

customs, and work carefully with Trajan. The difficulties of governing are clearly illustrated in this chapter.

In conclusion, this is a unique biography and a very accessible window into the life of Pliny. Most importantly, it demonstrates that Pliny was not self-conceited and was perceptive about himself and Rome's future.

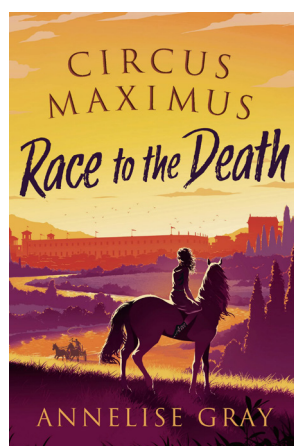
doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000351

## Circus Maximus: Race to the Death

Gray (A.) Pp. xiv + 347, ill. London: Zephyr, 2021. Cased, £6.99. ISBN: 9781800240575.

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I've seen this novel, aimed at 9–12 year olds ('middle grade'), described as 'Ben Hur meets *National Velvet*'. Young Dido rejects the traditional roles of a girl in ancient Rome in order to pursue fame as a charioteer at the Circus Maximus. Her father is a horse trainer and it is when he is murdered that she is not only placed in danger, but also liberated to pursue her adventure.

This is a rip-roaring tale centring on a female lead, but could it be one of those rare things, a book with a female protagonist which also appeals to boys? It is certainly lively and

compelling. This is a very well-researched novel, and young readers will also gain a wealth of background information about chariot racing, the Circus Maximus and the factions and politics of the different teams which competed – a subject which obsessed many Romans at the time. I would certainly recommend it to my pupils (although with the caveat that it is aimed at the slightly younger age-group).

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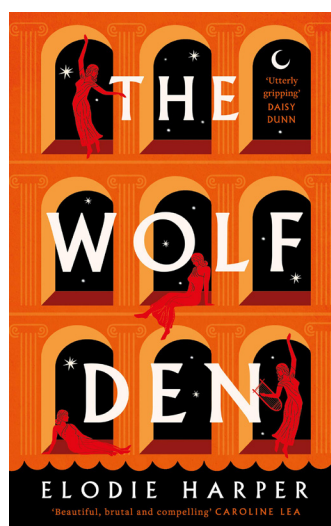
## The Wolf Den

Harper (E.) Pp. 454. London: Head of Zeus, 2021. Cased, £7.99. ISBN: 9781838933531.

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This novel is the fictional story of Amara, sold into slavery in a brothel in 1st century Pompeii. *The Wolf Den* is the first of a trilogy which follows the progress of Amara. (Further titles are *The House*



with the *Golden Door* and *The Temple of Fortuna*.) During the course of *The Wolf Den*, Amara finds herself in a horrible situation, yet her determination to win a way out and to help out as many of her fellow sex workers as possible makes this book readable and hopeful. A theme is female empowerment – Amara must develop her business acumen and strategise in order to improve her lot.

The characters are nuanced – Amara who seems to have a strong moral compass finds herself becoming a loan-shark in order to get out of her predicament. It turns out that

the brothel owner, who at first seems entirely loathsome, was raised in a setting of prostitution himself, which invites our sympathy.

Harper's choice of subject is central to life in Pompeii. Sex work was certainly very widespread – it is estimated there were 35 brothels in Pompeii at that time – roughly one to every 75 male inhabitants (M. Beard, *Pompeii*, 2008, 233–9). This is hard to credit, but there are two factors which may help to explain it – one is that there was a blurred line between brothels and inns. The other is that there were many incoming males since Pompeii was a trading port at the junction of sea and river.

Harper's writing is not gratuitous and she holds back on details about the sex and violence, but inevitably, in a book about a sex worker, the threat of sexual violence is ever-present. I would certainly recommend this book to other teachers – Harper is very strong on the atmosphere of Pompeii – the sights and smells. (Although I did find one anachronism concerning smoke – see if you can spot it.) It is also a plausible consideration of how a woman might climb through the profession of sex work to gain a position of some wealth and power. In addition, it offers a chance for us to consider, at one remove, how many modern enslaved people are still ill-treated.

However, due to the subject matter of sex work and the setting in a brothel, I would definitely not recommend it to a pupil below sixth form age and even at that age, I would be extremely cautious.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000375

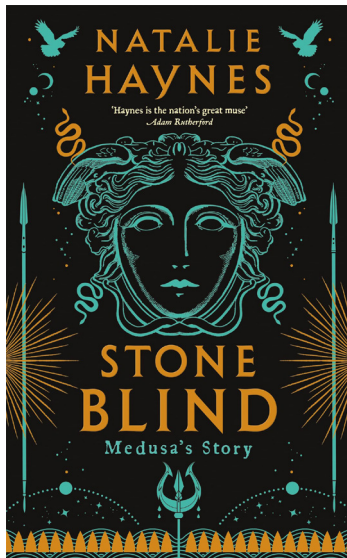
## Stone Blind: Medusa's Story

Haynes (N.) Pp. 384, Mantle; Main Market edition, 2022. Hardcover, £18.99. ISBN: 978-1529061475

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In what has in recent years become fiction's most crowded genre, *Stone Blind* is the latest in a series of retellings of Greek myth for the modern audience. Although the list of authors who deal in



retellings of classical myth appears to grow longer by the year, Natalie Haynes stands out as the preeminent and exceptional pen amongst some very fine volumes.

In her latest work, she sheds new light on one of the most enduring, famous and feared characters of the ancient world. Haynes' subject is Medusa: born a mortal, though of divine parentage, Medusa is both human and beautiful. The only echo of her divine ancestry is betrayed by the wings on her otherwise human feet and her immortal sisters, the

Gorgons, Stheno and Euryale. Although known to many readers as the 'monster' slain by Perseus, son of Zeus, and depicted in films such as the 1981 *Clash of the Titans*, or the 2010 reboot of the same name, this book offers us a different interpretation. The basic premise is the same as the mythical tales: Medusa is raped by Poseidon but as the act happened in the temple of Athena, the goddess of wisdom takes vengeance on Medusa for an act which was not her fault. Medusa is transformed by the goddess into a Gorgon. Gorgons were considered terrifying creatures, with tusks, scales and wings. At once, instinct would tell us that Medusa is now viewed as the 'monster' we have come to know from other cultural depictions, and this is where Haynes' narrative genius appears most strikingly.

In most iterations, it is Perseus, son of Zeus, who is depicted as the hero, who must save his mother from a terrible marriage by capturing the head of a Gorgon and Medusa, as his fearsome, inhuman adversary. In this manner, *Stone Blind* destroys this narrative and rebuilds it anew. Medusa is a victim of circumstance, who displays kindness, courage and generosity, who loves her sisters even though their appearance terrifies others, while Perseus is a spoilt, whiny and vindictive bore. The way in which Haynes elegantly portrays this code switch is through the use of chapters told from different points of view. Each chapter in the narrative is dedicated to the perspective of a mortal, immortal or mythical being. Most of the characters in the work are female and this lends a fresh and engaging narrative to the 'Perseus-centred' perspectives of old.

The narrative's most informed and interesting point of view, entitled *Gorgoneion*, is told from the point of view of Medusa's disembodied head. Playing brilliantly with the established narrative, it offers the reader the chance to see Perseus from Medusa's point of view. On the first page, we are asked to consider that Perseus is not all we have been led to believe: 'But it is enough. Enough to know that the hero isn't the one who's kind and brave or loyal. Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – he is monstrous.'

As the question of whether Perseus is the villain has been posed, it is at the feet of the narrative to prove this charge and this it does brilliantly. Before Perseus acquires the Gorgon's head, he is self-centred and petulant. This is mainly played out in acerbic and often witty dialogue between Athena and Hermes (who are sent by Zeus to aid Perseus) and their semi-divine relation.

Once Perseus acquires the head of Medusa, however, he becomes petty and vengeful. As the *Gorgoneion* grants its owner the

power to turn anything or anyone to stone, Perseus now possesses a powerful weapon and wastes no time in deploying its phenomenal power. In one instance, he turns a shepherd to stone for refusing to give him shelter for the night. Later he turns the Titan Atlas to stone, because he is turned away from his palace.

At the end of the work, Perseus rescues the princess Andromeda. When he asks to marry her, it is telling that Haynes has Andromeda's parents, Cepheus, and his wife, Cassiopeia, express their deep unease about the match, calling Perseus both vain and dangerous.

Overall, the narrative ends where it should, Perseus shows his character by settling a quarrel at his wedding to Andromeda by turning her uncle Phineas and his followers to stone. At the insistence of the other gods, Zeus allows Athena to take the *Gorgoneion* from Perseus before he does any more irreparable damage. The narrative ends with the head of Medusa as part of the armour of Athena, victim and aggressor bound together. Ultimately *Stone Blind* reveals that the manner in which we apportion praise and status can often be no more than the reflection of the author. Haynes notes that 'as the story is always told, she [Medusa] is the monster. We'll see about that', and she is correct, as *Stone Blind* shows Perseus to be a cruel, vicious and self-serving creature, while Athena is petty, vain and jealous, despite her immortality. The narrative suggests that it isn't always the characters that shape a narrative but the angle from which you view them which matters most. Haynes' newest narrative proves this brilliantly.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000296

## A Greek Reader. A Companion to A Primer of Biblical Greek

Jeong (M.) Pp. xii + 180. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022. Paper, US\$19. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7991-2.

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This Greek reader is designed to accompany Clayton Croy's *A Primer of Biblical Greek* (Croy, 2007). To the extent that it focuses on Koine Greek, therefore, its use as practice is limited for a typical British Classics audience; there is, however, much to admire and consider in how the book is conceived and executed.

Unlike most Koine textbooks I have encountered, in this one Jeong makes explicit reference to Greek teaching in Classics, citing Robert Patrick in this very journal on comprehensible input (Patrick, 2019). I am glad to see crossover between the areas, and hope this is a sign of the potential for future collaboration. Jeong claims to be taking a lead from Krashen in trying to write comprehensible and compelling stories which will carry second language learners along. By comprehensible, he means in keeping with Croy's sequence of presenting grammar and vocabulary. He leaves the reader to decide how compelling the Greek is. Titling it