



MEDUSA



ROSIE HEWLETT

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

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Readers have fallen in love with
Rosie Hewlett's novels

**'Fresh, bold, eye-opening and gripping: Medusa's real story
finally comes to light and it is one worth hearing' ★★★★★**

**'Rosie Hewlett is the queen of Greek
mythology retellings' ★★★★★**

**'A hauntingly sorrowful, tragically mesmerising,
delicious and dark retelling' ★★★★★**

'Bewitching story' ★★★★★

'Powerful, feminist, raw' ★★★★★

'A phenomenal read' ★★★★★

'The feminist retelling of Medusa we all need' ★★★★★

**'I had no idea how slowly Medusa and her story were winding
their way into my heart . . . until it was too late' ★★★★★**

'Beautifully written' ★★★★★

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For my mum and dad,
thank you for everything.

A Note from the Author

Mythology is all about sharing stories and it is human nature to weave our own thread into each story we tell, adding a little piece of ourselves into the narrative. This is what I love most about myths. They are all part of an incredible, vivid canvas that welcomes storytellers to add their own mark, allowing the tales to flourish and grow, to twist and turn, to adapt and evolve. I believe this is why they have endured for so long and why they will continue to live on for generations to come.

When writing *Medusa*, I followed this same tradition of myth, to retell but also reimagine. Therefore, there will be parts of this story that are very familiar and parts that will be entirely new. I hope you enjoy my version and I encourage you all to continue sharing these wonderful stories and adding your own, unique mark.

—*Rosie Hewlett*

Foreword

Five years ago, I sat down at my laptop and typed the following words: *I was beautiful once, I would not recommend it*. Little did I know then that those nine words weren't just the start of a new story, but also the most incredible, terrifying, rewarding journey that would completely change my life.

I wrote *Medusa* during the 2020 lockdown. It was, as I'm sure we can all remember, a very strange and difficult period. For months I couldn't work, couldn't see my loved ones, or even go outside. I felt trapped in this limbo with no end in sight. So, to distract my mind from spiralling, I decided to focus on the one gift lockdown had given me: time. Endless, uninterrupted time. Something that had always been such a rare commodity as an aspiring author juggling a full-time job. I told myself: *If I'm ever going to write a book, it's going to be now*.

So, I sat down, and I wrote.

Medusa's story had been forming in my mind long before I wrote those opening lines. I first learnt the truth of her tragic backstory when studying Classical Civilization at school. To this day I can still remember the outrage I felt in that very moment, when I realized this infamous 'monster' was no monster at all,

but rather a victim, a survivor, a woman who had been repeatedly silenced and misrepresented by history. I felt for Medusa so fiercely, it was as if I could actually *hear* her in my head, that scathing, bitter, powerful voice despairing at what the world has made of her.

I continued my studies in Classical Literature and Civilization at the University of Birmingham but, after graduation, I ended up moving away from the Ancient World and getting a job in film marketing. My love for Greek mythology stayed with me, though, as did Medusa. In fact, my anger on her behalf only seemed to grow stronger, fuelled by the injustices I saw reflected in the world around me. As women's voices were getting louder, so too was Medusa's voice in my head. When the *Hollywood Reporter* published its incendiary article on Harvey Weinstein in 2017, I felt so deeply inspired by the survivors who bravely spoke out, reclaiming their voices from the man who had tried to silence them. It made me think more about the Ancient World I adored, about all the fascinating, complex women like Medusa, who had only ever survived and suffered through the male gaze. Who would reclaim *their* voices?

It's important to note that during this time the myth-retelling genre had nowhere near the popularity it has today, with only a few books on the market. Nobody had yet written a Medusa retelling and, by the time 2020 rolled round, I feared nobody ever would. So, I thought to myself – why don't I try? Why don't I put to paper that voice I had been hearing for so long, and let Medusa finally speak out?

Writing *Medusa* felt like the perfect fusion of my greatest

passions – as a writer, a feminist and a classicist. I had always wanted to write my own myth retelling and keep that ancient tradition alive, but I also loved the idea of challenging tradition and getting to explore these stories through a feminist lens. In short, writing *Medusa* was a deeply rewarding experience for me, but that is not to say it was an easy one. So much of Medusa's myth is wrought with tragedy, and I especially found her ending quite difficult to navigate, as it can be viewed as such a powerless conclusion to her myth. Despite this, I never wanted to simply change Medusa's story to better fit my purpose. When writing myth retellings, my aim is always to stick to the 'original' story as much as possible, and to play around within that structure, exploring avenues that could plausibly exist within the ancient narrative. Of course, the term 'original' is subjective when speaking of mythology, but with any myth there are often the more celebrated or well-known versions. This was how I approached Medusa's story, trying to weave as much agency as I could to empower her, without diverging too greatly from its ancient roots. It was a challenge, but a very worthwhile one, and I genuinely found the process to be deeply cathartic.

When I finished writing *Medusa*, I had no idea what to do next. I had never completed a book before, let alone one I actually *wanted* people to read. I knew shockingly little about publishing and from the outside it can seem an intimidating and demoralizing world. Tentatively, I reached out to a few literary agents and was consequently rejected by all of them (an experience many authors are very familiar with). Some of the agents expressed a concern over myth retellings being 'too

niche', which just goes to show even the experts can't predict market trends!

Despite these rejections, I still believed in *Medusa*. The whole reason I wrote this book was to let her voice be heard, and so I hated the idea of it dying a quiet death in the graveyard of forgotten files on my laptop. I felt I owed it to Medusa to get her story out into the world, in whatever way I could. So, with the encouragement of my eternally supportive family, I decided to self-publish. This was a massive, terrifying jump for me, one I still can't quite believe I took. I had always been so private about my writing, never letting anyone read my work prior to *Medusa*, so to let the whole world read and critique my book was quite the escalation. But I felt like this was something I had to do. I had to let Medusa speak. I had to take this leap.

And I am *so* glad that I did.

I won't lie and say self-publishing was easy, but it was also one of the most rewarding experiences of my entire life. Within a few weeks of publication, readers were getting behind *Medusa*, shouting about it on their socials and helping spread the word. *Medusa* also went on to win the 2021 Rubery Book of the Year Award, which was utterly surreal and unexpected! I had been warned I would be lucky to sell more than fifty copies as a self-published author, so I was completely blown away by everyone's response. It is hard to express how much it meant to me that readers were championing *Medusa* simply because they loved the book, and because the story made them feel seen and heard. It is both powerful and heartbreaking to know that Medusa's ancient myth is still so relatable to women today, but

I cannot say it is surprising. Medusa is a woman objectified for her beauty, victim-blamed for a man's crimes, demonized by the world and doomed to fail by a system that is set up to be entirely against her. All of this sounds disturbingly familiar, an echo of injustices that women all over the world, throughout the centuries, have continued to endure. This is exactly why I wrote the book as if Medusa is speaking directly to the reader, utilizing our collective outrage to bridge that gap between past and present, uniting us together.

To all those readers who have championed *Medusa* from the beginning – words cannot describe how grateful I am. Your support fuelled me, inspired me, gifted me the motivation not only to write my second book, *Medea*, but also to face the dreaded query trenches again. Without you, I would not be writing this foreword right now. Without you, I would not be able to call myself a full-time, *Sunday Times* bestselling author. Without you, my dreams might never have come true. So, this special re-release of *Medusa* is my gift back to you, a monumental 'THANK YOU' for all you have done for me. This re-release is also a way for Medusa's voice to reach even more readers, which has always been my primary goal, and I am so grateful to my amazing publisher, Transworld, for giving it this opportunity to do so.

Lastly, to any aspiring authors out there, let this book be proof that rejections *do not* mean the end of your journey. They are just a small bump in a far longer road. So, keep writing, keep believing. I promise you it'll be worth it.

—Rosie Hewlett

Voice.

I was beautiful once.

I would not recommend it.

That might come as a surprise to you. A lot of the things I am about to tell you probably will, because there is a lot this world does not know about me. You see, my story has been retold and reimagined so many times over, sometimes even I do not recognize it.

I suppose when you hear my name you think of the usual picture – deadly eyes, a hideous face, that famous crown of snakes. Well, I am sorry to disappoint, but the truth is I was actually fairly ordinary, for a time at least. After all, you really shouldn't believe everything you read. Storytelling can be such a dangerous thing.

I have been called many things in my time:

Seductress.

Liar.

Monster.

Killer.

Rape victim.

People seem to forget that last one.

But history is written by the winners. Or, more simply, history is written by men. People seem to forget that as well. And this is why my story has never really been ‘my’ story. How could it be, when my voice never had a place in its retelling? I, like so many others, have fallen casualty to the narrative of men. My life has been ground down by their words, forcing me into the stifling confines of a cliché, a prop to bolster their own egos. An endless echo of lies, ringing throughout generations, haunting me.

Even now, in this modern world, my voice has still not been heard. Instead, I have been reduced to something even worse, a label to shame other women with, a brand logo.

Well, I am tired of it.

It is time for me to tell it for myself, in my own words.

Why now, you might ask, after all this time? I suppose, a part of me has been inspired by modern-day voices, those voices that are shaking the very foundations their injustices have been built upon. Yes, we can still hear you down here in the beyond, and I like to keep up to date with how the world is ever changing, ever evolving, ever continuing on its quest to destroy itself. You could hear us too, you know, if you bothered to listen in return.

Though, I suppose, if I am being entirely honest, the main reason I have not spoken out sooner is because I have been afraid. I know that probably seems comical to you. The infamous Medusa *afraid*? But it is the truth. I have been afraid of facing my past and breathing life into those demons I have tried to lay to rest for so long. In telling my story I would risk awakening that darkness inside me once again, that darkness which nearly consumed me.

So, it felt safer to hide within my silence. I had hoped that if I kept quiet then history would simply forget about me. After all, what was I in the grand scheme of things? My ‘reign of terror’ only lasted a handful of months. There are monsters out there who have inflicted misery for centuries; surely my name would be lost in their destructive wake? How I wished that would be the case. For, if the world moved on and forgot my past, perhaps I could too. Then I would finally be able to rest in peace.

But that never happened, did it? The world did not forget. My story continues to endure, even now in a world so alien from the one I knew. It is one thing to live a tragic life, but it is a whole other kind of torment to witness your life wrongly retold time and time again, clumsily passed from generation to generation. I watch the cracks form with every retelling, unable to stop the lies seeping in and suffocating the truths, twisting me into this silent villain.

I have had enough.

The time has come.

I am Medusa and I am finally going to tell my story. You do not have to believe me, but all I ask is that you listen.

The world owes me that.

Time.

Time was never a friend of mine.

When I was younger I thought I had an infinite abundance of it, like handfuls of shimmering ribbon, beautiful and endless. Little did I realize it was always trickling by, the seconds quietly peeling away my innocence, unravelling the safety blanket of youth. In later years, I was forever running out of time. When the world wants your head as a trophy, you know your days are undeniably numbered.

I have often wondered what time feels like when you are old; I never had the gift of experiencing that myself. I imagine it seems endless, but not like it did in youth, rather in a draining and tiresome way. Like being unable to fall asleep when you are so very tired of being awake, you wish the seconds would just slip away.

I guess time is nobody's friend, in the end.

But did you ever wonder whose fault it is?

Chronos. He is the old croak who lets it tick by, endlessly draining the world of its precious seconds. I have never met him, but I hear he is a real killjoy. In the world of the living, nothing mortal can escape Chronos. His power is like a slow and quiet

disease, always fatal in the end. Down here, though, he has no influence at all. Minutes, hours, years, centuries – they all swirl around us, like a gentle breeze we are only faintly aware of. It is only when we stop to look up at the living that we realize Chronos' power still endures.

I have never really understood the complexities of how time works. One day, perhaps I will get the chance to ask Chronos. The question that bothers me most is why some memories are lost for ever within its folds, whilst others stand out, everlasting?

I remember a lot of my life. And there is a lot I wish I did not. There are memories I wish I could burn from me, like cauterizing a wound. Or I would swallow leeches and let them suck this poison from my mind. Whatever it would take, believe me, I would do it.

There is a river in the Underworld that would offer me such a release, but the God of Sleep, Hypnos, guards it with ironic vigilance. Only those seeking reincarnation are able to forget, and I would rather spend eternity with my demons than face the living realm again.

And yet, I remember all the tiny, sickening details, those little flecks of colour that build up the tapestry of my life. They smother me. Like the smell of salt on his skin, the greyness of her eyes, the bite of the sword as it met my neck.

But, I am getting ahead of myself now and I want to tell my story right. So, I suppose I should be traditional and start at the very beginning.

The Beginning.

I was born amongst the waves.

I can still remember it, even now. The feel of the ocean stirring around me, the water swelling to a point of climax, waves crashing together in a dramatic crescendo, spilling on to land with a great urgency before slowly receding, leaving a gentle bubbling froth clinging to the upturned stones and the formation of a small child – me. This was how I entered the world, my naked body soaked and glistening, gritty with salt.

You see, my parents were the primordial sea Gods, Phorcys and Ceto.

Yes, I have parents. People seem to forget that ‘monsters’ can have family too.

Our universe began with chaos and it was the primordial Gods who were the first to spring from this void. They brought structure and meaning to the world, laying the very foundations it exists upon to this day. They split the sky from the earth, carved night from day and light from dark. They shaped the seas and raised the mountains, colouring the world with love and life. Amongst these Gods were my parents, who took responsibility for enriching the seas with hidden dangers. Of course,

Chronos was there too, shackling the world to the seconds he lets slip by so freely.

Many of these early Gods have been forgotten now. I still find it amazing how so many powerful beings have been overlooked by history and yet my story endures. *Why me?* I so often wonder.

I never really knew my parents. I have never even met Phorcys, my father. They did not want much to do with me. I was born an ordinary mortal and was therefore, in their eyes, a disappointment.

I see you raising your eyebrows. *Medusa? An ordinary baby?*

This is one of the many things about me on which history disagrees. Centuries of men posturing across pages of baseless claims, disagreeing for the sole purpose of feeding their plump egos. Well, I can confirm for the record: I was born a normal human child. In general, I find that most monsters are made, not born. Perhaps you should remember that next time you encounter one.

‘What is this?’ Stheno asked when she found our mother cradling my tiny body to her breast. She was one of the oldest of my mother’s children. Her name meant ‘forceful’ and she certainly lived up to it.

‘Your sister.’ My mother’s voice rippled like the waves. My sisters told me she had been calm, for someone who had just ripped themselves apart to create life.

‘Why is she so . . . normal?’ Euryale, my other sister, sneered from behind. ‘She’s basically a mortal.’

‘She *is* a mortal,’ my mother responded, her voice suddenly sharp.

My sisters stared incredulously at me. I was so ordinary, so . . . disappointing. How could I be related to the likes of them?

‘Well, I am not caring for any *human*.’ Stheno waved her hand dismissively, heading off up the beach with defiant steps. Suddenly, a wave rushed in and scooped Stheno off her feet, forcing her to crash down on to the stony ground. ‘Mother!’ She let out a furious shriek as the waves sucked backwards over the pebbles, bubbling with wicked laughter.

‘Do you think I would degrade myself to raise a mortal child?’ My mother’s voice was firmer now, her dark eyes narrowed. ‘Here, you will take her.’

Euryale reached out, taking my plump body in her awkward embrace. ‘But what are we supposed to do with her?’ Her voice hovered on the edge of a tantrum.

‘Whatever you want. It is no child of mine.’

Euryale opened her mouth to protest, but before she could our mother had already slipped off into the ocean, her scaly skin melting beneath its restless surface.

‘Now what?’ Euryale and Stheno shared a long look and then stared down at the tiny child before them – their new baby sister.

‘Well, I don’t want her.’

‘Well, neither do I!’

‘You’re the one holding her.’

‘That’s not fair!’

‘Finders keepers.’

After a quick and heated debate, they decided the best decision was to leave me with my own kind. Mortals.

There was a temple nearby where a lonely priestess served. My sisters were not overly familiar with mortal behaviour, but they assumed a solitary woman would accept an abandoned child – surely it would be in her human nature?

They had heard of this temple many years before, when it had become entangled in the latest gossip spread across everyone's eager lips. Despite its reputation, it was not until later years that I learnt the truth about the temple's tragic history and how the surrounding land came to be known as cursed.

This temple had once overlooked a proud yet modest city. As time passed, this city began to flourish and drew the attention of Poseidon, who saw his own greatness reflected within its success. He assumed himself the patron God of the city and began to tell this to all who would listen.

'Brother, if you are their patron God, then why have they built a temple in honour of Athena?' Zeus asked him one day with a poorly disguised smirk.

I'm sure you can imagine Poseidon's furious shock when he discovered the people had chosen to honour Athena over him. Unable to face this rejection, Poseidon decided that if the people desired the Goddess of War so badly, then he would bring war to them. He destroyed the city, reducing it to rubble and dust, for if he could not have it, then nobody could. The temple was all that was left standing, for Poseidon knew he could not offend Athena by destroying her sanctuary. That would undeniably be a step too far against Zeus's favourite daughter.

Some claim the few survivors tried to rebuild the city, but they soon fell victim to a depraved tribe of centaurs. Though

Athena's temple endured, the land would for ever remain deserted, for it came to be believed that any who dwelled there would meet a violent end. Perhaps there is some truth in that, if my life is anything to go by. Though I do not like to entertain the shallowness of hearsay. Rumours are a terrible thing, are they not? Like a disease passing from person to person, mutating into all kinds of hideous things.

I should tell you now, before you waste any of your time, there is no surviving record of that temple. Athena made sure of that. She obliterated all evidence from the Earth when she discovered that I had . . . well, I will get to that part later.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes. The solitary priestess. She had been the only one to stay after the devastation, the only one who would not abandon her Goddess. Loyal and lonely, my sisters thought she would be a suitable mortal for their baby sister. And so, they left me on those temple steps and that is how I came to be abandoned twice in the first few hours of my life.

Of course, I do not really remember any of this myself. I was filled in by my sisters in later years. They liked to cackle over how indifferent my mother had been, exaggerating all the plans they had had to get rid of me.

'We considered feeding you to wolves . . .'

'Or sacrificing you to Hades . . .'

'Or throwing you off a cliff to see if you'd sprout wings like us . . .'

'Or tossing you into the sea to see if Mother would change her mind . . .'

Needless to say, they had dark senses of humour.

I do not judge my mother for abandoning me. History will remember her as the Mother of Monsters; she bore fearsome, infamous children. She couldn't have the likes of me ruin her track record, could she?

And besides, I cannot complain, because I had a happy childhood and that is more than most can say.

Childhood.

My childhood memories are like faded dreams encased in lingering sensations. The sweet smell of incense, the cool touch of marble, the choking smoke after a sacrifice and the shock of cold water purifying my skin each morning. These memories all glow inside me like soft embers refusing to die away; if I focus hard enough, I imagine I can feel their gentle warmth. It's comforting, to remind myself I had once been happy. Though, if I try to reach out too far or hold on too tightly, these memories turn cold and bitter, tainted by the darker corners of my mind.

The priestess found me shortly after my sisters left.

As they had predicted, the priestess welcomed me into her life without hesitation. She had spent years praying for a companion and believed the Gods had finally answered her. As if the Gods would ever be that generous.

I never knew her real name; she used to say she did not have one any more. She just had me call her *Theia*, Auntie. I do not know what horrors Theia witnessed when her city was destroyed, or why she was the only one to stay. In fact, now I think

on it, I knew very little at all about Theia's past. I suppose when you are a child you do not think to ask about before; all you ever focus on is the now. I wish I still lived like that.

It was Theia who gave me my name, Medusa. I am aware my name is now synonymous with monsters, but it might surprise you to know it actually means 'protector'. Theia had wanted me to protect her temple and so named me as such. Irony has a cruel sense of humour, does it not? But, I guess you just have to laugh, or else you will go mad.

Or maybe I already am.

I was raised in the temple by Theia and I was taught from my earliest years to live piously. I dedicated myself and my life to Athena, spending every day serving her. It seemed like an honourable duty, back then. The fact that Athena's temple was all that remained of the lost city made our responsibility feel even more important. We had to protect it at all costs.

I suppose it might seem an odd backdrop for a childhood, a solitary temple set against the bones of a city, but how was I to know any different? I would play for hours amongst the rubble and debris, oblivious to the dark reality lying beneath the ruins. Ignorance is such a fragile gift.

I often wonder what would have happened if I had been left outside a different temple, had dedicated my life to another God. Perhaps then my life would not have spiralled so drastically out of control. Take Hestia, for example, the Goddess of the Hearth. I cannot imagine her punishing her priestesses like Athena did – she seems too warm, too welcoming. But then again, you really cannot trust any of the Gods; that much I