For all who search
J.C.

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THE BOY LOST IN THE MAZE

A Story Told in Poems by
Joseph Coelho

Illustrations by **Kate Milner**

CONTENTS

Prologue The Oracle 7
Chapter 1 Theo 9
Chapter 2 The Minotaur's Story 34
Chapter 3 Theseus in Troezen – The First Labour 37
Chapter 4 Theo 55
Chapter 5 The Minotaur's Story – A Toddler 83
Chapter 6 Theseus and Sinis on the Isthmus 87
Chapter 7 Theo at Sinis Solutions 117
Chapter 8 The Minotaur's Story – A Boy 143
Chapter 9 Theseus and the Demon Pig 147
Chapter 10 Theo and the Croydon Sow 157
Chapter 11 The Minotaur's Story – A Teen 177
Chapter 12 Theseus and Sciron in Megara 183
Chapter 13 Theo and Sciron the Lawyer 193
Chapter 14 The Minotaur's Story – Becoming a Man 209
Chapter 15 Theseus and Cercyon, the Wrestler King in Eleusis 213
Chapter 16 Theo and the Wrestler 231
Chapter 17 Theseus and Procrustes, the Bed-Stretcher on the Plain of Eleusis 261
Chapter 18 Theo and the Bed-Stretcher 277
Chapter 19 Theseus and the Labyrinth 295
Chapter 20 Theo 311

About Theseus in Greek Mythology 318

THE ORACLE

Time moves in spirals,
we are flotsam on Time's sea.
Time moves in spirals
and repeats its tragedies.

This story is about two boys,
separated by centuries,
parted by myth,
divided by reality.

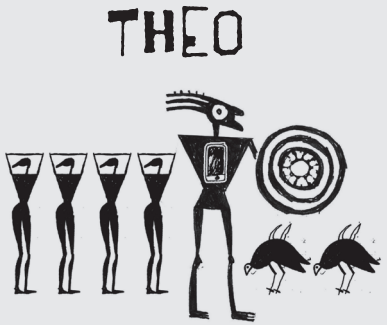
Two boys hoping to be men.
Two boys severed from their fathers.
Two boys searching a maze of manhood.

One in Ancient Greece
from a time of Magic and Mythos.
One in modern London,
a city of delusion and gloss.

I am the Oracle,
your thread through this maze
as two boys start their journeys.
No step will escape my gaze.

Let me hold your hand
through these dark and winding lands.
Let us discover together
what it means to be a man.

CHAPTER 1



THEO FIRST HEARS OF THESEUS

I'm doodling again,
geometric patterns and swirls.
Sir doesn't mind.
He lets me doodle –
knows it helps me think.

Sir is silent again. He does this thing
when he forgets words –
presses thumb and forefinger
to the bridge of his nose and massages,
like memory is a small furry thing
behind the eyes that needs coaxing.
He massages and ignores
our word offerings
until memory squeals to his stroking.

"Manhood – Theseus' story
is about manhood –
about fathers and sons,
about nature and nurture,
about legacy and destiny,
about parents and their children
and what it means to be a man."

I nearly say something
before remembering
the happy family kids around me –
the two-parent kids,
big-house-in-Putney kids,
been-on-a-plane kids,
have-the-full-Sky-package kids.

I rest my head back on my arms
and listen to Sir tell Theseus' story.
I scratch a poem title
into my book...

Theseus Killed Them.

THESEUS KILLED THEM!

"Your father is a king," said his mother.
"Just lift this heavy rock –
he left some things for you
to prove you're kingly stock."

Beneath the rock he found:
sandals and a sword.
Sandals for a journey,
a sword for the criminal hordes.

Theseus walked his father's road
but the way was filled with tests.
He had to battle six enemies
and prove he was the best.

The first was Periphetes,
who was a little dim.
Theseus took his bronze club,
Theseus killed him.

The second was Sinis,
who killed with a bent-tree limb.
He ripped his victims in two,
Theseus killed him.

The third was a pig
who'd been causing quite a stir.
She was the Crommyonian Sow,
Theseus killed her.

The fourth was named Sciron,
who gave his victims a surprise swim.
He'd feed them to a monster turtle!
Theseus killed him.

The fifth was Cercymon,
A king who wrestled for a whim.
He'd wrestle strangers to death,
Theseus killed him.

The sixth was innkeeper Procrustes,
who liked everything to be trim,
forcing guests to fit his bed!
Theseus killed him.

When the killing journey was done
Theseus found his father's kingdom grim,
the young yearly killed by the Minotaur...
so Theseus killed him!

ALL ABOUT THE MINOTAUR

We have to choose
a subject for our
English Coursework.

I choose
    to write about Theseus.
    Everything is just about him and the Minotaur.
I choose
    to delve into his journey to his father.

I choose
    to start reading
    everything I can about him.

Everything is all about the bull.
Everything is all about the Minotaur.
Everything is about muscle and horns.
Everything is about bestial strength,
                                blood and bones.

I choose
    to make my coursework
    a series of poems
    about his search for his father.

"Why can't I see Dad?"

I've noticed a silence
whenever I ask about my father.
Unspoken whisperings
mumble behind my mother's sealed lips.

I last saw him
in a mudslide of argument.
Told never to open the door to him,
to stonewall his calls
and brick up his letters.

Seventeen now and feeling the weight
of a father's absence.
Manhood's become a rock
I cannot lift alone.

It's more than the clichéd stuff,
the girl stuff,
the body-changing stuff.
It's an energy thing.
A sit-back-and-relax-with-Dad thing.
A kick-off-your-sandals-and-trade-sword-stories thing.

But my mother's silence is immovable
as I try to pry up the edges
of her secrets.

Offerings

Years of sacrifice,
years of feeding
quivering concerns
into the flaring snout of my mind.

I wanna see my dad
But he left us
I don't need him
But I miss him
If he cared he'd call
Who can I ask...?
If he cared he'd send a card
Who would understand?
What parts of me are like him?

THERE IS A STONE IN MY CHEST

Mark and I map the future
on a rainy walk home after school.

He wants to be a journalist,
his dad will teach him how to drive,
he's already picked his universities,
his parents will be at the Open Days,
his dad lets him sip raindrops of whisky
on sleepless nights.
His dad tells him how to talk to girls,
how to be respectful,
how to listen
like leaves listen to morning dew.

My mum tells me...
    "You don't have to go to university,
    no one in our family has. You'll drown."
My mum says...
    "Splash your name onto the council housing list."
My mum says...
    "Not another drab Parents' Evening –
    I'm not going again."

Dad would want me to go.
On his hailstone visits
he'd complain to Mum...
"Why can't this boy read?"

Because no one taught me how.

There is a stone in my chest
when I think of my father.
A stone I cannot lift.
A stone that settles its weight
when I visit the barber's alone,
when my body blooms.
There is a stone in my chest
that I cannot lift.

THESEUS IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

Like many of the Greek Myths, the Labours of Theseus are not set in stone.

Sometimes Theseus is referred to as the son of the King of Athens, at other times he is the son of the god Poseidon. His journey around the Saronic Gulf has been described as both a task to rid the road of bandits and a journey past the six entrances to the underworld. And each character he meets has different interpretations…. Was Phaia the name of the Crommyonian Sow or of the woman who owned the pig-beast?

These varying interpretations come about because the stories have been reimagined by many writers with different intentions for over two thousand years, writers who themselves were most likely referring to long-forgotten works. The ancient Greek historian, Plutarch, often refers to multiple interpretations when describing Theseus' journey, from both written text and hearsay.

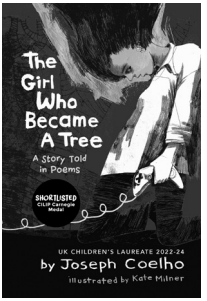
But yet, despite the thread of origin being web-thin at times, the thread remains, because there is something in these stories that connects, that speaks to our inner selves, that spoke to me. It was this thin thread that I let guide me – the story of a boy searching for his father.

So I have taken some liberties with the story (or rather held true to the tradition of multiple narratives).

My Theseus does not merely kill each bandit he comes across as per the "original" interpretations, for I find it hard to believe that such interactions would go so smoothly or be so black and white. Instead he goes on a journey and changes and is changed by it. The bandits are not just targets to be mowed down, they are flawed humans with their own histories and their own labyrinths to weave.

And then of course there is the Minotaur…. I have a soft spot for this poor beast who is so often painted as a bellowing brute, whilst the monstrous acts of his parents are so often confined to the bottom drawer. So I took great pleasure in giving him a voice and a backstory, recasting Ariadne as a sister who actually cared for her half-brother, and allowing the Minotaur to escape from the maze.

Joseph Coelho



Praise for *The Girl Who Became a Tree*

'Accessible and powerful, an imaginative and exciting narrative which is a thrill to read aloud' – *BookTrust*

'Coelho's story in poems interweaves the ancient myth of Apollo and Daphne with a nuanced study of grief and isolation, to absolutely stunning effect' – *Waterstones*

'Heart-breaking, powerful, totally involving and engrossing, with evocative illustrations from one of our most innovative illustrators' – *Tricia Adams, LoveReading4Kids*

'A highly readable, imaginative tale with a positive message. Succinct, thought-provoking and original' – *The Independent 10 Best Kids' Poetry Books*

'Plays with form and setting in a way that invites young readers in, asserting the Daphne myth's perpetual resonance' – *Imogen Russell Williams, Times Literary Supplement*

'Combines intense imaginative power with brilliant poetic technique in a multi-layered story of loss, deception, recognition and ultimate reconciliation' – *Fiona Noble, The Bookseller*

'This is wordsmithery extraordinaire' – *Teresa Cremlin, Open University*