



Youth Reads: Percy Jackson and the Olympians (Rick Riordan)

Kim Moreland | First Published: October 7, 2011

<http://www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/youth-reads/entry/40/17989>

You think your family is difficult, try being a member of Percy Jackson's clan. His father is absent, and his brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins are just plain weird. Along with his family troubles, Percy also has learning disabilities.

But his problems at school aren't just a result of his ADHD and dyslexia. Percy keeps getting kicked out of schools because, well, horrible disasters keep happening around him, like fires or floods, and he keeps getting blamed for them.

On a field trip to a museum in Manhattan the day before school ends, Percy almost gets killed. Right before his eyes, a teacher who hates Percy transforms into a monster and tries to kill him. Shortly after fighting the evil hag, Percy learns he isn't wholly human. His mother is human, but his absent father is Poseidon, a god of the sea, which makes Percy a half-blood or demi-god. The hag that attacked him, and others like her, are monsters from the underworld, and they are attracted to half-bloods.

Using modern-day teenage cares and situations as a backdrop, Rick Riordan has written an entertaining, action-packed adventure series based on Greek mythology. Riordan, a teacher by profession, shows great mastery of history and English. Besides being well written, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* provides a good introduction to the Greek myths on which it is built.

At the story's start, a major war is brewing between good and evil because the murderous Kronos, a Titan who had been cut into pieces as cast into Tartarus (a place below the underworld), is trying to reform and retake Olympus.

You might remember from school that Olympus and the gods were once located in the Greek Isles, but in this story Olympus moves to wherever the heart of Western civilization lies; right now it's located in America, and the entrance to Olympus is through the Empire State Building. Somewhere outside of the New York City is a camp for half-bloods like Percy. The camp has a protective barrier that protects the residents from monsters; at least, it did until a certain half-

blood betrayed the rest of them.

At the outset, Riordan explains the difference between the gods of ancient pagan mythology and the God of the Bible. In *The Lightning Thief*, Chiron, a centaur and camp director, explains that “God -- capital G . . . is a different matter altogether. We shan’t deal with the metaphysical.”

A bit about what the pagans believed: They believed in an eternal but uncreated universe, a universe that was endlessly locked into a system of expansion and decay. The gods Riordan is writing about are “great beings that control the forces of nature and human endeavors.” While the gods have great power, they are capricious, and their relationships, human and divine, reflect that.

Monsters never die and are “reborn from the chaos and barbarism that is always bubbling underneath civilization.” In this series, Percy is the savior through whom the eternal cycle of life and death continues.

Many educators have stopped teaching the classics today because they think them harmful, or just not worth repeating. However, cutting ourselves off the past is a form of self-hate. In *From Achilles to Christ*, Louis Markos writes, “The truism that says we can’t know where we’re going if we don’t know where we came from is only half true. The one who knows nothing of his origins is more than merely lost; he is, in the most profound sense, cut off from himself. He knows not who he is.”

Every civilization has myths that explain life and death, good and evil. The myths from ancient Greece are part of our great Western civilization. While those myths are like looking at reality through a reflection of polished metal or stone, we still do see aspects of it.

Throughout the series, you will find characters and stories that are familiar to you because many of the characters and symbols are portrayed in our architecture, literature, sculptures, and paintings. Those names and images are also represented in popular culture. Take, for instance, a very recognizable tennis shoe brand, Nike. Nike was a servant of Athena, and the check mark icon is a symbol of victory.

Christians should be at the forefront of transmitting biblical wisdom and also the wisdom from ancient writers and thinkers. And children and young adults need to read about heroes - - heroes like those in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* -- who portray the cardinal virtues the ancient Greeks devised: courage, prudence, temperance, and justice. Riordan writes about heroes who suffer to redeem. Percy and the Olympians (and a few humans, too) fight, and sometimes die, to stop the evil Kronos sets into motion.

While I’ve only read books one through four, I would say that those stories point toward something perfect, but that perfection can never be realized through the Greek, Roman, or any other myth except for Christianity.

Our perfect myth, the resurrected Christ, is also a historical reality. Christ is the complete truth. Because they ask the right questions, myths like those from the ancients and new stories from writers like Riordan have their place, and can be an entry point for people to see the real myth.

Markos explains that these “questions . . . build within the readers of their works a desire to know the higher truth about themselves and their Creator.”

Buy Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series for your young adult, and read the books yourself. (*The Lightning Thief*, book one, has been adapted into a movie, but I’d recommend reading the series first.) Discuss the implications of Greek mythology and their ideas of the eternal cycle of expansion and decay, and then compare and contrast those ideas to how the Christian belief in a relational and rational God has allowed humans to flourish in every way: culturally, scientifically, economically, and personally.

Kim Moreland is project manager and research associate at BreakPoint.



the Chuck
Colson Center
for Christian Worldview

www.ColsonCenter.org