

“Creative Cussing”:

The Sacred and the Profane in Rick Riordan’s Mythical Middle Grade Novels

Ideologically, childhood is viewed pervasively as a sacred, idealized, timeless, innocent, even mythic space. This social construct is reflected in the ways that gatekeepers often maintain boundaries around what is considered acceptable content for younger readers (e.g., Coyne, Stockdale, Nelson, & Fraser, 2011; Shanahan, 2007). In contrast, adolescence and young adult literature has traditionally been the place where those boundaries are tested, where risqué language and content may be deemed an important part of the maturation process as the teenager struggles with authority (Trites, 2004). However, arguments about whether YA is becoming too dark for the average adolescent (see Alexie, 2011; Gurdon, 2011) and debates in the media surrounding frequent adult readers of adolescent novels (see Graham, 2014; Howlett, 2015; Rosenberg, 2014; Wolitzer, 2014) intimate that young adult literature may be becoming even more adult in content. Current YA literature generally does not buffer readers from taboo topics, if it ever did, and it may present readers with realistic, sometimes vivid portrayals of profanity, sex, abuse, death, drugs, and rebellion against authority (Campbell, 2007; McClung, 2012).

Readers do not usually transition immediately from books that avoid taboo topics to those which revel in them. The middle grade novel, therefore, exists as a critical limbo space where adult topics are mentioned, yet are handled with delicacy, evasion, and circumlocution. For middle grade writers and publishers, this requires balancing the demands of verisimilitude and the anxieties of age appropriateness

(Birdsall, 2013; Rosen, 2014). Middle grade novels carve a plot between the sacral space of childhood and the boundary-testing, authority-challenging blasphemy of young adulthood. This article will look at examples from one of the most successful middle grade novelists, Rick Riordan. By creating humorous pseudo-profanity, Riordan appeals to what he sometimes calls the “immature” humor of his young readers and manages to capture what seems to be one of the most important developmental tasks of this age: learning to balance self-expression and freedom of speech with personal responsibility and social awareness.

The Contexts of Code-Switching and Cursing Avoidance

In an essay about the importance of knowing your audience, Riordan blogged that after writing adult mysteries for ten years, the main stylistic choice that shifted when he debuted writing for middle grades with *The Lightning Thief* (2005) was that he left out profanity. He says:

My prose hasn’t changed much since my adult mystery writing days, except for being curse-free. . . . But I do write with a middle grade sensibility. . . . I write for the middle grades for the same reason that I taught the middle grades so many years. I know those kids. I relate to them. I get their sense of humor and I understand what they’re looking for (I hope) in a story. (2013, January 1)

While it is debatable whether Riordan did or did not make other linguistic and content switches when imagining a new, younger audience, what is salient

here is the question of cursing, or rather, the creative avoidance thereof in books for middle school readers. Just as writing for children is conceived simultaneously, almost subconsciously, as a sacred trust and a subversive medium, Riordan approaches the sacred stories of various cultures with both mild irreverence and a deep respect, and he treats his middle grade subjects the same way. The use of offensive language in middle grade novels remains more controversial than that in novels for teenagers; therefore, authors often self-censor, drawing upon ideologies that assume that children and middle readers need at least a modicum of protection from “adult” subjects and language. Even though in some linguistic contexts using profanity is normative, in order to be considered full members of society, teens of all ages must learn the appropriate contexts for their expressive vocabulary. They need to learn to code-switch between formal and informal uses of language, and skillful novelists such as Riordan may provide models of ways to communicate in officially sanctioned and formal ways while amply allowing for humor, creativity, and self-expression.

The use of profanity by adolescents, although common, is still a behavior that especially younger teens need to learn to control and use in suitable contexts. Aitchison (2006) argues that as early teens experience a surge in vocabulary size, they “are learning how to adjust their language to the world(s) they live in.” Aitchison calls the skill of adapting language to differing linguistic contexts “appropriacy” (p. 20–21). Coyne, Callister, Nelson, Stockdale, and Wells (2012) investigated profanity in adolescent literature and state that most uses of profane language by adolescents are considered a socially unacceptable problem behavior. This reminds readers of YA novels that “profanity is included in several child or adolescent problem behavior checklists” and that when profanity is utilized “with the intent to hurt others it has been identified as a form of verbal aggression” (p. 361).

In her controversial essay about YA literature, “Darkness Too Visible,” Meghan Cox Gurdon (2011) theorized that “foul language is widely regarded among librarians, reviewers, and booksellers as perfectly OK, provided it emerges organically from the characters and setting rather than being tacked on for sensation But whether it’s language that parents want their children reading is another question” (para.

19–20). Two decades ago, Caroline Hunt (1996) contended, “Many books that speak directly to the adolescent experience use language that some adults do not like . . . children’s books do not always involve *obvious* taboos, but the YA ones generally do” (p. 228).

Undoubtedly, the issue of whether or not those subjects labeled taboo by critics, educators, politicians, and sociolinguists are allowable in books for adolescents is not as simple as either Gurdon or Hunt would paint it, and the use of more explicit content in schools still causes raging censorship battles. The Supreme Court wrote in *Bethel School District no. 403 vs. Fraser*, “It is a highly appropriate function of public school education to prohibit the use of vulgar and offensive terms in public discourse” (First Amendment Center, 2015). Most schools have policies about the use of offensive language,

although these policies are not always practicable to consistently enforce in hallways, and although teens are likely to hear and employ a wide variety of offensive language between classes, school texts are always liable to scrutiny (see National Coalition Against Censorship, n. d.; Center for Public Education, 2006).

Timothy Jay (2007), a premier psycholinguistics researcher on cursing, believes that the ability to assess situations in which to use language that society considers profane is a maturation skill. Since “language values clearly vary from one community to another” (para. 1), it is difficult to gauge how well middle school students understand “the etiquette of swearing.” In a related work, Jay and Jay (2013) say that preteens are still learning the necessary sensitivity “to contextual or pragmatic variables (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, social status or occupation of listener, social occasion, physical location) that constrain taboo word use” for adults (p. 473). It isn’t until children

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learn to “intellectually appreciate the impact of language on listeners and can empathize with them” (2007, para. 8) that they learn to evaluate which situations are appropriate for the use of taboo words.

Teachers often become the arbiters of district and school policies regarding profanity and may be caught in the crossfire in episodes of profane language usage

in textbook selections, student written work, or classroom discussions. According to Jay’s (2007) research, it is useful for educators and anyone who deals with children’s media to be aware of these categories of offensive speech and the various situations they might encounter. He delineates these different categories

of offensive language and demonstrates that each type of language “represents a different speaker intention”: “name calling, insulting, profanity, slang, vulgarity, obscenity, epithets, slurs, and scatology” (para. 4). Developing the language skills to appropriately navigate various social and academic settings while preparing for adult roles can be challenging. This involves continually increasing demands on a person’s vocabulary, but it also involves learning the contexts in which to use certain types of language. Jay (2009) reminds us, “We all grow up in a culture in which we have to learn which speech is appropriate and which is offensive in a given situation” (p. 91).

When it comes to profanity, this need for awareness of socially acceptable behaviors becomes even more apparent. Early adolescents may struggle to find ways to express themselves, but they might find models in fiction. Bandura and Walters (1963) theorized the importance of imitative models in the influencing of behavior and include textual models such as books. They argue that “the provision of models in actual or symbolic form is an exceedingly effective procedure for transmitting and controlling behavior” (p. 51). This influential social learning theory argues that the media children and teens consume likely affects their behaviors. Middle grade writers have the potential to influence their readers by modeling appropriate contexts for profanity use.

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A number of writers have reflected on the issue of profanity in their blogs or have spoken out in interviews, but few have systematically described their thought and writing processes. Parry (2013) categorized the options that writers have in her essay, “To #%&* or Not to #%&*: Profanity in Fiction.” She considers the question, “Do you need swearing to sound authentic when writing for teens and adults?” She determined that:

The issue is balancing authenticity with respect for your audience. Everybody encounters profanity; it is a language intensifier and can be useful in conveying the weight and reality of your character’s situation. And yet it is the nature of profanity to offend, so any use will have consequences in how the book as a whole is received. (para. 2)

Parry gives an example of ways that offensive language may affect reception, stating that middle grade books that include profanity will get shelved with the young adult titles. “On the other hand,” she says, “excessive swearing in any adult or YA books can come across as clichéd or amateurish” (para. 2). She reflects on the five different ways she deals with “an opportunity to use a swear word” (para. 2) in her novels. She may: 1) omit the word altogether; 2) reduce the amount of swearing a character may use; 3) evade using profanity; 4) substitute creative insults instead; and occasionally 5) commit to using profanity “when the first four choices are wrong for the voice of the character or the gravity of the situation” (para. 3–7). Musing on the same subject, Russell-Williams (2010) argues that swearing in children’s and young adult books “used to be pure anathema,” but now “it’s probably easier to get away with a cuss word in a children’s book than it is on the news.” She points out that going at rudeness obliquely, while being cautious about using invented profanity, is still probably the best way to go. That’s where creative avoidance of profanity becomes effective.

Riordan Models “Creative Cussing” Avoidance

Rick Riordan’s avoidance of most types of offensive language in his middle grade novels offers an interesting case study. A former teacher, he is cognizant of both the various ideologies used to define his readers and the adults who select, promote, or challenge his books. He has repeatedly claimed a pedagogical pur-

pose in the instigation and continuation of his Percy Jackson series (2005–2009), which began as a way to motivate his son, who has ADHD and dyslexia, to engage with reading, and which Riordan also utilizes as a forum to teach readers about the myths from Greek, Egyptian, Roman, and Norse mythology. His interest in the welfare of his readers elucidates much of his motivation for self-censorship.

At the same time, if Riordan completely avoided taboo language, it might restrict his characterizations and realism (verisimilitude being one of the main arguments behind including controversial elements in books for middle grade or teen readers). Instead, he has turned this self-restriction into an asset. Like many other middle grade writers, Riordan exercises a modicum of self-censorship due to audience concerns. He models for his readers some ways to expertly avoid cursing while occasionally finding humor in skillfully manipulating language; this generally results in avoiding offensive language as a weapon against peers, but inserting it during life-and-death moments of extreme duress. He scaffolds methods of using language in socially acceptable ways by demonstrating often humorous and skillful ways *not* to curse (see Bright, 2013).

Language Has Nearly Divine Power

Riordan portrays early adolescents as heroic, powerful, yet self-conscious and awkward individuals who accomplish super-human tasks, including gaining linguistic maturity. He clearly expects his readers to be capable individuals and to accomplish their own super-human tasks along with the characters, such as recalling the names of dozens of mythical monsters, heroes, and gods. Along the way, he successfully balances ideas of the sacred and the profane, of reverence and irreverence, of prayer and sacrifice employed by his most heroic characters, contrasted with the blasphemy and curses in which the more negative characters indulge. This is true in both the mythic sense and the linguistic sense. There is a playful attitude toward modern profanity, as well as blasphemy against the Hellenic and Egyptian pantheons; however, boundaries are drawn. Disrespect is dangerous when those you are disrespecting are godly beings (and, in some cases, teachers at school).

Also, in Riordan's tales, oaths aren't just flip-pant phrases; they may be solemn promises made to the powers that be. In fact, curses may be more than

just taboo language that sometimes causes listeners emotional harm; they may also be magical incantations that can cause bodily harm. Riordan's first book, *The Lightning Thief* (2005), includes a caveat that it won't deal with the religious or spiritual directly: "God—capital G, God. That's a different matter altogether. We shan't deal with the metaphysical" (p. 67). However, Riordan's characters do learn to deal with the existence of "great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavors: the immortal gods of Olympus" (p. 67). Language in Riordan's novels literally has power to invoke the wrath or the blessings of the gods (or the junior high school principal) and is far more than a symbolic representation; Riordan's version of potent cursing originates in the power of language to curse or bless in ancient Greco-Roman and Egyptian religious ritual and myth (see Faraone, 2005; Frankfurter, 2005).

Understanding the proper use of language is only one of the skills Riordan's heroes demonstrate; his characters learn that names have power, and words are the language of creation. Predictably, as adolescents, the main characters aren't always reverent about their relationships with the gods. For instance, the young Egyptian magicians use the sun disks on statues of Ra as basketball hoops, and Percy Jackson has a tendency to do impertinent things like ship Medusa's severed head to Mt. Olympus. The relationships between Riordan's protagonists, children of the Olympians or the Pharaohs, are reminiscent of the relationships between adolescents and any authority figures. The Greek gods in *The Lightning Thief* are portrayed as the ultimate deadbeat, absent parents. It's unsurprising, then, that the demigods in the story teeter between respect for their parents' godly powers and frustration and anger over their distance.

The creative cussing techniques that Riordan invents are part of that careful balance between reverence and irreverence. I use the term "creative cussing" in part because Riordan has been known to use the phrase himself, but also because when his characters

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curse, they speak in euphemisms rather than actual curses or other forms of profanity. In *The Throne of Fire* (2011), part of Riordan's Kane Chronicles

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(2010–2012) series dealing with Egyptian mythology, the teen magicians are at the Brooklyn museum attempting to collect an artifact that could save the world from total annihilation when they encounter an obstacle in the form of a major protective enchant-

ment. The narrator reports: "I muttered an Egyptian curse—the cussing kind, not the magic kind" (p. 21). In this case, the profanity is muted twice: first by it being in a different language, and second because the "cussing" is summarized rather than directly reported. A hint of a joke can be seen in the connection between magical curses and profanity, as well, which makes the mildness of the language function more as an intelligent choice made by the narrator, rather than an uncomfortable restriction.

Riordan's characters already seem to understand when certain types of mild profanity might be socially acceptable and that name calling could harm others, but they allow for mildly rude nicknames as a form of middle school bonding (e.g., Seaweed Brain, Wise Girl, Chicken Man). None of the protagonists use racial epithets, and when bullies or more serious enemies use epithets, it is done off-stage. Taboo language is toned down or elided, just as some of the other "mature" content is modified to make it middle school appropriate. A striking example of this is when the riotous god of wine, Dionysus, is on probation as director of the demigod camp, and he is forced to drink Diet Coke instead of wine. This and the centaurs who get tipsy drinking root beer become a few of the many gags in the story where the bawdy Greek myths are modernized, but not exactly bowdlerized. The adult content is muted without insulting the intelligence of the middle school reader. Profanity is similarly modified to satisfy a sense of realism and propriety simultaneously.

Language Usage Reveals Character

For writers, an important part of characterization is deciding how different characters will speak as a

means to distinguish them from each other. Along the way, writers must decide how these characters will react under the pressure of the plot. Much is revealed about a character's personality, background, and choices by the language he or she uses. For instance, one of Riordan's characters, Leo Valdez (*Mark of Athena*, 2012), ran away from home at an early age and spent much time in the foster system. Instances where he uses mild oaths (e.g., "heck" or "dang") or creative insults are notably higher than those of his peer Frank Zhang, who was raised in a conservative home with a strict Chinese grandmother. Another way that minor characters are painted with broad strokes is through their choice of epithets. A satyr (half-goat, half-man) traveling with the group of Greek and Roman heroes exclaims things like "Pan's pipes!" and "Holy mother of goats!" Conversely, the son of Hades, god of the Underworld, says, "Oh, Styx" or "How in Tartarus?" (swearing by locations in the Underworld), while a Pegasus bellows, "Holy horse feed!" (a more equine oath).

Some of the most memorable creative cussing in Riordan's books is when his heroes use ancient languages to curse. The attraction of swearing in a second language is one that many language learners are familiar with, lending this technique an air of getting away with the forbidden in a relatively safe manner. One of the first instances where Riordan uses this technique is in *Lightning Thief* when Percy Jackson first comes to the camp for demigods. His tour guide, Annabeth, orders a group of bullies to back off by crying, "Erre es korakas!"—literally translated as "Go to the crows!" in Greek (p. 89). Many characters invoke the Olympians by exclaiming, "Di Immortales!" (p. 125), and Percy finds himself speaking in tongues when he spontaneously shouts, "Braccas meas vescimini!" or "Eat my pants!" (p. 166).

Other times, characters make oaths casually or seriously to relieve stress in life-or-death situations or to make promises. More frequently used exclamations, such as "By the gods" or "May the fates forbid," may be complemented with original profanity using Egyptian concepts like "By Ra's Throne," "Thoth's Beak," or "Holy Horus!" In the Greco-Roman stories, "Pluto's Pauldron's," "Hephaestus's Hand Grenades," "Mars Almighty!" and even "Poseidon's Underpants!" represent some of the creative phrases Riordan invented to use in his novels. Many moments of creative

cussing involve humorous homophones. In one scene in *Titan's Curse* (2007), a group of questing demigods reaches Hoover Dam. One character, an immortal huntress of Artemis, uses archaic language and misses the nuances of modern English. She cracks up the rest of the group when she says:

"Let us find the dam snack bar," Zoë said. "We should eat while we can."
Grover cracked a smile. "The dam snack bar?"
Zoë blinked. "Yes, what is funny?"
"Nothing," Grover said, trying to keep a straight face. "I could use some dam French fries."
Even Thalia smiled at that. "And I need to use the dam restroom."
...
"I want to use the dam water fountain," Grover said.
"And . . ." Thalia tried to catch her breath. "I want to buy a dam T-shirt." (p. 208)

In *Son of Neptune* (2011), one character, Hazel, who can control precious gems and metals, uses a large outcropping of semi-precious stone to escape some small demons. She doesn't know the name of the stone she has pulled up from the ground until her pursuers curse the stone for stopping them:

"Schist," said an angry voice from the grass.
Hazel raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"
"Schist! Big pile of schist!"
A nun at St. Agnes Academy had once washed Hazel's mouth with lye soap for saying something very similar (p. 215)

Reporting or summarizing the cursing that other characters engage in occasionally becomes an opportunity to provide a few cheap laughs. Percy of *Son of Neptune* (2011) can understand the speech of horses, which results in a translation of only part of what the horse snorts at the group in one particular scene:

Arion nickered.
"Jeez, Hazel," Percy said, "Tell your horse to watch his language."
Hazel tried not to laugh. "What did he say?"
"With the cussing removed?"
...
"This time Arion whinnied so angrily, even Hazel could guess he was cursing.
"Dude," Percy told the horse, "I've gotten suspended for saying less than that." (p. 439)

Readers may find in Riordan's novels subtle reminders that using strong language in front of authority figures can lead to trouble; they may also learn that

while rude language can sometimes help them gain status with their peer groups, using such language in humorous ways works better than simply being crude or abrasive. They will also discover that saving taboo words for stressful situations rather than using them on a daily basis gives them more cathartic power (see also Stephens, 2011).

Riordan appears completely aware of the possible impact his creative cussing avoidance may have on his audience. He demonstrates that avoiding profanity while attempting to create realistic characters and situations requires a fine balance. In *Mark of Athena* (2012), one of his less-restrained characters, Leo Valdez, is initially scornful of his fellow quester Frank Zhang's use of mild epithets: "'Dang it!' Frank barked, which Leo figured was probably severe profanity for him. No doubt Frank would've cursed some more—bursting out the *golly geees* and *gosh dams*—but Percy interrupted" (p. 260).

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Avoiding Oath-breaking, Blasphemy, and Other Social Etiquette

When characters swear oaths, most of the time they are making solemn promises that have dire consequences if broken. For example, if someone swears by the River Styx and breaks it, the punishment can be severe. Oath-breakers, or those who are faithless to their friends, are villains. Similarly, when someone invokes a magical curse similar to those in Egyptian tombs or otherwise calls down godly wrath on someone, the curse generally gets results, as in the exploding donkey curse or the curse for summoning fruit bats. There are even mythical creatures that embody the curses of dead enemies, such as the *aria* in *House of Hades* (2013, p. 227).

It is notable that by far the most commonly used actual profanity in Riordan's books is the use of "Oh, my gods!" as an expression of surprise, annoyance, disgust, fear, or sometimes just as a filler word or phrase. Casual blasphemy that would have been elided or eliminated in nineteenth-century novels has

become a commonplace interjection, almost a nonce word. The plural is typically used to make it contextually appropriate, just as *Hades* replaces hell in most of the characters' exclamations.

It is important to note that the context in which the offensive language or use of an avoidance technique appears can impact their reception. Mildly

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offensive language may be used to add comic relief to a situation. Insults may be used for social bonding or as weapons, depending on the way they are used. It is important for adolescents to learn the social etiquette surrounding taboo words, and Riordan's characters model many of these avoidance techniques. Educators can have fruitful conversations talking about situa-

tions in which formal and informal language should be used, including slang or insults. However, discussions of profanity in class should be handled carefully. Riordan's work may aid middle school or high school classes in discussions of socially acceptable contexts for various types of language and code-switching, thus helping students learn to move confidently from one language register to another.

Categories of Creative Profanity Avoidance or "Creative Cussing"

In this section, I've categorized a number of ways that taboo language may be avoided in any type of novel, and I've included clarifying examples. It should be noted, however, that Riordan's work does not use every one of these methods. The chart in Appendix A (which contains page numbers and book references for each of the italicized quotations below) catalogs Rick Riordan's wide use of a variety of these profanity avoidance techniques in his first two series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005–2009) and *Kane Chronicles* (2010–2012). (Interested parties may contact me for copies of data from Riordan's *Heroes of Olympus* series [2011–2013].) In the Appendix, each

type of profanity avoidance or use is organized into the following categories:

- A. Character never curses; no replacement necessary
- B. Swearing is summarized; e.g., *she swore, he cussed*
- C. Grawlixes; use of a string of symbols to replace offensive language (e.g., #@\$%!) is more common in graphic novels and comics than in regular novels.
- D. Partial excision; some letters in the word are elided, shortened with hyphens, or turned into acronyms. (This is not a very common method in recent years, although a character who is beginning to swear may be cut off by another character in conversation, leaving just a hint of what was to come. The most modern version of this may be the texting acronym of OMG for "Oh my God.")
- E. Spelling changed to fit a dialect; e.g., *dem* for *damn*
- F. Contracted phrase; e.g., *helluva*
- G. Swearing in another language; e.g., *di immortales, vlacas, bifurcum*
- H. Archaisms; e.g., *zounds, blast*
- I. Minced oaths; commonly used replacement words—e.g., *golly, heck, flipping, bleep*
- J. Euphemisms; e.g., *kick you in your soft spot*
- K. Homophones; words that sound like profanity but aren't (e.g., *schist, dam*)
- L. Invented replacement words or phrases; this can be done very well or very badly. Too many middle grade fantasy books only use one replacement word (*Artemis Fowl* [Colfer, 2001] uses *D'Arvit* and nothing else). This is where Riordan's work is above average, often using the names of mythical places or people—e.g., *Hades' gym shorts! By the twelve gates of night! Pan's pipes!*
- M. The Captain Haddock approach; in the Tintin books (1929–1986; Haddock appears first in *The Adventures of Tintin, Vol. 3, 1932*), Hergé used long strings of erudite, tangential words for his hard-swearing sea captain—e.g., *billions of blistering blue barnacles*. (See Lopresti, 2009.)
- N. Characters curse; generally the choice of words is still mild in middle grade fiction and nearly nonexistent in writing for younger children. The terms that are found in middle grade fiction are most likely to be blasphemous (e.g., *my god*) rather than execratory or sexual in nature (e.g., *suck*). See Ursula Vernon's *Dragonbreath* (2009).
- O. Miscellaneous; speech acts related to swearing, but

that aren't actually acts of profaning. These include blessings, curses, insults, invocations, oaths, and names.

Implications for Instruction

Much more research can be done on the ways that Riordan's work and other middle grade novels differ linguistically, thematically, or materially from those marketed as children's books or young adult books. However, it is useful for educators and other promoters of these books to realize that most middle grade authors do see their readers as qualitatively and quantitatively different from older teens or children. While these young people are beginning to find ways to articulate their own experiences, a good novel may help them learn linguistic etiquette and originality.

Instructors can benefit from initiating classroom conversations about how language is never used in isolation. The context in which certain types of language are used is as critical as the words themselves (Jay, 2009). It can be valuable for language arts instruction to explore together issues of school and workplace policies of propriety, respect, self-expression, censorship, and other related debates, such as dress codes. Students may be asked to identify creative profanity avoidance, insults, and/or slang in various novels and then comment on the contexts of usage in each instance. Studying the ways in which middle grade authors deal with the appropriateness of certain types of language may be paired with secondary materials relating to First Amendment issues or cases where a student or teacher faced censure (including suspensions and firings) due to controversies surrounding profanity (see Sutton, 1992). It can be useful to have students write honest reflections about the types of slang, grammar, insults, and even profanity that may be common in their home lives, perhaps contrasting that with the expectations that schools have. Students may also participate in the crafting of a classroom policy on respectful language use with an acknowledged goal that all students feel the classroom space is a safe haven, free for self-expression while free from any forms of verbal abuse.

Simultaneously, it is important to be aware that students come from broadly divergent backgrounds, and how a child speaks can be closely tied to identity. Vajra M. Watson's (2013) study deals brilliantly with

the complications surrounding language use and systems of power that disenfranchise and silence many student voices. She wishes instructors to be aware that "classroom decorum is a culturally based assumption" (p. 403). One of her recommendations is that "teachers remain open to the truths students speak while offering them the tools to understand their audience, and furthermore, to code-switch when they deem it necessary and useful" (p. 403). Rick Riordan's strategies and those used by many other professional writers who have already had to grapple with the tension between writing honestly and writing respectfully, may empower some of those students to find a way to enrich their own voices.

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Appendix A:

Profanity Usage and Creative Avoidance in Percy Jackson and the Olympians (2005–2009) and the Kane Chronicles (2010–2012)

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Darn right!” yelled the driver.	Percy	Bus driver	27	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Grover was freaking me out.	Percy	Percy	29	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Maybe if I kick you in your soft spot, I thought.	Percy	Percy	35	J
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“O Zeu kai alloi theoi!” he yelled.	Percy	Grover	42	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Oh, Styx!” he mumbled.	Percy	Grover	59	L
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Erre es korakas!” Annabeth said, which I somehow understood was Greek for “Go to the crows!”	Percy	Annabeth	89	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“By the gods, Percy.”	Percy	Luke	111	M
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Di immortales!” Annabeth said.	Percy	Annabeth	125	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Dirty rotten” (Annabeth grumbling)	Percy	Annabeth	128	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Heck, it was nothing. I eat hellhounds for breakfast.	Percy	Percy (thoughts)	133	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Gee,” I said. “Thanks.”	Percy	Percy	153	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“May the Fates forbid.”	Percy	Chiron	156	O
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Grover whimpered. “Di immortales.”	Percy	Grover	161	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Braccas meas vescimini!” I yelled. I wasn’t sure where the Latin came from. I think it meant “Eat my pants!”	Percy	Percy	166	G
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Oh, goodness,” Annabeth said.	Percy	Annabeth	260	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Shoot, take a nap. I don’t care.”	Percy	Procrustes	278	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Almost, darn it.”	Percy	Procrustes	279	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	Annabeth and Grover got to their feet, groaning and wincing and cursing me a lot.	Percy	Annabeth and Grover	282	B
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Let’s whup some Underworld butt.”	Percy	Percy	284	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“Jeez, Annabeth,” he grumbled.	Percy	Grover	357	I
<i>Lightning Thief</i>	“May the gods curse him.”	Percy	Annabeth	371	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh my gods, you were looking in my bedroom window?”	Percy	Percy	23	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Found one. Thank the gods.”	Percy	Annabeth	29	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh, man,” said Annabeth.	Percy	Annabeth	38	I
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Swear upon the River Styx.”	Percy	Chiron	54	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Blast!” Tantalus muttered.	Percy	Tantalus	59	H, I
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“By the gods, I can see the family resemblance.”	Percy	Tantalus	64	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh my gods, Percy! You are so hopeless!”	Percy	Annabeth	86	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“May the gods go with you.”	Percy	Hermes	106	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Curse my relatives!”	Percy	Chiron	136	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Oh my gods.”	Percy	Annabeth	136	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Damn the heroes!” the girl said. “Full steam ahead.”	Percy	Clarisse	146	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	Somehow back in my regular clothes, thank the gods.	Percy	Percy (thoughts)	182	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	I made a silent promise to the gods that if we survived this, I’d tell Annabeth she was a genius.	Percy	Percy	211	O

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Tyson, thank the gods. Annabeth is hurt!” “You thank the gods she is hurt?” he asked, puzzled.	Percy	Percy/ Tyson	221	N
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Father Poseidon, curse this thief!”	Percy	Polyphemus	226	O
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	I cursed.	Percy	Percy	229	B
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	The Pegasus mare bucked and whinnied. I could understand her thoughts. She was calling Agrius and Luke some names so bad Chiron would’ve washed her muzzle out with saddle soap.	Percy	A mare	242	B
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Gee, thanks,” Grover mumbled.	Percy	Grover	249	I
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	I cursed.	Percy	Percy	267	B
<i>Sea of Monsters</i>	“Curse the titan lord,” Chiron said.	Percy	Chiron	276	O
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“Curse you!” Thorn cried.	Percy	Thorn	25	O
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“What in the name of the gods were you THINKING?” she bellowed.	Percy	Thalia	87	N
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“If you tell anyone,” I swear—	Percy	Thalia	173	O
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	At Hoover Dam: “Let us find the dam snack bar,” Zoë said. “We should eat while we can.” Grover cracked a smile. “The dam snack bar?” Zoë blinked. “Yes, what is funny?” “Nothing,” Grover said, trying to keep a straight face. “I could use some dam french fries.” Even Thalia smiled at that. “And I need to use the dam restroom.”	Percy	Zoë, Grover, Thalia	208	K
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“Holy Zeus, what were those tourists thinking?”	Percy	Bronze angel statue	219	L
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	The loudest sound was the voice of Atlas, bellowing curses against the gods as he struggled under the weight of the sky.	Percy	Atlas	275	B
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	“Dad! You flew . . . you shot . . . oh my gods!”	Percy	Annabeth	276	N
<i>Titan’s Curse</i>	Apollo said, “Jeez, you need to lighten up.”	Percy	Apollo	290	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“What in Hades?” Annabeth tugged on the bars.	Percy	Annabeth	109	L
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“They’re sacred to Apollo.” “Holy cows?” “Exactly.”	Percy	Annabeth/ Percy	135	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“Holy Poseidon,” I muttered.	Percy	Percy	209	L
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	Annabeth said, “Gee, I wonder.”	Percy	Annabeth	290	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“ <i>Di immortales</i> ,” Annabeth muttered.	Percy	Annabeth	277	G
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	There wasn’t even any thought to it. No debate in my mind about—gee, should I stand up to him and try to fight again? Nope.	Percy	Percy	304	I
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“That sucked,” he said.	Percy	Nico	206	N
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	She looked really angry, like she was going to tan somebody’s backside.	Percy	Juniper	328	J
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“ <i>Di immortales</i> .” Chiron yelled.	Percy	Chiron	329	G
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“Zeus knows how many more.”	Percy	Dionysus	340	L
<i>Battle of the Labyrinth</i>	“Oh, Hades if I know.”	Percy	Dionysus	346	L
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh, gods,” I muttered. “Don’t even think about it.”	Percy	Percy	10	N

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Last Olympian</i>	Demigod dreams suck.	Percy	Percy	28	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Dear, me. It didn’t work out, did it?”	Percy	Mrs. Castellan	95	I
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh, goodness.”	Percy	Mrs. Castellan	96	I
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Let the gods witness.”	Percy	Achilles	134	O
<i>Last Olympian</i>	I cursed and got to my feet.	Percy	Percy	139	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh gee,” he said sarcastically.	Percy	Nico	139	I
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“ <i>Di immortales.</i> ”	Percy	Annabeth	160	G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods we have a lot of work to do.”	Percy	Annabeth	161	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	I bit back a curse.	Percy	Percy	171	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	Holy horse feed!	Percy	Blackjack the Pegasus	183	L
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“I called her some names. . . . I doubt that helped.”	Percy	Michael Yew	184	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	Pomona cursed in Latin and threw more fruit.	Percy	Pomona	195	B, G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“I swear,” Hades said. . . . as long as I labor under the curse of your Great Prophecy, the Oracle of Delphi will never have another mortal host.”	Percy	Hades	211	O
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh, gods,” she said.	Percy	Rachel	212	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“That’s a load of minotaur dung,” Thalia said.	Percy	Thalia	220	L
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“ <i>Erre es korakas</i> , Blinky!” Dionysus cursed. “I will have your soul!”	Percy	Dionysus	267	G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods, you’re annoying.”	Percy	Percy	268	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“ <i>Na pari I oychi!</i> ”	Percy	Dionysus	269	G
<i>Last Olympian</i>	I cursed in Ancient Greek.	Percy	Percy	286	B
<i>Last Olympian</i>	<i>Oh-my-gods-that-big-snake-is-going-to-eat-me</i> type of paralysis.	Percy	Percy	287	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods, I hate heights!” Thalia yelled.	Percy	Thalia	321	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Oh gods,” I said.	Percy	Percy	341	N
<i>Last Olympian</i>	“Gods, that would be embarrassing.”	Percy	Rachel	380	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Background noises such as scuffling, hitting, and cursing by the two speakers have not been transcribed.”	Author	Preface		B
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	[Shut up, Sadie.]	Carter	Carter	3	I
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God.”	Carter	Sadie	12	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God.”	Carter	Sadie	22	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	[Give me the bloody mic.]	Sadie	Sadie	29	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“He’s a bloody Egyptologist!”	Sadie	Sadie	35	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Bloody typical.	Sadie	Sadie	37	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh my god”	Carter	Sadie	54	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Carter gave me one of his <i>God, you’re stupid</i> looks.	Sadie	Sadie	90	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Just open the bloody box.”	Sadie	Sadie	90	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Excuse me?” I asked, because <i>cartouche</i> sounded like a rather rude word, and I pride myself on knowing those.	Sadie	Sadie	97	K
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh, god,” I said. “Sorry, sorry. Do I die now?”	Sadie	Sadie	190	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh, god.”	Carter	Sadie	212 217	N

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God, no.”	Sadie	Sadie	220	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“By Ra’s throne!”	Carter	Bast	221	L
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Bloody awful reason to keep us apart,” I muttered.	Sadie	Sadie	245	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	<i>God, I look awful.</i>	Sadie	Sadie	247	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God, why hadn’t that occurred to me?	Sadie	Sadie	285	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	I had to use all my will to keep Isis from blurting out a string of insults.	Sadie	Sadie	290	B
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“God,” I said.	Sadie	Sadie	299	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	I kept yelling at the spot where Anubis had stood, calling him some choice names.	Sadie	Sadie	366	B
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Thank Thoth I found you!”	Carter	Zia	374	L
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Thoth’s beak! You are impossibly stubborn.”	Carter	Zia	376	L
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God, I can’t believe I just said that.	Sadie	Sadie	403	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	I was a bloody twelve year old.	Sadie	Sadie	442	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	“Oh, god.”	Sadie	Sadie	466	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God forbid, she might not even like Carter.	Sadie	Sadie	488	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Carter, god help me, was also my friend.	Sadie	Sadie	490	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	God only knew.	Sadie	Sadie	491	N
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Sadie looked at me and mouthed O-M-G.	Carter	Sadie	510	D
<i>Red Pyramid</i>	Sadie raised an eyebrow. “God, you’re thick sometimes.”	Carter	Sadie	512	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	I muttered an Egyptian curse—the cussing kind, not the magic kind.	Carter	Carter	21	B, G
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“God, thank you,” I said. “Goddess,” Bast corrected.	Sadie	Sadie/Bast	33	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Adele’s <i>19</i> began playing. God, I hadn’t heard that album since	Sadie	Sadie	36	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	My god.	Sadie	Sadie	42	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Not bloody likely.”	Sadie	Sadie	66	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Neckbutt (Neckbet)	Sadie	Sadie	102	N, O
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“For god’s sake.”	Sadie	Sadie	105	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	For a brief moment, I thought, My god, it’s Khufu.	Sadie	Sadie	106	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Lord, he was good-looking and <i>so</i> annoying.	Sadie	Sadie	112	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Emma demanded. “God, he was hot.” “A god,” I muttered. “Yes.”	Sadie	Sadie	113	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Liz made a gagging sound. “Lord, no! That’s <i>wrong!</i> ”	Sadie	Liz	135	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Gosh, thanks.”	Sadie	Sadie	189	I
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Holy Mother Nut.”	Carter	Bes	238	L
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“ <i>Di immortales!</i> ”	Sadie	Roman ghost	266	G
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Oh, Jupiter. You’re novices.”	Sadie	Roman ghost	267	L
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Ptah, son of Pitooley? Is he the god of spitting?”	Sadie	Sadie	273	O
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Oh, god.”	Sadie	Sadie	277	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“God, you’re annoying.”	Sadie	Walt	283	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Bes unfroze, found himself halfway submerged in sand, and did some creative cursing.	Carter	Bes	299	B

Book Title	Instance of Avoidance or Usage	Point of View	Speaker/ Actor	Page	Type (see pp. 14–15)
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“The bloody sundial—the stupid gates—we failed!”	Carter	Sadie	382	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Stuff it, moon god,” Bes said.	Carter	Bes	389	I
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	Sadie called Apophis some words so bad, Gran would’ve washed her mouth out with soap for a year.	Carter	Sadie	408	B
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Oh, god.”	Carter	Sadie	416	N
<i>Throne of Fire</i>	“Holy Horus,” Carter said	Sadie	Carter	422	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“You’re a god, aren’t you? You can bloody well do what you like.”	Sadie	Sadie	30	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Bloody gods and their bloody riddles.	Sadie	Sadie	32	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	She muttered something in Arabic—probably a curse	Carter	Zia	55	G
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Please. War gods do not poop on blankets.”	Carter	Horus as pigeon	65	I
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt.	Sadie	Sadie	79	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh . . . my . . . god,” Drew whimpered.	Sadie	Drew	84	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	We left the Plastic Bags behind us, all of them muttering, “Oh my god! Oh my god!”	Sadie	The Plastic Bags	84	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt. I was a mess.	Sadie	Sadie	85	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	It was so bloody unfair.	Sadie	Sadie	94	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Oh, gods of Egypt.	Sadie	Sadie	107	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	The news didn’t sit well with my brother. After several minutes of swearing and pacing the room he finally calmed down.	Sadie	Carter	175	B
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	It wasn’t bloody fair!	Sadie	Sadie	179	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh by the twelve gates of night,” Dad cursed.	Sadie	Dr. Kane	189	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	I nearly discovered the hieroglyph for <i>accident in my pants</i> .	Carter	Carter	209	J
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh, gods of Egypt—please don’t let that be Hapi’s loincloth.”	Carter	Zia	222	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“What’s in there?” “Bull,” Setne said. “Excuse me?”	Carter	Setne	223	K
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	A year ago, I would have said, “Freaky, but at least it’s just a statue.”	Carter	Carter	230	I
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Gods of Egypt, not <i>that</i> again!”	Sadie	Sadie	247	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Gods forbid!— ”	Sadie	Sadie	264	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	<i>And what bloody business?</i>	Sadie	Sadie	266	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Holy Horus, pal!” he complained.	Carter	Setne	290	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Whatever he told me was complete and utter Apis-quality bull.	Carter	Carter about Setne	290	L, N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh . . .” I uttered some words that were definitely not divine.	Carter	Carter	308	B
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“Oh, Holy Horus.”	Carter	Carter	312	L
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt.	Sadie	Sadie	317	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Gods of Egypt, this was confusing.	Sadie	Sadie	327	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	Zia’s jaw dropped. “Gods of Egypt.”	Carter	Zia	381	N
<i>Serpent’s Shadow</i>	“It’s so bloody hard,” I complained.	Sadie	Sadie	389	N