

Battling Greek Mythology, History, and Reluctant Readers:

An Interview with Rick Riordan

Those of us lucky enough to find an advance reading copy of Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* in our bags at the 2004 ALAN Conference were probably hooked from the start by Rick Riordan's updating of the Greeks gods and their myths and the introduction of a younger generation of demigods (half god, half mortal) led by Percy Jackson. Those attending the 2008 ALAN Conference not only found the fourth installment in our boxes but also had the pleasure of hearing Riordan speak as part of the urban fantasy panel.

Now that the fifth and final book of the Percy Jackson series has come out, Riordan shares with us his experiences as a classroom teacher, his upcoming projects, and his thoughts on reading. His website (<http://www.rickriordan.com/>) features conversations with the author, curriculum guides, and information about all of his novels. The following interview was conducted just before the fifth book's release.

TAR: *First, I would like to say how impressed I am with your books, and I very much enjoyed your talk at last year's ALAN Conference. Your books, like the infamous Reverend Wilbert Awdry's Thomas the Tank Engine, grew out of the stories told by a father to his son. If you don't mind my asking, what role do your children play in your writing?*



RR: I have two sons, ages 14 and 11, and they are always my first audience. I'd never dream of sending a manuscript to my editor until my sons vetted it. I've found that reading the book aloud to my boys is incredibly helpful to my writing process. It keeps the narrator's voice consistent and snappy, and it helps me keep the story moving.

My sons sometimes offer advice, but more often they let me know how they

feel just from their reactions. If they're confused, they'll ask questions, and I'll know that I need to clarify a passage. If I write a joke that I think is hysterical and they don't laugh, the joke gets cut. If they start to fidget and their attention wanders, I know I need to tighten up that section.

TAR: *You taught English and social studies for fifteen years and have mentioned that Percy is actually a combination of several of your former students. Can you talk a little bit about how your time spent teaching works its way into your novels? For example, did you get the idea about Percy's returnable pen/sword Riptide because your students' writing utensils went missing (I know mine did)? Or, are the magical items, like Annabeth's invisibility cap an interpretation of what you think kids would create?*

RR: My writing is informed equally by my experiences as a student and as a teacher. When I was in elementary school, my attention would wander easily. I used to daydream that my pen could turn into a sword. That’s where Riptide came from. Like Percy, I was not exactly a model student. I would get into trouble because I was very verbal, but I was also a reluctant reader. In high school, I never read a single book that was assigned in class. Not one. I would make As and Bs because I’d simply listen to class discussion and regurgitate the main points. I could write a great essay. I just didn’t want to read the books because they seemed boring to me. Of course, my karmic punishment was to become an English teacher. In college, I went back and read all that stuff I never touched in high school, but by then I was a little older and more ready to appreciate it. This experience gave me a lot of sympathy for the reluctant reader. In my own writing, I make a conscious effort to craft a story that will reach every student in a class, not just the students who love reading already.

When I wrote the *Lightning Thief*, I imagined myself reading the manuscript to my own classes. I tried to design a book that would keep the kids engaged, even right after lunch. If you’ve taught in the classroom, you know that’s a very difficult litmus test. Many of my characters, like Percy, are based on my favorite students. Usually those were not the honor roll students; instead, they were the students who came in thinking school was boring, found something they could relate to, and suddenly lit up in class. Those are the students who would make my year.

Being familiar with middle school, I felt like I had a pretty good understanding of what kids find funny, what they find interesting, what they find boring. My classroom philosophy has always been to make learning relevant and fun. I wanted kids to leave my classroom at the end of the year with a positive attitude toward reading. I tried to take the same approach with my writing.

TAR: *The obvious connections to mythology lend themselves to many mandated curriculums, so the possibilities of integrating your series into the classroom is a natural fit. How are the curriculum guides featured on your website created?*

RR: When the *Lightning Thief* was being prepared for publication, one of the first things I did was to create my own teacher’s guide, drawing on my favorite activities from my years in the classroom. If you’re like me, you’ve seen a lot of really horrible classroom guides that seem to have been written by someone with absolutely no clue what really happens in a classroom. I tried to make my teacher’s guide useful in the real world—something you could pick up and run with. As you can imagine, creating the guide took a huge amount of time and energy, but I think it was worth it. Every year, I get hundreds of thank-you letters from teachers who have used the guide in their classes. Because of time constraints, I haven’t written guides for the other books in the Percy Jackson series. There are guides available, but they’re created by the publisher and are more like discussion guides. Still, I think if teachers are going to incorporate the Percy Jackson series in the curriculum, they will most likely start with the first book.

Along with the guide, I created a curriculum rationale based on NCTE standards so that teachers would have some ammunition when facing censorship. I figured with magic, Greek gods, etc., there would be a lot of that. Surprisingly, the books haven’t run into a lot of resistance. Very occasionally, I hear of a parent protesting on religious grounds, but most people seem to realize that Greek mythology is part of our cultural heritage. Knowing about Classical Greece and Rome is part of being an educated person.

TAR: *How do you hope they (those guides) are/are not being used?*

RR: Mythology is a high-interest subject for kids. If it’s taught well, they eat it up. I hope that teachers are able to use my guide and my books to bring mythology to life—to make it seem relevant and modern. The themes explored in Greek mythology are just as important now as they were thousands of years ago—loyalty, heroism, hubris, family. I’m always happy when teachers and librarians tell me that Percy Jackson was a gateway for students to get interested in the original stories. They read Homer in high school and say, “Hey, that’s what happened in Percy Jackson!”

I Risk Being Shot by an Author

In his introduction to *Demigods and Monsters* (Riordan & Wilson, 2008), Riordan points to a lasting influence of mythology and the role it plays in his novels: “We are still creating myths all the time. My books, among other things, explore the myth of America as the beacon of civilization, the myth of New York, and the myth of the American teenager” (p. xi). Those three myths culminate in the final installment of the Percy Jackson series. In *The Last Olympian* (Riordan, 2009), Percy Jackson is about to turn sixteen and face the Oracle’s prophecy. He and his fellow campers attempt to protect Mount Olympus (on the 600th floor of the Empire State Building) from the titan Kronos’ attack. As Percy learns more about his enemies and their histories, he has trouble deciding whether to save the gods or have them destroyed.

With prophecies, sleep-away camps, villains with sympathetic histories, and young adults with exceptional talents, it seems inevitable that any young adult fantasy series written after (or during) J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* will find itself being compared with the Bard herself. However, Riordan’s stories are rooted in Greek mythology whereas Rowling’s blend various archetypes and literary references to create new characters with new histories. Ultimately, Riordan’s stories are more than just an updating of classical Greek mythology; they present a nuanced view of life in contemporary America.

In the novels, Percy travels west across the United States, eats French fries and shakes at diners, plays at arcades and amusement parks, and engages in battles at iconic American landmarks. Demeter and Persephone eat cereal; Poseidon wears Tommy Bahama, and his throne on Mount Olympus is a deep-sea fisherman’s chair; New York now serves as the site for Mount Olympus. However, the reader glimpses the dangers of pollution, consumerism, and life on the streets. Alongside the majestic trees in Central Park are the polluted depths of the Hudson River, and the people in New York defend the city until the end.

Percy’s friends also defy simplistic generalizations as mere representations of their parents. From Ethan Nakamura, the son of Nemesis (the lesser goddess of revenge), to his satyr friend, Grover, Percy learns the importance of balance in any world—mortal or Olympic. In fact, Percy and his friends resemble what O’Quinn (2004) describes as “radical mutant teens” who “are not about becoming someone else’s notion of who they should be; they are about accepting the uniqueness of their own promise and limits” (p. 52). Percy’s uniqueness is found in his willingness to truly listen to the needs of all creatures, from his pet hellhound, Mrs. O’Leary, to his nemesis, Luke.

Working with classical and contemporary mythologies, Riordan’s infusion of Greek mythology into modern-day America illuminates what makes this country the great complicated place it is.

TAR: *For those readers not fortunate enough to have you visit their schools, what do you focus on during those presentations, and how do those audiences respond to your works/ visits?*

RR: I’ve actually stopped doing school visits for the foreseeable future, which I have mixed feelings about. I love visiting schools because it lets me feel like I’m still a classroom teacher. For the last four years, I’ve toured all over the U.S. and U.K. and worked with tens of thousands of kids. It’s extremely gratifying to see how excited kids have gotten about the books. Typically in my presentations, I talk about how I became a writer and how I got started with the Percy Jackson series. I show pictures of my manuscripts and my brainstorming

notes. I talk about how many drafts I have to do on each book (typically 5–14) so students won’t feel so bad the next time they are asked to do a second draft of an essay. I show the different cover treatments from different countries. We do a lot of Q&A, and I do a quiz game on Greek mythology. Students always know all the answers, which amazes the teachers every time, but I’m not surprised. Students are more aware of mythology than most adults realize.

The downside of school visits is that they take me away from my writing, and as the demands on my time have grown, it’s become increasingly difficult to meet my deadlines. Right now I’ve got so many irons in the fire, I had to make the decision to stop traveling, at least for a

while, so I can tend to my job of getting the books out. Also as I mentioned, I'm the father of two sons, and I want to be there for my kids. That's really my primary job. The constant travel has just become too difficult for my family.

TAR: *Authors who write for young adults are often asked what young adult literature they read. I'm not necessarily going to ask you this question (but feel free to answer it); I'd rather know what pieces of literature you enjoyed teaching your students.*

RR: I read a lot of young adult literature. Whenever I go to a school, I ask the kids what they are reading, and we share recommendations. (Not what they are required to read, mind you—rather, what they are reading on their own.) I try to read at least one book by every author I hear about, just so I have a sense for what's out there. Not surprisingly, I tend to gravitate toward YA fantasy, because that's what I write and what I enjoy, but I'll read just about anything.

As a classroom teacher, my biggest thrill was taking a book that wasn't immediately accessible or an obvious kid-pleaser and turning it into a positive experience. *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be a really difficult read, but it can also be a very successful unit. It all depends on how well it's taught. I used to do a huge Shakespeare unit with my eighth graders. Again, that can be a really tough sell, but we would turn into an Elizabethan acting troupe, take sword-fighting lessons, dress in costume, and learn to insult each other in Elizabethan English; suddenly, the Bard seemed very relevant to middle schoolers. Basically, whatever book I taught, I tried to find the connection with the kids. I tried to make it come alive.

TAR: *A movie in the works; what about a video game?*

RR: That's up to Fox. They hold those rights.

TAR: *My 5-year-old son and I recently read/listened to your contribution to a new series: The 39 Clues: Maze of Bones. I understand other authors will write the subsequent volumes. What are your thoughts/experiences with that series? Like your other novels, it seems to continue your work as an educator.*

RR: Book 1 will be my only installment in *39 Clues*, simply because of time constraints. I have a lot of other projects in the works with Disney-Hyperion, including a fantasy adventure that comes out next spring and a new Camp Half-Blood series that will probably launch in late 2010.

I agreed to work on the *39 Clues* because it struck me as a great subversive way to teach kids world history. When I designed the story arc for the series, I basically used my "greatest hits" from my social studies class. I picked the topics that my students had enjoyed the most and used them as the focal points for the 10-book series. By the time kids have read the whole series, they'll have gone all over the world. If it gets kids interested in world history the way Percy Jackson has gotten them interested in Greek mythology, I'll be happy! So far, early indications are very positive.

TAR: *As a follow-up to that question, there are subtle hints to your readers on environmental issues. Would you care to share with us your philosophy on the environment? I like the idea of not only making our students/readers aware of these issues, but also sending them a message that they can do something about our planet.*

RR: I think the key word there is "subtle." I don't want to use YA fiction as a soapbox and hit people over the head with a message. Is Grover's search for Pan a metaphor? Sure. But I hope it speaks for itself, and I'll let readers make of it what they will. To quote Mark Twain (my literary hero): "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot."

References

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