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**THE PERCY JACKSON PROBLEM**

**BY REBECCA MEAD**

*Rick. Riordan 'series "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" has sold upwards* of *twenty million copies worldwide.*

About a year ago, the novelist Neil Gaiman delivered a lecture at the Barbican, in London, on behalf of the Reading Agency, a not-for-profit organization that promotes literacy and reading for pleasure among children and adults. In the lecture, which was reprinted in the *Guardian* ([http://www.theguardian.com/books/20 1](http://www.theguardian.com/books/201)3/oct/15/neil-gaiman­future-libraries-reading-daydreaming), Gaiman came out in favor of what might be called the "just so long as they're reading" camp.

"I don't think there is such a thing as a bad book for children," he argued, adding that it was "snobbery and ... foolishness" to suggest that a certain author or particular genre might be a baleful influence upon young reading might be it comic books or the works of R. L. Stine. Fiction is a "gateway drug" to reading, Gaiman said. "Every child is different. They can find the stories they need to, and they bring themselves to stories. A hackneyed, worn-out idea isn't hackneyed and worn out to them." Well-meaning adults, he continued, can easily kill a child's love of reading: "Stop them reading what they enjoy, or give them worthy-but-dull books that you like, the 21st-century equivalents of Victorian 'improving' literature. You'll wind up with a generation convinced that reading is uncool and worse, unpleasant."

The opposite argument-that the kind of book a child has his or her nose buried in *does* make a difference-has been mounted elsewhere, notably by Tim Parks, in an essay (<http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/201>4/aug/11/reading-upward/) that appeared on the blog of the *New York Review of Books.* "If the 'I-don't­mind-people-reading-Twilight-because-it-could-lead-to-higher-things' platitude continues to be trotted out, it is because despite all the blurring that has occurred over recent years, we still have no trouble recognizing the difference between the repetitive formula offering easy pleasure and the more strenuous attempt to engage with the world in new ways," Parks wrote. He enlisted the example of his own children's reading habits, and those of his young students, to argue that there is little evidence to suggest that readers will make progress "upward from pulp to Proust." "I seriously doubt if E.L. James is the first step toward Shakespeare," he concluded. "Better to start with Romeo and Juliet."

This debate came to mind earlier this month at the New York Public Library, when Rick Riordan, the author of the best-selling Percy Jackson series, was in town to promote "The Blood of Olympus," the latest and final volume in his second cycle of novels drawing upon Greek mythology. The first, "Percy Jackson and the Olympians," has sold upwards of twenty million copies worldwide, and more than three hundred of his young fans filled the Celeste Bartos Forum at the library, where Hyperion, Riordan's publisher, had placed promotional T-shirts and temporary tattoos on every seat, and had ranged stacks of signed volumes for purchase. The atmosphere was one of high excitement and engagement, and if it is true that I have seen adult audiences in that venue similarly riveted by the presence of an author-Karl Ove Knausgaard's rock-star appearance (https:[//www](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-5IvtOGAMo)).[youtube.com/watch?v=K-5IvtOGAMo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-5IvtOGAMo)))earlier this year, for example-I have yet to attend a literary event at which the presence of the author, or the mere mention of his most popular characters, has been met by uncontrollable squealing.

For those unfamiliar with the Riordan's Olympian fictions-which is to say, people without children between the ages of seven and seventeen-their hero, Percy Jackson, thinks he is just a kid with a learning disability and a troublesome tendency to get kicked out of school, until he learns that his difficulties can be explained by the fact that he is a demigod, the offspring of Poseidon and a mortal woman. In the first book of the series, "The Lightning Thief," Percy gets shipped off, at the age of twelve, to Camp Half Blood, a refuge on Long Island populated by his demigod peers. There he learns the skills becoming of his lineage-sword fighting looms large-and discovers his own peculiar gifts: even when injured, he is miraculously healed and empowered by water.

Riordan has come up with a clever conceit, which is amusingly sustained. Medusa is the proprietress of a garden center in New Jersey that sells lifelike statuary: no

prizes for guessing how the stock is replenished. Ares, the god of war, is a biker in a red muscle shirt who comes armed with a huge knife. ("I love this country. Best place since Sparta," he says.) A detour to Las Vegas finds Percy and his pals beguiled by the attractions of a casino: video games, laser tag, indoor skiing. The seductive spell of indolence is broken after Percy falls into a disconcerting conversation with a kid in bell-bottoms, who refers to something or other as "groovy." The bell-bottomed kid has been trapped in the-of course-Lotus Casino since 1977, though he thinks it's only been a couple of weeks. Percy, as narrator, says, "I said something was 'sick,' and he looked at me kind of startled, as if he'd never heard the word used that way before."

That slangy, casual style is a hallmark of the Percy Jackson books, which often read like a faithful transcription of teen uptalk. At the level of language, Riordan's books make J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series seem as if it were written by Samuel Johnson. Unlike the Harry Potter books, which, notoriously ([http://www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com/) *I*articles/arts/books/20 14/06/against\_ya\_adults\_should\_be\_embarrassed\_to\_read\_children\_s\_books.htrnl), have been embraced by adult readers as well as juvenile ones, the Percy Jackson books seem positively contrived to repel adult readers, so thoroughgoing is their affectation of teen goofiness.

Riordan is a former middle-school English and history teacher, and at the N.Y.P.L. he revealed himself to have the ingratiating informality strategically adopted by some of the best and most beloved teachers. In a PowerPoint presentation, he showed photos of himself as a nerdy kid, said that the first book he read for pleasure was "The Lord of the Rings," talked about his love of comics, and showed the first rejection letter he'd received, for a story he'd submitted to a magazine as a teen-ager. Riordan's tale of his publishing career was, perhaps, oddly pitched for a pre-teen and teen-aged audience; when he revealed that the advance he received for his first novel was fifteen thousand dollars, my nine-year-old son whispered to me, "That's a *lot* of money." Then again, Riordan's sense of what kids will find interesting or funny is clearly highly attuned, even if it might occasionally strike other, less best-selling adults as somewhat peculiar. The other day, my son read aloud to me an extended joke involving H.M.O.s and deductibles from "The Blood of Olympus," which he found hilarious in spite of his ignorance of the mysteries underpinning America's health-insurance infrastructure.

Riordan's books prompt an uneasy interrogation of the premise underlying the "so long as they're reading" side of the debate-at least among those of us who want to share Neil Gaiman's optimistic view that all reading is good reading, and yet find ourselves by disposition closer to the Tim Parks end of the spectrum, worried that those books on our children's shelves that offer easy gratification are crowding out the different pleasures that may be offered by less grabby volumes. Undoubtedly, Riordan has single-handedly sparked an enthusiasm among young readers for Greek mythology, and if kids are dressing up for Halloween as Apollo or Poseidon instead of lron Man or a generic zombie, so much the better. My son and his peers know the tales of the Greek gods far better than I do, and if some of that is due to reading books such as Mary Pope Osborne's wonderfully ungimmicky "Tales from the Odyssey," or from having "D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths" in the read-aloud rotation from an early age, a good measure of that familiarity has also come via Riordan's retellings.

Riordan has been admirably encouraging of real-world attempts to bring Camp Half Blood to life: summer camps inspired by his books have sprung up in various locations around the country, including one in Prospect Park ([http://camphalfbloodbklyn.](http://camphalfbloodbklyn/) com/) that offers its demigod denizens many happy hours of sword fighting, shield-making, quest-following, and capturing the flag. To hear one's offspring excitedly explain that camp was rained out because Poseidon made it rain, and that Zeus has been throwing thunderbolts, is enough to warm the heart of even the most skeptical defender of the Western literary tradition. If an indelible association between Ares and the Hells Angels lingers in these young readers' minds, such may be the price of their mythological literacy.

So why is it that I've been reluctant to hand over to my young Riordan aficionado the review copy I received of the author's other recent publication, "Percy Jackson's Greek Gods"? Lavishly illustrated on heavy, glossy paper, this is Riordan's answer to the D'Aulaires' celebrated volume. It is the same size as that familiar book, with its cover even drawing from the same color palette of yellows and blues. Inside, it contains the old stories, as retold in the voice of Percy Jackson himself: "A publisher in New York asked me to write down what I know about the Greek gods, and I was like, 'Can we do this anonymously? Because I don't need the Olympians mad at me again'"

Ingri and Edgar D'Aulaire, European immigrants to the United States who co-authored many books after their marriage in 1925, retold the myths in a heightened, poetic language: "In olden times, when men still worshiped ugly idols, there lived in the land of Greece a folk of shepherds and herdsmen who cherished light and beauty, "their book begins. Riordan's book strikes a very different tone. It is inscribed with obsolescence (Craigslist, iPhones, and the Powerball lottery are invoked) and delivered in the kind of jaded teen argot that proves irresistibly cool to kids from grade school up: ''At first, Kronos wasn't so bad. He had to work his way up to being a *complete* slime bucket."While the D'Aulaires wrote that "Persephone grew up on Olympus and her gay laughter rang through the brilliant halls," Percy's introduction to the story of Demeter's daughter reads, "I have to be honest. I never understood what made Persephone such a big deal. I mean, for a girl who almost destroyed the universe, she seems kind of *meh."* The former book, which was published fifty-two years ago, remains mostly lucid, even if in places it is stilted and dated. But I suspect it would be a very discerning elementary or middle school student--or a willfully perverse one- who would chose the old version over the Percy Jackson retelling. Put the books side by side, and the D'Aulaires look more like the Dull'Aires, as Percy and his demigod pals might put it. (Wow- this affect is *contagious.)*

Gaiman's view that any book that is avidly embraced can serve as a gateway to an enduring love of reading is surely true: my own earliest literary love affair was with Enid Blyton, that mid-century spinner of mysteries and boarding-school stories, who is among the authors Gaiman lists as having been deemed bad for children. But the metaphor of the gateway should prompt caution, too, since one can go through a gate in two directions. What if the strenuous accessibility of "Percy Jackson's Greek Gods" proves so alluring to young readers that it seduces them in the opposite direction from that which Gaiman's words presuppose-away from an engagement with more immediately difficult incarnations of the classics, Greek and otherwise? What if instead of urging them on to more challenging adventures on other, potentially perilous literary shores, it makes young readers hungry only for more of the palatable same? There's a myth that could serve as an illustration here. I'm sure my son can remind me which one.

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