paper (336p) ISBN 978-1-64603-469-7

Lindbergh (*The Thrall's Tale*) draws on Herodotus's *Histories* for a crackling novel focused on the lives of ancient Central Asian women warriors known as the Sauromatae, descendants of escaped Amazon captives. The story centers on its eponymous lead as she reflects on her crowning achievement: turning her people from "a disparate multitude of wandering herders" into a nation. Flashbacks to the future queen's childhood reveal that when she was five years old, a shaman prophesied she would become someone important. Though Akmaral grows up in a society of women fighters who serve Targitai, their warrior god, even her mother's combat prowess is no match for a group of depraved raiders whom Akmaral eludes by hiding under a yurt. As a young woman, she becomes romantically involved with two men: Erzhan, a fellow fighter and hunter who approves of her for having "sipped the enemy's blood"; and Timor, a peaceful Scythian prisoner whose story she gradually picks up as they learn each other's languages. Lindbergh brings her protagonist's ancient world to life with compassionate depictions of Akmaral's love interests and frank portrayals of the savagery around her—especially in Erzhan's brutal treatment of a young foe. Admirers of Laura Shepperson's *Phaedra* will be riveted. (May)

"Fraught with conflict both internal and external. Thoroughly imagined and vividly described... Fans of Madeline Miller and Natalie Haynes will relish how Lindbergh weaves fact and fiction to craft a gripping saga, a love story, and a convincing portrait of a time and people lost to history."

—Christina Baker Kline, #1 bestselling author of *Orphan Train* and *The Exiles*

"Meticulously researched, deeply imagined *Akmaral* brings the joy and hardship of a nomad woman warrior to vibrant, often aching life."

—Cathy Marie Buchanan, New York Times bestselling author of *Daughter of Black Lake* and *The Painted Girls*

"*Akmaral* delves deep into female power and confronts complex issues about womanhood, motherhood, and the sacrifices women make to protect those they love: issues as powerful today as they were in ancient times. If you love Madeline Miller's *Circe*, you must read *Akmaral*. Lindbergh delivers a breath-taking story filled with vivid characters, haunted landscapes, powerful battle scenes, and a love story you will not soon forget."

—Laurie Lico Albanese, award-winning author of *Hester*

“Magically immersive.... You will smell the sweat of the horses and feel the ache of a warrior who is also a mother and a lover. *Akmaral* transported me, night after page-turning night, to a world I would never have been able to experience otherwise.”

—Barbara Quick, author of *Vivaldi's Virgins* and *What Disappears*

“Akmaral may be one of the most fascinating warriors in literature.... Written with a wild poetry, the author brings to life a strong woman and her unforgettable story amid stark cliffs and green pastures. *Akmaral* is pure literary magic.”

—Stephanie Cowell, American Book Award recipient and author of *Claude & Camille: a novel of Monet* and *The Boy in the Rain*

**In an interview, Judith would be happy to talk about:**

- How raising rambunctious little boys led her to write a novel about “a woman making peace with making war.”
- Assumptions about women’s roles in society that we still struggle with today, many based the perspectives of the ancient Greeks, but contradicted by archaeology.
- The amazing burials that inspired the novel, including the Pazyryk Ice Maiden and Issyk “Golden Man” who is believed to actually be a woman.
- *Akmaral*’s nature-based cultural beliefs and practices, including shamanism, animism, and ancestor worship.
- The extraordinary history and landscapes of Central Asia from Ukraine to the Altai Mountains and Mongolia where traditions shown in *Akmaral* continue to exist today, including eagle hunting, living in portable tents called “yurts,” transiting long distances in search of pasture for animals, and annual *Naadam* festivals featuring wrestling, horse-racing, and archery competitions.
- The difference between historical fiction, mythological retellings, and “archaeological fiction” and how an author weaves all those facts into a novel.
- Judith’s “other” career as the Founder/Director of The Writers Circle, a NJ-based creative writing organization where she regularly teaches creative writing online and in-person to students age 8-80. (Visit <https://writerscircleworkshops.com/> for more information.)
- The importance of creativity and the value of the arts to inform the present, understand the past, and create the future.



**An Interview with**  
**JUDITH LINDBERGH**

**1. *Akmaral* takes place in Central Asia in 500 BCE. It's a really unfamiliar place and time. What inspired you to write about such an obscure topic?**

Obscure, yes, but fascinating! There is so much history and culture that people don't know anything about. I love to discover and share it through my novels. For *Akmaral*, I started with the Pazyryk Ice Maiden burial. She was discovered in Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains, a stunning landscape of high, lonely mountain pastures between the borders of Southern Russia and Northwestern China. It's the middle of nowhere, but just the kind of landscape that catches my breath and makes me fall in love. The find itself was extraordinary: a well-preserved woman's body buried in ice for over 2400 years. She was laid in a massive larch-wood coffin wearing a tall headdress decorated with rich gold ornaments. Six horses were sacrificed in her honor, their ornate felt saddlecloths still preserved by the ice. The Ice Maiden's body was covered with tattoos of wild animals, including a "flying deer" which is an important spiritual symbol for the horseback riding herders of far eastern Scythia. I discovered the connection between these horseback warriors and the Amazons of ancient Greek myth in my research. Herodotus tells that the Amazons joined with a group of Scythian warriors and eventually went off on their own to become the Sauromatae, my characters' cultural group. Then I read about the "Issyk Gold Man" found in Kazakhstan. Along with thousands of gold ornaments, the body was buried with weaponry, so archaeologists assumed that it was male. But more recent scholarship suggests that the warrior may have been a woman. Putting together these remarkable discoveries and details, I started to sense my woman warrior priestess Akmaral forming in my mind.

**2. You say that, at its heart, *Akmaral* is a story of loyalty, love, and motherhood. Can you explain what motherhood has to do with mounted Amazon warriors?**

The power or compulsion of motherhood is to nurture, care, protect. I experienced this feeling strongly when raising my sons. If anyone would have threatened them, especially when they were very young, I absolutely would have done whatever was necessary to protect them. The same is true for a small, vulnerable band of nomads, nurturing their families and herds on isolated mountain pastures. If threatened by another band—taking their grasslands, their animals, their children or their lives—what would they do? What would *you* do? For Akmaral's people, defensive and even offensive strikes were a necessary part of survival and a cultural obligation that all—including women—were required to participate in. Akmaral is trained from a very young age to protect and defend her people. She is only excused from her martial duties when she becomes a mother. This tracks closely with what Herodotus wrote about the Amazons, and what the archaeological record shows in female warrior burials. But later, as Akmaral matures through love and great loss, she discovers that the power and passion of motherhood extends to her entire people.

**3. *Akmaral* is based in ancient history, but you prefer to call your novel "archaeological fiction." What is the difference? And how do you turn all those facts into a novel?**

“Historical” means that there are written records of what happened in the past, whereas “prehistoric” refers to the time period before recorded history. There isn’t a lot of contemporary source material about the Scythians, and even less about my characters, the Sauromatae. Most of what’s come down to us is from Homer’s tales of the Trojan War in *The Iliad* or Herodotus’ *Histories* written around 430 BCE. But these ancient writers generally disparaged the wild, horseback riding Amazon warriors who were an aberration compared to the Greeks’ docile, house-bound, feminine ideal.

I had to dig into archaeology to discover who the Sauromatae really were. This involved picking through dense archaeological reports, reading about bones and burials and iron arrowheads and bronze blades to try to find a story. It’s always there; you find little tidbits—an interesting necklace buried beside a woman with a dagger or spearhead. Or a bronze mirror found with woman who appeared to be a priestess. That kind of discovery always makes me think.... Who was that priestess? What were their rituals and beliefs? Often artifacts can’t tell you, so I’d dive into folklore from the region, or reports of shamans (women and men) who still practice in these remote places. Along the way, I discovered traditions like horse-racing games used for courtship. I fit all these details and traditions with my characters and slowly a real story and world came into focus.

#### **4. There are many vivid scenes of hunting and battle in *Akmaral*. Did you have difficulty imagining your characters committing such savagery?**

It’s true. Writing those the battle scenes was a real challenge. I’m generally a pretty peaceful person. I do a lot of yoga, hiking, and meditation. So getting ready to kill a lot of people, even on paper, was hard! I’d put on some music, specifically a somber folk tune featuring traditional Tuvan throat singing of the Altai Mountains to set the proper atmosphere. The rumble of the voice and the slow, rising tension of the music was my way to prepare for battle and to embody Akmaral as she faced the same challenge. Akmaral isn’t bloodthirsty. She doesn’t want to kill. She doesn’t even want to become a leader. She does all that because she *must*—because she knows that it’s the only way to keep her people—her family—safe.

But there were other times when writing *Akmaral* that felt as natural as breathing. I love the outdoors, wide open spaces, horseback riding (though I’m not particularly skilled). I loved embodying the daily work of my characters and putting my own understanding of their lives to work. I loved learning how to build a yurt—at least in theory—and to make cheese by placing the curds on the roof to dry out in the cold sun, and how to fletch arrows using feathers and strong, flexible branches. I even practiced archery in my backyard—until I shot a hole through my neighbor’s brand new PVC fence! Luckily, my neighbor knew that I was doing research. He was very understanding.

#### **5. It’s been many years since you published a novel. What took so long?**

Yes, it’s been a startlingly long time since I published *The Thrall’s Tale*. Part of the reason is that I take a long time to write, especially given all the research. But part of it was also timing. An early version of *Akmaral* was completed in 2009, just when the Great Recession was causing massive changes in the publishing economy. My agent and editor simply couldn’t take a chance

on a story about such an obscure place and time. A few years later, I tried again, but the market was moving away from historical fiction. In fact, my agent at that time begged me to write something else, something she could sell. So I wrote a more commercial contemporary novel, which taught me a great deal about the range of my literary voice. Unfortunately, this new book still hasn't found a home. Publishing is very fickle and there are countless factors that go into a book getting published that the author and agent cannot control. I had almost given up on traditional publishing when a friend, Stephanie Cowell, told me about Regal House. She was also publishing a beautiful novel with them and thought they might like *Akmaral*. So I tried and it landed in just the right place. I'm honored and thrilled that it's finally found a home.

## **6. What have you been doing in the meantime?**

Between various versions of *Akmaral*, my contemporary novel, and a couple of other projects that ended up in a drawer, I realized that I needed a writing community to support me through the dry years. I had already started teaching creative writing in my area. Eventually that teaching grew into The Writers Circle, a creative writing community that I've been running since 2010. We have lots of fantastic teachers who are all published authors, too, and classes for writers from age 8 to over 80. I had no plan to start a business, but The Writers Circle grew of its own volition. I've sometimes struggled with the attention that it requires and how much time it takes away from my own writing. But then I discover how much our program means to so many students, especially to the young people who discover their own creativity and voices with us, and I realize that I've had a truly significant and positive impact on real people in my life. I'm grateful for everything that The Writers Circle has brought to me and all our of wonderful writing community.

## **7. What are you working on now?**

I have two projects in the works—one centering around a group of aging, independent, artistic women trying to find their relevance in a changing world, and the other a completely experimental novel or novella or *something* about the purpose and value of art in the heat of climate change. Both are in nascent stages and I'm not sure where either of them will go. Along with that, I'm writing a lot of short work to “cleanse my palate” and breathe new life into my creative soul.

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## Segment Ideas and Interview Topics for Judith Lindbergh

### Why Should We Care About Ancient History?

- Does the Russia/Ukraine conflict have ancient roots?
- What might the world have been like before there were borders, governments, and nations?
- Climate change and ancient conflict—what drove ancient people to move?
  - What risks for conflict do we face today in our changing climate?
- What can we learn from ancient people who had a more intimate connection with the natural world?

### How Creative Writing—and Creativity in General—Can Help Everyone from Kids to Adults

- As the Founder/Director of [The Writers Circle](#), Judith would discuss:
  - Her journey as a writer, but also through several creative careers, including dancer, actor, and photographer;
  - How her grounding in creativity helped her found The Writers Circle, a creative writing center based in New Jersey, in 2010;
  - The value of a writer's community for writing and much more;
  - How to find or found a writing community;
  - How The Writers Circle buoyed Judith through many years of struggle and small triumphs;
  - How a community of writers provides its own rewards beyond the elusive goal of publication.
- Judith would mention her own writing as part of the segment:
  - **What it takes to be an author:** As the author of two literary historical novels published eighteen years apart, Judith can speak personally about the persistence and commitment required to continue writing against all odds.

### Myth Versus Reality: Wonder Woman or The Woman King?

- Amazons and warrior women are more than comic book heroes. Archaeology proves that they were real. Judith would discuss:
  - Examples from archaeology that prove the legends of the Amazons in the Trojan War and other tales;
  - Myths and social assumptions about women in warfare or leadership;
  - How, when, and why women had leadership roles in ancient societies;
  - How a writer pieces together bits of bone, artifacts, and hefty academic research to create a novel about the ancient past.