

Book Review

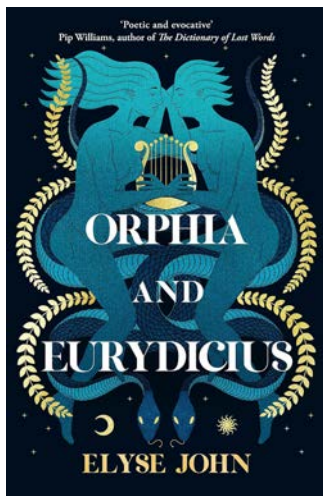
Orphia and Eurydicus

John (E.) Pp. 388. Sydney: Harper Collins, 2023.
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John's *Orphia and Eurydicus* joins the growing ranks of modern feminist retellings of ancient myth that seek to give (modern, feminist) voice to ancient women. Embedded in John's novel is a sub-theme on the power of stories to give voices to the voiceless and the importance of this, which John explores through a gender-swapping retelling of the myth of Orpheus, the ancient Greek world's most powerful poet. While following the basic outline of the myth – the poet joins the quest for the golden fleece, loses his beloved

Eurydice to death, fails to rescue her from the Underworld, and dies at the hands of the Maenads – John brings much that is new and unique to her re-telling. In an interesting twist, Orpheus becomes Orphia, a dominant, active, bisexual woman whose power of song is matched by her military prowess; she falls in love with Eurydicus, a sensitive, submissive, bisexual man, who wants only to protect others by fashioning shields and to serve Orphia.

The importance of poetry and its role in the creation of memory is woven throughout the novel. Orphia's desire to be a poet in order to give voice to the voiceless and to rescue the stories of the often-erased women is repeated frequently: through her song, Orphia will ensure that women are not forgotten. Especially well done are the scenes in which Orphia experiments with poetry, in particular those in which she meets the different Muses and learns the nature of specific poetic genres. This is an excellent example of 'show don't tell' as Orphia meets the Muses and their poetic styles, and learns to compose in the various genres. What makes tragedy differ from epic, and how do these genres relate to lyric poetry? The characterisation of the Muses as reflective of their poetic field is compelling and beautifully told. This is where the book truly shines.

The exploration of sexuality and gender, through the gender-flipping of the original myth and the bisexuality of the two main characters, was interesting, and it's refreshing to see female characters embrace their own sexuality, and make their own choices. The soft Eurydicus could be a nice change of pace from the standard hyper-masculine mythological hero, and consensual sex celebrating a reciprocal love in an ancient Greek mythological context is always welcome.

Unfortunately, the novel is marred by what is typical of this genre: it's a heavy-handed, one-dimensional retelling, in which all female characters are saints and almost all male characters, with the exception of the feminine Eurydicus, are under-developed villains. Apollo is a harsh and overly-controlling father, who wants to prevent Orphia's growth, Hades is a cruel misogynist who mistreats his wife, and while Jason starts as a supportive friend to Orphia, he later morphs inexplicably into a selfish hero intent only on his own glory, no matter whom he has to sacrifice. In keeping with a uniformly positive portrayal of women, the retelling of Medusa's story omits Athena's role in the abuse of Medusa, Niobe's children are killed by an angry Apollo, without Leto's demands for their death or Artemis' assistance, and Hera is refashioned as a saviour of women. Orphia – a powerful independent woman, who defies gods, defeats men in combat, and moves the world with her poetry – is backed by a coterie of powerful and supportive women. The lack of nuance and subtlety in characterisation and consequently plot make things rather tedious; there is no room for character development, surprise, or exciting revelations when the sex of the character immediately tells you if they are good or bad, how they will react to any situation, and how things will end.

Because of the potential for this novel to be read in the classroom, I think a content warning is necessary. Following the death of Eurydicus, Orphia, with the full support and approval of several significant female characters, commits suicide because she can't live without the man she loves. In a novel that champions the power of women it is an odd narrative choice to have the main character decide that death is preferable to life without her man. The author attempts to make Orphia's suicide fundamental to her enduring fame – by dying, she ensures her fame, and thus she becomes an inspiration to later, female, poets – but this seems a rather forced attempt to justify the suicide.

Modern retellings of ancient Greek and Roman myths are valuable not only in their own right as interesting novels but also for the role they can play in stimulating interest in Classics in younger readers, encouraging them towards further study of Classics. *Orphia and Eurydicus*, in part because of the novelty of its gender-swapping approach, will appeal to students and spark interest in one of ancient Greek's most interesting and least retold myths. One could wish, however, given the richness of ancient Greek and Roman mythology and its adaptability, that future authors will aim for more-nuanced retellings, avoiding the simplistic trope of strong faultless women triumphing over the evils of misogynistic men.

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