

## Interview with Rick Riordan

by Lyn Belisle



his family.

**Rick Riordan** is the author of the #1 New York Times best selling Percy Jackson and the Olympians series for children and the multi-award-winning Tres Navarre mystery series for adults. His Percy Jackson series features a twelve-year-old dyslexic boy who discovers he is the modern-day son of a Greek god. *The Lightning Thief* was a New York Times Notable Book for 2005. Film rights have been purchased by Twentieth Century Fox and a feature film is in development. For fifteen years, Rick taught English and history at public and private middle schools in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Texas. In 2002, Saint Mary's Hall honored him with the school's first Master Teacher Award. In 2003, he was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters. He lives in San Antonio with

**Lyn Belisle** is an award-winning teacher, artist, designer and writer who has taught a range of fine arts, humanities, English, and graphic design throughout her career. She was the recipient of the 2002 Trinity Prize for Excellence in Teaching for her outstanding performance in public education. Currently, she is on the faculty of the computer Science Department at Trinity University. One of her proudest accomplishment is being the mother of author Rick Riordan, whom she interviews for this article.



## Rick Riordan Interview

*Rick, your weblog (<http://rickriordan.blogspot.com/>) is called Myth and Mystery. Both your Tres Navarre mysteries and the Percy Jackson mythologically-based YA series have a central “hero” who follows a quest of sorts. How are the two concepts of myth and mystery treated as literary devices in your writing in general?*

Mythology is as relevant today as it ever has been. 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 be the hero’s quest or simply allusions to the Olympians.

Knowing mythology certainly makes one a more informed member of society, but it’s not simply important to understand and appreciate Western Civilization. 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 comment about Batman being 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, something that we left behind with the Bronze Age. We are still creating myths all the time. My young adult hero Percy Jackson allows me a wonderful opportunity to explore the myth of America as the beacon of civilization, the myth of New York, and the myth of the American teenager.

As for Tres Navarre, the protagonist of my mysteries, he is also very much in the Classical tradition. I would argue that the American private eye is a direct descendant of Odysseus – the capable crafty hero who must battle the forces of nature, the will of the gods, and the schemes of evil men to forge his own version of justice.

*I remember that one of your favorite books when you were a child was Fletcher and Zenobia by Victoria Chess and Edward Gorey. Any comments on those characters and situations as a very early influence? Any other memorable childhood books that shaped your work?*

Edward Gorey has a wonderful sense of the macabre, and I think children are drawn to darkness and danger much more than adults sometimes realize. You need look no further than the Brothers Grimm, or more recently the popularity of Lemony Snicket. *Fletcher and Zenobia* was not

overtly dark (though I did wonder about Zenobia's fear of axes). Still, it had subtle and subversive humor, and it created a space for me, as a reader, to imagine myself in the story. A good book is not just about narrative. It's about creating a geography wide enough to accommodate the reader. I could imagine myself stuck in Fletcher's tree, or sailing away to great adventures on the back of a giant moth. As a child, I was also drawn to the work of Roald Dahl. I was particularly delighted when James' giant peach squashed his horrible aunts.

*When you moved away from home in Texas to live in San Francisco, how did your memories (good or not-so) of growing up in San Antonio lead to the subject and setting of your first mystery, Big Red Tequila?*

Growing up, I often asked teachers what I should write about, only to be given that old axiom, "Write about what you know." I hated that, since I didn't know anything. It was only after moving away from San Antonio that I realized what a unique place it was. I needed distance to write effectively about my hometown, so along with "write about what you know," I usually tell aspiring writers that they must appreciate what they know. My first novel was driven largely by homesickness.

Growing up in San Antonio also affected my writing style. The Southern storytelling tradition and the tall tales of the Wild West are still very much alive in San Antonio. A good yarn must be colorful and exaggerated. As a child, I remember sitting around campfires at the Frio River, listening to the ways stories were told – sometimes the same stories year after year, but each time they would change and get grander, funnier, stranger. I imagine things weren't too different with tales of the Trojan War in the time of Homer.

*Your Tres Navarre books have a strong sense of locale; in fact, the city of San Antonio has been described as a major character in the books. The Percy Jackson books, by contrast, take young readers all over the country as well as to richly-detailed mythological locations. In general, what are your thoughts on the importance of locale in your own work? Has that changed?*

In my Tres Navarre novels, setting is a character. I try to design each story so that it could not possibly happen anywhere except South Texas – at least not without losing its essence. A quote attributed to O'Henry, perhaps apocryphally, listed four cities in the United States with a completely unique, unmistakable character: New Orleans, San Francisco, Boston and San Antonio. I think it's no accident the first three locales have long histories as literary settings, but when I began writing I had San Antonio pretty much to myself. It is indeed a rich location with its mix of cultures and its long colorful history.

The Percy Jackson books cover a lot more geographic territory. I basically picked locations our family had visited so my sons could picture the action as I told them the story. If there is a similarity in the way the two series treat setting, it is the idea of writing as travel. Readers like to be transported to exotic and interesting places. The physical journey of the hero also reflects his

spiritual journey. This is an ancient theme. Like so many literary protagonists from Theseus to Huckleberry Finn, Percy Jackson and Tres Navarre must leave home to discover home. The return is an essential element of the hero's quest.

*I'm incredibly proud of your achievements as a classroom teacher. How has that experience influenced your books for young readers? How do you balance the instructive with the entertaining? You've obviously found a good mix of both if one reads comments from both educators and young fans.*

When I write one of my children's books, I always imagine myself telling the story in front of my own classroom. I try to fashion a story that works well read aloud, that will keep the attention of a young audience. The more instructive a book is, the more entertainment value it needs. I am interested first and foremost in telling a good story, but it is always my hope to teach in a subversive manner, so that students don't even realize they are learning something. Judging from the comments of librarians, who tell me their mythology sections are getting a heavy workout these days, I'd say my plan is working!