

## Orpheus Rising: By Sam And His Father, John / With Some Help From A Very Wise Elephant / Who Likes To Dance

Lance Lee

Ellen Raquel LeBow, Illustrator

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*Orpheus Rising is a magical, memorable middle grade adventure that handles a serious topic with narrative grace.*

Lance Lee's *Orpheus Rising* is a modern allegorical retelling of the Orpheus myth. In it, a father-son team is pitted against the dark forces of the afterlife; they seek to rescue their deceased wife and mother from the clutches of purgatory.

John and Sam still grieve over Madelyn five years after her death. They hide their pain by sticking to a strict routine on their seaside farm, but they have shared, haunting dreams in which they are taunted. These dreams stop with the appearance of a mysterious blank book that Sam doodles in; his drawings turn into reality.

John and Sam—along with a magical dancing elephant, Lepanto, who was drummed up by Sam's imagination—embark on an adventure to the Far Land of Fear and Dread City, hoping to bring Madelyn back to the land of the living. During their trip, their fears, desires, and wildest imaginings come alive. But dark forces of the underworld pursue them, hoping to stop them from crossing the boundary between life and death.

This allegorical novel explores grief, sacrifice, and compassion. John and Sam are faced with conflicts that require their cunning, creative wordplay and imaginations, and even sacrifices, before they are to continue. Descriptions of their travels are spread across chapters, as they face tempests and, in a Sea of Faces, give in to mental exhaustion. Still, their responses to situations result in some levity: they respond with a collective “ohhh” when a ship appears about to crash into a cliff, and when a storm threatens to capsize them.

John, who begins the story as tragic and flawed, redeems himself during his adventures in the underworld, becoming a reluctant hero. Sam acts as his conscience and guide; his childlike enthusiasm combines with his dogmatic belief in their quest. Though imbued with magical powers, Lepanto also reckons with himself, confronting his mental fallibility under conditions of isolation and stress. John and Lepanto's exchanges are antagonistic at first, though they become more like friends later.

This is an imaginative novel that's full of terrifying imagery, as of a barren island whose colors are searing violet, red, and brown. Witches bake children to stone, and misshapen men with purple noses, beet-red faces, and mismatched limbs haunt John and Sam. Dread City is constructed as a gray purgatory whose inhabitants are frozen before death. Black-and-white illustrations come throughout; they resemble wood carvings and reinforce the foreboding atmosphere of the story.

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NANCY POWELL (July 27, 2021)

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