



Draw Medusa

OLIVIA A. COLE

Please be advised that this guide, like its associated novel, contains references to sexual assault.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Sixteen-year-old Alicia Rivers has a reputation that precedes her. But there's more to her story than the whispers that follow her through the hallways at school—whispers that splinter into a million different insults that really mean: a girl who has had sex. But what her classmates don't know is that Alicia was sexually abused by a popular teacher, and that trauma has rewritten every cell in her body, making her someone she doesn't recognize. To the world around her, she's been cast, like the mythical Medusa, as not the victim but the monster of her own story: the girl who “asked for it.”

Alicia was abandoned by her best friend, quit the track team, and now spends her days in detention feeling isolated and invisible. When mysterious letters left in her locker hint at another victim, Alicia struggles to keep up the walls she's built around her trauma. At the same time, her growing attraction to a new girl in school makes her question what those walls are really keeping out.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OLIVIA A. COLE is a writer from Louisville, Kentucky. Her essays have been published by *Bitch Media*, *Real Simple*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *HuffPost*, *Teen Vogue*, *Gay Mag*, and more. She teaches creative writing at Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts, where she guides her students through not only poetry and fiction but also considerations of the world and who they are in it. She is the author of several books for children and adults.

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PRE-READING QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Consider the title. What clues does it give you about the book? What do you know about Medusa? Do you think the book will be epistolary?
2. In ancient Greek, *Medusa* means guardian or protector. Here's a short version of her myth: famed for her beauty, Medusa served as a priestess in Athena's temple. Poseidon (god of sea, storms, and horses) raped Medusa in Athena's temple. Athena (goddess of wisdom and warcraft) turned Medusa into a snake-headed monster who turned any man who looked at her to stone as a punishment. Then Perseus (half-god, half-mortal, and famous for slaying monsters) cut Medusa's head off, killing her.
3. Many retellings of Medusa's myth do not use the word *rape* but instead some version of "Poseidon had sex with Medusa" to describe what happened in Athena's temple. But, in any version, Medusa does not consent. *Dear Medusa* focuses on this terrible hypocrisy: Medusa was raped, and she was punished for being raped. Poseidon was not punished for raping her. The language often used to describe the rape is neutral and passive ("had sex with") when sexual violence is anything but.

ACTIVITIES

1. Find three retellings of Medusa's myth online and compare them. What does each say happened to Medusa in Athena's temple? Why do they differ? Do any assign blame for what happened? To whom is it assigned? Why? Find the source of each version and discuss whether the provenance of each affected the retelling and why.
2. First, draw Medusa or describe her in a paragraph. Then find three images of Medusa online and compare them to one another, as well as your own creation. What do you notice? What do you infer about Medusa's personality and story from other artists' pictures of her? Are the pictures as you imagined? Why or why not? How do they differ from your picture or description? Why do you think that is? What would you think about Medusa if you didn't know her story?
3. How might Athena or Perseus have behaved differently? Choose one—Athena or Perseus—and rewrite Medusa's myth from their perspective. What would be different if they showed empathy for Medusa? Why didn't they? What would change if they saw Poseidon as the perpetrator? Why were they unable to see the truth of the situation, and what would need to change to allow them to understand?
4. *Dear Medusa* explores sexuality, gender, and power. Sexuality is "a person's behaviors, desires, and attitudes related to sex and physical intimacy with others." Gender is a socially constructed set of characteristics connected to and differentiating femininity, masculinity, and what's beyond or outside of those two. In *Dear Medusa*, Alicia and her peers have their own experiences of sexuality and gender. They also explore how stereotypes and gossip can harm and prevent people from understanding and accepting who they truly are.

ACTIVITIES:

- a. Define *sexuality* and *gender* using at least three reputable sources. Compare your definitions with classmates. What do you notice? Why are gender and sexuality often misunderstood and conflated? Why might gender influence sexuality? How has society used both concepts to control women?
- b. In *Dear Medusa*, Alicia says, "you probably know yourself better than anybody else." What do you know about yourself? What are you still figuring out? Create a work that represents your feelings about your identity. You may do so in any way you choose. Consider these ideas: write your own myth, illustrate a map-like journey, write younger or older you a letter, or write a poem, in Alicia's style, about some of the ideas you have about yourself today.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. The first poems of *Dear Medusa* are grouped under the date Friday, August 31. In these opening pages, what do you learn about Alicia? Make a short list of what you know so far. What is your initial impression of Alicia? What might be important to her, and why? What do you think her personality might be like? What is she struggling with? For each of your answers, cite evidence from the poems.

As a creative exercise, write today's date, and imitating Alicia's form or making up your own, create three short pieces that tell your story of today. Use a medium you are comfortable in, such as poetry, private or public journal entries, drawings, or collages.

2. Care, love, affection, friendship, and romantic and platonic relationships exist between girls in *Dear Medusa*. With Deja, Alicia has "gotten comfortable / saying what I think / without wondering / how it's going to sound." (p. 184) Of Sarah, who we meet only once, Alicia writes, "There should be a special word / for the kind of heartbreak / that comes not from a lover / but from a friend." (p. 137) With Geneva, Alicia feels like "everything hard in me / she turns soft." (p. 223) What is Alicia's relationship with each of these girls? How do you know? How does Alicia's behavior change toward each as *Dear Medusa* unfolds? Do any of these relationships remind you of ones that you are in, have had, or want to have? Pick one and explore either in a letter (to yourself or to another person, which you do not have to send), through a story, or through another form of art—drawing, music, or dance.
3. Reflect upon and respond to the following quotes through literary analysis or creative exploration.
 - a. Literary analysis: analyze the quote, considering what it teaches you about a character or a scene. What do you notice about it—what does it make you think about or feel?

- b. Creative exploration: use the quote as a creative writing prompt. Consider using it as a line in a poem, story, or journal entry you create, or explore the theme in your own writing or artmaking.

- "I only ever write when I'm supposed to be / doing something else." (p. 49)
- "In their minds there are two kinds / of women, and only one / is allowed to be human" (p. 61)
- "You already / sleep with everyone else, / why is this any different?" (p. 90)
- "But this whole world wants me to be smaller than I am. Smaller and neater." (p. 249)
- "Sometimes we are our own / worst enemy, fighting battles with people / hurt by the weapons formed against us both." (p. 255)
- "I think of Medusa / stone / I think of Geneva / soft / I think of all in between, all the betweens I am." (p. 272)
- "There are states between hurting and healing / I walk in that space / I am trying to hold on to my body / I am finding my way" (p. 344)
- "We both exist outside / any container / that seeks to hold us / We are both / made of blinding / light" (p. 361)

4. Alicia is white. Deja describes whiteness as "a shelter, a chaperone." (p. 67) Alicia reflects on her whiteness and on specifically anti-Black racism throughout *Dear Medusa*.

What special treatment does Alicia notice and write about in *Dear Medusa*? How does she make sense of this unfairness? Alicia chooses to not see her whiteness as "just one more thing I have to hate about myself." (p. 68) How and why does she make that decision?

- a. How does your racial identity affect how you see the world and how others see you? Where do you feel comfortable, seen, and cared for? How do the rest of your identities (gender, sexuality, ability, age, color, language, cultural background, and so forth) impact how you exist



in the world? Do any of these identities ever conflict with your racial identity or with one another? How do you deal with that?

5. Alicia writes, “our world swarms with secrets.” (p. 77) What secrets is Alicia keeping, and from whom? Why is she keeping these secrets? Use evidence from the text. Later, Alicia writes that secrets are “hidden in the wound / that is my body.” (p. 201) Why does Alicia believe her body is a wound? What does it feel and look like to be wounded as opposed to healed? How can you recognize wounds in yourself and others? Reflect on your own relationship to secrets: When are they important for you? What can be scary about releasing them? What happens when you share them with others who care about you?
6. Pick a text exchange between Alicia and Deja. What information is available to you that might not be if Alicia was writing a poem? What might be left out? What else might be included? How does a person’s perspective affect how they tell a story? Use evidence from the book in your answer. As a creative exercise: write a text exchange between any two characters in the book. Because *Dear Medusa*’s narrator is Alicia, we only read text exchanges between Alicia and other people. How does losing her perspective change the narrative?
7. Alicia has encounters with very different men and boys.
 - b. The Colonel’s charismatic public persona masks his abusive and illegal behavior, which contrasts with Mr. Ricky West’s and Mr. Upton’s genuine care of Deja and Alicia in ISAP.
 - c. David struggles but eventually makes a decision about Justin’s behavior towards Alicia.
 - d. When Alicia meets Deja’s uncle Ronnie, she tries to play the Game with him (“dares the wolf to look back / and not eat”) and finds that instead “he sees me as a child” and feels gratitude toward him. (pp. 238–240)
 - e. Uncle Ronnie’s care of Alicia contrasts with the “random” who texts her and says, “age is just a number,” and with the other random men who text Alicia and who she sometimes feels compelled to meet.

- f. Pick one of these pairs (Colonel/West and Upton, David/Justin, Uncle Ronnie/random) and compare their behavior, using evidence from the book. Explore what feelings or thoughts arise as you compare them and why.

8. Alicia often compares herself and other people to animals that, to her, symbolize specific traits, behaviors, or vibes. The wolf is a symbol that appears many times. Find the word *wolf* in at least three different parts of the book and write down the surrounding quotes to provide context. Use this evidence to define what Alicia means by wolf. Who is an eagle, and why? Who is a turtle, and why? Who is a flock of birds, and why? Who is a rabbit, and why? Are there other animals? Discuss why Alicia uses these comparisons.

CREATIVE EXERCISES:

- a. Would you have chosen the same animal to symbolize what the wolf symbolizes for Alicia? Choose an animal that means the same thing to you and write why, or further explore the symbolism of the wolf.
- b. Create a key showing what you associate with a range of animals. Is it similar to Alicia’s? Why or why not? What other animals, real or otherwise, will you include? Why?

9. Where do we see female autonomy and power in the book? How do the women support one another? Find examples. Imagine you are in a community of people who support and care for you. Who is in it? Why? Are they drawn from your life, from social media or celebrity culture, from other books, from movies, or from your own imagination? How might you build a supportive community for yourself?



POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Do some research about each of the mythical characters who appear in the text. Whose story or stories spoke to you, and why? Pick one mythical being to write a letter to. Why do you relate to that character? Write them a poem, letter, story, or song, or create a piece of art that explores why their story spoke to you.
2. In the acknowledgments of *Dear Medusa*, the author thanks other writers. Why do you think she chose these women? Choose one of the authors listed and read some of their work. Each author has work available online for free. After reading, complete one of the following activities.
 - a. Write either a short essay or a poem or story in response to what you've read.
 - b. Consider possibilities: Why did Olivia A. Cole name these authors in particular? What connections do you find between this author's work and the themes or ideas in *Dear Medusa*?
3. Alicia describes first learning about Medusa as "like looking / into a mirror." (p. 150) As her story progresses, Alicia identifies more and more with Medusa, wondering if any of Medusa's snakes were as red as Alicia's hair, and even wondering about Medusa's parents ("if they chose to leave her / to the caves"). Alicia eventually writes Medusa several letters, and the book closes with a letter to the gods that have wronged Medusa, signed by Medusa herself.
 - a. Analysis exercise: write or discuss what changes in Alicia's perception of herself and in her perception of Medusa from the beginning to the end of the book?
 - a. Creative exercise: reread Alicia's letters to Medusa (there are five). Why do you believe these letters are important to Alicia? Use evidence from the text to support your claims. Then, as if you are Medusa, write back to each.
4. *Dear Medusa* is written in free verse, with short lines and stanzas. Free verse poetry does not follow a set meter or rhythm. A line break is where the line ends. Most of *Dear Medusa* is written in sentences that are

broken up into lines, but there are some exceptions. Let's look at the poem "In bed thinking of sins." (p. 77) If we were to take that poem and erase the line breaks, we would have a paragraph that looked like this:

"I wasn't raised to think about sins, deadly or otherwise. I wasn't raised to wonder if I was going to heaven or hell. Sarah put these thoughts in my head. So did the whole world, I guess. We're always so preoccupied with what happens when we die. We don't even know what's happening when we're alive—our world swarms with secrets and we walk down aisles of them like Walmart purgatory. I wonder if Geneva goes to church or if like me she's looking for salvation elsewhere."

- a. What is different about the poem when written as a paragraph? Do you speed up or slow down as you read it one way or the other? What do you notice about the punctuation (or the lack thereof) and where the line breaks are in the poem?
 - a. Write an answer to this question: What are my thoughts about religion? Take your paragraph and break it into a poem in two different ways, with line breaks in different places. Be messy. You don't need to follow the punctuation. Try putting line breaks where there's no punctuation; what happens? Try to speed up or slow down your poems. How do you do so? Play with the stanzas. Alicia's poem has six stanzas. What happens when you give your poem three stanzas, seven stanzas?
5. Why does *Dear Medusa* end where it does? What do you learn and what do you not know? Why do you think the author chose to end the book there? What does it mean for Alicia's story?

CREATIVE EXERCISES:

- a. Imagine Alicia's next day, month, or year.
- b. Imagine you were in Alicia's supportive community. Write her a letter.

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