

Dear Reader,

I am delighted to share with you my new book, *MEDUSA*, illustrated with extraordinarily powerful paintings by the fine artist, Olivia Lomenech Gill.

Most of us have an idea of who Medusa is – we think of her snakes, her death stare, the fact she will turn any man who looks at her to stone. Punished by Athena for ‘allowing’ Poseidon’s attentions, we think only of her cut-off head, held aloft by the triumphant golden boy, Perseus. We’ve known that myth for a long time now, long enough for that head to end up as a motif for fashion houses and Marvel films. Her horrifying Caravaggio portrait competes with Bernini’s mesmerising sculpture of a weeping woman, covered in marble serpents.

But I wanted to know who she was before she was turned into a gorgon, before she became a convenient symbol for neurosis over feminine rage and power. Literature hasn’t always cared to examine what exactly Poseidon thought he was doing, harassing and assaulting a young woman who was just trying to mind her business. Society has tended to reward ‘heroics’ as displayed by Perseus and his sword of decapitation. But what does Medusa think about her reputation, her beauty that turns into alleged physical ugliness, punished by

the whims of others? I believed that there was another way of looking at this story.

In my version, Medusa speaks to the reader directly. She’s a young girl, living by the sea with her sisters, minding her own business. When she reaches puberty, people decide that her beauty is her only value. She is stalked by an older, all-powerful sea god, Poseidon, until he won’t take her evasion any longer, and he rapes her. The goddess Athena is so jealous that this has happened, that she punishes Medusa for leading him on. Medusa is physically transformed into a gorgon, her hair turned into snakes. She flees her village, full of a new-found self-hatred. Perseus, a young man from a faraway court, is sent out against his will to kill this mythical creature, the Medusa. The question is: will he be rewarded for his manly brutality, or will Medusa learn to love herself again?

I wanted to write about Medusa because she is an Everywoman. She starts as a young girl, objectified and sexualised by a society which strips her of agency and narrative. When she defies the boxes it tries to put her in, and makes attempts to reclaim herself, she is punished by the same society that once held her up as a paragon of alluring girlhood. Medusa ends up with scars. Her path to womanhood is a rocky one, but

she is stronger than when she started. The story of what happens to Medusa is a story about the abuse of power, about consent, about beauty and ugliness. Above all, it is a lesson on how to be comfortable in your own skin.

I have tried to keep hold of the mythic element and the epic narrative tradition – indeed, Medusa calls herself a ‘sailor poet’ and the tone is poetic. But I also wanted the reader to feel like she was inside Medusa’s head, with her every step of the way. I wanted to make it more conversational, more human – because what happens to Medusa in my version really does happen to young women. They don’t have their hair turned into snakes, but on a metaphorical level, they do. I also wanted the reader to feel like she could laugh, so there are bursts of humour amongst the darkness. Every one of Medusa’s snakes has a name and personality, for example. She takes possession of her perceived disfigurement, and it comes to enhance her life in ways she could never have foreseen.

Importantly, I wanted to give space to *Medusa* to talk about what happened to her with Poseidon, but for it to not be the only thing that defines her. Whilst her ordeal was very real, and very painful, it does not control the narrative over the whole

of her life, and I think it was essential to present it in such a context. I finished my first draft of *Medusa* the same week that the Weinstein scandal broke open, in 2018. I had once been a girl: I knew what I was writing about before it even hit the papers. Every woman I know has their personal Poseidon, and the Athenas around them, who turn a blind eye, who place the blame at their feet. This book won’t get rid of the problem, but it will hopefully encourage the *Medusa* in all of us to love what we are and speak up for ourselves, even if we are scared.

It has been a privilege to write this book, and to see it so vividly illustrated. I spent too much of my own childhood reading books and watching films where the girls were valued only for being pretty, dutiful and quiet. I still see those stereotypes everywhere, and I still have to fight those impulses in myself. So this is not that kind of book. This is a book that questions our foolish ideals of beauty, of femininity and masculinity. It encourages the reader to speak up for herself and to know her own worth – and yes, even to name and love her snakes. I hope you enjoy it.

With all best wishes,

Jessie Burton