

Provisional Syllabus

Classical Studies 0021
Percy Jackson and Friends
Spring 2025: Tu, Th 10:15-11:44

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“My concerns as a writer have changed over the years, but I keep being drawn back to the Greeks. My fascination with them stems from earliest childhood. *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* was one of the first books I experienced alone, in the sense of reading it by myself to myself and poring over the illustrations so thoroughly that even now I can call most of them up in my mind's eyes in stunning detail.” – Ellen McLaughlin, playwright

“Ready to get started? Fasten your armour. Grab your shield. Make sure your sword is sharpened. Within these pages are monsters that have been waiting 3000 years to fight you. It's time you showed them who's boss.” – Rick Riordan, Introduction to a 2009 reprint of Roger Lancelyn Green's *Tales of the Greek Heroes* (first published 1958)

Course description and learning goals:

Most modern people first encounter the ancient world in early pleasure reading and other forms of play, whether in myth collections like *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* or fantasies like the Percy Jackson series or, increasingly, cartoons and video games. This seminar will examine the presence of classical myth and ancient history in young people's culture from the nineteenth century to the present day, both in traditional literary forms and in newer media such as cartoons, video games, and fan fiction. Along with the material that we read and discuss together, each student will present and write about a classically-inspired work for children or young adults that particularly interests them. Students will analyze a range of texts and other works to learn about:

- Why childhood exposure to the classics has been considered important at different periods in American and British culture: the present day, the mid-20th century, and the mid-19th century.
- Which children are seen, or have been seen, as the ones who should know about the classics.
- The ways in which some very dark stories are made child-friendly, and how ideas about what is suitable for children have changed over time.
- How some of the more troubling aspects of the ancient world – enslavement, imperialism, gender inequality – are presented to modern children.
- The particular dynamic between author and audience when adults are writing for children, what those adults think children like, and what they want children to get from their works.
- Different genres of children's literature: fantasy, historical fiction, the myth collection etc.
- The way illustrations contribute to the meaning of a story.
- Along the way, some interesting myths and aspects of ancient Greek and Roman culture.

Required Texts: (all other course materials will be supplied in a course pack)

Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* (ISBN 9780786838653)

Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire, *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* (ISBN 9780440406945)

Caroline Lawrence, *The Thieves of Ostia* (ISBN 9781842550205)

Laura Amy Schlitz, *Amber & Clay* (ISBN 9781536228144)

Recommended resource: A good starting point for classical myths is the website Theoi Greek Mythology (<https://www.theoi.com>), which was one of Rick Riordan's sources.

Devices Policy: Laptops, ipads, and cell phones must be put away during class. All required materials will be available in books or in a course pack.

Course requirements:

-- *Preparation, attendance, and participation:* 20% of grade

You are expected to read the assigned material carefully, to come to class (or to let me know in advance if you have a good reason not to), and to speak in class. This is a discussion-based course in which you will learn by voicing your half-formed thoughts and questions and by responding to what your classmates say.

-- *2 short papers* (specific prompts to be supplied in advance): each 20% of grade.

-- *Final presentation and paper* (10-12 pages): 40% of grade.

You will choose a work that presents the classical world to children or young adults from any period and in any medium. You will give a presentation on this to the rest of us and will write a final paper about it. A list of suggestions and links to websites that include many further possibilities will be provided.

Tentative schedule of readings and topics: detailed assignments and discussion questions will be provided in advance

1/16: Introductions

1/21: Children's literature: questions and definitions

The Lightning Thief, Chapters 1-6

Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, "Essentials: What is Children's Literature? What are Children?"

1/23: Percy Jackson and the "hidden adult"

The Lightning Thief, Chapters 7-15

Claudia Nelson and Anne Morey, "A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers"

1/28: The lessons of Percy Jackson

The Lightning Thief, Chapters 16-22

Rick Riordan, *The Lost Hero*, Chapter 1

Sheila Murnaghan, "Classics for Cool Kids"

Rick Riordan, "Feathers? Why Feathers?"

Classics for American children

- 1/30: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, preface, “The Gorgon’s Head,” “the Golden Touch”
- 2/4: *A Wonder Book*, “The Paradise of Children” and “The Three Golden Apples”
- 2/6: Hawthorne’s legacy: illustrated myth collections for children
D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths
- 2/11: *D’Aulaires* and other myth collections, continued
- 2/13: American children encounter the classics: Betsy Ray, Homer Price, Andy

Classics for British children

- 2/18: Charles Kingsley, selections from *The Heroes, or Greek Fairy Tales for My Children*

Difficult issues

- 2/20: Slavery in classical books for American children: Hawthorne & historical fiction
- 2/25: Slavery in Roman Britain, selections from Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Eagle of the Ninth*
- 2/27: The myth of Persephone

Ancient children, contemporary concerns

- 3/4: Caroline Lawrence, *The Thieves of Ostia*
- 3/6: Plato, *Meno*

[spring break]

- 3/18: Laura Amy Schlitz, *Amber & Clay*
- 3/20: *Amber & Clay*
- 3/25: *Amber & Clay*

New media

- 3/27: cartoons and video games
- 4/1: fan fiction
- 4/3-4/29: presentation of individual projects
- 5/6: final paper due