“This ain’t Odysseus’ Odyssey”: The Radical Inclusion of Disability in Rick Riordan’s Fantasy Novels

By

Sydney Chinowsky

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements to receive honors designation in English Literature

Examining Committee:

Dr. Tiffany Beechy, Department of English

Dr. Karen Jacobs, Department of English

Dr. Benjamin Robertson, Department of English

Dr. Michele Moses, School of Education

Table of Contents

Introduction

> *Children as individual readers need to see themselves and their issues and problems represented in books in order to feel validated. They also need to be introduced to the feelings and experiences of others in order to react empathetically and humanely. —Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman,* Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature

When it comes to various literary genres, realistic fiction and fantasy fiction would seem to be about as different as one can get. Yet in recent years, scholars have begun to recognize the potential that fantasy fiction holds when an author weaves realistic elements into a mythical, magical world. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a leading scholar in the field of disability studies, asserts that "Juxtaposing realism and myth blends robust social criticism with a utopian impulse …. The mythic perspective dislodges the dominant viewpoint, opening a discursive space for imagining new ways of being" (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 129). For most readers, fantasy books offer an escape from daily life, yet as Garland-Thomson argues, the incorporation of real-world social issues into a fantasy novel can turn that novel from escapist fiction into radical fiction. By presenting realistic issues in a fantasy setting, authors can disrupt social norms through the presentation of a hypothetical world that incorporates a person's unique way of being into that space instead of pathologizing it. In this paper, I will explore the differences between radical and escapist fantasy literature by examining three of Rick Riordan's middle-grade fantasy series.[1] Specifically, I will investigate Riordan's portrayals of three different types of disability—learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and chronic illness—and

[1] Middle-grade literature here indicates books marketed for children 8-12 years old, or late elementary/early middle school range, based on *Publisher's Weekly*'s general definition (Maughan, "Navigating Middle Grade Books").

how he does or does not incorporate his characters' disabilities into the fantasy worlds that he created.

The reason that I am focusing on children's fantasy literature, rather than adult fantasy literature, is that children's literature has "historically has been a realm for expressing utopian visions and launching subtle critiques of the existing social order" (Mickenberg and Nel, pp. 445-446). Children's literature has the potential to make a large impact due to the fact that it can expose young people to ideas that will help them shape the future as they become activists and leaders. The significance of middle-grade fiction in particular is that it addresses "the things kids are going through [in their preteen years]: friendships made and lost, family relationships changing, physical changes, a wide range of school experiences, and a growing awareness of the wide world outside of oneself and the injustices it often contains" (Simonsen qtd in Maughan). Furthermore, radical literature "may offer alternative versions of the stories [children] are telling themselves about themselves" (Reynolds 113). In other words, radical literature encourages children not only to imagine a better future for the world they live in, but also to imagine themselves in a more positive light.

Once a middle school English and history teacher, Rick Riordan is one of the most popular middle-grade fantasy novelists today. He has penned almost twenty novels for young readers, as well as many more short stories, and has won the Children's Choice Book Awards for Author of the Year, the School Library Journal's Best Book award, and the Stonewall Book Award for children's literature. Riordan's books are commonly categorized as fantasy, yet he draws many of his plot elements from various world mythologies and the epic texts associated with those mythologies. Riordan adapts these stories to modern-day America, with middle and high school students from many different backgrounds as the heroes. Riordan's writing is

therefore an excellent demonstration of how fantasy fiction can become radical, as he often weaves together traditional mythic and fantasy traditions with the issues that modern-day young people face, such as gender and sexual identity, race relations, religion, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and interacting with America's school system. By incorporating these varying elements into his fantasy world, Riordan utilizes traditional themes to challenge the othering of various identities. Through this investigation, I will demonstrate the position of power that children's fantasy fiction occupies to either advance or retrogress the view of disability in society.

The Inception of Riordan's Radical Fantasy Work

Riordan's son Haley inspired him to write his first middle-grade book. Haley, like Riordan's father, was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD at age ten (Riordan suspects that he himself is at least mildly dyslexic and possibly has ADHD.) Despite his challenges with school, though, Haley was very interested in Greek mythology. Riordan has explained that his son often requested Greek myths as bedtime stories, and when Riordan ran out, Haley requested that he make up some new myths. Riordan states, "I remembered a creative writing project I used to do with my sixth graders — I would let them create their own demigod hero…. and have them describe a Greek-style quest for that hero. Off the top of my head, I made up Percy Jackson and told Haley all about his quest to recover Zeus' lightning bolt in modern-day America" ("An Interview with Rick"). The protagonist of Riordan's first middle-grade book, *The Lightning Thief* (2005), is twelve-year-old Percy Jackson, who in addition to being the son of the Greek god Poseidon, also has dyslexia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In *The Lightning Thief*, Riordan gives an accurate portrait of what it is like to live with learning disabilities (LDs), while also teaching his readers that it is not the abilities a person is born with,

but rather what they do with those abilities, that makes them a hero. The way Riordan frames his character with ADHD and dyslexia made major strides in the literary world for children with those diagnoses, as heretofore the portrayals of learning disabilities were both limited and one-sided. Riordan's portrayal of Percy is radical because it accurately and ethically represents LDs in a fantasy work, bringing awareness to the LD community in a way that had never before been done.

Before *The Lightning Thief* was published, there were few books for children that featured a character with an LD. Those books that did, such as *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (1998) and *My Name is Brain Brian* (1993), centered their plots around the character's disability. While these stories could be inspiring to readers, they also contextualized the characters' LDs solely within the realm of school. Riordan challenges the notion that stories about a person struggling with disability must appear solely within the regulatory context of the school system that defines a part of their identity as defective. As Riordan's son Haley states in an interview, "You read a lot of [fantasy] books and none of them have a hero who is dyslexic or has ADHD – it's always perfect people in a perfect world doing perfect things. Percy is, in fact, very flawed and he has to fight against that and at the same time fight monsters" (Riordan, "My Boy's Own Adventure"). Percy's journey to become more self-confident despite his disabilities mirrors his journey to become a classic fantasy hero; utilizing these parallel journeys, Riordan normalizes dyslexia and ADHD.

The Representation of Disability in Literature

Like other minority groups, people with a disability are often at risk of being tokenized, stereotyped, or omitted completely from literature and the arts. Characters with disabilities often fall into one of several tropes, such the disabled saint (e.g. Tiny Tim) who provides inspiration or

a lesson to the able-bodied protagonist through their goodness despite having to live with a disability; or the disabled villain (e.g. Darth Vader, Captain Hook) whose need for vengeance is partially driven by the existence of their disability. A particularly common trope in fantasy and science fiction is that of a disability that is either "cured" by magic/science by the end of the story, or is rendered obsolete by the granting of a magical power or prosthetic that makes up for the disability (for example, Daredevil in Marvel comics, Jake Sully in *Avatar*). The common theme in all of these tropes is that either the disabled character acts only as a plot device for the main character, or their disability is temporary. The problem with this type of representation, especially in children's literature, is that it presents the disabled figure as either a figure whose disability represents their entire identity or a figure who needs to be fixed in order to become a hero. In either case, the disability is not presented as a realistic element of the character's everyday life. While it is important to promote the representation of disability across a wide variety of genres and levels of fantasy, erasure of the realities of disability perpetuates "a world that exceptionalizes and objectifies [disabled people]" (Young, "I'm not your inspiration").

However, publications in the last couple of decades have slowly started to turn against these disability tropes. While these stories are still few in number, they present characters with disabilities just as dynamically and fully as able-bodied characters. One of the motivators of this change is the work of scholars in the field of disability studies. In order to properly contextualize Riordan's writing, I will now provide a bit of background on this field.

Disability studies is a relatively new, yet robust, area of study in academia. Since the inception of disability studies in the 1960s, scholars have begun to investigate the representation of disability in the arts. One of the primary models that emerged regarding this representation is the social model, which views disability primarily as a social construction. Rosemarie Garland-

Thomson, a leading social model disability scholar, states that “Disability studies challenge our collective representation of disability, exposing it as an exclusionary and oppressive system rather than the natural and appropriate order of things” (Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation,” 523). She then argues for “applying the vibrant logic of biodiversity to humans. Such a logic reimagines a public sphere that values and makes a tenable space for the kinds of bodies variously considered old, retarded, crippled, blind, deaf, abnormal, ugly, deformed, or excessive” (525). In other words, representation of disability should not focus on how to fix disabilities, but rather on how society can reform itself to fully include those with disabilities. This argument is one of the key aspects of the social model of disability studies.

While by 1999 the social model was universally preferred when approaching literature, recently there has been a call to create more nuance within that model to account for the economic, political, and medical hurdles that disabilities can present to individuals. Tobin Siebers, one of the foremost scholars on disability theory, presents a somewhat different approach to the social model; he draws ideas from the philosophical realists, who believe that “reality is socially produced” but “social reality, once made, takes on a shape, politics, and history that belong to the realm of human action” (Siebers “Disability Studies” 18). In other words, while the concept of disability is a social construct, that construct is still a significant element of everyday life for many people. Siebers argues that many disabilities cause real pain, and it is not useful to see these disabilities solely as constructs because it ignores the fact that the people with those illnesses are often actively pursuing a cure or a way to lessen the pain they feel on a daily basis.

Both Garland-Thomson and Siebers are focused on identity and the representation of identity. They acknowledge that disability comes in many forms, including physical, cognitive,

learning, and chronic illness. However, they primarily focus on physical disabilities and chronic illness. Neither writer spends very much time discussing cognitive or learning disabilities, despite them making up a large percentage of the population's disabilities. Furthermore, because they are concerned primarily with physical disabilities, both Garland-Thomson and Siebers focus on the visual representation of disabilities in the media but do not discuss as much the literary side of disability representation. However, while neither of these writers is focused exclusively on literature or learning disabilities, they do raise important questions that can be applied to literature, namely the issue of how disabilities should be portrayed. Both essays raise the question of disabilities as asset—should artists portray those with disabilities as differently-abled, or should they acknowledge the difficult reality that many people with disabilities face on a daily basis?

This raises the question for Rick Riordan's writing of whether his portrayal of disabled characters can be effective for his young readers in helping them build confidence and see themselves along a spectrum of human diversity. In this thesis, I will utilize the work of both Garland-Thomson and Siebers, while also drawing from other disability theorists, in order to describe the ways that Riordan's portrayal of LDs accounts for both the social construction of disability and the impairments that disabilities present to daily living. However, I will also utilize these theorists' writings to dissect Riordan's less radical portrayals of other disabilities, and how these portrayals are not only escapist, but can also deteriorate the image that society holds of these disabilities in general.

Much of the literary work within disability studies focuses on autobiography, memoir, and realistic fiction in general. Yet studying the intersection of disability studies with children's literature can be valuable, as children's books can be a powerful venue through which to educate

young readers about disability and to encourage social change. Scholars of children's literature, such as Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman, have observed that the didactic nature of children's books often results in children learning about the world around them, and how to interact with it, through the books that they read. Furthermore, children's books often revolve around themes of discovering one's unique identity and overcoming obstacles (themes that are also present in the heroic epic). By accurately portraying a character with a disability within the context of a children's fantasy book, authors like Riordan can utilize and subvert the expectation of these themes of identity formation and overcoming challenges in order to disrupt the societal rhetoric surrounding disability.

In this thesis, I will give an overview of Riordan's portrayal of disability within his various middle-grade fantasy series. First, I will trace the journey of Riordan' protagonist Percy throughout the series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians,* and more specifically *The Lightning Thief,* as Percy deals with both his learning disabilities and mythical challenges. By looking at Percy's journey in the context of disability studies, I will demonstrate how Riordan incorporates the challenges of ADHD and dyslexia into stories about Greek mythology, and why these side-by-side challenges of having a learning disability while fighting mythical monsters revolutionize the classical hero for young readers today. I will then juxtapose Percy with two other disabled characters from Riordan's books in order to further investigate the interaction between realism and fantasy. Through this juxtaposition, I will demonstrate how Riordan's lack of accuracy in these subsequent portrayals of disability can ultimately be a step backward for the representation of disability in literature. Ultimately, I argue that Riordan's varying portrayals of disabilities can act as a jumping-off point for conversations about disability in children's fantasy literature and

how the literary community can continue to utilize traditional heroic, fantastic, and mythic structures in order to bring awareness and justice to disabled communities.

Chapter 1: Percy Jackson, a New Kind of Hero

The first middle-grade book series that Riordan wrote, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, brings the myths of Ancient Greece to modern-day New York City. In order to help his son Haley feel better about his recent diagnoses, Riordan decided that the titular character Percy would likewise have ADHD and dyslexia. In reading further about the subject, and consulting his middle school students who also had ADHD, he decided that "Making Percy ADHD/dyslexic was my way of honoring the potential of all the kids I've known who have those conditions. It's not a bad thing to be different. Sometimes, it's the mark of being very, very talented" ("An Interview with Rick"). Riordan has been very open about the inspiration for his books, and frequently discusses in interviews how impressed he is with the creativity of his students who had ADHD and/or dyslexia because they have to approach problems in different ways. The concept that "it's not a bad thing to be different" is one of the core themes of Riordan's books; this theme drives the development of Percy as he comes to terms with his disabilities and uses them as a source of strength rather than shame, consequently dismantling stereotypes of ADHD and dyslexia as he becomes a hero.

The Heroic Epic in Riordan's Work

The premise of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series is straightforward: Greek gods are alive and well and living in modern-day America, which can lead to rather humorous encounters between the powerful deities and pop culture. Some of Riordan's changes to Greek literature are superficial: the war-god Ares drives a motorcycle instead of a chariot, and Medusa

owns a “Garden Gnome Emporium” where she sells the results of her victims as stone lawn ornaments. While sometimes silly, these changes bring humor and accessibility to the millennia-old myths. Riordan even opens his first novel with Percy addressing the reader directly, in an homage to the oral history of epic poems. However, Percy’s opening lines are not an invocation of a muse, or a rumination on the larger themes of the book, but rather a straightforward “warning” about the dangers of reading this book: “Look, I didn’t want to be a half-blood …. Being a half-blood is dangerous …. Most of the time it gets you killed in painful, nasty ways. If you’re a normal kid, reading this because you think it’s fiction, great. Read on …. But if you recognize yourself in these pages …. Stop reading immediately. You might be one of us” (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief,* 1). In modifying this convention of the epic to speak to his audience, Riordan immediately draws in his target audience: children who feel like outsiders, especially those with LDs. By implying that what they are about to read may in fact be real and that they could all be a part of it, Riordan directly invites his readers to not only enjoy the story, but to imagine themselves as its heroes. In this manner, Riordan fulfills his original goal: creating a story where his learning-disabled son and others like him could see themselves as the hero.

However, Riordan’s major contribution to the heroic epic genre goes beyond these small (and often amusing) aesthetic modifications. Because many of the problems that his heroes face are modern day issues, such as living with LDs in an unaccommodating school system, his contribution is filling the framework of mythology and the heroic epic with themes that are relevant to children today. Furthermore, the ways that Riordan’s heroes face challenges, both mortal and mythological, reflect the morals and values of many young people today. Even though Percy discovers that he has great magical powers due to his godly parentage, he wins his

most important battles through intelligence, creativity, and empathy, rather than through brute force or godly intervention. This reworks what it means to be a hero while dismantling harmful stereotypes about learning disabilities. Percy may have trouble focusing on homework, but through quick thinking he devises plans to get out of sticky situations. He struggles to memorize names and dates, but his understanding of people and what motivates them allows Percy to find peaceful resolutions to conflicts. By appropriating and subverting tropes of the heroic epic, while remaining accurate in his portrayal of ADHD and dyslexia, Riordan created a modern-day hero.

A Brief History of ADHD and Dyslexia

Dyslexia and ADHD are often comorbid conditions (meaning that they occur together in a person.) Both ADHD and dyslexia have been controversial diagnoses since they were first described. While doctors, educators, and parents have observed the symptoms of these learning disabilities for many years, they were both only officially recognized and defined within the past couple of decades. Even today, there are fierce debates as to whether ADHD and dyslexia truly exist, or whether they pathologize common childhood behavior. For the purposes of this thesis, though, I will treat ADHD and dyslexia as recognized disabilities.

It was not until 1987 that the APA released a revised version of the DSM-III that coined the term attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Even with this official title, though, there are still many critics of the concept of ADHD. Their issue with it predominantly lies in the fact that "the cardinal ADHD symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity are not unique to ADHD. In addition, there is a remarkable overlap of these ADHD symptoms with those of comorbid mental health conditions or learning problems" (Lange et al. 253). Furthermore, the symptoms of ADHD can also just be the signs of a particularly active child. Parents are wary of the pharmaceutical industry wanting to over-medicate their children. Because ADHD is a

diagnosis of symptoms, and no specific etiology has been found, the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD is an inexact science, which often leads to unclear educational and disability policies.

The history of dyslexia follows a remarkably similar history to that of ADHD. Research on dyslexia gained momentum in the early 20th century as ophthalmologist James Hinshelwood and general practitioner Pringle Morgan found that dyslexia is not always caused by illness or brain injury, as was previously expected. Both of their reports found that children with dyslexia appeared to be quite intelligent but struggled abnormally with reading "due not to any lowering of the visual acuity, but to some congenital deficiency of the visual memory for words" (Morgan qtd in Kirby). It was in the 1960s, when dyslexia research had become a big topic in medical communities, that some started to believe that dyslexia is not an actual medical condition, but rather "a pseudo-medical diagnosis used by middle-class parents to explain their children's poor performance in reading" (Kirby). The fact that the majority of dyslexia diagnoses were in middle-class children, and that part of the diagnosis required a discrepancy between reading level and IQ, spurred this idea that dyslexia is simply the result of a child's laziness when it comes to reading. The myth of dyslexia as a "pseudo-medical diagnosis" has endured to this day.

Much of the controversy surrounding ADHD and dyslexia is due to the fact that up until the late eighteenth century, there was not a need to diagnosis either of the conditions. It was not until literacy became more prevalent and a structured school day became the norm that the symptoms of ADHD and dyslexia became apparent. Therefore, while dyslexia and ADHD are recognized disabilities, they are also a kind of social construct. However, "While drawing attention to the cultural meanings around a condition like dyslexia is important, especially when looking at its history, it is also necessary to remember that such meanings refer, ultimately, to a group of people who struggle with a skill fundamental to life in contemporary society" (Kirby).

Therefore, in regards to this paper I will address both the social and the practical impacts of living with learning disabilities, considering that ADHD and dyslexia are both neurological conditions whose effects are magnified by the structure of modern society.

Riordan's depiction of ADHD and dyslexia become even more significant when one considers the history of these disabilities. While well-meaning, individuals who believe that ADHD and dyslexia are not true conditions have made the lived experiences of those with the disabilities that much more difficult. In addition to coping with the disability itself, students are often faced with the difficult task of proving to their teachers and parents that they truly have a disability and that their struggles in school are not simply due to laziness. Riordan's books thus bring much-needed visibility to the LD community.

The Visibility of ADHD and Dyslexia in The Lightning Thief

One of the foremost issues with the portrayal of learning and cognitive disabilities is the "invisibility of disability." As Brenda Jo Brueggemann poetically describes it, "Many of us "pass" for able-bodied—we appear before you unclearly marked, fuzzily apparent, our disabilities not hanging out all over the place. We are sitting next to you. No, we are you" (Brueggemann, 369). When people think of disability, they often think of the handicapped symbol—that of a person in a wheelchair. Yet much more common, though less noticeable, are learning disabilities.[2] The lack of books that portray LDs in a straightforward and consistent manner results in both a lack of characters with which children with LDs can identify, as well as a lack of opportunities to educate readers about LDs.

[2] According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the year 2015-2016, 13% of students ages 3-21 received special education and related services for a disability. Of that 13%, 34% of those students had a specific learning disability. ("Children and Youth with Disabilities").

In *The Lightning Thief*, Riordan immediately foregrounds Percy's learning disabilities, which makes it clear to the reader that despite the fact that this is a fantasy adventure novel, Percy's personal journey with dyslexia and ADHD will be of great importance as well. One of the distinctive characteristics of Riordan's writing is that he often delays describing a character's appearance; Percy's appearance is not mentioned until the third chapter of *The Lighting Thief,* when his mom states that he gets his black hair and green eyes from his father (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief,* 38). When he finally does describe a character's appearance, Riordan is somewhat of a minimalist; he will give each character two or three defining physical traits and then leave the rest to the reader's imagination (e.g. he only describes supporting character Silena Beauregard's appearance once, saying that she has blue eyes, despite her appearing in four of the five books in the *Percy Jackson* series).[3]

In contrast to how Riordan approaches the description of physical appearance, within the first few pages of *The Lightning Thief*, Riordan introduces Percy's struggles with dyslexia and ADHD: Percy laments that his Latin teacher Mr. Brunner expects him "to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact that I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I have never made above a C- in my life" (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief,* 7). By choosing not to focus on his characters' physical appearance, Riordan makes his other characterization choices, including Percy's learning disabilities, that much more prominent to the reader.

Garland-Thomson praises two *New York Times Magazine* covers that each portray women with physical disabilities for refusing "the traditional visual rhetorics that present

[3] It is interesting to note that Silena Beauregard is a demigod child of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality. Thus, in this particular example, by minimizing the description of the character's physical appearance, Riordan eschews the convention of defining female characters by their physical attractiveness. By linking Silena to Aphrodite but then giving no indication as to how conventionally attractive she is, Riordan causes the reader to question their expectations of beauty and forces them to focus on Silena's actions rather than her appearance.

disability as sentimental, inspirational, curable, shameful, or disposable" ("Disability and Representation," 526). Riordan likewise presents Percy's ADHD and dyslexia in a similar fashion, making disability visibility and honesty a priority in his novels. He does not shy away from stating outright the ways in which Percy has differing cognitive abilities from his classmates, and he references Percy's ADHD and dyslexia twenty-seven times within his first novel. Not all of these mentions are significant or involve Percy's disabilities being a detriment to him, but Riordan never lets the reader forget that this is still a big part of Percy's identity. Percy learns that his LDs are not something to be ashamed of, but they are a consistent presence in his life, sometimes helpful, sometimes a hindrance. It is not the disabilities themselves that make Percy an inspirational character to readers, but rather the way in which he learns to approach life with those disabilities in mind.

"What was so great about me?" Percy's Self-Esteem at the Beginning of the Series

By first establishing Percy not as a child with great magical powers, but rather as one who struggles in school, Riordan both places Percy at a point where he can begin a journey of personal growth, and presents him as an accurate representation of a student living with LDs. One of the biggest struggles that students with LDs face is not coping with the LD itself; rather, it is the frequent assumption by parents, educators, and classmates that doing poorly in school equates to being unintelligent or lazy. Disability studies scholar Brenda Jo Brueggemann summarizes:

> When people with LD describe their experiences in school, they describe abuse and humiliation. Someone who learns to read in the fourth grade is a slow learner, not someone who learned to read in the fourth grade. Someone who cannot spell is stupid, because spelling is a basic skill, universally acquired in elementary

> school—even though it quite evidently is not. Children are routinely told that they will "never amount to anybody," that they are limited, stupid, hopeless—in a word, "retarded." (Brueggemann 374)

Riordan forces the reader to immediately face what a person with LDs might face every day, as described by Brueggemann. Although Percy struggles to remember verb conjugations and is a slow reader, nothing within the first few pages suggests that Percy is unintelligent. In fact, Percy is one of the few students who takes an active interest in his Latin class, and tells his classmates to “shut up” and pay attention to their teacher (*The Lightning Thief*, 5). Yet except for his Latin teacher Mr. Brunner, all of Percy’s teachers equate his struggles in school to either a lack of intelligence or laziness. Near the end of his school term, Percy relates that, “when our English teacher, Mr. Nicoll, asked me for the millionth time why I was too lazy to study for spelling tests, I snapped” (*The Lightning Thief,* 17). By juxtaposing Percy’s thoughts with what Percy’s teachers say, Riordan challenges the notion that children with LDs are stupid.

In “Supporting Students with Dyslexia at the Secondary Level: An Emotional Model of Literacy” (2007), education and literacy researchers Louise Long, Sean MacBlain, and Martin MacBlain suggest that “teachers can contribute to enhancing students' self-confidence by conveying that they care for them in the teaching-learning transaction. More important, students need to feel that teachers care as they encourage them to learn” (Long et al. 131). Even if readers are unfamiliar with studies such as the ones quoted above, Riordan presents them with a clear model of how teachers should not act in the classroom. Instead of receiving aid and emotional support from his teachers, as the researchers suggest, Percy’s teachers berate him in front of his classmates, questioning why he does not score better on his tests. As quoted in the above paragraph, Percy’s teacher Mr. Nicoll believes a common misconception—that students with

dyslexia and/or ADHD are just being lazy and would improve if they worked harder. Although Mr. Nicoll is the one who verbally harasses Percy, it is Percy who is expelled from Yancy Academy when he finally "snaps" as a result of the abuse.

Riordan depicts both the outward and the inward effects of a school system that does not support students with LDs. Percy, through his experiences with his teachers, has learned to attribute his poor grades to a lack of intellect. He wants to do well in Mr. Brunner's Latin class, but believes that he is destined for failure due to his inability to read and to focus. Percy laments to his friend Grover that, "I just wish [Mr. Brunner would] lay off me sometimes. I mean, I'm not a genius" (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, 8). When Percy states that he is not a genius, it is clear that he too equates his LDs with being unintelligent. Yet the quote also implies that Mr. Brunner *does* believe Percy to be a "genius," calling into question Percy's reliability when it comes to his perception of himself. Riordan thus suggests to the reader that Mr. Brunner has seen past the conventional stereotypes of LDs where other teachers, and Percy himself, have not.

Due to the belief that he is unintelligent, Percy has low self-esteem in the beginning of the series, which is a common phenomenon in students with LDs. While there is still debate as to whether a diagnosis of dyslexia can be directly linked to overall lower self-esteem in children, a 2015 study on the secondary symptoms of dyslexia found that "children with dyslexia have a higher [general anxiety] and a lower self-esteem in the school setting compared to children without similar difficulties" (Novita 286). While it is troubling to know that students with LDs often struggle with anxiety and self-esteem issues, it can be constructive to depict these realities in literature. Accurate portrayal of disabilities can encourage systemic change in the school system so that children with LDs receive more support.

Riordan, in accordance with Novita's findings on self-esteem, illustrates that Percy has doubts about his worth when it comes to school. He has internalized the rhetoric he has heard about himself and believes that he is a bad kid because of his struggles in school. He wonders why his mother says that she is proud of him, because "What was so great about me? A dyslexic, hyperactive boy with a D+ report card, kicked out of school for the sixth time in six years" (*The Lightning Thief,* 38). Since Percy has already been expelled from several schools due to accidents he has caused, he must attend Yancy Academy, "a private school for troubled kids" (*The Lightning Thief,* 1). Percy's low self-esteem is made worse by the fact that because his ADHD and dyslexia have led him to do poorly in school, he must attend a school with students who "were juvenile delinquents, like me" (*The Lightning Thief,* 22). Percy considers himself to be a juvenile delinquent, despite the fact that he has never engaged in criminal acts or purposefully acted out. Percy does not recognize his own talents because he has not had an opportunity to flourish, nor does he recognize that doing poorly in school does not equate to poor moral standing.

Instead of starting the story with a hero full of confidence and power, such as Heracles or Achilles, Riordan begins his story with an ordinary boy who feels alone and helpless. Instead of inspiring awe in his readers, Riordan instead focuses on creating a protagonist who reflects the experiences that many of his readers have faced themselves, drawing them into the story in the process. As the story continues, Riordan demonstrates through multiple situations that Percy is in fact a quick learner and a clever strategist, which will be discussed below. Riordan thus dismantles the notion that struggling to read or an inability to focus on homework means that a student is fated to be unsuccessful in life. Furthermore, by initially depicting Percy as having low self-esteem, Riordan creates space for Percy to grow into a more confident person. In the

process, Riordan demonstrates to readers with LDs that even if they lack confidence now, they can learn to trust in themselves and their abilities.

Percy's First Battle

The first battle with a monster that Percy faces, which features one of his worst teachers, Mrs. Dodds, demonstrates that Percy's journey as a hero will involve fighting the stigma of his learning disabilities as well as fighting mythical monsters. In the beginning of *The Lightning Thief,* Percy feels powerless against the school system that has told him that he is too lazy and stupid to succeed in life. In fighting against his enemy, a cruel teacher who does not believe in him, Percy symbolically begins a journey of proving his worth to himself and to the rest of the world.

Mrs. Dodds is actually a Fury in disguise, and she has come to kill Percy. In Greek mythology the Furies, or the Erinyes, are three sister goddesses whose task is to "take vengeance on men, whosoever hath sworn a false oath" (Homer 19.259–260). They appear prominently in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and other tales of Orestes. In Riordan's world, the Furies are more generally the torturers of Hades and have dominion over the Fields of Punishment. However, the true monstrosity of Mrs. Dodds lies not in the fact that she is secretly a hag-like woman with bat wings, but rather in the fact that during the time that she is disguised as a math teacher, she is unnecessarily cruel to Percy and his classmates. Percy describes Mrs. Dodds as "this little math teacher from Georgia who …. looked mean enough to ride a Harley right into your locker" and who "figured I was devil spawn" (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, 4). When the Fury attacks Percy in the first chapter, he has no knowledge that the world of Greek myth is real, and therefore it appears that his worst nightmare has come true: one of Percy's teachers has turned into a literal monster and is trying to kill him. Mr. Brunner aids Percy in his battle by tossing Percy a sword,

and Percy uses that sword to kill the Fury. Percy's first victory in battle is destroying a teacher who has made his life miserable, which foreshadows the journey that he is about to undertake in becoming a hero.

The Othering of Percy

However, Percy does not immediately enter the world of heroes after his battle with the Fury. Due to the magical Mist that prevents mortals from seeing the monsters and gods around them, everyone at Percy's school is tricked into thinking that Mrs. Dodds never existed. Even Mr. Brunner, a witness to Percy's battle, denies Mrs. Dodd's existence and questions if Percy is "feeling [alright]" (*The Lightning Thief,* 15). In his last few months at school, Percy's struggles with his schoolwork and his struggles with entering into the Greek world parallel each other. Just as his teachers deny that he needs help and believe that he is just being lazy and irresponsible, so too do they and his classmates believe that he is going crazy and hallucinating the demon that attacked him. Neither are true, but Percy begins to believe both of them as his classmates and teachers' comments wear him down day by day. Percy is the only one who seems to remember the battle against his former math teacher, and he begins to question his own sanity: "this twenty-four/seven hallucination was more than I could handle …. at night, visions of Mrs. Dodds with talons and leathery wings would wake me up in a cold sweat" (*The Lightning Thief*, pp. 16–17). Distracted by these thoughts, Percy's ADHD becomes worse; his grades further decline, leading to his expulsion.

Mr. Brunner, who until this point has shown signs of being a mentor figure to Percy due to his encouragement of Percy and his willingness to see past the stereotypes of LDs, contributes to Percy's negative thoughts and his unwillingness to enter the Greek world. Mr. Brunner is actually the famous teacher of Greek heroes, the centaur Chiron in disguise, and he has been

watching over Percy during the school year. However, despite the fact that Mr. Brunner/Chiron aids Percy in his battle with the Fury, he unintentionally delays his role as Percy's mentor by bringing up the concept of normality, consequently humiliating Percy and seemingly breaking off their previously positive relationship. After his final Latin exam, Brunner pulls Percy aside and tells him that it is for the best that he is leaving Yancy, because "this isn't the right place for you. It was only a matter of time" (*The Lightning Thief,* 21). Percy immediately becomes distraught, thinking to himself that "after saying he believed in me all year, now [Mr. Brunner] was telling me I was destined to get kicked out" (*The Lightning Thief,* 22). Seeing that Percy has become distraught during their conversation, Brunner then goes on to say "you're not normal, Percy. That's nothing to be—" at which point Percy cuts him off and runs away (22). By intentionally denying Percy's encounter with the Fury and then questioning Percy's normality, Brunner ostracizes his student instead of supporting him.

The concept of normality is prominent in the field of disability studies. Disability scholar Linda Feldmeier White emphasizes that "disability is more than impairment; disability is what society makes of that impairment in constructing 'disability' as the opposite of something thereby recognized as 'normality,' part of a structure that privileges some and oppresses others" (White pp. 372-373). When Brunner states that Percy is not normal, he places Percy in the category of the "other," suggesting that he cannot fit into society because of his disabilities. Even though it is implied that Brunner was going to say that not being normal is nothing to be ashamed of, in the context in which they are speaking it is clear that society's expectation of normality has led Percy to his current state: expelled from school and ashamed of who he is. While Riordan later reveals that what Brunner was referring to was the fact that Percy is a demigod and therefore belongs at Camp Half-Blood, to Percy it sounds like the only educator

who has ever supported him is now turning on him. Once again, Percy's identity as a demigod and as a student with ADHD and dyslexia intermingle, and this intermingling leads him to have even greater self-doubt.

By the end of the second chapter, Riordan has situated Percy at the lowest point of his life thus far. Percy has been expelled from school for the sixth time, has lost the support of his favorite teacher, and believes himself to be a failure. Furthermore, he now fears for his life and his sanity after being attacked by a Fury. At this point, Percy is poised to begin his journey of growth. By invoking tropes of the heroic epic while simultaneously depicting Percy's school experiences in a realistic manner in the first few chapters, Riordan establishes *The Lightning Thief* as a radical new kind of heroic epic—one in which Percy gaining confidence in himself and learning how to live with his disabilities is essential to him becoming a hero.

Reframing ADHD and Dyslexia

In Greek epics and mythology, the hero always has a remarkable attribute that sets them apart from ordinary mortals—Heracles has his strength, Achilles his invulnerability, Odysseus his intellect, and Orpheus his musical talents. Riordan therefore subverts a convention of the heroic epic by normalizing Percy within the context of Camp Half-Blood instead of distinguishing him with unusual qualities. Percy does eventually discover that he has incredible power over water due to his father Poseidon. However, when he first arrives at Camp Half-Blood, a place for demigods to live and train in safety, the first thing Percy learns is that he is actually normal among demigods. Annabeth, another demigod at Camp Half-Blood, explains to Percy that almost all demigods have ADHD and dyslexia, and within their community these disabilities can actually be helpful:

> "The letters float off the page when you read, right? That's because your mind is hardwired for Ancient Greek. And the ADHD—you're impulsive, can't sit still in the classroom. That's your battlefield reflexes. In a real fight, they'd keep you alive. As for the attention problems, that's because you see too much, Percy, not too little. Your senses are better than a regular mortal's." ….
>
> "You sound like … you went through the same thing?"
>
> "Most of the kids here did." (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief,* 88)

Eventually, Percy will come to accept that his unique qualities are nothing to be ashamed of, but for the moment he needs to feel a sense of commonality in order to have the confidence to move forward in his adventure. Percy is not weird or looked down upon for struggling to read, and he is not going to get kicked out of Camp Half-Blood for failing to complete his homework on time. Within the world that he has created, Riordan redefines what normalcy is, an important step in achieving justice for those with disabilities according to the social model.

With regard to the concept of normalcy and acceptance, Garland-Thomson asks, "What would happen if our society fully recognized and validated human variation?" ("Disability and Representation," 525). Riordan answers her question with Camp Half-Blood, a place that embraces the cognitive variation that demigods possess. Instead of being forced to learn within an environment that is not suited for him, Percy spends his days reading Homer (in the original Greek) and doing a variety of outdoor activities, such as canoeing and sword-fighting, in which he excels. For the first time in his life, Percy is not only normal, but also successful.

By demonstrating to the reader the true potential that Percy has, Riordan poses the question of how society can reframe itself in order to better include those with LDs. A popular saying goes, "Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will

live its whole life believing that it is stupid." This quote is typically used in regard to the education system to point out the need for diverse teaching practices, but it also easily sums up the issue that the social construction model sees with society today: society does not allow those with disabilities to thrive due to the restrictions placed on them because of their disabilities. Thus, Riordan utilizes the heroic fantasy setting of his novel in order to call into question the societal norms that create or aggravate the struggles of living with a disability.

Balancing the Portrayal of Disability in Fantasy

The social model is the most commonly accepted model of disability studies today, and I use it extensively in this research. However, the social model is not without its drawbacks, and I will address those concerns here. The most common critique of the social model is that it often overlooks the frequently harsh day-to-day realities of a person living with a disability. Garland-Thomson points out in her essay "Disability and Representation" that the artists Monet and Close were forced to change their artistic styles after developing disabilities late in life, but the forced change led to artistic evolution, which contributed to them being seen as great artists. In other words, their disabilities had a positive impact on their art (524). However, what she does not mention is that while Monet's blindness led to a new artistic style, it also probably had repercussions on how he was able to live his daily life. Siebers takes issue with the social model because, "strong constructionism either fails to account for the difficult physical realities faced by people with disabilities or presents their body in ways that are conventional, conformist, and unrecognizable to them …. The challenge is not to adapt …. disability into an extraordinary power or an alternative image of ability. The challenge is to function" (Siebers, "Disability in Theory," pp. 740, 750). For this reason, Siebers would most likely take issue with the fact that Garland-Thomson only addresses the positive results of disability and does not acknowledge the

challenging realities that disabilities present. This one-sided view of disability becomes especially prevalent in fantasy and sci-fi literature, where a disabled character is granted a magical power or item of technology that renders their disability not only irrelevant, but transform it from a disability into a superpower.[4]

In order to avoid this one-sided portrayal in literature, an author most show all elements of a disability, and that is where Garland-Thomson falls short in her article "Disability and Representation" by only focusing on the ways that disability improved Monet and Close's artwork. However, portraying disabilities realistically, as Siebers' encourages, does not mean that one cannot have a character in a fantasy story who is both disabled and has a magical power. What it does mean is that the author in question must do their research on the disability and be careful not to "cure" their character's disability through the use of magic, or portray the character as inspirational simply because they have a disability.

Riordan walks this line well in the *Percy Jackson* series. Even though Percy learns that he does not have to be ashamed of his LDs, and is able to use them to his advantage in battle, his disabilities are never "cured" through magic. Many times throughout *The Lightning Thief,* Riordan mentions demigods struggling to read, such as when they come across Medusa's lair:

> The neon sign above the gate was impossible for me to read, because if there's anything worse for my dyslexia than regular English, it's red cursive neon English. To me, it looked like: ATNYU MES GDERAN GOMEN MEPROUIM.
>
> 'What the heck does that say?' I asked.
>
> 'I don't know,' Annabeth said.

[4] Characters who fit into this stereotype are the Marvel superhero Daredevil and Mad-Eye Moody from the *Harry Potter* series.

> She loved reading so much, I'd forgotten she was dyslexic, too. (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, 171).[5]

In this quote, Riordan acknowledges the difficulty of a person with dyslexia reading something like cursive. Through Annabeth, he also subverts the stereotype that someone who has dyslexia will never be a good reader or enjoy reading.

In later novels, even though Percy has been learning how to live with his LDs and is improving in school, he still shows symptoms of ADHD and dyslexia. As events lead up to Percy's final confrontation with the main villain of the series, Kronos, he is tasked with going through reports for Chiron (Mr. Brunner) detailing monster activity across the country, but his ADHD makes it difficult to concentrate. "I tried to skim through Chiron's stack of reports as we walked …. [but] they were pretty depressing, and my ADHD brain did *not* like concentrating on depressing stuff" (Riordan, *The Last Olympian*, 68). Even though Percy's ADHD and dyslexia do help him in certain situations, most of the time his disabilities do not aid him in any sort of magical way, and Riordan does not shy away from portraying the realities of dealing with LDs on a daily basis. At the same time, Riordan does not portray Percy as an inspiration to readers *because* he has disabilities. It is not the fact that Percy is living with disabilities that makes him a hero. Rather, he is a hero because of many different aspects of his life, including his quick thinking, his empathy, his selflessness, his persistence, and yes, the fact that he decides to persevere in school despite having ADHD and dyslexia. In other words, disability is just one

[5] Note that when Riordan describes Percy having difficulty reading, Percy often describes the experience as the letters being jumbled up. Dyslexia can have many different effects on readers; words and letters can appear in different ways depending on the individual—letters can be flipped, blurry, wavy, or constantly move around. Most likely for the sake of simplicity, Riordan represents dyslexia as seen in the quote above because that is the easiest way to show a non-dyslexic person in print what dyslexia looks like.

aspect of Percy's identity, which is a divergence from many other portrayals of disability in literature that frames disability as an all-consuming element of an individual's life.

Subverting the Portrayal of Disability in Ancient Greek Literature

By countering the traditional portrayal of disability, Riordan breaks boundaries and ushers the representation of disability into the modern world. In Greek myth and epic, figures with disabilities often appear only as supporting characters, or the disability appears as a metaphorical punishment. Tiresias, one of the characters from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, is an elderly blind man who holds the gift of prophecy in exchange for his physical sight. His only role is to warn Oedipus of his metaphorical short-sightedness, because Oedipus does not realize that he is the subject of the play's prophecy. Later in the play, Oedipus gouges out his eyes in penance for not heeding Tiresias' advice. Furthermore, Oedipus walks with a limp because his parents pierced and bound his feet at birth in order to avoid a prophecy. His swollen feet are both a key to discovering his identity and a symbol of the idea that Oedipus has been marked for tragedy since birth. However, beyond the actor shuffling onstage, Sophocles never mentions that Oedipus' limp impairs him (he is even able to slay an entire group of people on the road.) Sophocles utilizes disability exclusively as a symbol in his play, instead of portraying it as an actual element of daily life.

Homer also features physical disabilities in The *Iliad* and The *Odyssey* in metaphorical ways for supporting characters. Thersistes, "the ugliest man who ever came to Troy," has several physical deformities which symbolize his repulsive personality (Homer 2.250). He questions the way that Agamemnon runs his camp, for which Odysseus brutally attacks him, to the great amusement of his fellow soldiers. This is the only scene in which Thersistes appears, and it is

clear that his chief role is to serve as a comic fool; his questions for Agamemnon seem justified, but his disturbing appearance bars him from being taken seriously by the Greeks.

In contrast, even when Odysseus is an old man who is battle-weary and scarred from both the Trojan war and his journey home, he is still the only man strong enough to string his bow, proving that he is worthier than any of the suitors who have invaded his home. In these characters, and many more, one can see that ancient Greek literature does not allow a hero to have a disability. Heroes possess strength and intellect no matter their age, and disability appears solely as a symbol of a larger metaphorical concept. This trend relates to the pervasive patriarchal system that existed in Ancient Greek society, which highly valued the masculine-associated traits of physical strength and mental prowess.

Even Homer himself falls victim to the symbolic portrayal of disability. While there is still no evidence as to who exactly Homer was (or if he even existed at all) one trait that has been associated with him throughout the centuries is blindness. The "blind bard" as he is often called, is seen as being that much more of a legendary writer due to his blindness. Like Tiresias, Homer's lack of physical sight supposedly gave him a greater ability to see the truth and the divine.

The trend of portraying disability as a symbol rather than a realistic attribute has, unfortunately, continued for many centuries since Homer wrote his works. Garland-Thomson argues that "because disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens the experience real people have of their own or others' disabilities" (*Extraordinary Bodies,* 10). Garland-Thomson is correct that the representation of disability in literature is often one-dimensional; while the statistics are improving, there are still only a handful of realistically-portrayed disabled

characters in literature today (Leininger 587). Garland-Thomson's observation that there are few mitigating narratives to counter these representations adds significance to the fact that Rick Riordan subverts this portrayal of disability by creating a hero who has ADHD and dyslexia but whose entire identity is not defined by those disabilities and whose disabilities are not symbolic of any larger theme.

Percy as a Hero

The most significant way that Riordan adapts and subverts the Greek epic, as well as the stereotypes of LDs, is the values that his heroes reflect. One of the most prominent conventions of the epic hero is that the hero reflects the values of the society in which they live (Lawrence 18). The values of Greek society can be seen in their heroes: heightened physical ability, prowess in battle, divine or royal heritage, and an ability to lead. All of these traits can be seen in Theseus, Achilles, Heracles, Jason, Perseus, and many other Greek heroes (notably, the only female hero among this group is Atalanta.) While Percy Jackson reflects these traits as well, they are not the traits that Riordan focuses on when it comes to what makes Percy a hero. When Percy achieves victory, it is through his creativity, empathy, and ability to improvise and persist in the face of hardship, which are values held by the younger generations of Western society.

One of the biggest stereotypes of LDs, as mentioned earlier, is that having an LD equates to being unintelligent. While Percy might not be conventionally book-smart, throughout the series he displays an ability to create complex plans and quickly make connections. At the climax of *The Lightning Thief*, Percy must battle the war god Ares. His ADHD causes him to be "wide awake, noticing every little detail" and he realizes that he cannot beat the god in strength or technique. But Ares is reckless and arrogant, so Percy uses that to his advantage: he steps into

the ocean and holds back the power of the waves, pretending to be too exhausted to continue fighting. When Ares is almost on top of him:

> I released the tide and jumped, rocketing straight over Ares on a wave. A six-foot wall of water smashed him full in the face …. He turned in time to raise his sword, but this time he was disoriented, he didn't anticipate the trick. I changed direction, lunged to the side, and stabbed Riptide straight down into the water, sending the point through the god's heel. (Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, pp 329-330)

During the battle, Percy demonstrates the ability to think on his feet and assess the situation. Partially he is able to do so because of his ADHD-heightened battle reflexes, but it is through his own reasoning that he is able to figure out the best way to trick Ares. In this scene, as well as many others, Riordan undermines the stereotype that children with ADHD and dyslexia are less intelligent than their peers.

As Percy grows up, he becomes an even better strategist, demonstrating his ability to learn and use what he learns to his advantage. In the final battle with Kronos, Percy directs an army of half-bloods to defend New York. He assigns them to various parts of the city based on where their godly talents can be best utilized, such as when he decides to "take care of the boats" loaded with enemy troops and instructs the children of Demeter to guard "the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. Grow thorn bushes and poison ivy in the tunnel. Do whatever you have to do, but keep them out of there!" (Riordan, *The Last Olympian*, 169). Percy has knowledge not only of his own abilities, but also the abilities of others, and he uses that knowledge to strategically defend Manhattan, once again pushing against the stereotypes of ADHD.

Another common stereotype of children with ADHD that Riordan dismantles is that having ADHD directly correlates to having a lack of empathy for others (Marton et al. 114). It is

true that ADHD can sometimes appear as narcissism, but ADHD does not actually impair the area of the brain that deals with empathy. Often, an apparent lack of empathy is tied to distraction, a lack of social skills, or "an inability to manage frustration, impatience, or anger" (Barkley). Percy does struggle to control his temper at many points throughout the series. When his friend Annabeth goes missing, he rails against Camp Half-Blood's director Dionysus (the god of wine) for failing to help the search effort, even though, "in the back of my mind, I knew Mr. D was not somebody to mess with. Even if you were an impulsive ADHD kid like me, he wouldn't give you any slack. But I was so angry I didn't care" (Riordan, *The Titan's Curse*, 61). Furthermore, Percy and Annabeth frequently get into arguments due to their impatience with each other. Riordan does not deny that some people with ADHD have trouble controlling their emotions in a way that society expects, or that can hinder relationships. However, Percy also displays empathy, thoughtfulness, and selflessness in crucial moments. He frequently is willing to sacrifice himself to save others, such as when he is fighting the titan Atlas and realizes that "I couldn't hope to beat Atlas. But there was someone else who might stand a chance" (Riordan, *The Titan's Curse,* 268). He volunteers to hold up the sky for the goddess Artemis so that she can fight Atlas, knowing that he will likely be crushed to death by its weight. In this moment, Percy is completely willing to sacrifice himself to save his friends and the world.

The most important moment of selflessness that Percy displays, though, and the moment that sets him apart from other Greek heroes, is when he refuses the gift of immortality. Many traditional Greek heroes seek immortality, glory, and power in their quests: Heracles performs his twelve labors in order to be absolved of his sins and to become a god; Jason seeks the Golden Fleece in order to win back his throne; Achilles chooses to fight in the Trojan war and die gloriously in battle rather than live a long and uneventful life. While each of these heroes save

the lives of people in the process of accomplishing their goals, and reflect the Greek ideal of glory, their motives are essentially selfish and shortsighted.

Percy, as a representative of the values that are taught to many children today, chooses generosity over power. In doing so he also defies the stereotype that children with ADHD are selfish (Sinfield). Even though Percy has felt bitterness toward his father Poseidon and the other gods, he chooses to put aside his anger and help the gods in order to save the world rather than accept power from Kronos. After Percy defeats Kronos, Zeus offers Percy "one gift from the gods …. Perseus Jackson—if you wish it—shall be made a god" (Riordan, *The Last Olympian*, pp. 350-351). Percy only considers the offer for a moment before rejecting immortality in favor of a much more impactful gift. He knows that "Kronos couldn't have risen if it hadn't been for a lot of demigods who felt abandoned by their parents …. They felt angry, resentful, unloved, and they had a good reason" (353). Thus, for his gift Percy requests that the children of the gods be acknowledged and that the minor gods and peaceful titans who supported Kronos be given amnesty and a voice on Olympus. Percy uses his experiences in a constructive manner in order to ensure that others will not feel ignored and alone as he did. Furthermore, he chooses to forgive the minor gods and titans who fought against him because he understands how they felt mistreated. In rejecting immortality and devising a plan to create a more peaceful and caring community, Percy demonstrates empathy, thoughtfulness, and selflessness. Percy, like the Greek heroes before him, reflects the traits that modern society wishes to instill in its citizens. By revising these heroic traits, Riordan modernizes the Greek hero by breaking down stereotypes of LDs.

The Radical Impact of Percy

Garland-Thomson urges writers to portray disability in a realistic, non-symbolic manner, yet she also foresees that because literature has historically taken advantage of the stereotypes of disability in order to strengthen their metaphors, "if disabled characters acted, as real people with disabilities often do, to counter their stigmatized status, the rhetorical potency of the stigma would be mitigated or lost" (*Extraordinary Bodies,* 12). Yet Riordan's writing is compelling not just in spite of, but *because* of his resistance to portraying disability in a stigmatized manner. He avoids the audience rejection response by renovating and updating the heroic epic, creating a fantasy world that embraces the realities of disability. This radical restructuring of society in which someone with LDs is not only normal, but also a hero, defies the societal assumptions that a diagnosis of ADHD or dyslexia means the end of a person's potential. Riordan's books are therefore a crucial turning point for the heroic epic and children's literature, because his subversion of the traditional depiction of disability in literature subverts the view of disability in general.

Chapter 2: Hearthstone, Walt, and Other Depictions of Disability in Riordan's Novels

Since the publication of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, one of the notable qualities of Riordan's books has been that he has increasingly portrayed a variety of characters with differing races, gender identities, sexualities, religions, and abilities. Riordan has received pushback from both liberals and conservatives in the process. From conservatives, the reaction has mainly been concerning "Rick Riordan turning a middle grade fantasy series into a piece of liberal propaganda" (Deck). From liberals, there has been greater concern over whether Riordan is portraying these characters in an accurate manner. Most of them focus on the genderfluid and Muslim characters in Riordan's novels, but an important element that should not be overlooked

is the portrayal of characters who have disabilities other than ADHD and dyslexia. While Riordan had a lot of personal experience with learning disabilities, he does not have experience with deafness or terminal illness. This is not to say that an author cannot write about experiences that they themselves have not personally experienced; however, it does require a great deal more effort on their part to portray that experience accurately. In the books following *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Riordan's portrayal of disability is sometimes hit-and-miss. In some areas, Riordan continues to create radical fantasy worlds that incorporate disability into the world itself and disrupt the social norms that surround disability. At other times, though, Riordan's portrayal of disability moves away from the social model and the importance of accuracy. When this occurs, Riordan's writing becomes escapist rather than radical, and results in the perpetuation of the invisibility and harmful stereotypes of disability instead.

In this chapter, I will give an overview of two of the other disabled characters in Riordan's novels: Hearthstone from *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* and Walt Stone from *The Kane Chronicles.* Through these characters, I will investigate how Riordan continues to utilize mythology to incorporate disability into his writing, and the ways in which fantasy writing can become escapist instead of radical due to a lack of research and experience with disabilities.

Hearthstone and the Maturation of Riordan's Writing

As Riordan's target audience has grown older, the topics that he addresses in his books have become more mature as well. For example, in *The Lightning Thief* Riordan implies that Percy's stepfather Gabe Ugliano verbally and physically abuses him and his mother. The full impact of this abuse is never explored, though, and Riordan resolves the issue of Gabe in a lighthearted (if somewhat macabre) manner by Percy's mother turning him to stone with Medusa's head. However, by the time he wrote the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series

a decade later, Riordan's target audience was closer to high school age than middle school age. This is partially due to the original readers maturing (I myself starting reading *Percy Jackson* when I was in fifth grade, and the first *Magnus Chase* book came out in my freshman year of college). However, many authors are also realizing that kids are perhaps ready to be exposed to tougher issues at an earlier age, if those issues are presented in a thoughtful manner. Thus, Riordan retains many of the same themes in his books but delves into them in more detail, bringing a greater level of maturity to his writing.

Riordan returns to the topic of parental abuse in *Magnus Chase*. Hearthstone (or simply "Hearth"), one of the main characters of Magnus Chase, is an elf from the world of Alfheim who also has complete congenital hearing loss.[6] The elves in Alfheim are obsessed with perfection, and Hearth's parents therefore rejected him due to the fact that his hearing "isn't perfect" in their view (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer*, 254). This rejection turns into outright abuse after Hearth's brother dies, as his parents blame Hearth for his death. Hearth's backstory with his parents, and his subsequent confrontation with his past, forms a major plotline of the Magnus Chase trilogy. Even though the trilogy technically centers around Magnus's point of view, and Riordan frames him as the protagonist, Hearth arguably has the most significant character development and plot arc. Like Percy Jackson, the story that Hearth follows is a journey to become a hero as well as to confront the stigma surrounding his disability. While Hearth came to terms with his deafness long ago, he must overcome his father's criticism and accept his brother's death in order to become a great magician.

Riordan's Portrayal of Deafness

[6] Note that in the United States, there is a difference between a person being deaf (as in medically deaf) and being Deaf, which refers to being a part of the community of deaf, hard-of-hearing, and ASL-using people in the US. Riordan never goes into the difference between "deaf" and "Deaf," because there is no supportive community for the deaf in Alfheim. However, I will be employing both terms throughout this paper when they are relevant.

> Riordan has stated that he was inspired to make Hearth deaf because:
>
> Years ago, I worked at a summer camp (like Camp Half-Blood, but mortal) and one of our counselors was training in American Sign Language. She used to translate the lyrics of songs in sign language and I was struck by what a beautiful way of communicating ASL was. I liked the idea of making Hearth a powerful character who was also hearing impaired. (Riordan qtd. In Potter)

In a similar manner to how he portrayed Percy's experiences with ADHD and dyslexia, Riordan often discusses the realities of being a deaf person in a hearing world. Even though Hearth's friends all learn ASL (that's "Alfheim Sign Language" in the series), there are still moments where they lose track of what Hearth is trying to say, especially when he signs "quickly" or "with annoyance" (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor,* 68). Riordan also makes note of certain situations that would be a hindrance to a deaf person that would not bother hearing people. Magnus realizes that taking a deaf person's hands can be quite a rude gesture, even when done with a caring intent, because "it was the ASL equivalent of putting a gag on someone's mouth" (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor*, 106).

Furthermore, while Hearth is very good at reading lips, Riordan points out that, "lip reading a single person [is] hard enough. Trying to read an entire room [is] nearly impossible" (Riordan, *The Ship of the Dead,* 93). While the difficulty of keeping track of a conversation solely through lip reading might seem evident to some readers, lip reading is often portrayed as a sort of infallible super power in many novels that feature deaf characters. A study of deaf characters in modern romance novels found that, "Across the sub-genres of Romance, almost all deaf characters could lip-read with ease and have no problem communicating with a wide range of people and often all day" despite the fact that "lip-reading is as demanding as playing a fast-

paced video game" (McVane). While a middle-grade fantasy novel and a romance novel are two very different things, McVane's finding demonstrates that deaf individuals are often assumed to have perfect and effortless lip-reading abilities.

Beyond describing the day-to-day practicalities of Hearth's experience, Riordan also gives a portrait of ASL as a language. Instead of simply translating Hearth's ASL directly into dialogue, Riordan often chooses to describe Hearth's signs and the overall message they convey, since sign language rarely has a one-to-one translation with English sentences. By intermingling translation with a description of Hearth's signs, Riordan ensures that Hearth's deafness never falls by the wayside during the story. Furthermore, in describing Hearth's signing, Riordan educates the reader on the nuances of ASL (and the beauty of it). Magnus explains that ASL signs often have multiple meanings, which can lead to greater complexity in simple statements than a non-ASL-speaking person might assume. For example, when about to face a dragon, Magnus and Hearth come across a dead deer: "*Eaten,* Hearth signed, putting his closed fingertips under his mouth. The sign was very similar to *hoard/treasure*" (Riordan, *The Ship of the Dead,* 208). By associating the two signs in the moments before coming face to face with a dragon, Riordan heightens the suspense for the readers while also educating them on how signs interact.

Hearth's friends take his condition in stride; the only friend who does not learn ASL is Jack, a magical talking sword who claims that because he does not have eyes to see Hearth's signs, and he does not have lips for Hearth to read, their communication must therefore be impossible. This conflict is utilized for humor more than anything else, and Hearth's friends always translate Jack's words into ASL for him. However, Magnus often reflects to himself that Jack could put in more of an effort to learn a way to communicate with Hearth.

In addition to Jack, Hearth encounters a few other characters who refuse to learn ASL; some of these characters are villainous, while others are shortsighted and self-centered. Thor, while technically an ally of Hearth, pretends to know sign language and effectively ignores everything that Hearth says in this way. Thus, moments such as the following occur:

> "I was ready to go to Geirrod's fortress myself, but I'm very glad you volunteered to go for me!" [Thor said].
>
> "*We did?"* Hearthstone asked.
>
> "That's the spirit, Mr. Elf! I'm glad you are ready to die for my cause!"
>
> "*Really not"* Hearth signed. (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer*, 366)

While Thor's behavior is humorous, Riordan also demonstrates through this dialogue the ease with which a hearing person can dismiss someone who is hard of hearing. It would be reasonable for Thor to not understand ASL, but Thor takes advantage of Heath's deafness by pretending to know ASL and therefore using Hearth's signing at his convenience. In contrast, when Hearth and another character, Alex Fierro, become friends, Alex quickly realizes that she should learn some ASL so that she and Hearth can fully communicate with each other. Hearth does not expect every person he meets to know ASL, but he does expect respect for the different method with which he communicates, and Hearth's friends show themselves to be allies by making the effort to learn ASL and trying to be aware of their privilege when talking with Hearth. Magnus and the rest of Hearth's friends attempt to sign while speaking whenever possible, and when they cannot sign they try to enunciate clearly so that Hearth can more easily read their lips. The only time Magnus ever gets frustrated with Hearth's deafness is when they are in a dangerous situation and Hearth cannot hear his name being called; in these moments,

though, Magnus does not blame Hearth, but instead makes the effort to make sure that Hearth gets the message in another way.

Riordan portrays the difficulties of deafness in an accurate manner, but he also accurately portrays the potential situational benefits of it as well. At the end of the first book in the series, Magnus and his team must stop the monstrous wolf Fenris from breaking free of his bonds and starting Ragnarok. Fenris has great persuasive abilities, though, and soon the entire team is under his power except for Hearth, who cannot hear his words. What would normally be a hindrance to Hearth becomes a great asset, as Hearth is able to take action against Fenris and save his friends due to his immunity to Fenris' words. In moments like this one, Riordan frames deafness in a similar way that he frames Percy's ADHD and dyslexia: sometimes it is helpful, sometimes it's a hindrance, and most of the time it is just simply a part of who Hearth is.

Realism in a Fantasy World

Riordan's portrayal of deafness goes beyond moments where he is directly describing Hearth's actions, which makes for a story that not only includes a deaf character, but also embodies a deaf worldview. There is a particular trait of Riordan's writing in the *Magnus Chase* series, which does not appear in any of his other books: even when a character is not speaking ASL, Riordan still often describes their gestures as they talk. For example, Magnus notes that, "Samirah raised her index finger like, *One moment*" (Riordan, *The Hammer of Thor,* 370). Even though Magnus is the narrator, not Hearth, it is clear that Magnus has spent enough time with Hearth that he has started to see the world as Hearth does. Much like how Percy's narration often gets distracted due to his ADHD, Magnus's narration notices people's gestures and expressions more than the average hearing person would. This detail of Riordan's writing furthers the realism of his characters.

The need for realism in fantasy might seem odd at first glance. Indeed, many critics argue that Riordan should keep politics and social issues out of his novels. However, Riordan's portrayal of a deaf character as one of the heroes of the Norse world is significant for the same reason that his inclusion of a dyslexic character, a genderfluid character, and a Cherokee character is significant. Riordan does not simply include these people in his world; he creates a space that incorporates their unique identities into the worlds themselves. Instead of being "measured simply by how well [they] assimilate" into the world, the characters enter a world that accepts and even reflects their experiences (Cohen 56). Alex, a genderfluid character who is also a child of Loki, utilizes her inherited magical shape-shifting abilities and her valuing of change and flexibility to defeat Loki. Piper, the daughter of Aphrodite and a Cherokee man, invokes her knowledge of traditional Cherokee stories and myths to fight Greek monsters and save her friends. In these cases, and more, Riordan does not frame his characters as the "other," outsiders in a world that does not belong to them. Instead, they are part of a group of individuals who each have unique identities and whose identities shape the world around them. Hearth's deafness, Percy's dyslexia, Alex's gender identity, and Piper's Cherokee heritage are not the focuses of their stories, but instead are an integral part of both their identities and the worlds in which they live. It is for this reason that Riordan's fantasy worlds are radical: they propose a space in which people's differences are not stigmatized, but rather integrated and even utilized.

When it comes to the representation of disability specifically, Riordan takes a significant step in choosing not to pathologize Hearth's deafness. In this aspect of Riordan's portrayal of Hearth, one can see how Riordan promotes the social construction model of disability studies. For most of the history of disability studies, there has been a conflict between the medical model and the social construction model. The difference between the two is that:

> The medical model situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective. Social constructionism makes it possible to see disability as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than medicine. (Siebers, "Disability in Theory," 738)

Riordan rejects the medical model in his novels. At one point, Hearth even outright rejects the offer to have his hearing magically restored to him. He has lived as a deaf person for his whole life, and to lose that would be to lose an intrinsic part of his identity that does not need to be fixed. His deafness is not pathologized by any character other than the villainous father whom he ultimately defeats.

As stated previously, Riordan goes beyond merely accepting Hearth's deafness, and embraces aspects of social constructionism, engaging in what Siebers describes as "the disabled body chang[ing] the process of representation itself …. The body is alive, which means that it is as capable of influencing and transforming social languages as they are capable of influencing and transforming it" (Siebers, "Disability in Theory," 738, 749). When Riordan portrays Magnus as being more visually aware of people's body language due to Hearth's influence, he is not only including a deaf character in his books but acknowledging Hearth's impact on his environment. For this reason, reality in fantasy can be an important tool for social change. Through the intersection of disability and fantasy, Riordan encourages the reader to actualize a world where disabled people are not only able to live without having change constantly forced upon them, but are also able to enact change in the world themselves.

Hearth and the Story of Fáfnir

As with Percy Jackson, Riordan's portrayal of deafness goes beyond an accurate demonstration of the everyday challenges and experiences of living with a disability. Through integrating a deaf character into the mythology that he draws his inspiration from, Riordan makes Norse mythology compelling and relevant for modern day readers. In doing so, Riordan continues to challenge the preconception of what kind of a person can be a hero.

While Hearth plays a significant role in the first *Magnus Chase* novel as Magnus's friend, guide, and protector, it is in the second novel that Hearth begins to undergo his own journey as a hero. In order to do so, he must confront his father who abused him as a child. This challenge takes place over the second and third books in the trilogy, and culminates with Hearth making peace with his past and using his experiences to become a powerful sorcerer.

Alderman, Hearth's father, abused Hearth during his childhood due to his deafness and the death of Hearth's brother Andiron. Alderman, despite knowing ASL, refuses to communicate with Hearth in ASL. Instead, he forces Hearth to read his lips and gives him a board to write his thoughts on. This board causes extreme humiliation for Hearth, as it is a clunky and slow method for communication, and Hearth is not able to write fast enough to convey all he would like to say in a conversation. In contrast, with ASL Hearth is able to convey complex thoughts in an efficient manner through the many-layered meanings of signs, combined with the prosody of altering the nuance of his gestures in order to "shout" or "whisper" or to convey anger versus sympathy.

Alderman's behavior is reminiscent of the treatment of deaf students in schools in the 19th and 20th centuries (and in some schools still today). His refusal to use ASL and his insistence on lip reading is a common practice in schools that emphasize oralism over manualism. Oralism was originally developed as "a new option for deaf people" to "grant deaf

people more opportunities" (Cohen 14). In the process, ASL came to be seen as "primitive, an indication of deficient intelligence" (9). Since then, though, research has confirmed that ASL is a legitimate language and that restricting deaf children's use of it can negatively affect them both educationally and emotionally.

To this day, though, organizations such as the Alexander Graham Bell Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing believe that ASL's "use is declining" and that the use of cochlear implants and listening and speaking language is preferable to teaching a child ASL (Sugar, "AG Bell"). The AG Bell Association assumes in this case that a majority of deaf children are actually hard of hearing, and with enough technology they will be able to hear and speak like any other person, and therefore have no need for the Deaf Community. In response to the AG Bell Association, many members of the Deaf Community have staged peaceful protests and written op-eds explaining why oralism often fails deaf children. One deaf woman who was raised in an oralism environment and then learned ASL as a teenager stated that, "I feel comfortable and more at ease with Sign Language than dealing with the stress of misunderstandings, impatient and frustrated people, the headache and eyestrain of having to listen and lipread" (Stine, "My Letter"). While it is implied that Hearth was completely congenitally deaf from birth and therefore never learned how to speak, his father's emphasis on lip-reading over ASL conforms to a significant part of the oralism platform. This aligns with what many in the Deaf community consider to be the forces of oppression.

For Hearth to become a better sorcerer and to save his friends, he must confront Alderman and the trauma of his past. For this plotline, Riordan draws heavily from the story of Sigurð and Fáfnir, which is detailed in several Norse texts. However, while Hearth's journey follows the general plotline of the Norse myth, his motivations and actions differ from the classic

Norse hero Sigurð in several ways. It is in these character trait differences that Riordan once again adapts and reimagines a mythical hero for modern readers.

Sigurð is one of the most prominent mortal heroes in Norse mythology, and is a particularly important figure in the Germanic tradition. The most detailed account of him is in the *Völsunga saga,* from which I will be drawing quotations. In the *Völsunga saga,* as in many other attestations of Sigurð, the hero is descended from Odin himself, and is part of a long line of powerful kings. Sigurð embodies the classic Norse hero in many ways: he is of noble blood, a strong-willed and able fighter, he shows little mercy to his enemies, and he attracts the attention of any woman he encounters. One of the most popular stories of Sigurð involves him slaying the dragon Fáfnir, who was once a mortal man before his mind and body became twisted by greed. Fáfnir's son Regin raises Sigurð, and together they confront the dragon who was once Regin's father.

Hearth's encounter with his father Alderman closely resembles the story of Sigurð and Fáfnir, with Hearth representing both Sigurð and Sigurð's foster father Regin, and Alderman representing Fáfnir. However, unlike Sigurð, and many other traditional Norse heroes, Hearth is not exceptionally strong, or good with weapons, or a ladies' man. Indeed, he is described as "a tall pale man" with "short, spiky hair …. so blond it was almost white" and constantly in need of a good meal (Riordan, *The Sword of Summer,* 15*).* He also acts awkwardly around any potential romantic interest. Beyond these surface-level characteristics, though, the most significant difference between Hearth and the traditional Norse heroes is their values. Hearth is unwilling to take revenge on those who have wronged him, including his father. While Hearth does want to protect others from the evil of his father, he attempts to convince Alderman to become a more moral person rather than kill him. He summons the spirit of his brother Andiron in order "to give

his dad a chance at redemption" (230). In contrast, Sigurð immediately kills Regin when the birds suggest that Regin might kill Sigurð in the future. Hearth's patience and willingness to forgive is a key trait in his characterization as a modern-day hero.

Furthermore, Hearth has no desire to take the gold that once belonged to Andvari the dwarf. In the legend of Fáfnir, Andvari warns that his gold, and the magic ring that goes with it, will curse anyone who possesses it. Fáfnir takes the gold anyway, heedless of the warning. After slaying Fáfnir, Sigurð too takes the gold, for, "I'd ride home and leave this treasure alone, if I knew that I would never die. But every bold man wants to have control of his wealth until his fated death-day" (Crawford 33). Sigurð gains great wealth from the dragon's hoard, but in the end, he meets a tragic fate at the hand of his own family. Andrew McGillivray, a professor of rhetoric and Scandinavian studies, argues that "the literary culture that the saga was formed in may in fact criticize such greed for wealth while at the same time admiring the heroes who make the ultimate sacrifice in seeking it out" (381). Hearth, on the other hand, insists that they return the gold to Andvari so that it can never tempt anyone again. This selfless act is similar to the moment when Percy turns down immortality. Thus, Riordan transforms the ultimate takeaway of the story of the gold; instead of being a commentary on greed, power, and bravery, the story instead becomes a celebration of empathy and selflessness, which aligns with today's literary portrayal of heroism.

Riordan's use of Sigurð's story not only demonstrates the kind of hero that his readers should admire, but also presents a new type of villain. Long before Alderman acquires Andvari's ring, he is still a cruel and selfish man. In "penance" for his brother's death, Alderman orders Hearth to fulfill a twisted version of a wergild. In historical Norse and English society, a wergild was "the price set upon a man according to his rank, paid by way of compensation or fine in

cases of homicide and certain other crimes to free the offender from further obligation or punishment" ("wergild | weregeld, n."). In many societies, the concept of blood money was (and sometimes is still) used to keep order when a murder is committed. However, Alderman appropriates the concept as an excuse to abuse Hearth. Thus, Alderman displays his monstrosity long before his transformation into a dragon. His monstrosity lies not just in his greed, but also in his refusal to accept his son. Alderman's dying words to Hearth are "use your board"; his last act is to degrade his son and remind him of his supposed inferiority.

While Alderman is an extreme example of the type of treatment that a deaf person might face, Riordan's message to his readers is clear. Even though it was his greed for money that turned him into a dragon, Alderman's true greed seems to be a greed for perfection and control, which only harms those around him. As with Percy's confrontation with Mrs. Dodds, Hearth's confrontation with his father is not only a display of heroism, but also a condemnation of the abuse of the disabled. Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel, both scholars of children's literature, assert that "radical children's literature models and encourages activism by children as well as adults, and exposes unjust uses of power" (Mickenberg and Nel 445). Alderman, in his narrow vision of an ideal world, rejects Hearth because he cannot accept his son's way of being; in doing so, he rejects Hearth's attempt to create a world in which individuals with disabilities can be heroes. Hearth's subsequent victory over Alderman encourages activism against those in power who stigmatize and pathologize disability.

The Dangers of Under-Researching

While generally the way in which Riordan's portrayal of Hearth is accurate and respectful of the Deaf community, Riordan does misrepresent deafness in a few key ways. He received significant criticism from deaf readers when he described Hearth as being "deaf and

dumb" in *The Sword of Summer*, as well as using the term "mute" several times. The terms "dumb" and "mute" are both relics from a time when people who were deaf were also considered to be "incapable of being taught, of learning, and of reasoned thinking" or that they were "silent and without voice" due to their inability to hear (National Association for the Deaf). However, it is rare for a deaf person to have non-functional vocal cords, making the term "mute" technically inaccurate. Furthermore, "because deaf and hard of hearing people use various methods of communication other than using their voices, they are not truly mute" (National Association for the Deaf). And of course, deafness has been found to have no effect on mental capability. While Riordan was likely not attempting to be insulting, his use of these offensive terms demonstrates the importance of an author doing research on any group that they represent in a story. In neglecting to do the work to make sure that the language he used was accurate, Riordan has both alienated some deaf readers as well as perpetuated terms that are offensive and outdated.

Furthermore, Riordan emphasizes that Magnus and his friends take care not to have conversations while walking, because Hearth has a hard time watching a person's signs and watching where he is going at the same time. While some deaf individuals may require this accommodation, many others develop excellent peripheral vision over the course of their life and therefore have no trouble carrying on a conversation while walking or engaged in other activities. Riordan may have based this trait of Hearth's on a particular deaf person that Riordan knows, in which case he may not have been aware of the inaccuracy. However, taking the time to read texts by other deaf people or to have members of the Deaf community read over his work before publishing it could have lent an either greater depth of accuracy to his writing.

Walt Stone and Allegories of Chronic Illness

Percy Jackson and Hearthstone are the primary characters in Riordan's books who have disabilities, and Riordan portrays these disabilities through a non-pathological and non-magical lens. Even though Percy's learning disabilities and Hearth's deafness both connect at some point to their magical abilities, the disabilities themselves are grounded in the realm of realism, and they are never "cured" of their disabilities through magical means. Furthermore, Percy and Hearth each go through their own journeys to develop as individuals, and each face outside obstacles along the way, becoming heroes in the process. However, Riordan's more minor characters do not always receive the same thoughtful treatment.

While Percy and Hearth may be at peace with their circumstances by the ends of their series, Siebers points out that for many people with disabilities, "The great challenge every day is to manage the body's pain, to get out of bed in the morning, to overcome the well of pain that rises in the evening, to meet the hundred daily obstacles that are not merely inconveniences but occasions for physical suffering" (Siebers, "Disability in Theory," 744–745). This is especially true in the case of chronic illness, and it is here that the representation of disability becomes more difficult. How does an author avoid portraying a person with a chronic (and possibly deadly) illness as a victim, when they suffer through immense pain every day? And, in a book meant for younger readers, how does an author handle the situation of a character with a fatal disease? Should the character die, inviting a conversation about human mortality? Or should the character somehow be saved? Riordan chose the latter path for the secondary character Walt Stone in the Egyptian mythology-based *Kane Chronicles* series, and in doing so he pursued a problematic, escapist portrayal of chronic illness.

Riordan's portrayal of Walt differs from his portrayal of Percy and Hearth in three significant ways. The first of these is revealed when Walt is introduced in the second book of

The Kane Chronicles: *The Throne of Fire*. Walt's disability is firmly rooted in magic. His family is descended from the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, who tried to eradicate the worship of the Egyptian gods. His descendants, including the famous Tutankhamun, were therefore cursed with short lives. This curse manifests in a way that "modern doctors think it's related to sickle cell anemia" (Riordan, *The Throne of Fire*, 277). While the symptoms of Walt's curse only loosely resemble the symptoms of sickle cell anemia, Riordan still actively chooses to link the magical curse to an actual chronic illness. The issue here lies in the fact that Riordan could have chosen to bring awareness to sickle cell anemia, but instead chooses to only use the disease for comparatives purposes.

Fantasy author Corinne Duyvis explains that, "Even when disability parallels are handled wonderfully, it's frustrating when these metaphors or made-up, sci-fi disabilities are used in lieu of actual disability representation" (Duyvis). Unlike Percy, who truly has ADHD and dyslexia even though they are linked to him being a half-blood, Riordan is insistent that, "[doctors have] been trying for decades to figure out how King Tut died, and they can't agree. Some say poison. Some say a genetic disease. It's the curse, but of course they can't say that" (Riordan, *The Throne of Fire*, 277). Riordan not only eradicates the notion of a chronic genetic illness being present in his fantasy world, but he also frames Tutankhamun's death through a fantasy lens, dismissing the true cause of his death and the work that scientists have done to uncover that cause.

Furthermore, Walt is of Egyptian and sub-Saharan African descent, and people who are African or of African origin are disproportionately affected by sickle cell disease.[7] Riordan takes

[7] This is due to the fact that the gene for sickle cell disease can actually be beneficial in equatorial areas traditionally affected by malaria, as the sickle-shaped red blood cells are unable to carry the malaria parasite. Carriers of the disease with only one abnormal copy of the gene exhibit no detrimental symptoms, but have a better chance of

advantage of this statistic by linking Walt's curse to sickle cell anemia without ever addressing the realities of the disease. Sickle cell anemia has received much lower research interest and funding than almost any other genetic disease, and doctors rarely take their patients' pain seriously, or they over-prescribe opiates (Strouse et al.) This is likely due to the fact that sickle cell anemia is primarily viewed as a "black disease," and therefore has been a lower priority in the medical community since the disease was first identified in 1910. In fact, diagnosing and finding treatment for sickle cell anemia was one of the primary missions of the Black Panther Party in the 1970's. Keith Wailoo, a Princeton professor who researches the history of sickle cell anemia, states that the disease is "a microcosm of how issues of race, ethnicity and identity come into conflict with issues of health care" (Wailoo qtd. in Gold). Patients therefore not only face the inherent physical pain that comes with the disease, but also the hardship of finding a healthcare provider who knows how to, and is willing to take the time to, treat their symptoms. While Riordan does address other racial discrimination issues in *The Kane Chronicles*, such as police brutality and racial profiling, he never addresses the societal circumstances that make living with sickle cell anemia that much more difficult.

The secondary issue that makes Riordan's portrayal of Walt problematic lies in the fact that, unlike Percy or Hearth, Walt's disability is "cured" by magic. At the moment when he is about to die, he merges his body with Anubis, the god of funerals, thus granting him immortality. The trope of a disability or illness being cured through magic is common in fantasy novels. It might seem appropriate that in a children's novel there should not be any tragic death; however:

> When an author takes a serious topic and makes it less serious, it trivializes it and completely undermines the experience of anyone who deals with that serious

---

fighting off malaria. Thus, the gene is passed down and concentrated in the population affected by malaria, leading to a prevalence of the disease in people who have African ancestry.

> topic in real life. And the reality for most people with a disability is that there is no magical cure, it doesn't go away, it's something you live with forever, and it's a struggle to either simply live with it or to figure out a way to keep it under control. (Burns).

Doctors have still not discovered a cure for sickle cell anemia. While people with the disease live longer today than they did in the past due to various medications for symptom-management, the average life expectancy is still only around forty-five years. Riordan associates Walt's curse with a real-world disease, and then gives him a cure that no one with that disease would be able to access. For a reader with a sickle cell disease, this could be disheartening, and for a reader without personal experience with the illness, it could give them an unrealistic view of what people living with it face. Riordan's portrayal of this particular disability is therefore much more escapist rather than radical.[8] Instead of weaving together societal issues and suggested ways to disrupt those issues, Riordan instead ignores the issues entirely. He allows Walt, and therefore the reader, to escape the realities of chronic illness, even though real individuals with chronic illness cannot so easily avoid their condition.

The third issue with Walt's disability and subsequent cure for that disability is the fact that, unlike Percy and Hearth, Walt undergoes no significant character development over the course of the novel, nor does he become a hero in his own right. Walt never develops into a fully round or dynamic character; he serves primarily as an object of pity for Sadie Kane, one of the protagonists of the series. Walt insists that "I'm going to die anyway, Sadie. I want my life to mean something …. When I got to [the magicians' headquarters], I felt like I had a destiny, a

[8] Some define escapist literature as any text that is written for entertainment and that takes place in a fantastic or alternate reality. For the purposes of this paper, though, I am juxtaposing escapism with radicalism in the sense that escapist literature does not engage with social issues in the ways that radical literature does.

purpose. Even if it made the curse more painful, it was worth it" (Riordan, *The Throne of Fire*, 278, 281). Despite the fact that Walt feels fulfilled by practicing magic and helping the other magicians fight against evil, Sadie consistently refers to him as "poor Walt" and argues that he should not practice magic. As he prepares to sacrifice the last of his energy to cast a spell that will help save the world, Sadie tries to stop him and insists, "you are *not* going to die, Walt Stone. I forbid it" (Riordan, *The Serpent's Shadow,* 268*).* The rhetoric that Riordan utilizes when referring to Walt implies that he is not allowed autonomy over his body due to his illness.

The most significant element of Walt's character is his illness and how that illness affects Sadie; the positive impact that he has by performing magic pales in the face of this illness. Even though Walt has saved many people's lives through his actions, Sadie only cares about how his absence will affect her. She thinks to herself, "I simply couldn't stand the thought of losing Walt …. Just once, couldn't I succeed at something without a massive sacrifice?" (Riordan, *The Serpent's Shadow,* 268). In Walt's last moments, Sadie's thoughts are not of the pain that he feels, but rather how that pain affects her. One can see in this scene how Walt's primary character purpose is to serve as an object for Sadie. Rather than viewing him as a real person, she views him as an object to keep or to lose.

Riordan could have used Walt's death as an opportunity to demonstrate to Sadie (and therefore the reader) the error of seeing a terminally-ill person as an object over which one can lay claim. However, because Walt survives through magic, Sadie never grapples with the implications of how she viewed him. The story seemingly has a happy ending, as Walt gets to live and Sadie gets to stay with him. But unlike Percy's or Hearth's stories, Riordan does not take the opportunity to utilize Walt's story as a commentary on the treatment of the disabled in society, or how a person is more than their disability. Instead, Riordan takes advantage of the

reference point of a real-world illness without taking responsibility for the implications of using that illness. Additionally, Sadie, who is a white-passing biracial woman, claims ownership of Walt, a black man, further perpetuating the racist logics that exist in society.

Kenny Fries, a memoirist and poet who specializes in disability studies, created the Fries Test (akin to the Bechdel Test) to evaluate works of literature that feature disabled characters. The rules are as follows:

> Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the character's disability not eradicated either by curing or killing? (Fries)

For *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Riordan passes all three of Fries' criteria: he makes clear that all half-bloods have ADHD and dyslexia, including several of the main characters; Percy and his fellow half-bloods have their own plotlines that are independent of non-disabled characters; Percy and his friends retain their learning disabilities throughout the series. *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* does not feature more than one prominent character with a disability, but Hearth does have his own independent plotline and his deafness is never "cured." *The Kane Chronicles,* on the other hand, does not pass any of Fries' requirements. Walt is the only disabled character in the series, he has no independent plotline and mainly serves as a romantic object for Sadie, and his illness is cured in the end through magic. While the Fries Test is not the end-all, be-all for the portrayal of disability in literature, just as the Bechdel Test is not a comprehensive view of feminism in film, it is a useful reference point for understanding not just how many characters with disabilities appear in a work of literature, but also the depth of their storyline and whether their portrayal is comparable to a non-disabled character. The Fries

Test is another way in which one can identify the shortcomings of Riordan's portrayal of sickle cell disease.

Conclusion

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to see the musical adaptation of *The Lightning Thief* at the premiere of its touring show in Chicago. The purpose of my visit was to see how Percy and the other half-bloods' learning disabilities would be adapted for the stage. To my delight, the show that I attended happened to be a matinee show with students from schools all around the Chicago area in attendance. While waiting for the show to start, I struck up a conversation with a volunteer named Karen from Christopher House, "a family of schools that helps low-income, at-risk families succeed in school, the workplace, and life" (christopherhouse.org). I asked her what she thought of *The Lightning Thief* novel and how it can apply to students; she explained to me that in addition to being a former teacher and now volunteer, she has a grandson with dyslexia. Her grandson has difficulty finishing books because of his disability, and he once lamented to her that she must wish he were more normal because then he would be easier to teach. She told me her reply to him and to the rest of her students was, "The more different you all are, the more I learn. If you were all the same, I'd never learn anything" (Karen). This statement is one of the core values of featuring disabilities in literature, and especially in children's fantasy literature. Karen's grandson benefited greatly from seeing a character with the same disability as his as a hero in a fantasy series; his excitement at seeing himself in Percy drove him to finish the entire series despite his struggles with reading, which is something that he has rarely accomplished in the past.

However, Karen's grandson is not the only type of reader who can benefit from reading literature like *The Lightning Thief*. Every one of the hundreds of students that I saw in the theatre that day had read Percy's story, which meant that every one of them had read a book with a learning-disabled character as the hero. As Karen had passionately explained to me, the more that people read stories about people different from themselves, the more they learn. Furthermore, the more that people of varying ability appear in literature, the more that disability becomes de-stigmatized in the real world.

Rebecca Mead, a writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote an article in 2013 entitled "The Percy Jackson Problem" in which she laments, "What if the strenuous accessibility of [Riordan's writing] proves so alluring to young readers that it seduces them in the opposite direction from …. an engagement with more immediately difficult incarnations of the classics, Greek and otherwise?" (Mead, "The Percy Jackson Problem"). It is true that Riordan writes his books in a vernacular full of slang terms, pop culture references, and silly puns. However, Mead's criticism of Riordan's "affectation of teen goofiness" ignores one of the key values of Riordan's writing. Riordan's novels are not necessarily meant to be an introduction to world mythology for readers who are too young or too impatient to be able to sit through longer and more complexly-written academic mythology books. Mead's assumption that Riordan's books are, essentially, a dumbed-down version of mythology ignores the revolutionary work that Riordan has done by not just borrowing ideas from mythology, but also decisively reframing those stories to create a new genre of radical mythology in which individuals with disabilities, traditionally excluded from heroic narratives, can save the world. In the words of Garland-Thomson, "representation structures rather than reflects reality" (Garland-Thomson, "Disability and Representation," 523). Radical fantasy like Riordan's brings awareness to underrepresented communities and works to

encourage readers to realize a world in which differences are a fundamental and celebrated element of how society functions, rather than something to be fixed or shunned. To discount the radical work that Riordan has done is to discount the literary and societal value that children's fantasy literature holds in society.

Furthermore, to focus solely on the stylistic elements of Riordan's writing is to ignore some of the much more potentially problematic elements of his books. As powerful as Percy's story can be for demonstrating how a person with disabilities can be a fantasy hero, Riordan's books also illustrate the problematic side of including disability in literature without proper research to support that portrayal. Riordan's somewhat-inaccurate portrayal of deafness and his ignorant portrayal of Walt are by no means malicious in tone, but they are nevertheless problematic portrayals of disability. In the case of Walt, Riordan's writing could ultimately do more harm than good when it comes to raising awareness of sickle cell anemia. Thus, in a single author, one can see the vast differences between portraying a disabled character as a symbol or object for non-disabled characters versus portraying them as a round and dynamic character whose character arc develops a genre of literature for the modern day.

This thesis does not cover every character with a disability in Riordan's novels, and it certainly does not cover the ever-increasing number of fantasy authors who are including disabled characters in their books for young readers. The next step for this research would be to investigate Riordan's books more thoroughly as well as to compare him to other authors who feature characters with disabilities in their novels that are aimed at a similar target audience. By viewing a larger sample of authors, one could gain a more comprehensive look at how disability is re-shaping classic literature and literary tropes, and how radical fantasy interacts with

traditional myths and fairy tales in order to inspire young people to become activists and catalysts for change.

As briefly mentioned above, another angle that one could pursue is that of adaptation. Thus far, Riordan's novels have been adapted into films, graphic novels, and now a musical. In the case of the films and the musical, Riordan had no artistic rights over the production of these works. Therefore, an interesting path to pursue would be which facets of a literary work are deemed most important in the process of adaptation. Riordan portrays Percy's learning disabilities as a central element to his character and storyline. The films barely mention these disabilities, though, while the musical leans into them and investigates even further the psychological impact on a child who grows up in a school system not adapted to their needs. What do these greatly-differing portrayals of Riordan's protagonist say about the priorities of the film and theatre industries when it comes to the representation of disability?

Ultimately, Riordan's writing can act as an example of both productive and harmful portrayals of disability for the literary community. Like the Greek and Norse heroes that he invokes, Riordan should not be taken as an ultimate role model nor as warning of what not to do, but rather as an example of both successes and failures in attempting to enact change. Through observing both the revolutionary portrayal of Percy and the uninformed portrayal of Walt, readers and authors alike can gain a greater understanding of what it means to represent disabled characters in a manner that does not exceptionalize, pathologize, or objectify their disabilities, but instead portrays them as real people. Through a continuous process of research, open dialogue, and experimentation, children's fantasy literature can make great strides in modernizing traditional stories for young readers by breaking down the societal rhetoric that otherizes individuals with disabilities.

Works Cited

"An Interview With Rick." *Rick Riordan*, http://rickriordan.com/about/an-interview-with-rick/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2018.

Barkley, Russel. *ADD, ODD, Emotional Impulsiveness, and Relationships*. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=58&v=rcwp9T3zNcM. Accessed 19 Nov. 2018.

Brueggemann, Brenda Jo, et al. "Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 52, no. 3, Feb. 2001, p. 368. *Crossref*, doi:10.2307/358624.

"Children and Youth with Disabilities." *National Center for Education Statistics*, Apr. 2018, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp.

"Christopher House." *Christopher House*, https://christopherhouse.org/. Accessed 21 Feb. 2019.

Cohen, Leah Hager. *Train Go Sorry: Inside a Deaf World*. Reprint, Vintage Books, 1995.

"Community and Culture – Frequently Asked Questions." *National Association of the Deaf*, 6 Dec. 2016, https://www.nad.org/resources/american-sign-language/community-and-culture-frequently-asked-questions/.

Crawford, Jackson, translator. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Hackett Publishing Company, 2017.

Deck, Mikala. *The Hammer of Thor Community Reviews*. 24 Oct. 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27904311-the-hammer-of-thor?from_search=true.

Duyvis, Corinne. "Disability Metaphors in Sci-Fi and Fantasy." *Disability in Kid Lit*, http://disabilityinkidlit.com/2016/03/15/disability-metaphors-in-sci-fi-and-fantasy/. Accessed 3 Mar. 2019.

Fries, Kenny. “The Fries Test: On Disability Representation in Our Culture.” *Medium*, 1 Nov. 2017, https://medium.com/@kennyfries/the-fries-test-on-disability-representation-in-our-culture-9d1bad72cc00.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. “Disability and Representation.” *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2005, pp. 522–27.

---. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability In American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.6682x408d.

Gold, Jenny. “Sickle Cell Patients Suffer Discrimination, Poor Care — And Shorter Lives.” *Kaiser Health News*, 6 Nov. 2017, https://khn.org/news/sickle-cell-patients-suffer-discrimination-poor-care-and-shorter-lives/.

Homer. “The Iliad by Homer.” *The Internet Classics Archive*, translated by Samuel Butler, http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/iliad.html. Accessed 23 Nov. 2018.

Karen. 9 Jan. 2019.

Kirby, Philip. “A Brief History of Dyslexia.” *The Psychologist*, https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-31/march-2018/brief-history-dyslexia. Accessed 3 Nov. 2018.

Kristen, Burns. “Bookish Musings: Disabilities Being Magically Cured in Books.” *Metaphors and Moonlight*, 8 Feb. 2017, https://blog.kristenburns.com/disabilities-being-magically-cured-in-books/.

Lange, Klaus W., et al. “The History of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.” *Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders*, vol. 2, no. 4, Dec. 2010, pp. 241–55. *PubMed Central*, doi:10.1007/s12402-010-0045-8.

Lawrence, Stuart. “Ancient Ethics, the Heroic Code, and the Morality of Sophocles’ Ajax.” *Greece & Rome*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2005, pp. 18–33.

Leininger, Melissa, et al. “Newbery Award Winning Books 1975–2009: How Do They Portray Disabilities?” *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2010, p. 16.

Lobner, Katie, et al. “NIH and National Foundation Expenditures For Sickle Cell Disease and Cystic Fibrosis Are Associated With Pubmed Publications and FDA Approvals.” *Blood*, vol. 122, no. 21, Nov. 2013, pp. 1739–1739.

Long, Louise, et al. “Supporting Students with Dyslexia at the Secondary Level: An Emotional Model of Literacy.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2007, pp. 124–34.

Marton, Imola, et al. “Empathy and Social Perspective Taking in Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.” *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology; New York*, vol. 37, no. 1, Jan. 2009, pp. 107–18. *ProQuest*, doi:http://dx.doi.org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10802-008-9262-4.

Maughan, Shannon. “Navigating Middle Grade Books.” *Publishers Weekly*, 13 Apr. 2018, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/76625-navigating-middle-grade.html.

McGillivray, Andrew. “The Best Kept Secret: Ransom, Wealth, and Power in Völsunga Saga.” *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 87, no. 3, Apr. 2016, pp. 365–82.

McVane, Maili. “Romances and Deaf Characters.” *Dear Author*, 22 Sept. 2011, https://dearauthor.com/features/essays/romances-and-deaf-characters/.

Mead, Rebecca. "The Percy Jackson Problem." *The New Yorker*, 22 Oct. 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/percy-jackson-problem.

Mickenberg, Julia L., and Philip Nel. "Radical Children's Literature Now!" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 4, Nov. 2011, pp. 445–73. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/chq.2011.0040.

Novita, Shally. "Secondary Symptoms of Dyslexia: A Comparison of Self-Esteem and Anxiety Profiles of Children with and without Dyslexia." *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, vol. 31, no. 2, Apr. 2016, pp. 279–88. *Crossref*, doi:10.1080/08856257.2015.1125694.

Potter, Minion. "Rick Riordan: 'I've Loved Mythology since I Was a Child.'" *The Guardian*, 4 Oct. 2015. *www.theguardian.com*, https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/oct/04/rick-riordan-magnus-chase-interview-percy-jackson.

Reynolds, Kimberly. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Riordan, Rick. *The Hammer of Thor*. Disney-Hyperion, 2016.

---. *The Last Olympian*. Disney-Hyperion, 2009.

---. *The Lightning Thief*. Disney-Hyperion, 2006.

---. *The Serpent's Shadow*. Disney-Hyperion, 2012.

---. *The Ship of the Dead*. Disney-Hyperion, 2017.

---. *The Sword of Summer*. Disney-Hyperion, 2015.

---. *The Throne of Fire*. Disney-Hyperion, 2011.

---. *The Titan's Curse*. Disney-Hyperion, 2007.

Siebers, Tobin. "Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body." *American Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2001, pp. 737–54.

---. "Disability Studies and the Future of Identity Politics." *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, edited by Satya P. Mohanty et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 10–30. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=307874.

Sinfield, Jacqueline. "7 Reasons Why ADHDers Seem Self-Centered." *Untapped Brilliance*, https://untappedbrilliance.com/7-reasons-why-adhders-seem-self-centered/. Accessed 23 Nov. 2018.

Stine, Tracy. "My Letter to Parents of Deaf Children." *Huffington Post*, 12 Apr. 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/my-letter-to-parents-of-deaf-children_n_9635674.

Sugar, Meredith. "AG Bell: Dispelling Myths about Deafness." *Baltimore Post-Examiner*, 2 Apr. 2015, https://baltimorepostexaminer.com/ag-bell-dispelling-myths-deafness/2016/04/02.

Williams, Sally. "Percy Jackson: My Boy's Own Adventure." *The Guardian*, 8 Feb. 2010. *www.theguardian.com*, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/feb/08/percy-jackson-rick-riordan.

Young, Stella. *I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much*. *www.ted.com*, https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much. Accessed 21 Feb. 2019.