

Jan 2010 - RICK RIORDAN / Just Imagine

Rick Riordan is the bestselling author of the multi-million selling *Percy Jackson* series, which has gone on to spawn a successful Hollywood movie, released in February 2010. There is no doubt that 2010 has been a landmark year for Rick as it's also seen the launch of *The Red Pyramid*, the first in his Kane Chronicles series, as well as *The Lost Hero*, the debut novel in his Heroes of Olympus sequence. Here he talks about how it all started, and where it might be going...

You began our career as a teacher, first in San Francisco and then back in your home state of Texas - do you think teaching is a good place to learn and hone storytelling skills?

Without question...I think teachers have different styles, and I don't think all teachers are natural storytellers. In my case, though, storytelling was very much a part of my classroom, and I learned a lot about condensing a story, about making it relevant and funny and adventuresome and telling it all to an audience who had, relatively speaking, a very short attention span...so, yes, it taught me a lot.

You wrote your first short story when you were 13 - it was rejected by *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine - did you have any inkling then that writing was what you'd end up doing?

I certainly hoped it would be; I had two goals when I was young: I wanted to be a teacher and I wanted to be a writer, and I'm fortunate that I got to do both. My parents were teachers, which was where I got the itch to be a teacher, and with writing, I grew up with storytelling...I enjoyed being told stories when I was a child, and it was really my English teacher when I was thirteen who told me that [writing] could be something I might want to look at as a career. She encouraged me early on, and that's why the last Percy Jackson book is dedicated to her.

I think that's every teacher's goal, to be that person for at least some of our students, to reach at least *some* children who might not otherwise learn to love reading or become life-long learners...I always hoped to be that one person.

And if you'd known that it'd take another 20 years before you got published, would you have carried on?

[Laughs] Well, quite possibly not...and in fact there was long period when I was at university where I didn't write and I went on to other things. I was quite discouraged, [back then]...and even when I got back to writing and had a manuscript, for my first adult novel, it was rejected thirteen, fourteen times. And even then, when it finally got published it was another ten years after that before I could really call myself a full-time writer.

So writing does have to be something you do because you love it and are committed to it, rather than looking at it as a potential career. A lot of people say to me that they're thinking about changing jobs and becoming a writer and I say well...give that some thought!

I found a reference in an interview, one you did with the *Austin Chronicle* in 2001, that you'd run an underground newspaper while at the University of Texas in the early 80s.

I actually ran the newspaper in high school...my friend and I were quite the pranksters and we [produced] the *Alamo Heights Lampon*, which was illicitly printed on the school's printer, at their expense, and had a large circulation for just one day. I think they suspected it was us, but they could never prove it.

You were also one third of a folk trio called Cheyenne...

I still have blackmail-worthy pictures, somewhere in my house, of me with a very long, Tony Orlando-style hair-do!

So was there ever a chance that newspaper journalism or music might've claimed you?

I don't think so, not seriously, as I was never *really* good enough at either. I enjoyed playing music, I had a wonderful time doing it and it was my job in college; playing gigs in a cover band is what got me through my university years, made me enough money to pay my bills. But it wasn't going to go anywhere, I always knew we weren't going to cut records and make it big, we just weren't at that level. But it was a lot of fun while it lasted...and journalism...I enjoyed it, but it's a hard thing to make a living at. Just like being a freelance fiction writer, it's a *very* difficult proposition. So teaching was my fall-back position, but it was also something that I truly loved to do, and I was comfortable with the teaching profession, it allowed me to be a storyteller and draw a paycheck at the same time.

You've said that you started writing your first book [the adult hard-boiled crime novel *Big Red Tequila*, published by Bantam in the US in 1997] 'as a lark'; when did you realise that the writing side of things was getting serious?

I had a suspicion, as I was writing the book, that it had a good shot at being published. It *felt* very different than anything else I'd written, and I really did have a compulsion to finish the manuscript, in a way that nothing else had ever motivated me before. I often tell aspiring writers that getting published is rather Zen...you have to *forget* that you want to be published in order to be published. Simply *wanting* to be published will not do it for you; you have to find the story that you *must* tell, and until you find that story nothing you do will matter. Many people want to be an author, but do you have a story to tell? That's an entirely different thing.

By the time your second Tex-Mex thriller, *Widower's Two-Step*, was published you'd won three major crime awards - the Anthony, the Shamus and the Edgar; did you consider giving up teaching then?

No, not really. It's a very scary thing to get rid of your safety net, because with the career comes the benefits - like the health insurance, which in the States is *not* a guarantee and is very much something you hang onto if you can. Also, drawing a regular paycheck really has its advantages, especially when the alternative is not knowing when or if your next paycheck is coming.

At that point my wife and I were having our first child and so I kept writing and kept my full-time job and I did enjoy doing both. People had trouble believing that I enjoyed teaching, they'd say 'Don't you want to quit?' and when I did quit they said 'Congratulations!', but I really did enjoy the classroom.

Do you think that, if you hadn't had the idea for Percy Jackson - and if it hadn't become quite such a phenomenon - that you'd still be teaching and writing adult crime novels on the side?

I imagine so, either that or I would've gotten to the point where the crime novels just were not doing as well as I wanted, and [possibly] I would've gone back to full-time teaching. Or I might have reinvented myself in some other way, it's so difficult to say as I really didn't have a master plan.

The crime genre in the States does seem to be a very vibrant one - were you enjoying being a part of it?

Yes, I was, and it does do better than other genres, but compared to Young Adult fiction it's not a big seller, necessarily; there are a few people who do very well with thrillers, but most publishers will tell you that the market is glutted, there are so many people trying to write in that field.

But there is some very fine writing there, in that field...

Oh very much so...Dennis Lehane [*Mystic River*, as well as scripts for *The Wire*] is a fabulous writer, incredibly talented and writes beautiful, beautiful prose, and Michael Connelly [*The Poet*, *Trunk Music*] has written some amazing novels as well...there are many great writers.

The first Percy was published in the States in 2005, and the seventh and last Tres [pronounced 'Trace'] Navarre novel two years later. Was that a difficult cross-over period for you, handling two wildly different characters and styles?

It was quite difficult to separate them and to keep both series going with equal momentum. As enthusiasm built for Percy Jackson, it became harder and harder to devote time to my adult novels, which, while well-received, were not nearly as much the dynamo as the Percy Jackson series was. So that became a difficult balance.

But in the writing process, I think the two series were probably more similar than they were different...I think what a reader is looking for, whether they're an adult or a child, are characters who are sympathetic, and they want a little bit of humour, a plot that pulls them through the book and a situation they can relate to.

The only difference is that writing for children is harder, and I say that because children are a much more difficult audience; they will *not* stay with you through three pages of extraneous description, they just won't. If you lose them, they'll just throw the book down and say that they're bored. So when you're writing for children you always have to be cognisant of the storyline, always keep the tension high and keep their interest in one way or another.

Were you also still teaching during the time you were writing both the Percy and Tres Navarre novels?

I was, and it was definitely a lot to do. But I'm a firm believer that one can find time for anything if it's truly important, and there are always excuses

for why one can't do a certain thing. When people say to me 'I hope to write a book some day, when I'm not busy', I always tell them don't wait, because that day will never come!

You now have three successful strands: there's the original Percy Jackson quintet - which I presume isn't necessarily finished...

...well it is... [pauses] I really did see *The Last Olympian* as the end of the five-book series, and the only way it's *not* done is in the sense that *Heroes of Olympus* is a companion series and many of the characters from Percy Jackson will reappear, but with a very different spin, a very different perspective, narrated third person. So *Heroes*, also a five-book series, is a very different lens into Percy Jackson's world - in a way [that world] is done, but those characters do live on.

You also have the brand new *Kane Chronicles* series running side-by-side with *Heroes*...once again, what's your secret, how do you keep so many balls in the air?

It was a challenge to myself, and I had no idea whether I could pull it off. I typically take about a year to write a book, but I was aware that within that year there was a lot of dead time...I would allow myself days, sometimes weeks, where I would just let the manuscript sit and I'd stay away from it, then I'd come back. I've always had a rather hit-and-run process when it comes to writing, I sit down and write a paragraph and then I *run* away, let it mellow, and come back to it later. It works, but I was aware that it was at least conceivable that I could speed things up

You tour and do personal appearances across the US, you have titles in 16 languages that mean you have world-wide commitments, all of which must be extremely time-consuming - did the time you spent as a teacher, with all the planning that that profession demands, help at all with what you do now?

I don't think anyone's ever asked me that before, but I think you're probably right...I think it did help, in the sense that planning a lesson, scheduling time - anticipating how long a certain activity will last in the classroom - does make one more aware of time management and of long-term projects. Certainly it's something I've always tried to drill into my students, but something I'm honestly not very good at myself...

You wouldn't know!

I really am not by nature a very disciplined person; I have no routine, I don't sit down at nine and work until five in the evening - every day is different for me. But having said that, deadlines are tremendously helpful, they certainly help to keep me on track when I find things are looming over me!

You now have a second pantheons of gods which you're deeply involved with - not to mention plots and storylines - do you have any tricks for keeping everything separate? I know Cornelia Funke uses a truly massive pin-board to map out her stories, do you use any particular technique?

In the past I have used a flowchart program called *Inspiration* that I got when I was a teacher, which simply makes brainstorming maps. I used that for several of my novels, especially early on, and would print out these massive sheets and pin them on the wall; it was very helpful to visually see the flow of the novel and every square would be a chapter, and I would move them around as need be.

Now, at this point, I've internalized that process enough that I don't need the visual aid any more; what I'll do is write a short outline, a paragraph for each chapter, look at it and rearrange it as needed. Then I'll do a very quick first draft; it always changes from the outline, but it *generally* follows. And then *most* of my time is spent revising, revising, revising, going over and over and over [the book] until it flows.

This is before it goes to your editor?

Oh absolutely, I wouldn't *dream* of sending anything to an editor before I've fixed everything I possibly know how. I would be incredibly embarrassed to send an editor one of my early drafts as they're just wretched, but I'm sure every writer thinks that.

Even though the manuscript may be 'perfect' when you send it off, isn't it weird how the editor can make it better?

It is very true, and I tell students that all the time, that no one can write anything perfectly the first time...nor the second time nor the third time. And it does take someone else's eye to point out what needs to be enhanced or cropped, what needs to be brought out of the manuscript that's not already there. It does take a helping hand, and that's what an editor does.

Why do you think that writing is the only art form that allows this kind of collaborative creation? Artists, sculptors and musicians don't...

Well, I think the form is fluid enough to allow that sort of interaction... whereas my wife, who is a visual artist, often bemoans the fact that once something is on the canvas, that's it. I think if art allowed collaboration, artists would quite possibly do more of it...with writing there's always a sense that you're never done, you're just under a deadline and it's 'do' rather than 'done'.

Having said that I wouldn't say that writing is the *only* collaborative art form - look at film and TV, which are collaborative in the extreme, to the point that it really is art by committee. I've talked to television writers who want to be novelists and I say 'Why in the world? You make *no* money as a novelist and you're making *tons* as a screenwriter!' And they say 'Yes, but I have no ownership of the product, I'm just a small cog in the machine'.

Did you have a relationship at all with the people who wrote the script for the Percy Jackson film?

No, I got to read a draft of it and make some suggestions, but that was the extent of my involvement.

Do you know which draft that was?

All I know is that they had *many* of them, that's what I was told.

And how did you feel when you saw the movie?

I didn't see it, and I don't intend to. It's such a different art form, such a different medium, and whenever I see a movie of a book that I enjoyed it always ruins something...even if it's a well-done adaptation. I had that feeling with the Harry Potter books when I saw the films; as well done as they were, as entertaining as they were, I was *quite* annoyed when I read the seventh Harry Potter book and I *couldn't* get Daniel Radcliffe's face out of my imagination. He's a great actor, but that's *not* the way I saw Harry Potter.

And there you are...it's so difficult to pull off well, so I just made the decision [not to see the film] - especially as I was already writing the *Heroes of Olympus* and revisiting that world. I needed to keep my own vision clear and not go there.

Are the very different voices for Carter and Jason your way of keeping them as individuals, so they don't acquire elements of each other?

That was very much a conscious choice...I do like to push myself to try things I've never done before. And I did want to make sure that I separated the second series, *Heroes*, from Percy Jackson, who has a very distinctive voice. With the *Kane Chronicles*, I'd never tried alternating first person narrators, and it was a *great* challenge and also a lot of fun. [I had to try] to delineate Carter from [his sister] Sadie by giving them their own way of speaking, and

doing it as an audiotope so it came across as this informal bickering between siblings.

Which works very well, as Sadie has been brought up in the UK...

Sadie is based loosely on my own mother, who was American but raised mostly in London until she was in High School; when she came back to the States she had a terrible case of culture shock - she had a British accent and British sensibilities, but everyone was telling her she was American, though she didn't feel it, so she was really trapped between these two cultures. I always found that fascinating, and she used to tell me stories about growing up in England...it was somewhere I had absolutely no context for, but it was always this captivating, alluring 'other place'.

When did you first come to London?

About ten years ago, as a teacher, chaperoning a group of my students...I've visited London so many times since then, a week here, a week there, usually twice a year. I feel that I know certain locales well enough that I can now write about them.

Being in English schools has also helped me quite a bit, because I've come to understand the children here, understand the subtly nuanced differences in what they think is funny and interesting, as opposed to their American counterparts. The *Kane Chronicles* is not a book I could have written ten years ago, but I finally reached a place where I felt I could pull it off.

You're extremely well versed in the whole world of Greek mythology, are you as well up on the Egyptian equivalent?

No, not as well as that...I did know about Egyptian mythology, but generally speaking it's not as well known, mostly because it hasn't been part of our culture in the same way that Greece and Rome have. We didn't know anything about hieroglyphs until a couple of hundred years ago, whereas Greek mythology has been embedded in our culture for thousands of years,

so we're just now, in the grand scheme of things, understanding the Egyptian myths.

But once you do know them you see *clear* parallels to the Greek and Roman stories and even early Christian scriptures...you see *huge* influences from Egypt on all of those, so it's well worth knowing and it's been a wonderful challenge to bring it to life, much more difficult than working with Greece and Rome.

I wondered if it gave you more freedom because people know less about the Egyptian gods?

In a way it does...my interpretation is breaking new ground and it's not something that's ever been done to any extent before. It's been my playground.

Have you done any trips to Egypt to do research?

I haven't, I would love to do that - although, with Percy Jackson, I didn't go to Greece until I'd finished the series! But as with Greece and Rome, you can appreciate the mythology wherever you are...there are a lot of universal elements in it.

What comes first for you: plot or character?

It's so difficult to parse that out because they develop simultaneously...I forget who said this, but one writer said that plot is just what the characters do next, so to say whether one comes first or the other is very difficult.

For me a lot of it is actually setting; I will think about where I would like to put scenes and then I'll take the action from place to place. With *The Lightning Thief* I picked places that my sons and I had visited - St Louis, Los Angeles, Las Vegas - so they could picture the action, and I wove the myth through this geographical narrative. But within that the characters are equally as important, they shape what happens in every locale.

I noticed, as you were talking, that you seemed to be looking away and seeing a picture of what you were talking about in your head - is that true, do you see it, then write it down?

Yeah, I have been told that I am a very visual writer, and I think that's probably accurate...I do think in terms of maps, I think in terms of geography, so in that way my books are almost cartographic and I'm the explorer, charting the territory as I come across the plot.

A character in a your adult novel *The Devil Went Down to Austin* is referred to as wanting to turn the clock back, and you are quoted as saying that you miss the old city of Austin as you knew it - how big a part does nostalgia play in your work, and was Percy Jackson a way of revisiting your childhood?

Absolutely, and on a number of different levels. Greek mythology was really what started me out as a reader, and as a writer, so to revisit that with my son when he was in a similar pass and didn't really like reading had a very, very nice circular feeling to it. I was coming back to my beginnings and sort of reinventing Greek mythology, which is always been reinvented for one generation after another.

That definitely was a wonderful feeling, and I do have a nostalgia for childhood; that's probably why I was a teacher for so long, the Middle School years [yrs 7-9] were a very formative time in my life and I think that's why I'm drawn to it. Kids at that age are changing in so many ways and that's when we either catch them or they slip through the cracks.

Do you think your books will draw new readers in behind them, or are you going to have to start writing books for older readers?

That's something I've thought about a lot, and it's alarming to me when kids come up and say that they've grown up with my books - that was only five

years ago! And it impresses on me how quickly time passes...I don't know if these will be books that are still read in five years, ten years, I have no idea; the best that I can do is try to write something that is relevant for the audience that I know, and hope they're universal enough that they'll still be appreciated by the next generation.

Would you write adult books again?

I don't know that I would do that; I might...never say never? But right now I'm having so much fun and it's also very demanding of my time. It's hard to conceive that five years from now I'll be back writing adult books, but on the other hand, if you'd told me five years ago that I'd be doing this now I wouldn't have believed you.

In an online interview with Barnes and Noble it was suggested that you might want to return to teaching some day - do you think that's possible?

I think it's increasingly unlikely, just because of the demands on my time and how the books are doing, and so I don't see that happening. I would love to be back in the classroom, I'd love to get to know the kids again and see them develop, see the light go on, and *really* make a difference and impact on individual children's lives.

I don't think I'll ever be able to recapture that time in my life, but I do console myself with the idea that I am still a teacher; I have a different capacity, and my classroom now has several million children in it - rather than twenty or thirty - but I do feel that I'm still able to do something that I did in the classroom, which is turn children into readers.