Culture



"Percy Jackson and the Olympians" stars Walker Scobell in the titular lead role, a smart aleck son of Poseidon on a perilous quest to retrieve the missing lightning bolt of Zeus, the thunderous king of the gods. (Courtesy of Disney/David Bukach)



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January 13, 2024

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When I was in fourth grade, my Catholic school held a Scholastic Book Fair in the gym during recess. There weren't many kids there, but I wandered in because I wasn't particularly interested in playing in the yard like most of the other students. I wasn't really a "reader"; I'd read chapter books and some nonfiction fare, but nothing that really sparked my imagination. But in that room full of books, I spotted a curious-looking cover: a boy riding a winged horse perched atop one of the Chrysler Building gargoyles, overlooking a foggy Manhattan skyline.

This was *The Titan's Curse*, the third book in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series, and you bet I snatched it right away. It didn't take long for me to find the first two books and devour them too, and then I had to play the waiting game for the next book in the series to come out. In the meantime, I started reading a lot of other middle grade and young adult fiction, and at some point, I had indeed become a "reader."

These books were responsible for forming not only my taste in genre fiction but reading in general. So, you can imagine that, upon learning they were getting a television adaptation, I was both cautious and excited. Cautious because the last time *Percy Jackson* was adapted, the resulting films failed to live up to both fan expectations and critical assessment. Excited because this time author Rick Riordan is heavily involved in its production, which signals a more faithful adaptation in tune with what fans want.

So now that it's streaming, does the TV series live up to the book series? Happily, it largely does.

Official trailer for "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (YouTube/Disney Plus)

A Disney+ original series, "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" stars Walker Scobell in the titular lead role, a smart aleck son of Poseidon on a perilous quest to retrieve the missing lightning bolt of Zeus, the thunderous king of the gods. Joining him are Annabeth Chase (Leah Jeffries), the ever-serious daughter of Athena, and Grover Underwood (Aryan Simhadri), Percy's goat-legged satyr protector. Along the way, they encounter no shortage of obstacles from Greek myth: the Minotaur that faced off against Theseus in the labyrinth, the demonic winged Furies and even Medusa, whose famous petrifying stare menaced Percy's namesake Perseus.

It should come as no surprise that my love of Greek mythology and my eventual interest in the classics could also be traced back to this series. It was this love of gods and monsters that led me to read, for the first time, Dante's *Inferno*, itself owing much to the Greeks. His vision of hell, and thus the popular conception of how infernal structures work, are an evolution of tropes originating from the Greek afterlife — structures that are similarly used in "Percy Jackson," as his quest eventually leads him to the Underworld (located, naturally, below Los Angeles).

Much of the books' tongue-in-cheek nature is preserved in the show. For instance, the so-called god of parties, Dionysus, is the grouchy camp director for Camp Half-Blood, a central location of the series, where children of the gods are taught how to survive against the monsters hunting them. Played brilliantly by Jason Mantzoukas, Dionysus has been banned from alcohol by Zeus and essentially forced to babysit a summer camp, hence the grouchiness. Another example: the Minotaur, as terrifying as it may be, wears only a pair of white underpants, a visual design lifted straight from the books that basically says, "It's OK not to take this *too* seriously."

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In one memorable moment, Percy's mother Sally (Virginia Kull) tells her son about how she met his father, informing him that he was not a man, but a god. Looking at his mother like she's gone crazy, he confusedly replies, "You fell in love with God? Like ... like Jesus?" It's a funny moment in a series that's full of them, but it helps break tension in a scene that's otherwise a serious conversation about discussing why a son's father has seemingly abandoned him.

In a similar vein, the show's interpretation of Greek myth can be surprisingly complex. Its take on Medusa, in particular, is multifaceted, presenting her more as a victim than a monster. It is a change from the books, but one that improves the narrative, especially since Medusa was taken advantage of by Poseidon, Percy's father, whom Percy similarly resents for never being in his life. It brings to mind more recent reclamations of the character as a feminist figure, an allegory for female rage and empowerment. In an interview with Variety, Riordan states, "As a 12-year-old boy in 2005, I don't think [Percy] had the bandwidth for deconstructing the patriarchy." However, the 2023-24 TV show lets Medusa's perspective on the matter shine — and it is all the better for it.



"Percy Jackson and the Olympians" on Disney+ stars Walker Scobell as Percy Jackson, Leah Jeffries as Annabeth and Aryan Simhadri as Grover. (Courtesy of Disney)

For those who did not grow up reading *Percy Jackson*, it may be tempting to dismiss the series as just a *Harry Potter* riff, with Greek myths papering over tropes that Potter had well-worn into childrens' fiction. But the series has quite a lot to say about parental abandonment, single parenthood, growing up with a disability (Percy is dyslexic and has ADHD) and more. These are rich themes for a children's series and much-needed representation for kids who can relate to these characters. Where Harry Potter's various sufferings often spilled into the realm of melodramatic unrealism, there is a nasty naturalism to Percy's struggles: an alcoholic and lazy step-boyfriend, a depressed mother, abandonment issues, all turning into ceaseless rebellious tendencies.

Percy Jackson was, for me, one of the most important pieces of fiction I ever had the pleasure of reading. It introduced me to so much — from mythology to complex

themes to the very joy of being a reader. It set a high bar and, so far, the series has managed to clear it. While it remains to be seen how the rest of the season will go, given its strong performance out of the gate, I'm more than happy to recommend the show to both newcomers and faithful readers alike.

"Percy Jackson and the Olympians" is streaming on Disney+.

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 2-15, 2024** print issue under the headline: The quest of Percy Jackson.