

Literature Circle Guide to *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan

Book Summary

When troubled student Percy Jackson vaporizes his math teacher on a class field trip, he begins to suspect that his life is not what it seems. He discovers that his lifelong reading and attention troubles are all signs that he is a half-blood—a child of the Greek gods. After a summer training session with other demigods and Chiron the centaur, he sets off on a cross-country quest to Los Angeles (the entrance to Hades) with his friend Grover the faun and Annabeth, a child of Athena, to recover Zeus' lost thunderbolt and stop a war between the gods. Along the way, where modern life and mythology intersect to create both humor and excitement, Percy will come to know his father Poseidon, rescue his mother, and discover that he has what it takes to be a hero. Ultimately, Percy learns to trust his friends and his abilities and to choose love over despair.

Author Information

Rick Riordan knows his myths! For fifteen years he was an English and History middle-school teacher in both San Francisco and Texas. After writing many short stories and a series of award-winning mysteries for adults, he decided to try his hand at young adult fiction. Using a story he had originally told his son at bedtime, he brought together his love of Greek stories and his experiences working with students who have learning differences for an action-packed adventure series. This exciting story of a modern-day Greek hero has already been optioned for an upcoming movie. Rick Riordan now writes full time and lives with his wife and two sons in San Antonio, Texas.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Describe what kind of student Percy Jackson is. What troubles does he have in school?
He has been in six schools in six years. In fifth grade he accidentally aimed a cannon at the school bus and in fourth grade somehow dumped his whole class into the Marine World shark pool. He describes himself as ADHD and acknowledges difficulty with both reading and behavior. (p. 2 and p. 11)
2. What is Percy's relationship with his mother? Why does he think she has bad luck?
He thinks she is "the nicest lady in the world." (p. 33) Unfortunately, she is married to a gambling, drinking bully. Her parents died in a plane crash and she had to drop out of college and work odd jobs. Then Percy's father disappeared before he was born. (p. 30)
3. What does Percy discover about the Greek gods at Camp Half Blood? What do they have to do with the camp?
The gods are still active and a force in people's lives according the Chiron (p.73), only now they are based in America instead of Greece. The camp is a

training ground for the children of the gods. It has 12 cabins for each of the twelve Olympians. (p. 81)

4. Why is Percy more excited about his upcoming quest to the Underworld than scared? What other feelings does he have about his assignment?
Percy is surprised to find himself eager to take on Hades. He wants revenge, not only because Hades has sent three monsters after him, but because he may find his mother in the Underworld. Secretly, he believes he may be able to rescue her. Also, he is very confused by the fact that his father, who he has not known until now, needs his help. "Emotions rolled around me like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope." (pp. 144-145)
5. What clues do Percy and his friends have that all is not right with "Auntie Em"? Why do you think they overlook them?
She keeps her face covered with a veil, she is overly friendly, she knows Annabeth's name without being told, she doesn't eat when they eat, and all three children are troubled by how lifelike her statues are. The children are hungry, lost and penniless after the bus accident and eager for some assistance. (pp. 173-176)
6. What does Percy's fight with Echidna reveal about his character? What new things does he discover about himself?
Like any hero, his first thought is not for himself but the people around him. How can he protect the park ranger and his family? His leap from the monument is both an attempt to save their lives by risking his own and a leap of faith that his father will protect him. Echidna accuses him of having no faith, but this leap show how brave he really is. (pp. 210-211)
7. The god, Ares, says he loves America. He calls it "the best place since Sparta." What does he mean? Do you agree with his assessment of America? Why? Why not?
Ares is the god of war and Sparta was a famously war-like state in ancient Greece. Ares is saying that America is very violent and war-like. Answers may vary about his assessment. Some students may talk about recent wars or violence in the media. Still others may talk about decreasing crime rates and American freedoms. (p. 227)
8. At the Lotus Casino, Percy realizes that unless he gets out quickly, he will "...stay here, happy forever, playing games forever, and soon I'd forget my mom, and my quest, and maybe my own name. I'd be playing virtual rifleman with groovy Disco Darrin forever." What critique is the author offering of modern life? Do you agree with it?
Riordan is describing what he believes happens to children who watch too much television and become addicted to electronic games. They stop thinking; they forget about time, people, and everything but their own pleasure. These amusements are a trap. Students' answers to the second part

of this question will vary, but they should support their opinions with facts and personal stories.

9. When describing the effects of Mist, Chiron says, “Remarkable, really, the lengths humans will go to fit things into their version of reality.” How is this true in the novel? In Greek mythology?

When the bus is overturned by the Furies, the passengers see only unruly children attacking three old ladies. At the St. Louis monument, nobody listens to the child who sees Percy emerge from the water without a drop on him and people assume the explosion was a terrorist act. People watching Ares and Percy fight see modern guns instead of ancient swords. Eventually, the reporters create a story, that Percy uses, about how he and his friends had been kidnapped. For the Greeks, any act of nature or emotional disruption (rage, love, etc.) is created by the gods. Percy gets angry around Ares because he is the god of war. The weather is unseasonable because Poseidon and Zeus are fighting.

10. When Percy finally meets his father, Poseidon seems distant and hard to read. Percy says that he is actually glad about this. “If he’d tried to apologize, or told me he loved me, or even smiled—that would have felt fake. Like a human dad, making some lame excuse for not being around.” Do you agree with Percy? **All the children of the gods have mixed feelings about their immortal parents. Poseidon had not acknowledged his son because to do so would be to expose him to many dangers. At the same time, because of his absence, Percy has had to endure the bullying of Gabe, the sadness of his mother, and familial poverty. But Percy discovers his father is a god, and when he finally meets him, his description of him is admiring. He is dressed, thinks Percy, like a beachcomber and he thinks he probably smiles a lot. At the same time, it must be very painful to Percy to have his father describe him as a “wrongdoing.” Every child wants to be desired and loved.**

11. How does the last line of the prophecy—*you shall fail to save what matters most in the end*—come true? What do you think of this ending? Did Percy make the right choice?

In the Underworld, Percy makes the decision not to save his mother’s life so he can stop the war between the gods. He makes an ethical decision that puts the happiness of many before his own desires. He makes a similar decision not to save his mother from Gabe at the end of the story; he does not turn him into a statue. The implication, however, is that his relationship with his mother is maturing. He leaves her with Medusa’s head and the right to make her own decisions. The prophecy comes true, but it is not, as Percy initially believes, a tragic prophecy. His mother is alive, the war between the gods has been averted, his friends have realized their dreams, and he is ready to step into the world as a hero.

12. Throughout the story, Percy is troubled by frightening dreams. In what ways do those dreams increase the tension in the story? Is their menace completely resolved by the end of the story?

Percy's dreams, about the great chasm of Tartarus and the voice of whom he believes to be Cronos, continually suggest that there is more to this story than meets the eye. There is a force of greater and older evil than the gods' fighting. On the one hand, those problems are resolved when Luke is revealed as the real Lightning Thief who has been brainwashed by Cronos. This revelation and the return of the lightning bolt would seem to resolve the story. However, Percy is troubled by what he has heard. Even the gods will not believe him when he says that he is sure Cronos is coming back. The implication is, of course, that he is and that the battle will continue in future books.

13. After her return from the quest, Annabeth resolves to try again to live with her father and her stepfamily. Do you think they will all get along better now? Why? Why not? What do you predict will happen?

Annabeth is a different person after the quest. She has finally proven herself after the upsetting events surrounding her arrival at Camp Half Blood. Because of this and her newfound friendship with Percy, she may be able to get along better with her younger half-siblings and her stepmother. In addition, the fact that they come to Camp Half Blood to get her shows that they, too, are ready to reach out. Nevertheless, Annabeth still seems to have many unresolved feelings about her own mother Athena, and she is still a demigod. Monsters won't stop attacking. How will her family react then?

14. In the end of the book, do you sympathize at all with Luke's feelings of betrayal? Is there anything you can relate to about his point of view?

Luke feels that he is being constrained as a hero and that when he was asked to steal an apple from the Garden of the Hesperides, he was merely repeating what Hercules had already done. His need to distinguish himself is understandable. Yet throughout the book, the author has hinted that many great heroes have, in fact, been half-bloods—Washington, Shakespeare, Houdini. What then really constrains Luke? Why can't he make something of himself? Why does he choose to listen to Cronos when Percy resists him? Annabeth and Percy choose to leave Camp Half Blood and set off into the world to try their skills. Why doesn't Luke do this?

15. Percy's learning difficulties become strengths in a different context. What seem to be attention problems allow him to be aware of all sides of attack during a battle. While he struggles to read English, he masters ancient Greek almost effortlessly. What skills are valued most in today's society? How might students who struggle today have been successful in a different moment in history?

Students' answers will vary. Our "information age" depends on strong literacy skills—reading, writing, and comprehension. A pre-literate hunting society, however, might not have valued academic skills as much as athletic

ones. In addition, leadership might not depend on the ability to read well or succeed in school. Having a trade—blacksmithing, woodworking, stone-building—or knowing how to work with animals and crops could ensure your success!

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1–3; Comprehension: 4–6; Application: 7–8; Analysis: 9–11; Synthesis: 12–13; Evaluation: 14–15.

Activities

1. Imagine you have just discovered that you are a half-blood. What cabin do you think you will end up in at Camp Half Blood? What are the possibilities? Write a creative piece describing your arrival and discovery of your true parentage.
This activity gives students a chance to think about their own personal strengths and how they are connected to the gods. Are they generous like Hermes? Wise like Athena? Do they resist restriction like the sea? Teachers may wish to fully explore each of the gods attributes before students begin this project. In addition, students may want to make a list of all their personal characteristics before deciding which god they are related to.
2. This book is the first in a series. Luke is still at large, Cronos is growing stronger, and Percy is about to step out into the world as the acknowledged son of Poseidon. What will happen next? Like the Oracle, make four predictions about the next book. What will happen in it? Share your predictions, the clues that support them, and create a group chart showing what you, as a group, think are the most likely upcoming events.
Children love imagining what will happen next. Doing so also encourages them to go back to the book for a closer reading and a hunt for clues. In addition, their interest in the upcoming book is encouraged.
3. World War II is revealed in the book to actually have been triggered by an epic battle between the gods. How can a modern event be explained by the gods? Pick a current event—an earthquake, a battle, or even a surprising celebrity love affair—and explain how the gods were really behind it. You can present your explanations as a television newscast!
Children apply their knowledge of mythology with this project. You may want to read some Greek and Roman myths before you start—the story of Troy, how fire came to man, Pandora's box, etc.