Clarion Review

Romance

Medusa's Cause
P.E. Zimmerman
Xlibris
978-1-4797-3697-3
Four Stars (out of Five)

“You too would be a little peculiar in thy habits if you had snakes growing out of thy head,” sighs the sister of the girl a spiteful Greek goddess turned into the famous monster with the reptilian hairdo.

The title character of P.E. Zimmerman’s reworking of the Medusa myth may look like a horror on the outside and be capable of turning men into stone statues with just one look, but in this tale she is victim, not villain. The hero here is not the Perseus who slew her, but the sister, Euryale, who seeks to ease the suffering and rescue the soul of her tormented sibling.

Zimmerman has artfully turned the legend on its head. The rape of Medusa by Poseidon in Athena’s temple is redone as a tryst, a seduction of a willing young woman eager to give herself and her love to a god. Unfortunately, in doing so she breaks a vow to remain a virgin priestess to a goddess, and for that mortal sin she is transformed into Greek mythology’s most hideous and horrifying creature.

In addition to making Medusa a sympathetic character, Zimmerman gives her a family and a backstory, most of which is told through flashbacks as remembered by Euryale and Sthenno, the oldest of the sisters.

Medusa’s Cause is very much a love story—but of that between sisters rather than lovers. Zimmerman has woven into their story many other well-known tales and characters from Greek mythology, including Perseus, Pegasus, Demeter, Hades, Poseidon, Hephaistos, Athena, and even Hades (who gets a rare sympathetic and even slightly comic treatment).

The author sets his re-crafting of the familiar tales in the midst of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BC, which also allows him to bring in historical personages such as Demosthenes, Cleon, and Socrates as well as the Oracle of Delphi and her priestess, the Pythia.

Zimmerman's language is lovely, although he does have a peculiar habit of putting extra vowels into words in an attempt to convey a sort of speech impediment by some of the minor characters, most notably a sorceress Medusa's sisters encounter and spend the winter with while on their quest to find their snake-coiffed sibling. Some sections are lengthy—the above-mentioned wintering chief among them—and at times bring the pace of the story to a crawl. But Zimmerman manages to revive himself and his characters after each such dip, rewarding readers who slog on through the slow parts.

Medusa's Cause is the first in a promised series of novels in which the author intends to recast and retell the ancient myths from a new perspective. Zimmerman spent six months traveling around Greece and obviously much longer reading the mythology, and his love of the country and its stories shines through. So does his good heart, as evidenced in his ability to take an ancient tale of horror and turn it into a story of love, hope, and redemption. His Euryale is saintly yet believable in her acceptance of, and affection for, her afflicted sibling, of whom she tells Sthenno, "She is a creature of our wildest fears, dear sister, savage to our eyes and sickening to our hearts. Still, I love her."

It is this love that carries the story and makes Zimmerman's work both unique and appealing as well as a thoroughly enjoyable, clever, and intelligent read.

Mark McLaughlin