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Brynne Rebele-Henry

Orpheus Girl

United States (2019)

TAGS: Cerberus Eurydice Helen Orpheus Sisyphus

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Orpheus Girl
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America, United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2019
First Edition Details	Brynne Rebele-Henry, *Orpheus Girl.* New York: Soho Teen, an imprint of Penguin Random House USA, 2019, 176 pp.
ISBN	9781641290746
Genre	Fiction, Novels, Romance fiction, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults (Teens and Young Adults (according to publisher's website))
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Creators

Brynne Rebele-Henry by Larry D. Moore. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: January 7, 2022).

Brynne Rebele-Henry , b. 1999
(Author)

Brynne Rebele-Henry is an award-winning American writer. Prior to her first fiction publication she was an established poet whose work included two complete collections, *Fleshgraphs* and *Autobiography of a Wound*. Her work focuses on LGBTQ+ issues and representation.

Sources:

wikipedia.org (accessed: March 10, 2020);

twitter.com (accessed: March 10, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

Orpheus Girl is the debut novel by Brynne Rebele-Henry. It follows the narrator Raya, a sixteen-year-old girl living in a conservative Texan town, and her best friend/first love Sarah, the daughter of their local pastor. Their story is one of many teens who live in conservative communities where homophobia dominates the perception of those with queer identities. Both girls have slowly come to terms with their own queer identities despite the knowledge that their town would reject them; an understanding that is based on previous instances of queer teens being 'sent-away' in the recent past. This has them both to keep their identities a secret over the years.

The story begins with Raya and Sarah's relationship developing into a romantic one. Their happiness in having found one another is abruptly interrupted, however, when they are forced to 'come-out' by a boy in their school who caught them having sex. Once their peers have found out it is not long before their families do as well, and they are both sent to a conversion camp in order to be 'cured': first Sarah by her parents and then Raya by her grandmother. Both girls face physical and psychological torture from the camp employees who hope to 'turn them straight' but throughout Raya remains determined to rescue the girl she loves from the torment of the camp through escaping its walls.

The narrative itself is framed as a loose retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice; Raya plays the role of Orpheus (the rescuer), Sarah is Eurydice (the captive), and the conversion camp is the underworld. Conscious allusions to this are made throughout the novel as it is Raya herself who draws the parallels between the myth and her situation, a technique she develops to cope with her horrifying circumstances.

Analysis

From the outset of *Orpheus Girl* the protagonist and narrator Raya indicates to the reader what they should expect in terms of references to Greek mythology throughout the novel. Raya shares with the reader her personal fascination with Greek myth stemming from when she first watched her estranged mother playing the role of the mythological queen of Sparta, Helen, on a television show. Raya has not spoken to or seen her mother in person since she was a baby but was instead raised by her maternal grandmother, albeit begrudgingly. Raya's

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mother, now a relatively well-known actress, however, remains a part of her daughter's life in the form of the characters she plays on television.

Throughout the novel various Greek myths are referenced by Raya when she draws parallels between these stories and her own life. The function of these myths is twofold. For the reader it aids in their understanding of Raya's numerous predicaments and emotions throughout the book by creating vivid imagery rooted in comparable stories; for Raya meanwhile the stories and characters of Greek mythology themselves act as a coping mechanism for her to deal with her own situation and feelings. Brynne Rebel-Henry carefully weaves Greek mythology throughout her work in this way.

The most prominent myth within the story is of course given away by the title of the book: Orpheus and Eurydice. To demonstrate the diversity of both Rebel-Henry, and in turn Raya's, knowledge of myth and application of its parallels, however, I will begin by outlining some of the briefer references made throughout the novel.

When Raya, and Sarah, are sent to the conversion camp by their families they meet Char, one of the camps employees. It is quickly made apparent that Char herself was once a 'patient' at this camp and has now gone on to inflict the same tortures treatments she lived through onto others like herself. Thanks to difficulty sleeping due to long-term trauma Char is also almost always awake and to be found wandering the camp. Char's omnipresence at the camp is, therefore, one of the largest hurdles to Raya's plans for escape. During one of these attempts to flee their prison Raya compares Char to the three headed dog Cerberus guarding the gates to the underworld, preventing her from returning to the land of the living.

On another occasion Raya compares herself directly to Sisyphus. In Greek myth Sisyphus was cursed to spend eternity in the underworld rolling a stone up a hill only for it to roll back down again each time. The teens at the camp themselves are forced by their counsellors, including Char, to move rocks as part of their treatment: a physically exhausting and mentally monotonous task meant to break their resolve and bend them to the camps primary goal, heterosexuality and gender conformity. Like Sisyphus Raya sees herself as cursed to repeat and endless task with no purpose. She is queer and she will not allow them to convince her this is wrong, but she cannot escape their exacting 'treatments' either.

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Each time Raya uses myth to relate the nature of her situation to the reader she is also removing herself from the torment she is forced to undergo by imagining she is part of something ancient. In each scenario the camp is the equivalent of the mythological underworld, which ties in neatly to the wider Orpheus and Eurydice narrative of the story.

Throughout *Orpheus Girl* Raya explicitly casts herself in the role of Orpheus who has journeyed to the underworld (the conversion camp) in order to save his (her) great love, Eurydice (Sarah), and return with them both to the world of the living (the world outside the camp). Sarah is sent away first by her parents after both girls are forced out of the closet. Raya is sent to the same conversion camp the following day by her grandmother who was recommended its facilities by Sarah's parents. Although Raya is devasted that she and Sarah have been rejected by their community and effectively imprisoned in this institution, she is reassured by the fact that she and Sarah will still be together. She sees this as an opportunity for her to save the girl she loves and for them to escape. It is in this moment she first embodies Orpheus.

The only problem with this comparison that the reader may spot early on, is that in the myth Orpheus fails. Orpheus does not heed Hades instructions and turns back to look for Eurydice as he is leaving the underworld only to lose her because of that very action. While this may be a sign of foreboding to readers familiar with the myth Raya herself appears to ignore this aspect of the story. In some respects, she could be seen to be in denial. She is so desperate to find hope anywhere she can, that she frames her life in terms of a mythological story in order to distance herself from what is happening to her and find strength. While Raya is Orpheus, she does not have to be herself.

As both girls go through their 'treatment' Raya plans how she will get Sarah and herself out; this leads to three escape attempts, two of which fail. After the second attempt at escape the girls are forced to undergo electro-shock therapy, a technique that has historically been used by similar institutes. Raya begins to lose hope as she and Sarah undergo these torturous procedures. At this point the unfortunate ending of the original Orpheus and Eurydice myth comes into play. Raya begins to see her story as doomed to a devasting ending much like Orpheus, and even says as much.

All is not lost, however. Due to a suicide amongst their fellow teens

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Raya and Sarah are offered a new opportunity to escape, which they seize upon. This time they are successful. The novel ends with Raya, Sarah, and two of their peers fleeing the conversion camp, injured but with renewed hope that they can find acceptance in the outside world. As the novel closes Raya offers a new, less literal interpretation of the Orpheus myth. She wonders if the story was a reminder never to look back, as she turns away from the conversion camp and the family that sent her there to start a new life with Sarah.

Orpheus Girl is a story about identity. Throughout the novel Raya uses myth to define herself and her actions. In a world that refuses to accept her identity as queer, as a lesbian, as a girl who loves another girl, she uses myth to establish an identity that no one else can take from her in order to survive. Brynne Rebele-Henry has done more than retell a myth in her debut novel, she has demonstrated what myth can still mean to modern audiences experiencing their own internal and external struggles.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Cerberus Eurydice Helen Orpheus Sisyphus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Adversity Authority Coming of age Diversity Family Freedom Identity LGBTQI Love Queer Rejection Romance Sexuality

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