



Russell Hoban
The Medusa Frequency

"Russell Hoban is our Ur-novelist, a maverick voice that is like no other".
Sunday Telegraph



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An inexplicable message flashed onto the screen of his Apple II computer at 3am heralds the beginning of a startling quest for frustrated author Herman Orff. Taking up the offer of a cure for writer's block plunges him into a semi-dreamland inhabited by a bizarre combination of characters from myth and reality; the talking head of Orpheus, the young girl of Vermeer's famous portrait, and a frequency of Medusas.

The Medusa Frequency Details

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Author : Russell Hoban

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From Reader Review The Medusa Frequency for online ebook

Renay says

although the blurb made it sound pretty and interesting, a "trip to those places in your head you've never been to before" were hard to read and even harder to understand, if understanding were at all possible. nonsensical ramblings, flights of fancy and wondering, and garbled mumbo jumbo seem to be the theme and plot of the story.

being only a short book i thought i could handle the small task of reading it. i was wrong. i couldn't handle it. it's hard enough living in my own head and trying to sort and understand the rantings, let alone reading someone else's.

the book has a pretty cover.....

;)

MJ Nicholls says

This is one of those tiresome tales where a blocked novelist undergoes a mental procedure to cure his writer's block and ends up hallucinating the severed head of Orpheus via various spherical objects from his everyday life. Same old same old. Many of Hoban novels take place in surreal alternate realities that pile on extra layers of confusing surrealism, until it becomes harder to grasp what exactly is happening to whom—and does it matter? This one satirises literary London (and the author, obliquely) to a slight degree, but is mainly about the protagonist hallucinating the severed head of Orpheus via various spherical objects from his everyday life, and something to do with his girlfriend and Eurydice, and conversations in all-caps with science-fiction creatures with unpronounceable names who talk in unpronounceable sentences. At any rate, whatever Hoban is up to—the whole thing is impossible to tear one's pleasure-racked eyes from for more than twenty seconds, and making sense of the novel is probably good cerebral fun, for those tedious anachronists who care about finding coherence in their books.

Zach says

I picked this up on a whim because I loved the structure and narrative of Riddley Walker. While this doesn't share the futuristic post-apocalyptic world of Riddley, it is no less bizarre. Much of the novel's dialogue occurs between the narrator and the disembodied, hallucinated head of Orpheus, which is both hilarious and jarring.

The narrative is difficult to follow for the first half of the novel, but I eventually got used to the novel's patterns of unpredictability and existential woe.

I recommend this as a short, perplexing, but satisfying read that shifts time and perspective in fits and starts.

Glyven says

The Medusa Frequency is a short science fiction novel from the 1980s, a decade that saw film, TV and other media increasing their potential for cutting-edge sci-fi via better, computer-generated special effects. The technological conceit of Russell Hoban's novel might tempt some to label it as "cyberpunk," but its classification as *any* kind of science fiction would be too restrictive. True, it starts off with a struggling novelist attempting to cure his writer's block by having his brain "zapped" by a machine. But the novel, instead of becoming a *Max Headroom*-like story of man-meets-computer, turns into a meditative tale of romantic unfulfillment, kept ostensibly in the mythic-futuristic realm by characters that are technology-based (the Kraken) or influenced by Greek myth (the Head of Orpheus).

Hoban is an author with a great sense of humor that manifests itself in everything from character names (Gombert Yawncher, Tycho Fremdorff, Boumboume Letunga et al.) to the absurd appearances of a talking disembodied head. He's also a cerebral writer--**The Medusa Frequency** could be seen as intertextual and metatextual, but its references to the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, to Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and to extra-literary artifacts (films, paintings, music, comics) are balanced with the aforementioned wit.

But in much the same way that Woody Allen's most celebrated film comedies, while highly literate and intellectual, are ultimately about romantic relationships, **The Medusa Frequency** is essentially the story of a man coming to terms with lost love. For all the novel's inventiveness, some readers may feel cheated, as if they've been tricked into reading a book about someone else's (perhaps Hoban's) romantic troubles. There are times when the story's fantastical elements are treated as hallucinations, or at the very least are made secondary to the main character's anguished pursuit of his ex-lover.

Other readers may view the relationship material as poignant. **The Medusa Frequency** is thought-provoking and not at all superficial, and I may appreciate it more after a second reading. Hoban's better-known novels have eluded me thus far, but I anticipate reading **Riddley Walker**.

Old Man Scaps says

Weird, delightful, sad, and hilarious. A short novel in the first person.

Herman Orff, a writer trying to write his third novel, becomes so desparate that he meets up with Istvan Fallok, his musician ex-friend. (At one point, the two of them both dated a woman named Luise. The love of their lives, and she dumped them both. She had dated Istvan first. Hence the ex-friend-ness.)

So. Naturally, Istvan zaps Herman's brain with music from a machine. (Electrodes and everything.) This zapping leads to hallucinations that are supposed to help Herman write his third novel. These hallucinations star the severed, sea-soggy head of Orpheus, the mythical Greek fellow who invented music, who longs for Eurydice, who has trouble remembering his past.

Further weirdness ensues, and Russell Hoban's infatuation with story, myth, art, loss, and humor shine through every page, often lyrically, but never indulgently.

I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants a healthy dose of well-executed literary weirdness.

Mkfs says

What a charmer!

This is exactly the sort of novel that I find myself groaningly -- nay, head-strikingly -- slogging through, page after page, in a fruitless quest for plot or message. Typical first-novel junk: a blocked writer, who cannot get over the decade-old loss of a woman, is pushed into the process of self-discovery by external forces. Do new writers write about anything else?

But Russel Hoban is not a new writer, and this is not his first novel. More to the point, he is a *good* writer, and *Medusa Frequency* works. It works very, very well. While not a compelling page-turner, it lurks at the edge of the mind, waiting, a lyrical and playful retelling of an age-old story.

That story is, of course, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which Hoban twists into an analogy for the creative process. Got art trouble? The head of Orpheus will turn it into heart trouble for no charge. Trapped in the singular worldview of a first-person narrative? Buy one of the supporting characters a beer, and see what happens.

All of this with Hoban's characteristic skewering of the arts. A viewing of an experimental film rings disturbingly true, and had me squirming in reminder of the seats at the Anthology Film Archives. "I don't think film people should be allowed near words, it's bad for everybody", Hoban says through the narrator, but clearly the opposite works out quite well.

In many ways, the novel is Proustian, if one refuses to take Proustian to mean "a long rambling meditation on the past" and instead defines it as "exploring the workings of the mind through narrative":

You know how you'll hear a sound while you're asleep and there comes a whole dream to account for it and in the dream there are things that happen before and after the sound

And if such mind-wandering fails to grab you, there are plenty of likeable-fellow moments as the main character languishes around the month-old coffee cups in his cluttered apartment:

In the morning I came awake as I always do, like a man trapped in a car going over a cliff.

Sounds like *somebody*'s got a case of the -- well, you know.

Tony says

My name is Herman Orff. At parties when people ask me what I do I say I'm a novelist and then they say, 'Oh, should I have heard of you?' and I say, 'I think not.' Then we both find somebody else to talk to.

Our narrator has written two novels which did not sell well, though at least one woman has read the second one three times and is a kind of fan. Actively seeking inspiration for a third book, Orff pays the bills adapting works of literature to comic books. 'Balloon Speech'. He once did War and Peace in 25 colorful pages.

The attempted 'inspiration' comes from that girl in the Vermeer painting, new love, old love, and, when all that fails, an electrical head-zapping treatment. It is then that the Head of Orpheus speaks to him, but first appearing as a football (soccer ball for those on this side of the wall), then a cabbage, then half a grapefruit.

Orff likes to listen to international broadcasts to be soothed by languages he does not understand. A character keeps bumping into him, sometimes as a busker, then again as a waiter. *Gom yancher*, he might say. *Numsy fy?*

I cheated and re-read the Eurydice and Orpheus myth before wrestling with this and it helped, maybe. But Hoban assuaged me near the end with this quote from H. P. Lovecraft: *The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.*

If all I've written above sounds as if this book was a little too goofy for me, that would be mostly wrong. There were, instead, wonderful surprises lurking on almost every page. And dialogue that blew me away. Like this:

'How do you feel about the back of cereal boxes?'

'As noumenon or phenomenon?'

'As an art form?'

'They seem to have fallen into disuse; I remember when they had little stories on them.'

'Right. They've gone with our pre-atom-bomb innocence. We're living in a time that cries out for reaffirmation of traditional values. Used properly the back of a cereal box is to literature what Buddy Holly is to music: it's got drive, it's got soul, it's got be-bop. Look at this.' He took a box of Holywell Corn Flakes out of a desk drawer and showed me first the front and then the back of it. They were both the same . . . 'Do you believe that?' he said. 'Two fronts, no back, you don't know where you are with it, your whole day starts off funny. Put a comic on one side and that's the back, you eat your corn flakes and you read it, you know where you are.'

After Orff eats half a grapefruit - or what's left of Orpheus - he feels a tightness in his chest and a pain running down his left arm, so he goes to the doctor:

'I guess by now you've finished the novel you were working on when I saw you last year. Breathe in.'
'No, actually I haven't.'

'Breathe in again. Very stressful occupation, novel-writing, so I'm told. Do you happen to know Rupert Gripwell? Lean forward.'

'No. Is he a novelist?'

'Undertaker. He says they don't last as long as journalists.'

'Undertakers?'

'Novelists.'

'Why is that?' I said, as he took my blood pressure.

'Says they drink alone too much. People drink faster when they drink alone. You drink alone much?'

'Well, I can't be bothered to go looking for people every time I want a drink, can I?'

Can I?

Samantha The Escapist says

I picked this book up off used book table. It had long since lost its jacket and just sort of sat there all tiny and black. There was no description, I had no familiarity with the author. So going on only the single-paragraph first chapter, I decided I was on board for something weird.

However, I didn't exactly ask for the pretentious and tiresome writing.

Compelling and tedious all at once. It was fun to sift through the weird, and if I had the time back I'd still have read it, but I can't really recommend it for anything in particular.

Nate says

Fucking weird.

Ani says

One of those thin volumes it takes you long to read. Beautiful language, overflows with prose and striking images. If you are a kind of reader who likes to highlight great lines with a marker, beware that you will need to highlight everything here. This bizarre book is hard to imagine to be written over 30 years ago. At times absurd, twisted, confusing it begs you to read it again when you are done or just open up a random page every night before bed or when you confusingly wander to your bookshelf.

Sara says

I know 3 stars can be a sign of indifference, so let it be known that this isn't the kind. I am quite fond of Hoban's books in a weird way and this isn't the last book of his I'll read.

Chad Walker says

A clever little book, maybe a little *too* clever. But it's a quick read, and enjoyable along the way, and adds up to more than I thought it would. The Greek references are interesting, but a simple Wikipedia search will get you more or less up to speed on figures like Eurydice, Orpheus, Hermes, etc., and the book is perfectly readable with little to no knowledge of mythology.

A lot of humor in here too; I chuckled out loud a number of times. In a lot of ways it reminded me of *The Crying of Lot 49* - a lot of the stylistic tics here seemed out of Pynchon to me. Not a classic on my shelf, but definitely worth a read.

Rachel Denham says

Initially, the book was really confusing, but the writing is superb and kept me going.

There are a lot of things happening at once, and a lot of references to figures that I didn't know or had forgotten about. I found myself having to brush up on my knowledge of Greek mythology. Despite the confusion, it got a lot more concise. By the end of the book, everything seems to make complete sense.

I enjoyed the book and actually saw a lot of elements of existentialism in it. I found myself thinking a lot about writings by Camus (particularly *The Stranger*) while reading this book. It's also interesting that Hoban made a connection between existentialism and Greek mythology. This is actually the second time that I've seen the two being linked, and in this case, the two make a very formidable pair.

The book is very complicated, but its themes are easily understandable. The book forces you to think, but it doesn't go over your head.

I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who enjoys intelligent reads and not just "fluff" reading. My rating is a 4-4.5.

Owen says

The *Medusa Frequency* reminded me of what little I've read of Philip K. Dick. The main character undergoes some kind of electroshock treatment to remove his writer's block, but he ends up having circular conversations with the imagined head of Orpheus. Orpheus, by now just a rotting skull, appears from other similarly shaped objects like a football, grapefruit, or head of cabbage. There's also the computer that talks to him about multi-tentacled thing at the ocean deep. And there are a few female characters, who are obviously just imitations of Eurydice, or Medusa, I forget. It's a pretty trippy novella; I can't decide if it got easier to read towards the end or if I just took the plunge.

Anne Earney says

What did I think? This is a strange little novel. If I didn't stop reading between chapters, I completely forgot what was going on, even if only a few hours passed. My favorite character was a disembodied head that was actually the hallucination of other characters. The writing involves some really fun word-play, including made-up words and some hilarious dialogue (kinda metafictional, or maybe just extremely dry, but either way I laughed out loud several times). Some of the reviews mention the science fiction element, which might have kept me away had I not been seeking out novels with references to the Netherlands, but the science part turned out to be such a small part, it was insignificant. Despite the 3-star rating, I am interested enough in Russell Hoban's work to read more.
