DEMIGODS AND MONSTERS

Your Favorite Authors on Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians Series

Edited by Rick Riordan
with Leah Wilson

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INTRODUCTION

Rick Riordan

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—BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR.

—Mark Twain, front matter to *Huckleberry Finn*

X-Raying the Author's Head

Many years ago, before Percy Jackson appeared in my life, I was known primarily as a writer of grown-up mystery novels. One night I was doing an event with two other authors, and one of them was explaining why he liked my book *The Devil Went Down to Austin*.

"The structure is amazing," he told the audience. "It's a book about scuba diving, and as the characters go deeper into the dark murky water, the plot also gets darker and murkier. The symbolism is really clever."

The audience looked suitably impressed. I looked confused.

I use symbolism? Who would've guessed?

After the event, when I confessed to the other author that I hadn't done the murky structure thing intentionally, that perhaps it was just the result of my faulty outlining, his jaw dropped. He'd studied my writing. He'd made brilliant insights. And I'd just been telling a story? Impossible!

That doesn't mean his insights weren't valuable, or that the symbolism wasn't there. But this does raise an important point about the difference between writing a story and analyzing it.

Any book, for children or adults, can be read on many levels. We can simply enjoy it. Or we can look for hidden meanings and nuances. We can even write essays about the book, exploring it from different angles.

The writer's job is to write the book. The careful reader's job is to find meaning in the book. Both jobs are important. The meanings you find can enlighten, fascinate, and surprise. They can even surprise the author. The author, at least *this* author, uses symbols and themes subconsciously. I don't think about it, any more than a native speaker of English consciously thinks about subject-verb agreement as he speaks.

The front matter to *Huckleberry Finn* has always been one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes. Twain was adamant that readers simply read his book, not scrutinize it for morals or messages, much less a plot structure. Of course, this has not stopped generations of English majors from writing their graduate theses on the novel.

When I was first approached about editing this anthology, I wasn't sure what to think. Why would so many talented writers want to write about my children's books? And yet, when I read their essays, I was amazed. Each had a different angle on Percy Jackson—all of them fascinating and thought-provoking. Many of them made me think, "Is *that* what I was doing in the series?" It was like having someone take an x-ray of my head. Suddenly, I saw all this stuff going on inside that I was never aware of.

Maybe that's why Mark Twain tried to warn off critics who wanted to interpret his work. It's not that the interpretations are wrong. It's that they tend to be a little too close to home!

The Accidental Demigod

I never intended to write the Percy Jackson series.

When my oldest son was in second grade, he began having problems in school. He couldn't focus. He didn't want to sit down and read. Writing was a painful challenge.

Being a novelist and a middle school teacher, I had a hard time accepting that my son hated school. Then came the fateful parent conference when the teachers suggested my son get a full psychoeducational evaluation. A few weeks later we got the results: ADHD and dyslexia.

These were not new concepts to me. I had taught many students with learning differences. I had made modifications. I'd filled out evaluation forms.

But when the child in question is your own son, it's different.

How could I help him make sense of what was going on with him? How could I frame the problem in a positive way?

In the end, I fell back on what I knew best—storytelling.

My son's saving grace in second grade was Greek mythology. This was the only part of the curriculum he enjoyed. Every night, he would ask me to tell him bedtime stories from the myths, and when I ran out of them, he asked me to make up a new one.

And so it sprang from my mind unbidden—like Athena from Zeus' forehead—the myth of how ADHD and dyslexia came to be. I created Percy Jackson, a Greek demigod in the tradition of Hercules and Theseus and Perseus, except Percy is a modern kid. He has ADHD and dyslexia, and he learns that taken together, those two conditions indicate without a doubt that he has Olympian blood.

In *The Lightning Thief*, ADHD means you have finely tuned senses. You see too much, not too little. These reflexes don't serve you well in a boring classroom, but they would keep you alive on the battlefield. Dyslexia indicates that your brain is hard-wired for Ancient Greek, so of course reading English is a struggle.

My son had no trouble buying this theory at all.

In the story, Percy Jackson discovers that being different can be a source of strength—and a mark of greatness. Being academically hopeless does not mean you are a hopeless person. Percy was my way of honoring all the children I've taught who have ADHD and

dyslexia, but more importantly he was a myth for my son to make sense of who he is.

When I was done telling the story, my son told me to write it down. I was dubious. I didn't think anyone would like it, and I didn't exactly have a lot of spare time. I was already teaching full-time and writing a mystery novel a year. But I made the time and wrote *The Lightning Thief*.

My son loved the final version. Apprehensively, I gave the manuscript to some of my students. They loved it too. I sent it off to the publishers under a pseudonym so I wouldn't be embarrassed by the flood of rejection notes. Within weeks, the book went to auction and was snapped up by the Disney Book Group.

At the end of that school year I became a full-time children's writer. The Percy Jackson series was soon published around the world.

If you'd told me five years ago that someone would want to create an anthology of essays based on a bedtime story I made up for my son, I would've called you crazy.

The Power of Myth

So why does the series resonate with young readers? Why do people still want to read Greek myths? These are stories from a long time ago about a very different society. What possible relevance could they have in the twenty-first century?

Certainly, you can get through life knowing no mythology, but it would be a pretty poor existence. Mythology is the symbolism of civilization. It contains our most deeply embedded archetypes. Once you know mythology, you see it everywhere—from the names of our days of the week to our art and architecture. You would be hard-pressed to find any work of English literature that does not draw to some extent on classical mythology, whether it's the hero's quest or allusions to the Olympians.

So knowing mythology makes one a more informed member of society, but its importance goes beyond that. Mythology is a way of understanding the human condition. Myths have always been man's attempt to explain phenomena—and not just why the sun travels across the sky. Myths also explain love, fear, hate, revenge, and the whole range of human feelings.

When I speak to school groups, I often ask children what Greek god they would like for a parent. My favorite answer was from a schoolgirl in Texas who said, "Batman!" Actually, the girl's suggestion of Batman as a Greek god is not too far off, because it's the same idea at work: creating a superhuman version of humanity so that we can explore our problems, strengths, and weaknesses writ large. If the novel puts life under the microscope, mythology blows it up to billboard size.

Myths aren't something that happened in the past, either. We didn't leave them behind with the Bronze Age. 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.

When we understand classical mythology, we understand something of our own nature, and how we attempt to explain things we don't comprehend. And as long as we're human, there will be things we don't comprehend.

On a more basic level, Greek mythology is simply fun! The stories have adventure, magic, romance, monsters, brave heroes, horrible villains, fantastic quests. What's not to love?

Mythology especially appeals to middle grade readers because they can relate to the idea of demigods. Like Hercules, Jason, and Theseus, Percy Jackson is half-man, half-god. He is constantly struggling to understand his identity, because he straddles two worlds, but belongs in neither. Middle schoolers understand being in between. They are between adulthood and childhood. They feel stuck in the middle all the time, trapped in an awkward state. Everything is changing for them—physically, socially, emotionally. The

demigod is a perfect metaphor for their situation, which is why the hero's quest resonates for them.

When I do school events, I usually play a trivia game on Greek mythology with the kids. It doesn't matter what school I visit, or how little mythology the students have done in the classroom. The students always know the answers, and the adults are always amazed. I can almost guarantee some teacher will come up afterward, wide-eyed, and say, "I didn't know our students knew so much mythology!"

It's not a surprise to me. Young readers *own* mythology. They see themselves as the hero. They gain hope in their own struggles by following the quests. And yes, sometimes they even see their teachers as the monsters!

About This Anthology

Within these pages, you will find out what really makes Dionysus tick. You'll learn how to assign a letter grade to your parents. You'll explore the coolest monsters and most horrible villains of the Percy Jackson series. You'll decide whether becoming a Hunter of Artemis is a good deal or a disastrous mistake. You'll even learn how to unfreeze your eyeballs and recognize your own prophecy. Which essay comes closest to the truth? It's not for me to say.

About a year ago at a signing for *The Lightning Thief*, a boy raised his hand in the audience and asked, "What is the theme of your book?"

I stared at him blankly. "I don't know."

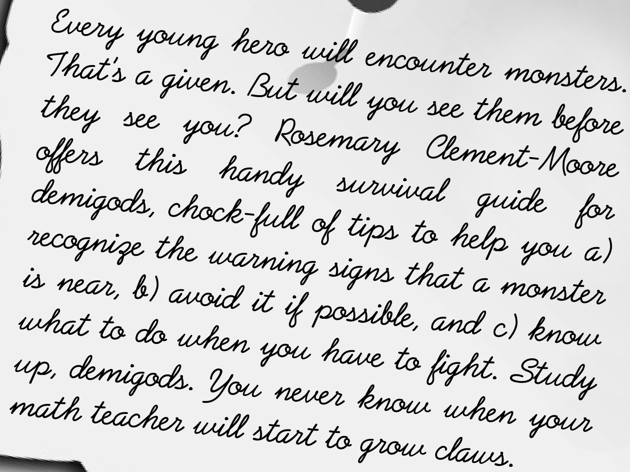
"Darn it!" he said. "I need that for my report!"

The lesson here: If you want to know the theme of a book, the last person to ask is the author. This anthology, however, offers fresh perspectives and amazing insights. If you're looking for something to lift the Mist from your eyes and make you say, "Aha! There *are* monsters!", then you've come to the right place.

Monster Recognition for Beginners

Lessons from Percy Jackson on Monsters and Heroes

Rosemary Clement-Moore


Every young hero will encounter monsters. That's a given. But will you see them before they see you? Rosemary Clement-Moore offers this handy survival guide for demigods, chock-full of tips to help you a) recognize the warning signs that a monster is near, b) avoid it if possible, and c) know what to do when you have to fight. Study up, demigods. You never know when your math teacher will start to grow claws.

What would you do if you woke up one morning and found a satyr on your front porch, and he explained that he was going to take you to a special camp for people like you: half-god, half-human?

You might be tempted to laugh, thinking it's a practical joke. Or maybe you'd think it was great. But if you've read the Percy Jackson books, you would also be seriously worried. Being a demigod may sound glamorous, but in Percy's world, the child of a god can look forward to a life full of hardships and danger. Heroes, whether they are on a quest or just trying to live through the school year, must always stay on their toes and on the lookout for monsters.

Imagine you're living in Percy's world: Does that donut store on the corner make a shiver run down your spine? Does the popularity of a certain coffee chain have anything to do with the mermaid on its logo? And what about the homeless man under the bridge near your apartment: Does no one think it strange that he wears a muffler and trench coat all year round?

Or maybe you live in the country, and suddenly a lot of cattle are mysteriously disappearing. Is it a coyote problem, or a wandering monster snacking on your uncle Walt's best milk cows? What really started those California wildfires: a careless camper or a fire-breathing chimera?

To Percy and his classmates, asking these kinds of questions could mean the difference between life and death. Not to mention the success of a quest. Ignoring their instincts could lead to death . . . or worse, humiliating defeat.

If you suddenly discover you are a demigod like the ones in Percy Jackson's world, don't be lured into spending all your time on rock climbing and archery practice. These things are important, but if you really want to survive a monster attack, you need to learn how to recognize them. That way you can make a plan for fighting, or fleeing, whichever seems more prudent. Percy Jackson has had to learn these lessons the hard way. While some of his classmates might consider the constant threats to life and limb opportunities for personal growth, the wise hero should take a page from the children of Athena and fight smarter, not harder.

Fortunately, we have Percy's triumphs—and mistakes—to learn from. So just in case you do open your door to a satyr one morning, here's some of what I've learned from reading the Percy Jackson books: how to survive in a world full of monsters who want to kill you in three easy lessons.

Lesson One: Monsters and You

The first thing to realize in dealing with mythical creatures is the basic nature of the relationship between hero and monster: There is a very good chance that even a random encounter between them will result in death for one or both. Simply stated, heroes kill monsters, and monsters resent that fact.

Let us take some examples from the ancient world: Bellerophon, Theseus, Hercules, and Perseus.[1] All of them heroes, all of them slayers of monsters—chimera, Minotaur, Hydra, and Gorgon. And the monsters never forget it. Youth is no protection, either; monsters have no ethics, so they don't have an ethical problem with getting rid of their natural enemies while they are still young and vulnerable.

Now, a demigod has certain advantages over monsters. Depending on the type of creature he's facing, the demigod may be faster or more mobile. His ability to use a weapon may counter the natural advantage of, say, a bulletproof hide, like the Nemean Lion's, or seven heads that always grow back, like the Hydra's. The human half makes the hero smarter than the average monster, provided the hero actually uses his brain. The god half doubtlessly adds advantages as well, though of course this would largely depend on the god in question.

The monsters' biggest advantage—besides the obvious things like claws, teeth, and poison, and superior size and strength—is that

[1] The original one, not Percy Jackson of *The Lightning Thief*, etc. The ancient Perseus was the son of Zeus, not Poseidon, so it's curious that his mother picked that name.

they never really die. The centaur Chiron tells us monsters are "archetypes." An archetype is the original, basic idea of something. This means that when similar characters pop up in different books and movies, all of them are based on the original archetype. For instance, the *character* of "Fluffy," the three-headed dog who guards the sorcerer's stone in the first Harry Potter book, comes from the *idea* of Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the entrance to the Underworld.[2]

So monsters, like ideas, can never be killed, and they have very long memories. If you're a hero and you encounter a magical creature, it may have been turned to dust many times over the years by heroes just like you. It would be wise to assume that it is holding a grudge and would be happy to help you along to your doom.

Percy Jackson has this harsh reality thrust upon him in no uncertain terms, and it's an experience we can learn from: Nothing says "your days are numbered" like a Minotaur on your doorstep.

It should be noted that children of the less powerful gods aren't going to attract as much monstrous attention as those with more powerful parents. You might think it would be "cool" if your Olympian parent was one of the major gods, but that kind of status comes with a big price tag.

Percy is the perfect example of this. Having Poseidon as his father may give him some awesome powers, but it also makes him a very high-profile target. So even if you had skills remarkable for a demigod, this in no way would guarantee you an easy time of it.[3]

The world of gods and monsters is a harsh one. A hero can't rely on his immortal parent for help. There are rules against direct inter-

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[2] Chiron wouldn't use this example, of course, because in his world there are no such things as wizards. That would be just silly.

[3] Just the opposite, since according to the agreement between the Big Three, you should not even exist, and lots of creatures would be trying to arrange it so you didn't.

ference, and it seems as though the higher in the echelon a god is, the more limited he or she is in stepping in to help. After Annabeth Chase runs away from her father's house, her mother Athena helps her by making sure she meets up with an older, more powerful half-blood. Thalia, daughter of Zeus,[4] leads her friends almost to the safety of the camp, but when she is about to be killed by a horde of monsters, all that Zeus can do is turn her into a tree on top of Half-Blood Hill.

Ultimately it is up to young heroes to watch out for themselves. A parent or patron may be some help, but it's the nature of the hero to have to face the monsters on his or her own.

Lesson Two: Types of Monsters

Monsters could be categorized in many different ways: by habitat, allegiance, intelligence, lethality, and so on. For the purpose of this lesson, I'll separate them into two main types: those who will kill you on purpose—whether it's personal, or because you've blundered into their lair—and those who will kill you by accident.

For the most part, monsters are very territorial; they tend to stake out a hunting ground and protect it viciously. When Percy's brother Tyson is attacked by a sphinx in the city, it may have been just because he ventured into its territory. Notice that the fact that Tyson himself is a monster gives him no protection.

Here we see the type of monster who may have nothing against you personally, but will not hesitate to kill you anyway. This may be because it is (a) guarding something it thinks you want to steal; (b) hungry; or (c) both.

Young heroes seem to encounter these types of monsters most frequently when they are on a quest, but not always. Monsters can be found just about anywhere, and if you stumble onto a Hydra's

[4] See previous footnote re: unauthorized offspring.

hunting grounds, chances are that one of seven heads would eat you before you could explain that you were merely on your way to the corner deli for a pastrami on rye.

Some monsters stay very isolated from the mortal world. Percy has to go to the Sea of Monsters to encounter Polyphemus, the Cyclops shepherd with the carnivorous sheep, and Scylla and Charybdis, who between them destroy (again) the ironclad ship, *CSS Birmingham*, and its crew. But other creatures rely on humankind for survival. In ancient times, monsters often lived off of humans by stealing their sheep and goats (or sometimes by making off with one of their maidens). In Percy's modern world, many monsters have moved into retail, making a living off of humans in an entirely different way.

This kind of magical creature doesn't mean to kill you, but is simply going about its business, completely indifferent to your fate. Take, for example, the chain of Monster Donut shops. They spread across the country, each of them connected to the life force of a monster. The stores multiply like Hydra heads, but whether their success actually comes at the expense of their human customers—the modern equivalent of the stolen sheep or maiden, for example—remains to be seen.[5]

Other retail ventures are more obviously dangerous, like Medusa's shop, which Percy, Annabeth, and Grover run across in their first quest. In olden days, monsters who preyed on humans could often be found at the intersection of major roads, where there was the most traffic. Now monsters like the Medusa open shops. Mortal society used to center around the crossroads, but it now revolves around retail. Therefore, the smart hero should be careful in

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[5] If we lived in the world of Percy and the Olympians, I would definitely wonder about that coffee chain with the mermaid on its logo, for no other reason than convincing mortal society that it is reasonable to pay three dollars for a cup of coffee is surely a plot to speed the end of Western Civilization.

stores; no one wants to pay for a cheeseburger by spending eternity as a stone lawn ornament.

Monsters don't consider death or dismemberment a flaw in their business plan. Take the Graiai, for example. Who would have thought it was a good idea to put three hags who share one eye in control of a taxicab in New York?[6] Since the sisters cannot pass the eye between them without a violent argument breaking out, the taxi's only destination seems to be disaster. Yet getting heroes on their way has been the hags' job ever since Ancient Greece.

The fact that they don't care what it does to their half-mortal passengers shows why immortal things should never be dealt with lightly. Even when a magical creature is merely going about its business—even when, like the Gray Sisters, it is technically being helpful—it can be very dangerous.

Now we come to the monster who does in fact take death very personally. In addition to the innate hatred between monster and hero, there is another reason that some fanged, winged, leather-skinned horror might want half-bloods like Percy dead. Many monsters are servants to various gods, who keep the creatures on staff to take care of odd (and sometimes distasteful) jobs, like tracking down heroes, guarding treasure, and torturing demigods who make them angry.

Which means that if you anger one of the gods, he or she is likely to send something really nasty to let you know about it. Percy Jackson angers several gods just by breathing, so he probably feels like the whole world is out to get him. But that's not actually true. Most of the time, *several* worlds are out to get him.[7]

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[6] Though this would explain a lot about Manhattan cab drivers.

[7] By that I mean the mortal world, the immortal world, and the Underworld. Speaking of Hades, he may have a special reason to hate Percy, but all half-bloods should be wary of him. He's like that kid at your school who never gets invited to play with everyone else, but with superpowers and several thousand years for his temper to come to a boil. Hades is understandably cranky.

Whether you are dealing with the bull-headed simplicity of the Minotaur or the conniving ferocity of the Furies, if a god has sent a monster after you, there is little you can do to avoid it. So you may be wondering why I bother to mention it in a lesson about avoiding monstrous conflict.

If you are a hero, and a vengeful (or possibly just bored) god has sent a monster after you, you may not be able to steer clear of it, but early recognition of the threat will allow you to control the battlefield; wise tactics can even things out between unmatched opponents.

For instance, if you were a hero with a fire-breathing chimera on your trail, then you'd want to arrange your confrontation near a handy water source—or at least away from combustible materials. By identifying the monster early, you can lead it away from innocent bystanders, troublesome eyewitnesses, and destructible buildings. You should always try to limit collateral injuries and property damage, as it reduces the chance you will become wanted by conventional authorities.

This is a case where Percy's adventures show us how *not* to deal with monsters. Think of how much easier his life would be if he didn't spend so much time wanted by the police for blowing up cars, buses, school gymnasiums, and national monuments. Mortal law enforcement may not seem like much of a threat compared with a phalanx of bronze bulls or a pack of hellhounds, but why add unnecessary inconveniences to an already complicated quest?

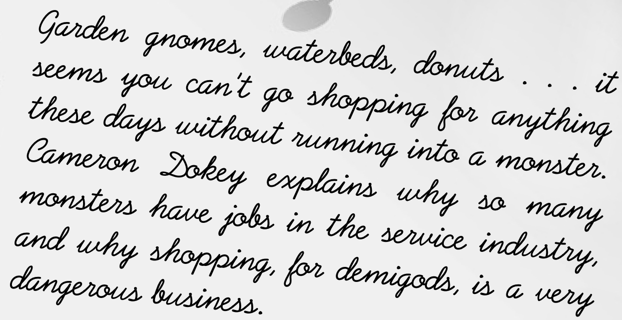
Lesson Three: Spotting a Monster

Monster recognition isn't just about memorizing the names and types of creatures you may encounter, though that doesn't hurt. If you're wondering whether your algebra teacher is a Fury or just a mean old lady with a lot of cats, the most important thing is to use your head, starting with your eyes, ears, and nose.

Why Do So Many Monsters Go Into Retail?

And How Come They're Never Selling Anything a Demigod Really Wants?

Cameron Dokey



It's not easy being a young demigod.

Just ask Percy Jackson. He can tell you.

Always assuming he has time to catch his breath between pursuing a quest or being pursued by the forces of evil hot on his trail, sometimes literally breathing down his neck right behind him.

In Shakespeare, there's a stage direction that reads: *Exit, pursued by a bear*. (I am not either making this up. You can look it up for yourself if you want to. It's in *The Winter's Tale*. Act III, scene 3. And you thought Shakespeare was just some stuffy dead guy.)

But my point, and I do have one, is that the character in Shakespeare had it lucky. At least he knew it was a bear behind him. Whenever Percy Jackson flees the scene, he never knows what shape the thing after him might take. That's one of the challenges of being chased by monsters. And that's not all. Equally challenging may be the fact that Percy also never really knows what's up ahead. Friend or foe. Battle or temptation.

Which pretty much brings me to the topic of this essay: Just what is it about monsters and shopping?

There are a lot of monsters in Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. There are also a surprising number of opportunities for shopping. Action, adventure, Greek gods, retail therapy. Not your ordinary combo. Not that much about Percy falls within the realms of the usual.

An ordinary demigod? I just don't think so.

But on almost every quest Percy takes, and his first one in particular, sooner or later, some creep who definitely doesn't have Percy's best interests at heart pops up to try and sell him something. Sometimes it's something he doesn't need. Sometimes it's something he doesn't want. Usually it's both. But Percy and his pals stop to check the whatever-it-is out anyway.

Yes, that's right. Even with danger all around them, our hero and his companions take the time to shop.

What the heck is that all about?

Let's begin to answer this question by doing the same thing Percy and his quest mates Grover the satyr and Annabeth, daughter of Athena, goddess of wisdom, do in chapter eleven of *The Lightning Thief*. Which, as I'm sure I don't need to remind you, is Percy Jackson and the Olympians book one.

Like Percy, Annabeth, and Grover, we're going to kick off our monster retail tour with a visit to ATNYU MES GDERAN GOMEN MEPROIUM.

For those of us not afflicted with demigod dyslexia, that would be Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium.

True confession: Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium is my favorite monster retail experience of all time. Probably because I didn't have to actually experience it myself. But also because Aunty Em turns out to be Aunty "M." That's short for Medusa, who may be the original experiencer of the bad hair day.

Actually, considering she has to go around with snakes on her head where her hair's supposed to be, I think we could just go with bad hair life.

Good rule to follow, in case it should happen to come up: Never piss off Athena, goddess of wisdom, Annabeth's mom. That's how Medusa ended up as old snakehead, and now *she's* plenty pissed off. So pissed that one look at her hairdo is all it takes to turn you to stone. If you look at a reflection of her, you're good to go. But if you look at her, well, head on. . . .

That's who all the garden gnomes in the emporium are—creatures of one sort or another who looked Aunty Em right in her beady, bloodshot eyes. Grover even thinks he spots one that looks a lot like his Uncle Ferdinand. It turns out he's right. Only it doesn't just *look* a lot like his Uncle Ferdinand. It *is* his Uncle Ferdinand.

Grover gets extra points, by the way, for urging his companions not to set foot in Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium. He's certain he smells monsters, and it turns out he's absolutely right. Unfortunately, Percy and Annabeth overrule him. Not necessarily because they've developed a sudden interest in acquiring yard art for Camp Half-Blood, but because *they* smell burgers and they're hungry.

Let's just re-cap the overall scenario, shall we?

Percy, Grover, and Annabeth have just begun their quest. They know there's danger all around them. In fact, they've just escaped

from an attack by all three of the Furies in the back of a bus, which is no mean feat, I can tell you. So I suppose I should cut Percy and Annabeth some slack, because it does make a certain amount of sense that all that Fury-fighting would have made them hungry.

But instead of heading for a nice safe McDonald's, where you can always use the bathroom even if you don't buy a Happy Meal, what does our hero do instead? He leads his friends straight to the back of a warehouse filled with extremely odd yet lifelike statuary. Why? Because the proprietor, whose face is completely hidden from sight by a veil (did I forget to mention that?), says there's a free snackbar.

Huh?

Surely the thing somebody ought to be smelling right about now is a rat. Strangely enough, nobody, with the possible exception of Grover, does. This is monster retail at its best and brightest: side-tracking the hero and his companions, then putting their lives at risk. The fact that they all eventually escape is fine and dandy. It's also cause for alarm. Because it's right here, with the trip to Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium, that a pattern starts to form.

When the going gets tough, the heroes go shopping. But some-how they never notice until it's way too close to too late that the only thing the monsters really have for sale is trouble.

Here's another case in point: chapter seventeen of *The Lightning Thief*. That's when our gang pays a visit to Crusty's Waterbed Palace.

Percy's quest to retrieve Zeus' lightning bolt has taken him and his companions from the east coast to Los Angeles by this time. No sooner do they set foot in the city, however, than they're set on by a pack of thugs. And it is while trying to escape from them that our trio decides to pay an impromptu visit to the Waterbed Palace.

So far, so good. But wait! There's more. Because once inside the Waterbed Palace, something strange happens. Well, more than one thing, if the full truth must be told. But the *specific* strange thing I'm getting at is this: Percy and his companions stick around.

Our hero and his friends have made it all the way across the country and they're still not much closer to finding Zeus' lightning bolt than they were when they set out. Time is definitely doing that thing where it runs out. So what do Percy, Grover, and Annabeth do?

You got it. They shop.

Unlike the side trip to Aunty Em's, where he was pretty certain he could smell trouble coming, this time Grover's the one who lets the trio down. He develops a sudden, potentially fatal attraction to the waterbeds. Almost before the trio knows what's happening, Grover's tied to one of the beds, with Annabeth not far behind. Both are in definite danger of being stretched to *one size fits all*.

Unless Percy thinks on his feet pretty darned fast, not only will he fail in his quest, but he and the others are going to be extremely uncomfortable—though admittedly more likely to be picked first for basketball.

Fortunately, by the time chapter seventeen has rolled around, thinking on his feet is a thing at which Perseus Jackson is learning to excel.

He turns the tables on waterbed salesman Crusty, short for Procrustes, a.k.a. the Stretcher, a real *kill 'em with kindness* guy. Percy does this by convincing Crusty that those waterbeds look pretty good, so good that Crusty himself ought to try one on for size. The moment Crusty does this, Percy's in the clear. He dispatches the monster, rescues his friends.

The shopping trip is over. The quest is on.

But I've still got a question, and my guess is you do too: Why in Western Civilization didn't Percy walk in then walk right back out the Waterbed Palace door? As soon as the thugs had departed, of course. Fast as our hero thinks on his feet when the time comes, why does it take *the time* so long to arrive? Why didn't Percy spot that there was something weird going on right off the bat?

I mean, come on.

A guy that Percy himself describes as looking like a raptor in a leisure suit tries to sell three individuals clearly not old enough to have their own credit cards some waterbeds? Get real. Do you have any idea how expensive those things are? And I'm talking before the shipping and handling costs. No salesman is that desperate. No real one, anyhow.

It's Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium all over again, when you get right down to it. Our friends end up walking right into a trap. But the thing that lures them into the trap in the first place is a front. Specifically, a store front.

So just what is it about monsters and retail? Why would monsters even pick retail in the first place? Why go to all the effort of trying to lure Percy and his friends in to shop, when it would be so much easier to simply jump out from behind the nearest available cover and wipe them out? Percy and his pals only add up to three, after all.

At least they do in *The Lightning Thief*. Our hero does get some reinforcements as his adventure moves along. Even so, monsters come in an infinite variety of shapes and sizes, not to mention numbers. Surely all they'd have to do would be to keep on coming. Sooner or later, and probably sooner, Percy and his pals are bound to get tired.

And here's another question for you: If the monsters are going to go to all the trouble of setting up the opportunity for retail, how come they never seem to be selling anything a young demigod might actually want? Like some super new weapon, the ability to shop for your heart's desire, or to travel through time.

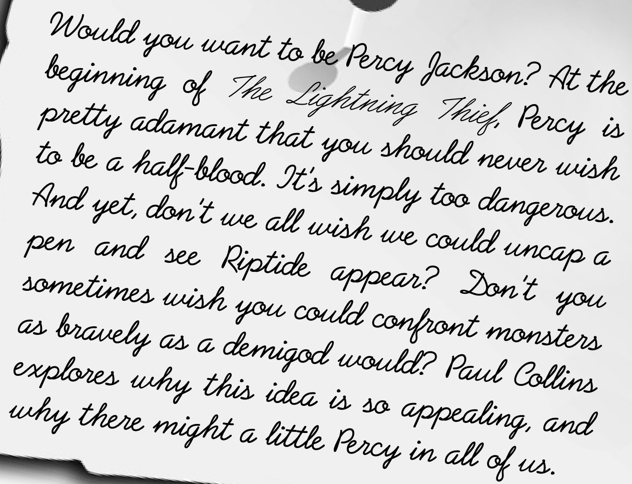
It took me a while, but I think I've come up with an explanation.

The fact that the monsters aren't selling anything our hero and his companions really, truly want is part of the point. I'm talking about the author's point, now. And Percy not being able to spot the danger monster retail poses, at least not immediately, is the other part. Because the truth (which I put forward knowing full well that I

Stealing Fire From the Gods

The Appeal of Percy Jackson

Paul Collins



Growing up is dangerous. Being yourself is dangerous.

In the classic Australian film, *Strictly Ballroom*, the chief character, Scott, wants to dance his own steps and wants to do it his way. And all Hades breaks loose!

Scott's attempts at becoming an individual, at becoming *himself*, are seen as a crime, an act of rebellion, against the social "group" of which he is a member because Scott is not fitting in; he's not *conforming*.

Well, neither is Percy Jackson.

Percy is dyslexic, has Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and is always getting into trouble. In most school systems, and society at large, that pretty much makes Percy a loser, the kid least likely to succeed, the kind of kid who'll never amount to anything and isn't worth the effort anyway. Ever heard that one before?

Rick Riordan, author of the Percy Jackson series, turns these so-called flaws on their heads.

Like many kids in his position—labeled a misfit, looked down upon, shoved to the side lines—Percy feels shut out, left behind, and is beginning to feel frustrated and anxious about it. He can't work out why some of the teachers always pick on him, why things always go wrong even when he tries his hardest to do the right thing.

Of course, once you've been stuck with a label—like dyslexic, disruptive, troublemaker—it's pretty hard to change things back, because you're dealing with people's *perceptions*. They don't see "you" anymore, they just see the label.

In its own way, *The Lightning Thief* is a classic "Rags to Riches" plot, a type of story we've heard over and over again since early childhood: *The Ugly Duckling*, *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, King Arthur, Star Wars, *David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre*, Harry Potter, *Rocky*, the biblical Joseph and his brothers, and many, many more. They are all essentially stories about growing up, about coming into the power and responsibility of adulthood, and about the dark forces that try to stop them. They begin, usually, with a child or youthful hero/heroine who is often an orphan or part orphan (like Aladdin, Percy has "lost" a father) and who has been marginalized, forced to live in the shadows like Cinderella: neglected, scorned, undervalued, overlooked, and mistreated.

This story is found in every culture and every time, including that of the North American Indians prior to the arrival of the Europeans and as far back as ninth-century China (and there is no reason to think that was its first occurrence).

So why is this particular plot so important to us? What is it *really* about?

Well, I'll tell you. It's about rebellion.

It's about people growing up and becoming *themselves*. Just as Scott tries to do in *Strictly Ballroom*, just as Harry Potter tries and every person who has ever lived has tried. Just as a fair few of the heroes and heroines of Greek myths have tried.

And this is no accident.

The gods of Olympus—all-powerful, simultaneously good *and* bad, unpredictable, oddly *human* in their flaws—are stand-ins not only for the establishment (school, society, church) but also for those other godlike beings: parents.

Rick Riordan has rightly seen this and created a story about the children of the gods, who are in precisely the same power relationship to their very-much-alive-and-kicking gods as children in our world are to their parents. And this, I think, is one of the secrets to the success of the series: It mimics the experience of everyone growing up—and of every person's troublesome need to become him- or herself.

Seeing Clearly

The Lightning Thief is also about "seeing clearly": the schools Percy has attended (six so far) and the various teachers he's had, as well as his smelly unpleasant stepfather, have marked him down as a troublemaker and a no-hoper. When something goes wrong, it must be Percy's fault.

And that's because they don't see the real Percy.

Nor, for that matter, does he see *them* very clearly: He's unaware that his teacher Mr. Brunner is actually a centaur, that Mrs. Dodds is a razor-taloned Fury out for his blood, that his best friend Grover is a cloven-footed satyr, and that the three old ladies on the roadside are the Fates.

Later, he fails to see through the disguises the various gods or monsters adopt—sometimes until it's almost too late, as when the Mother of Monsters, Echidna, along with her doggie-who-ain't-a-doggie, tries to turn him into a smokin' shish kebab.

Percy's failure to "see clearly" extends to his "normal" life as well: His dyslexia, considered a handicap in our world, causes visual distortions. "Words had started swimming off the page, circling my head, the letters doing one-eighties as if they were riding skateboards," he describes it in *The Lightning Thief*. In reality, the dyslexia is the result of Percy's brain being hard-wired for Ancient Greek and is part of his uniqueness.

But most of all, Percy doesn't see himself clearly.

Like the schools and society that have labeled him as some kind of maverick and failure, he sees himself in terms of those same labels.

In the Rags to Riches story, the true focus is not so much on growing up, as it is one of its chief requirements: becoming *aware*.

It is learning to be *conscious*, learning to *see* clearly and wholly, that distinguishes these types of stories. Even Peter Rabbit manages to escape the dangerous farmer and the garden in which he eats and plays to his heart's content (like any egocentric infant) only when he climbs up high to get a better view of things.

Attaining consciousness—awareness—is the true mark of the rebel, and the greatest danger for those in power, whether they be gods or parents. It is no coincidence that authoritarian regimes, like Saddam Hussein's pre-invasion Iraq, seek always to control the media and to dictate what people can and can't know.

Rags to Riches

In his astonishing book *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker outlines and explores the fundamental stories that have entranced, and continue to entrance, the human race. One of these is the

A Glossary of Ancient Greek Myth

Nigel Rodgers

A

Aegis

A sacred adornment of great importance, normally worn as a medallion or necklace around the chest of a god (or a man worshipped as a god, such as Alexander the Great), or carried on its own in solemn procession. Zeus, king of the gods, first gave an aegis to his daughter Athena, patron goddess of Athens, which made her invulnerable even to his thunderbolts. Fringed with snakes' heads and decorated with images of the Gorgon—the dread creature that turned viewers to stone—the aegis brought victory to whichever side the god wearing it supported.
(See Athena, Perseus)

Aegean Sea

The main sea around Greece, which took its name from Aegeus, King of Athens. When Aegeus' son Theseus, as a young man, sailed off to Crete as part of Athens's tribute to the Minotaur, he promised his father that he would change the color of his ship's sails from the normal black if he had returned safely. Although he did escape alive from Crete, Theseus failed to do so, and Aegeus threw himself, in grief, into the sea—which was thenceforth known by his name.

Aeneas

Son of the goddess Aphrodite and the Trojan prince Anchises, and hero of *The Aeneid*. Aeneas escaped from Troy as it fell, carrying his aged father. His subsequent wanderings around the Mediterranean led him to Carthage, where he had a passionate affair with Dido, the city's founder and queen, and when his god-given duty called him reluctantly away, Dido in despair committed suicide. Aeneas then visited the Underworld to meet the ghost of his father, who had since died, and hear of his part in Rome's future greatness before sailing on to Latium (now Lazio, central Italy). There Aeneas married Lavinia and founded Lavinium, a city on the coast that was the precursor to Rome. The Romans venerated Aeneas. Julius Caesar claimed to be descended from him, as did Augustus, during whose reign Virgil wrote *The Aeneid*.
(See Aphrodite, Trojan War)

Amazons

Female warriors. While real women in Greece were secluded indoors, unable to vote let alone fight, one mythical race rejected male dominance: the Amazons. Their name may come from *Amazona,* meaning "without breasts," for they reputedly cut off their right breasts in order to shoot better, but in Greek art they are always shown with both breasts. The Amazons lived in Pontus (the north coast of modern Turkey) and other remote, legend-misted regions around the Black Sea. Here they formed societies where the women ruled and men either did the domestic work or were excluded altogether. Above all, the Amazons fought, invading many territories and even founding cities such as Ephesus (on the Aegean coast of modern Turkey). Theseus of Athens, who had joined Hercules on one of his adventures, abducted Antiope, an Amazon princess, and took her home to Athens. In revenge the Amazons invaded Greece, and were only defeated right outside Athens. During the Trojan War, the Amazon queen Penthesilea went to Troy's aid, fighting valiantly

until killed by Achilles. Most unusually, Achilles wept at her death. Later, Alexander the Great reputedly loved an Amazon queen whom he encountered in central Asia.
(See Theseus)

Andromeda

Mythical princess, the daughter of Cepheus, king of Ethiopia, and Cassiopeia. Andromeda rashly boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids, and the angry sea nymphs complained to Poseidon, the sea god, who sent a flood and monster to ravage the land. To appease the angry god, Andromeda was chained to a rock as a sacrifice to the monster. But Perseus, the hero who had just killed the hideous Medusa, saw Andromeda and fell in love with her. He killed the monster and married Andromeda, and their son (also named Perseus) became the ancestor of the Persians. Along with Cepheus and Cassiopeia, Andromeda and Perseus were later raised to the heavens as constellations.
(See Perseus)

Aphrodite

Goddess of love and the most beautiful of the Olympian deities. Aphrodite was worshipped in many forms across the Mediterranean; doves were sacred to her and she was often shown attended by Eros, mischievous god of desire. However, Aphrodite had disconcertingly foul origins. The god Kronos, urged on by his mother Gaia, castrated his father Ouranos and threw the severed genitals into the sea. Out of the resulting foam rose Aphrodite, the "foam-born." Blown ashore by Zephyrus, the west wind, she landed at Cyprus, where she was dressed and bejewelled by the Horae, goddesses embodying the four seasons. Now dazzlingly lovely, she caused amorous chaos on Olympus, for every god adored her. Zeus married her off to Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, but it did not prove a marriage made in heaven. Aphrodite soon grew bored with her lame (and ugly) husband and had an affair with Ares, the war god. When Hephaestus realized this,

he threw a steel net over the sleeping couple that chained them to their bed. The other gods looked on, laughing. Aphrodite had affairs with other gods such as Hermes and men such as the Trojan prince Anchises (the father of her son Aeneas). Aphrodite's beauty bewitched another Trojan prince, Paris, and when he was called on to judge who was the most beautiful, Athena, Hera, or Aphrodite, Paris chose the love goddess. In return he was gifted with great sex appeal, which won him the heart of Helen, the loveliest woman alive. Unfortunately, Helen was married already—to Menelaus, king of Sparta. By eloping with her, Paris started the Trojan War.
(See Aeneas, Ares, Athena, Eris, Hephaestus, Hera, Jason, Nereids, Ouranos)

Apollo

God of music, poetry, medicine, light, and science, and for many the archetypal Greek deity. Apollo was born with his twin sister Artemis on the island of Delos. His father was Zeus, king of the gods, and his mother Leto, a Titaness. The baby god was fed nectar and ambrosia rather than milk, giving him the strength he used to kill the serpent Pytho, which had molested his mother. He named the site of his victory Delphi, and it became the seat of his Oracle, the greatest in Greece. Each winter Apollo went far north to the land of the mysterious Hyperboreans in a chariot drawn by white swans, and returned with the spring. He was master of the lyre, Greece's main musical instrument, and of the bow. On Mount Parnassus near Delphi he held court, playing his lyre and attended by the Nine Muses. Apollo could be dangerous if crossed. The satyr Marsyas rashly challenged him to a musical contest, and when Apollo won, he had Marsyas flayed alive. He could dispense sickness as well as medicine, sending plagues if angered. But generally Apollo was a beneficent god, honored by humans and the other Olympians. Depicted always as a serenely handsome, beardless young man, Apollo had many, often unhappy, love affairs, most notably with Daphne, a nymph. Apollo

pursued her passionately but in vain, for she prayed to her father, the river god Peneus, and he turned her into a laurel tree just as the god was about to grasp her. One of his other love affairs was with the princess Coronis. When Apollo discovered she had left him, he shot her with one of his arrows, and repented of his rage too late to save her. Their son Asclepius was saved by the centaur Chiron, however, and grew up to be a divine healer. Apollo also fell in love with Hyacinthus, a Spartan prince, whom he taught to throw the discus. When Hyacinthus was killed by a flying discus, the first hyacinth flower sprang from the ground stained by his blood. Apollo was at times identified with Helios, the sun god, but they were really distinct deities.

(See Artemis, Delphi, Hecate, Helios, Hercules, Hermes, Laurel, Mount Olympus, Nymphs, Oracles, Orpheus, Python, Zeus)

Arachne

Daughter of a Lydian dyer, who rashly challenged the goddess Athena to a weaving contest. The tapestry Arachne wove depicted the scene of Athena's contest with Poseidon with such brilliant realism that the goddess, jealously enraged, destroyed Arachne's works. Athena then turned the weaver herself into a spider, doomed to repeat forever her compulsive weaving. From Arachne's name come the terms *arachnid* and *arachnophobia* (fear of spiders).

Ares

God of war. Irascible and cruel, Ares was disliked both by other gods and by human beings. Although the son of Zeus and Hera, and so part of Olympus' "royal family," Ares was not loved by his parents. Only Aphrodite, bored by her blacksmith husband Hephaestus, loved him, and even then only briefly. More usually, he spent his time haunting the battlefield with his supporters, the lesser gods Deimos (fear) and Phobos (panic), killing at will. But Ares was not invincible, for he lacked intelligence as well as charm. Athena often managed to outwit him and even Hercules, who was a mere

demigod, at times defeated him. Ares was worshipped by men only in Thebes, a city noted for its militarism and dullness.
(See Aphrodite, Eris, Hephaestus, Hera)

Ariadne

Daughter of King Minos and Queen Pasiphae of Crete. Ariadne fell in love with Theseus of Athens when he came to Crete as one of the sacrificial victims for the Minotaur, and so she gave Theseus a thread to help him find his way back out of the Labyrinth, the maze in which the Minotaur was held. After Theseus had killed the monster, the couple escaped from Crete together. However, Theseus—for reasons still debated—abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos. There she was rescued by the god Dionysus, who married her. Ariadne, in origin, was probably a Minoan goddess connected with the Great Mother.
(See Dionysus, Minotaur, Theseus)

Artemis

Daughter of Zeus and Leto and twin sister of Apollo. In one avatar she was a chaste huntress, slim, athletic, and short-skirted (Greek women usually wore long robes). Protector of young wild animals, she roamed the woods with a bow and was attended by nymph-huntresses sworn to celibacy like her. (These twenty shadowy nymphs, immortal but with no real power, were nameless apart from Callisto. Callisto, daughter of Lycaon, was seduced by Zeus while he was disguised as the goddess herself. When Artemis discovered this, she shot the unfortunate Callisto.) When the hunter Actaeon came upon Artemis bathing naked, she angrily transformed him into a stag and he was devoured by his own hounds. Often shown with the crescent moon, Artemis was sometimes associated with Selene, the Titan moon goddess, and even with Hecate, the fearsome queen of darkness. As Selene, she fell in love with the beautiful youth Endymion, who was put by Zeus into an immortal sleep to preserve his beauty. Artemis was also worshipped as the Great Goddess, an older multi-breasted fertility goddess venerated in a huge temple at

Ephesus in Asia Minor. (This is the temple of Diana that St. Paul later attacked; Diana is the Latin form of Artemis.)
(See Apollo, Hecate, Nymphs, Zeus)

Athena

Goddess of wisdom. Athena was born fully formed from the forehead of Zeus. Unlike most other gods, Athena showed almost no interest in sex, and was often called *Parthenos* (virgin). Still, she was affronted when Paris, the Trojan prince, chose Aphrodite over her in the Contest of Paris. In the Trojan War that followed, Athena favored the Greeks, especially the wily hero Odysseus, whom she helped on his long wanderings as he made his way home. Athena was the patron goddess of Athens, especially of its craftsmen, and her temple the Parthenon, the most perfect temple in the Greek world, still rises above the city. She had won Athens's devotion with the olive tree, which the Athenians preferred to Poseidon's gift of a fresh-water spring. Another of her titles was *Promachos*, defender or champion, for she was a fighter goddess, shown always with spear, helmet, and shield. She sported the hideous snake-haired *aegis* of Medusa, who was killed by her protégé Perseus, and was frequently pictured with a snake coiling beside her and an owl, a symbol of wisdom, on her shoulder.
(See Aegis, Aphrodite, Arachne, Ares, Eris, Furies, Hercules, Medusa, Nemean Lion, Pegasus, Perseus, Poseidon, Zeus)

Atlas

Titan punished by Zeus for joining the "revolt of the Titans" by having to stand forever at the world's western edge and support the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. Only once did he have a break: Hercules, on his mission to fetch the golden apples of the Hesperides, agreed to take on his great burden if Atlas fetched the apples. This done, Hercules promptly gave the crushing weight of the heavens back. Atlas was the father of Calypso and of the Pleiades, who became a constellation. He gave his name to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, the westernmost area the Greeks knew.
(See Calypso, Hesperides, Titans)