

In “‘A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers’: Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson Series and Education’s Culture Wars” (Asterisks & Obelisks conference, 2009), Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson trace the indebtedness of San Antonio author Rick Riordan’s successful Percy Jackson and the Olympians series (2005-09) to educational theorist John Dewey. In the present paper, we will extend that reading to the question of how Riordan’s post-9/11 saga engages with the Deweyan concern of educating children for effective citizenship—for leadership rather than “followership,” as Daniel Schugurensky puts it—within a superpower.

In focusing on the pushback that the exertion of great power attracts, Riordan’s work follows that of earlier children’s writers who invoke the classical world, such as Rudyard Kipling in his Puck stories and Alan Garner in *Redshift*. In this paper, however, we will focus more on Riordan’s indebtedness to another form of popular culture, namely film. Specifically, like Alfred Hitchcock’s Cold War film *North by Northwest*, Riordan’s saga invokes a sweeping east-to-west trajectory and life-and-death confrontations involving national monuments: the U.N. building and Mount Rushmore for Hitchcock, the St. Louis Arch, Hoover Dam, and other sites for Riordan. Similarly, Hitchcock’s film pits the representatives of an evil urbanity (Communist spies who speak with British accents and smuggle their microfilm in pre-Columbian artifacts) against a master of popular tripe, the American advertising executive played by Cary Grant; Riordan’s saga pits ancient Titans and allied monsters against American teenager Percy Jackson, whose ambivalent championship of the Greek gods is carried out in a distinctly populist and contemporary voice. As both Hitchcock’s and Riordan’s texts demonstrate and for reasons to be explored in this paper, the thriller discourse is a natural vehicle for nationalist/imperial discourse, and especially for the expression of anxiety about what it means to be a citizen of the Western superpower.

Just as Dewey’s emphasis on the empirical means that he is no uncritical responder to the past, Riordan suggests that we must both reenergize the classical by putting it in touch with the vox populi and reenergize the nation by putting it in touch with the classical.