



# Tales of the Underworld

Susan Price



OXFORD



### About this book

In this collection of stories about loss and longing, a beautiful Indian princess uses her wit to rescue her husband from Death; a miraculously gifted musician tries to secure his wife's release from the Underworld; a god must be returned to life to prevent the End of the World; and animals at the dawn of time puzzle over the first death.

### Talking points

- Read the letter from the author. Ask your child if they can think of any other stories that look at why we can't bring people back to life.
- Read the blurb on the back of the book together. How might the characters in these stories 'win back' a lost loved one?

### During reading

- On page 17, why does Savitri insist that no one tells Satyavan of his fate?
- On page 56, why does Hades set this rule for Orpheus?
- Read page 67 together. Discuss how Loki can love Balder, yet also hate him.
- What natural phenomena are explained in *Death and New Life*?

### After reading

- Discuss which attempts to secure a return are successful.
- Ask your child to think about why the author might have chosen this particular order for the stories.

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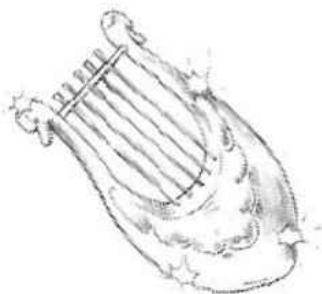
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# Orpheus and Eurydice

*A myth from Ancient Greece*

## Chapter 1

### Orpheus and his lyre



**Orpheus** was the finest musician and singer who ever lived. His playing and singing were so beautiful that Apollo himself, the god of the sun and music, came down from Mount Olympus and gave Orpheus his own lyre. ‘You will make greater music on it than I can,’ said the god.

When Orpheus played on that lyre, he could make the sad happy, and the happy sad. He could make his listeners drowse and sleep, if he chose.



When he played, the birds perched on his shoulders to hear, the sheep gathered near to listen. Wild animals, even fierce lions and wolves, crept close to him and lay down to listen with their heads on their paws. So powerful was his music that, to hear it, rocks rolled after him, and trees tugged their roots from the ground and followed him.

Wherever Orpheus went, people gathered around in crowds to hear him play and sing.



Whole villages, whole towns were left with empty streets while Orpheus sang. Among the people who went to hear him sing was Eurydice. She heard him, and she loved him. Once she'd heard him sing, she couldn't go home, but followed him wherever he went, over mountains and through forests.

Orpheus loved Eurydice too. Once he'd found her, he played no sad music. They married, and their wedding was attended by singing birds and walking trees, by laughing people, howling wolves and dancing stones. For a year Orpheus and Eurydice were never apart and always happy. At the end of that year, Eurydice was following Orpheus across a meadow, when she trod on a snake. It bit her and she died.

All that was left of her was buried in the earth. Her spirit, the soul of her, had gone into the Underworld, the kingdom of the god Hades and his sad wife, Persephone.

No one who had gone to the Underworld had ever returned.

Orpheus played no sad music then, either. Without Eurydice, he played no music at all.

He hardly ate. He no longer washed or changed his clothes. He became dirty and ragged. He left his hair and beard uncombed, so they grew long, tangled and wild. All day long, every day, he tried to understand that he would never see Eurydice again. However hard he tried, it made no sense to him. He tried to think what he would do, now he was without her, but nothing seemed worth doing.

All he wanted was to be with her again. So all he could do was go down into the Underworld and ask its king, Hades, to let Eurydice go.

He knew that Hades had never released any of the souls he ruled. He knew that the journey to the Underworld was dangerous for the living. But he hated being without Eurydice. Going to the Underworld was easier than suffering another day without her.

Orpheus took no food or drink with him – he couldn't think of things like that. He could think



of nothing but finding Eurydice. Dirty, ragged, hungry, sleepless, he walked south. He walked for days, crossing rivers, climbing forested mountains. When he stopped, exhausted, the birds brought him nuts and berries. Lions brought him lambs to eat. The birds and animals knew him, and hoped he would play his lyre for them again, if they kept him alive. He played to reward them, but the music was so sad that the wolves howled and the lions wept.



## Chapter 2

# Journey to the Underworld



Orpheus reached the cave that led into the Underworld. The way was narrow, cold and dark. Down, down, down and colder than winter. Down, down and further down, with the weight of the whole Earth hanging above his head.

The air was colder still, chilled with water and

he smelt the stink of the river Styx. The waters of the Styx are black, cold and poisonous. It cannot be waded, or swum, but it must be crossed to reach the Underworld.

All who reach its banks must be rowed across by the ferryman, Charon, and he must be paid. That is why pennies are placed on the eyes of the dead before they are buried, and sometimes in their mouths. When their ghosts reach the Styx, they can use the pennies to pay the ferryman.

Some of the dead are not given pennies – either because they die alone, or because their families are too poor. These ghosts are trapped on the banks of the river Styx. They cannot go back, because they are dead and no longer have a place in the world of the living. They cannot go forward because Charon will not take them across the river if they cannot pay him.

Orpheus heard these ghosts before he reached them. He heard the murmuring and sobbing of their voices as they begged and pleaded, endlessly, to be taken across the river.

Then he came among them, and they crowded about him. Their breath and their touch was icy. They clutched at his clothes, at his hair, at his beard, at his arms. They were behind him, in front of him, beside him – he couldn't escape them. They pressed themselves against him, because they smelled his warm blood and



envied it. Blood is life, and the ghosts longed for life.

‘Please,’ they said, ‘oh, please –’

Whispering.

‘Help us. Please.’

Clutching.

‘Give us blood.’

‘Please, oh please –’

‘Give us money. Please.’

‘I have no money,’ Orpheus said. ‘I cannot give you blood.’

They didn’t listen to him. Some were transparent, they’d been there so long, fading away. They longed to cross the river.

‘Please, oh please ... Help us, please ... Give us blood. Please, please ...’

Instead, Orpheus unslung his bag from his shoulder. From it, he took his lyre. He sat down among the whispering, clutching, pleading ghosts, and he played. At first they crowded round him, not listening, desperate to leave that place. Pulling at him, sniffing at him.

But slowly, the music reached them. Little by little, they heard and listened. The constant sound of the ghosts' sobbing and pleading had gone on for ever, like the sound of waves against a beach. Now they listened to the music they had loved when they had lived, and they were soothed. Many lay down and slept, for the first time in all the centuries since they had been there and their moaning finally faded away.

Orpheus stood and, still playing, walked through them to the river's edge.

There was Charon's ferry-boat, a ghost of a boat, a rotting hulk. Charon stood in it. He was as thin as bones, and grey. Unsmiling, he watched Orpheus. 'You have no business here,' he said.

'I must cross to the other side,' Orpheus said.

'You are alive.'

'But Eurydice – she is over there. I must be with her.'

'Your time to cross the river will come,' Charon said.





‘But when?’ Orpheus cried. ‘In a year? Ten years? Twenty? I can’t be without her. I must go to join her.’

Charon laughed and held out his hand.

‘I have no money,’ Orpheus said.

‘Then you stay here,’ Charon said. ‘With them.’

‘Please take me across, please –’

‘Now you sound like them,’ Charon said.

‘I’ll play for you,’ Orpheus said. His music had calmed the ghosts: perhaps it could please the ferryman ... He ran his fingers over the strings, making a sound like clear, sweet water – very different from the water of the Styx.

‘No lullabies will charm me,’ Charon said.

Orpheus played no lullabies. He played a dance tune, bright and quick and light. Charon twisted his mouth and turned his face away, scorning it. But he soon turned his head again. He listened. The music, so lovely in that cold place, made his heart ache. When the music stopped, he said, ‘If I row you across, will you play for me again?’

Orpheus nodded.

‘Get in,’ Charon said. ‘You have your passage.’

Orpheus climbed into the half-ruined boat, and Charon took up the oars. He rowed Orpheus across the cold, stinking waters to the other side.

Orpheus jumped from the boat and climbed the bank.

Charon shouted after him, 'You said you would play for me again!' His voice echoed from cavern walls far away.

'I shall come back,' Orpheus said, 'bringing Eurydice with me. Then I will play for you again.'

Charon slumped over his oars. 'Hades will never let her go. He is jealous of everything that is his. He will keep you. Play now – keep your promise. You will never come back this way.'

'When I return,' Orpheus said, and went on into the darkness.



## Chapter 3

# A deal with Hades

From ahead, from the darkness, came a wild barking. It echoed around the caverns. Orpheus stood still, afraid. The barking was that of a pack of dogs, of wild, hungry, fierce dogs, the kind that attacked travellers on lonely roads.

From the darkness sprang one dog, one huge dog. It came at Orpheus, baying. It had three heads, and the lashing scaly tail of a great snake. This was Cerberus, the dog that guarded Hades' kingdom.





Orpheus had faced many wild, fierce creatures. Now, as often before, he played on his lyre. He played smooth, flowing music that fell on Cerberus' ears like soft rain.

Cerberus had never heard such sounds. The great dog had heard the cries and moans of ghosts, the splashes of Charon's rowing, dismal echoes ... But such music it had never heard. It stopped, astonished.

Orpheus walked closer, still playing. Cerberus growled, but let him come nearer.

Orpheus knelt beside the hound and played lullabies and sad, sweet laments. The great, fierce, three-headed hound whimpered, lay down, and then rolled on his back. From three fanged mouths lolled three tongues. The great hound fell asleep.





Orpheus rubbed the hound's belly. Then he rose and went on into the Underworld. He entered Hades' dark, chill hall. In silence, he walked to the foot of Hades' throne.

There sat glowering Hades. Beside him sat his wife, the beautiful, sad Persephone, who longs always for the bright world above.

Orpheus knelt and waited for the King of the Underworld to give him permission to speak.

'You are alive,' Hades said, at last. 'I know, by the din your footsteps made. Why are you here?'

'To ask a favour, great King,' Orpheus said.

Hades laughed. 'I grant no favours to the living.'

Persephone leaned forward and spoke. 'What is it you would ask?'

'Eurydice, my dear Eurydice, is here in your Hall, great Queen ...'

The Queen was puzzled. 'Yes. But what would you ask?'

'Let her go, Queen – let her go!'

Hades laughed again, and the Queen said, 'My husband allows none to go. If your Eurydice is here, here she must stay. And you must go back to the world above.' The Queen's voice broke, because the world above was where she wanted to be. For six long months of every year, when she had to live in her husband's cold Underworld, she longed for light, sun and warmth.

Orpheus sobbed. 'No, Queen – no. Not without her. I cannot be without her. I cannot go back and leave her here in the dark and cold. Please, I beg you, please, let her go.'

The Queen looked at Hades, but Hades shook his head. 'All the gold in the earth, all the silver held tight in stone – it belongs to me,' he said. 'All the iron, all the copper – it belongs to me. Every diamond, ruby, emerald, sapphire – I grasp them hard. If you would have them, then you must sweat for them. All the dead too, are mine. I hold hard to what I have. I give nothing away. Eurydice is mine.'

'You want me to work for her?' Orpheus said. 'You want me to pay? I can pay with music. I'll play for you.'



‘I want none of your noise,’ Hades said.

But Persephone said, ‘Play, please play. Play me something the shepherds play when it’s hot and the flocks are drowsing.’

Orpheus played. He played the shepherds’ music and Persephone leaned forward to listen. Her eyes opened wide, then they filled with tears, so much did she long for the land above. Although hearing the music hurt, it soothed too. She wept to hear it, but was glad to weep.

Hades scowled. The music didn’t move him. He shook his head.

Orpheus played a lament for his loss of Eurydice. He shed no tears. The lyre sobbed instead. Hades’ hard face softened. The sobbing and moaning of the lost dead was with him always. He hardened himself against them and didn’t hear them.

But he heard the music. It spoke to him for the dead. In the music, he heard their sorrow and their longing. ‘Stop playing,’ Hades said.

‘Go on, go on,’ said Persephone.

Orpheus played on. From every part of the Underworld, the ghosts came. They gathered about Hades' throne, silent, staring, listening and longing.

Some remembered music played before kings in firelit halls. Others remembered tunes at a village wedding, or pipe music in a market place. But all remembered and all ached.

Orpheus lifted his head and saw Eurydice looking at him. He stopped playing. The lyre hung from his hand.

Eurydice stood among the other grey ghosts beside Hades' throne. A moan rose from the others. They cried, they whispered, because the music had stopped.

'Play again!' Hades said.

'Let Eurydice go,' Orpheus said.

'Play.'

'Let her go.'

'If you play again, I'll let her go.'

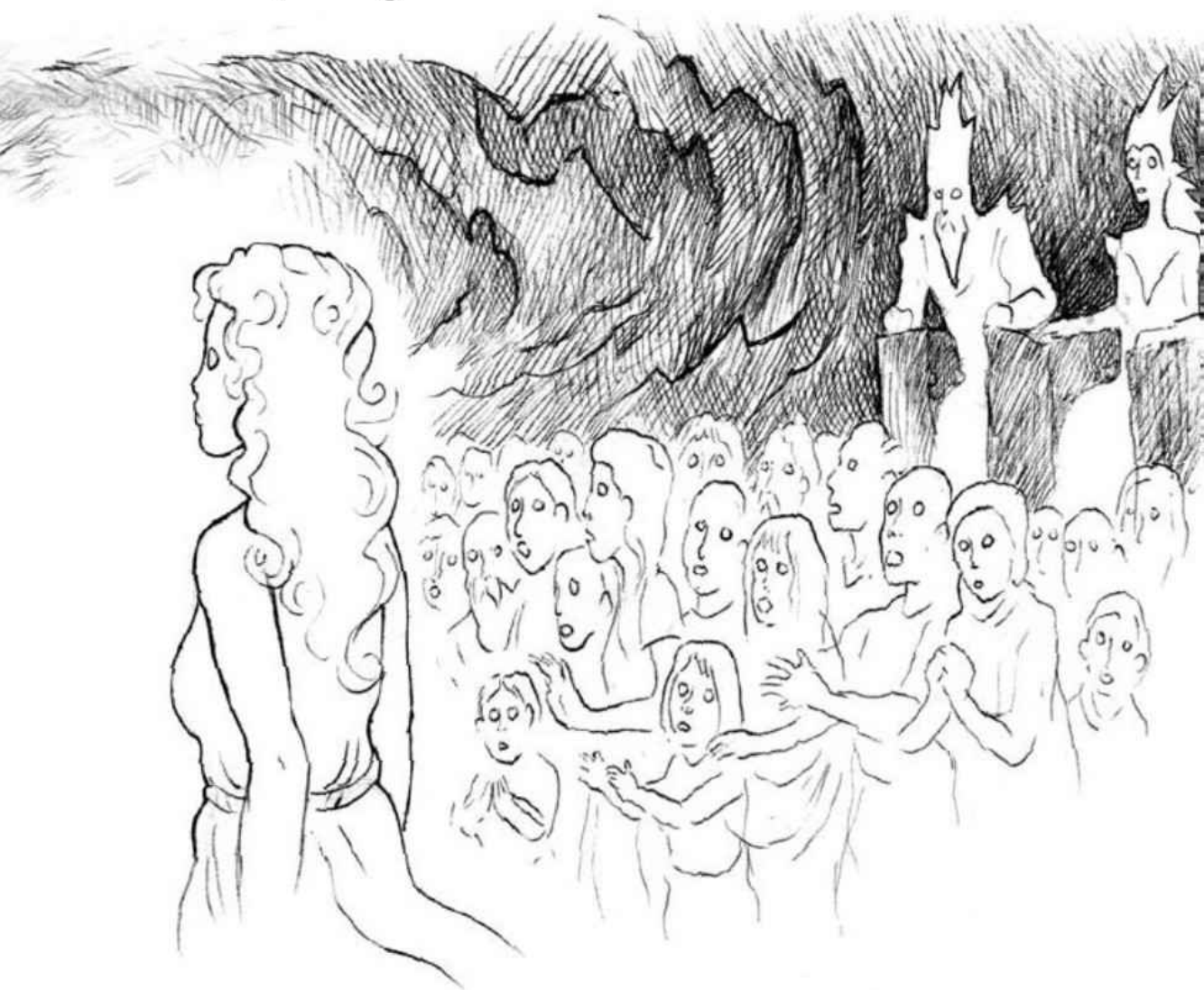




Shrieks burst from the ghosts.  
Shrieks and cries because Eurydice was to be set free, but they were not. Then there were moans and pleas for the music to begin again.

‘Promise,’ Orpheus said. ‘Give me your word that you will let her go.’

‘My word,’ Hades said. ‘I give you my word, on my honour as a god, that if you play again, I will let Eurydice go.’



Orpheus played again. The ghosts wept bitter tears, hearing that music and knowing they would never hear such music again. They did not want it to end.

But music must end. Orpheus stopped playing and held out his hand to Eurydice. She stepped forward to take it.

Then Hades said, 'I will let Eurydice go – but you must not look at her until she stands in the sunlight.'

Orpheus dropped his hand and looked at Hades. 'Great King, you gave your word.'

Hades smiled. 'I keep my word. If you can climb back to the upper world, and never once look behind you, never once look at Eurydice until she stands under the sun – then she may return to the living. Yet if you once look – if you glance – behind, then she is still mine.'

Orpheus looked at Persephone, but she shook her head. 'He is King here,' she said.

Orpheus said to Eurydice, 'Follow me. I shall not look back.'

## Chapter 4

### **Don't look back**

Orpheus walked out of Hades' hall, his back stiff, his eyes staring before him. But his eyes saw nothing. The only thing he wanted to see was behind him. All he thought was: is she behind me?

He knew that she must be. He had asked her to follow him, and no one would want to stay in Hades' hall. She was as silent as a ghost, unspeaking, her footsteps unheard, but for sure she was behind him.

He came down by the stinking shores of the Styx, and there lay Cerberus, still sleeping. Orpheus passed the hound quietly. Eurydice, behind him, made no sound.

Orpheus had to stop himself from turning his head. He had to believe that she was behind him.

At the bank of the Styx, there was the half-wrecked boat. The ferryman sat in it, waiting. As soon as he saw Orpheus, he called out to him.



‘Play again! You promised you would play again!’

‘I will,’ Orpheus said. ‘But please, ferryman, tell me – is there a woman behind me? Does she follow me?’

Charon peered into the darkness behind Orpheus. ‘I see no one.’

Orpheus’ head started to turn, but he clenched his teeth and stiffened his muscles. He would not look behind. ‘Look carefully ... My wife ... Does she follow me? Does she?’

‘A ghost, is she? Ghosts are hard to see. They’re grey, faint ... She could be there and I’d never see her. Ah, no!’ He held out his oar to stop Orpheus stepping into the boat. ‘Play first. You promised you would play again.’

Orpheus lifted his lyre and played again. As he played, he listened, trying to hear the slightest sound behind him. He thought his right side grew colder than the rest of him – was that because she had come close, to listen? Or, in the deep chill of the Underworld, was it only that he wished for her to be at his side?

He finished the music and stepped into Charon’s boat. He held his breath, waiting to feel the boat rock as she stepped aboard – but a ghost has no weight.

Charon started to row. ‘Play as we cross. I never hear such music.’

So Orpheus played and sang – a song that he knew Eurydice used to love. He hoped that she smiled as she listened, but he didn’t dare turn his head to see.



Charon rowed slowly, but he kept his word. He carried Orpheus to the other side, and watched him step from the boat.

‘Play one more time,’ Charon said. ‘Once more.’

‘It’s a long way, back to the world above,’ protested Orpheus.

‘But I must stay here for ever, and it may be long before I hear you play again.’

So Orpheus played one last time, and he kept his eyes on Charon and the boat. Then he said, ‘Follow me,’ though he didn’t look behind. He walked away from the Styx, climbing up through the caverns. With every step he paused, listening. He tipped his head backwards, listening. Was she there?

He started to turn his head – but stopped himself. He must believe she was there, but not look. When he reached the upper world, when they both stood under the sun again, then he could look at her until the sun went down. They would live their lives, and every day of their lives, he could look at her.

It was a long hard climb. It's easy to tell of such a climb, but hard to do it. Step by step Orpheus climbed, out of death, until he saw sunlight shining on a wall.

The mouth of the cave was near. He hurried his steps. A breeze touched his face, scented with pine and rosemary. He turned to tell Eurydice ...

He stopped himself just in time. Leaning against the cave wall, he clenched his fist. Then he went on.

The cave's narrow way twisted, and he stepped into the full light of the sun. After so long in the dark, he was blinded by the glare, and had to cover his eyes with his arm. The heat of the sun on his skin felt like warm water.



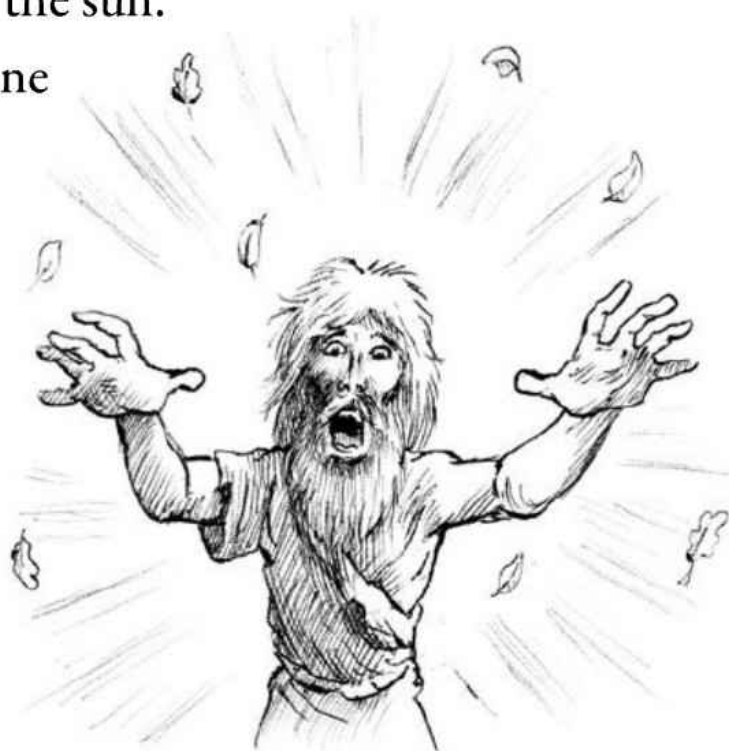
He stepped out of the cave, into the breeze, into the scent of thyme, into bird song. Dizzy with relief and gladness, he raised his arms to the sun and shouted aloud. He had done it; he had outwitted Hades. Hard as it had been, he hadn't looked behind him.

He threw down his lyre and, laughing, turned, holding out his arms.

And saw Eurydice in the shadows of the cave mouth, stretching out her arms to him. She gave one long wild cry as she was snatched back, forever, into the darkness of the Underworld. To live, always, in Hades' hall.

Orpheus had turned too soon. Eurydice had not yet stepped into the sun.

If he had waited one more moment, if he had given her time to take just one more step ...



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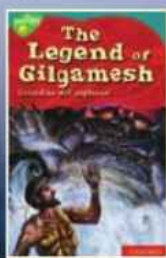
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