



# Authorgraph No.183: Rick Riordan

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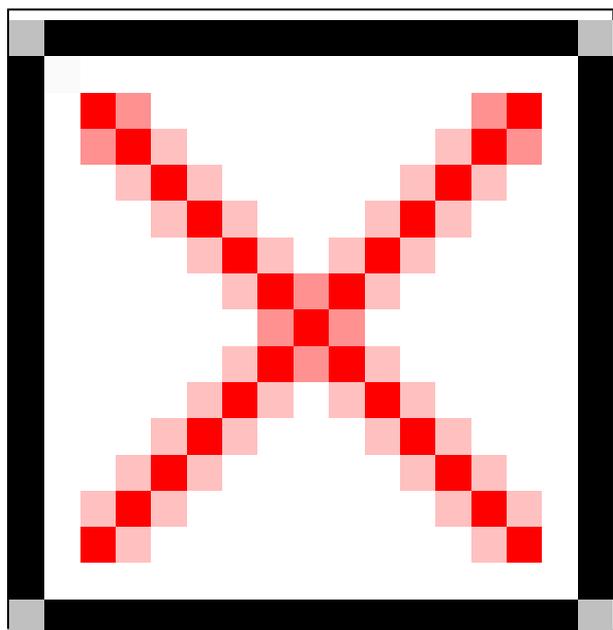
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**Rick Riordan** is interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**.



**Rick Riordan** interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**

Rick Riordan is a very busy man: tracking him down for a transatlantic phone call is no easy feat. There's no surprise in that; even before the release in February of the blockbusting film **Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief** directed by Chris Columbus of Harry Potter fame, Rick had hit the big time with the original book version of the story ? and its sequels ? which made the top spots on **The New York Times** bestseller list. As a result, Rick's been on the circuit in the US and elsewhere, his feet hardly touching the ground as he increasingly resembles the demi-gods of his own creation.

And the sense of speed continues into the conversation with Rick. It's not that he makes you feel rushed or that he's eager to end the interview; rather the reverse, he is so easy to talk to that it is hard to stop. More it is that while the conversation is going on, Rick thinks as fast as he travels and matches it by talking fast, too.

Given that Percy Jackson has struck 10-14 year-old readers with such a thunderbolt, it would be easy to think that Rick's first career ? 15 years of teaching ? led him straight to writing for children. After all, he knew the audience really well but strangely, although he says, ?I did a lot of storytelling in the classroom. I was good at it. It brought the stories to life and my writing grew out of that,? he actually began his writing career with four prize-winning mystery novels for adults about Tres Navarre, an unlicensed private eye, set in his home town of San Antonio, Texas.

Rick might have gone on and written more about Tres had his son Haley not been diagnosed as being dyslexic and having ADHD. ?I would never have written for children if it hadn't been for Haley. He was seven or eight years old and was a very reluctant reader. I began to tell him the stories from Greek mythology, made up and not read. They became **The Lightning Thief**

From the beginning, Rick knew they were something special. 'I had a feeling it would be the most important thing I'd ever done,' he says with absolute confidence which doesn't feel as if it just comes with hindsight. Although, given that it was his first children's book, I can't help expressing surprise at his certainty. But Rick has his reasons. 'It was the sense that many different things had come together. I was at a crossroads. Mythology, my son, fantasy, my own love of stories, my adult writing. It was a kind of alchemy. The product was bigger than the sum of the parts.'

Rick's unerring ability to reach these younger readers may have been that he had himself been what he calls 'not a bookish child'. He had little interest in reading until he was 12 when he discovered **The Lord of the Rings** and from there moved on to all kinds of fantasy. 'My teacher said, 'You know **The Lord of the Rings** is based on Norse mythology?' I said, 'No, what's mythology?' That was when I became really interested in it.'

'I have a lot of sympathy with reluctant readers as I was one and my son is one. I know reluctant readers need stories that are concise, punchy and spiced with humour. You have to write many questions that the reader wants an answer for. That's something J K Rowling understands absolutely. She was a strong influence on my books.' Of course, Rick knows his books are read by voracious readers too, who, as he says, can read them just as well, but his understanding of the particular reasons which make his books so accessible is part of why he is so sure of his ground in children's books.

Not that Rick is foolish enough to think it is just *how* they are told that makes the Percy Jackson stories so successful. After all, Greek myths have been reeling in readers of all ages for thousands of years. As Rick says, 'There is everything enticing you could want in these stories. Action, romance, great characters - all larger than life.' And he is careful about respecting their origins. 'I go back to the primary sources - not the originals as I can't read Greek and only have a bit of Latin - but the early translations are usually a lot more detailed and a lot more powerful than the recent versions.' Using that starting point he writes his own versions. 'I take liberties in modernising but I never change the basic facts. I want readers to be sure that Percy Jackson fits the myths.'

But Rick thinks that for the pre-teen age group he pitches to, it is not just that the Percy Jackson books are good stories with all the necessary ingredients included: 'I think there is a developmental stage which comes at about 12 that attracts readers to myths. At this age young children are on the cusp. They are changing fast physically and emotionally. Mythology captures that change.' As he says, in mythology, and especially in Greek mythology, characters are flawed: 'The Greek gods are the original 'super powers'. The heroes have such incredible gifts but they also fail. 12-plus readers like the ambiguity of this.' This duality suits the pre-teens' own sense of fallibility and of not knowing exactly what they want from life in contrast with their younger selves for whom simpler versions of characters, who are all good or all evil, are more readily accepted.

Alongside the fallibility of the characters Rick thinks that the morality of the world of the Greek gods and goddesses is also appealing. 'Morality in Greek myths is not clear like in modern religion. It is a grey zone and that appeals to children. It is not only that the Gods are models of both good and bad behaviour, it is also that heroes have to muddle a way through an uncertain world where doing good is not always rewarded.'

As a student, Rick majored in English and History which is where he saw 'how persuasive mythology is' so it comes as no surprise that in his most recent book, **The Red Pyramid** which launches 'The Kane Chronicles', he is getting under the skin of the Egyptian myths. He was guided to tackle another mythology by his readers and he went back to his teaching days when it came to making a choice. 'Casting back to teaching, Egypt was always very popular. Egypt is a high interest subject but its mythology is much less well-known. In fact, it is as amazing and colourful as Greek mythology.' Before writing, Rick did a lot of research and from that the 'Chronicles' took shape - but it wasn't easy! 'It was the most challenging thing I've done. The stories are very convoluted and the gods change their names and what they do from one story to another. Usually that is because of where the story is set. In different places a god will have a different name but the same attributes as another god from somewhere else!'

Rick also guessed that his readers would have less prior knowledge of the Egyptians. 'I had to assume most people

reading **The Red Pyramid** wouldn't know very much. I try to make the readers realise how much they know without them realising they are learning.?

With **The Red Pyramid** Rick hopes new readers will be hooked not only for this book but the rest that will follow. Having written for adults too, he is very aware of how demanding children as readers can be. ?Children are a much tougher audience than adults. They will not stay with you if your novel isn't engaging. You have to create a much tighter narrative to hold their attention.? But a series is comfortable for him and he knows its power. ?I like instalments,? he says. ?I've always been a series reader and my observation is that young readers like series.?

And, for those that do, Rick is certainly going to offer great reading entertainment as he has set himself the possibly heroic, certainly hectic, schedule of a book every six months. ?I want to write the new Egyptian series but I don't want to disappoint the Percy Jackson readers so it will be Greek mythology in the Fall and the Egyptians in the Spring.?

No wonder Rick Riordan is hard to catch but, thank goodness for his demi-god powers which presumably include living without sleep.

**Julia Eccleshare** is the children's book editor of the **Guardian** and the co-director of CLPE (The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education).

## **The Books**

(published by Puffin, unless otherwise indicated)

*Percy Jackson:*

**Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief**, 978 0 14 131913 1, £6.99 pbk

**Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters**, 978 0 14 131914 8, £6.99 pbk

**Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse**, 978 0 14 132126 4, £6.99 pbk

**Percy Jackson and the Battle of the Labyrinth**, 978 0 14 132127 1, £6.99 pbk

**Percy Jackson and the Last Olympian**, 978 0 14 132128 8, £6.99 pbk

**Percy Jackson: The Demigod Files**, 978 0 14 132950 5, £4.99 pbk

*The Kane Chronicles:*

**The Red Pyramid**, 978 0 14 138494 8, £12.99 hbk

*Heroes of Olympus:*

**The Lost Hero**, 978 0 14 138492 4, £12.99 hbk (October 2010)

*The 39 Clues:*

**The Maze of Bones**, Scholastic, 978 0 5450 6039 4, £6.99 hbk

**Rick Riordan's** website: [www.rickriordan.com](http://www.rickriordan.com) [3]

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