



Walker Scobell

Age 14

Where to see: Erie, Pa.

Before "Percy Jackson and the Olympians," Scobell nabbed his big break starring opposite Ryan Reynolds in "The Adam Project." He'll soon be seen alongside Michael Douglas in "Blood Knot."

After shooting Season 1 of "Percy Jackson," Scobell found himself looking forward to a few months of quiet. "This might be the only opportunity I have to go to a regular school again," he says. "Even if it's just for a month, I would really like to do that."

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learning about are real. To empower his son, Haley, Riordan positioned Percy's ADHD and dyslexia as strengths. They came from his battle instincts and his innate ability to read ancient Greek. Five books and 11 years later, Percy is a full-fledged hero, whose story will get a definitive screen adaptation when the TV series of the same name hits Disney+ on Dec. 20.

Between then and now, Riordan managed to quit his day job as "Percy Jackson" bloomed into a full literary ecosystem. There are two sequel series narrated by other characters, "The Heroes of Olympus" and "The Trials of Apollo," made up of five books each, plus companion books, graphic novels and, as of September, new books where Percy is the central character. That's before getting into Riordan's separate series based on Egyptian and Norse mythologies, or Rick Riordan Presents, his publishing imprint highlighting other authors and folklore.

It's hard to imagine that it has taken "Percy Jackson" almost two decades to get "Harry Potter" if, as Jon Steinberg, co-creator of the Disney+ series, puts it. Until you remember when 20th Century Fox tried to do just that.

According to screenwriter Craig Tilly, Hollywood studios began "buying up any book that had three kids chasing monsters" following the massive box office success of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" in 2001. Tilly ended up writing Fox's "Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief" at the invitation of director Chris Columbus, who had helmed the famed first "Harry Potter" film. "The problem," says a source close to the production at the time, "was Tom Rothman." The Sony Pictures chief, who was then co-chairman of 20th Century Fox, "was notorious for doing movies on the cheap. So if 'Harry Potter' is what you're aiming for, you're automatically handicapping the project."

"Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief" headed to theaters in 2005 with something of a built-in audience — which the source says Rothman took for granted. "He felt marketing could sell a known book series, so why spend top dollar? But the special effects are bad. There's not the edge that the books had." And according to Tilly, budgetary constraints led to major rewrites of some of the first book's most climactic moments, upsetting fans in the process.

Rothman declined to comment, but a source who was high-ranking at Fox at the time claims that Fox never discussed replicating "Harry Potter," and that it would have been unwise to give "Percy Jackson" a Harry Potter-like budget when the \$65 million the studio did spend was enough to do the job.

The movie made \$227 million at the box office — decent, but nowhere near the \$976 million reached by "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" on its \$225 million budget. Fox eventually greenlit a sequel, and "Percy Jackson & the Olympians: Sea of Monsters" made \$202 million in 2007. Some insiders felt that this dashed any potential for a major franchise. But the Fox source points out that Rothman exited the company in 2002 and priorities simply began to shift. Either way, the studio never bothered to adapt the last three books.

If you ask Uncle Rick, though, the problem was much bigger than money. "It's refreshing that Uncle Rick has the DPO movies even more than we do," a fan wrote on Twitter in 2020. Uncle Rick wrote back: "Well, to you guys, it's a couple hours' entertainment. To me, it's my life's work going through a meat grinder when I pleaded with them not to do it."

"Plead he did, as demonstrated in emails Riordan wrote to Fox in 2009. He published them on his blog in 2011 — nearly 3,000 words, not including the 24 pages of script notes he says he attached. In the emails, Riordan begs the studio to listen to him about how it could preserve the spirit of the book.

"After the movie experience, I basically wrote off Hollywood for a long, long time," Riordan says. "I really didn't want to have anything to do with the film industry. There were many years of me saying, 'I don't want to engage. I don't want to think about other adaptations. I'm done.' But when it started to become clear that something was going to happen with me or without me, I had a long talk with Becky, my wife. We said, 'Well, if something's going to happen, it's probably best to give it one more shot.'"

That "something" was the 2009 acquisition of 20th Century Fox by the Walt Disney Co., sending the screen rights for the "Percy Jackson" books into the hands of the Mouse House. For Riordan, the deal was cause for both concern and "a glimmer of hope."

It took "many meetings with many different executives and many different branches of the Disney conglomerate," but eventually the Riordans got on

board as executive producers of a new adaptation. Only this time, Riordan insisted that the project live on the small screen. "My feeling was always that television was the better format for 'Percy' because it allows a larger canvas to tell more of the story," Riordan says. "And to be more faithful to the source material, which is what the fans of the books really would love to see."

Things are different now that Uncle Rick is involved.

Shipping on a cup of coffee from craft services on the Vancouver set of "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" — it's January, and there's one week left until production wraps on Season 1 — Riordan says that one of the "fundamental mistakes" made in the films was that the characters were aged up. Logan Lerman was 17 when he stepped into the role of Percy Jackson, while Percy's friends, Annabeth Chase and Grover Underwood, were played by 23-year-old Alexandra Daddario and 25-year-old Brandon T. Jackson.

"Now, having been through the production process, I totally get why they did that. It's much easier to work with older actors," Riordan concedes. Still, "once you have older teens, it's a completely different dynamic. You lose so much of the wonder. The magic of being a middle grader doesn't come across the same way. There's a jaded teenage quality."

Riordan's eyes light up when he talks about finding the children who became his trio: "They're perfect, and they've only become more perfect."

Walker Scobell, who starred in "The Adam Project" alongside Ryan Reynolds, is just 14. "He's got that snarky attitude, but he's also very sincere," Riordan says. "Did I care that his hair is a different color than what is described in the book? Not at all. He just felt like Percy."

And 17-year-old Aryan Simhadri plays Grover, whose character is technically a 14-year-old half-human, half-goat. But says age gracefully, and the books say he looks 14. "Does he look exactly like I describe him in the book? No. That doesn't matter," Riordan says.

And then there's Leah Sava Jeffries, the 14-year-old playing Annabeth, daughter of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Riordan says her prayers most thoroughly: "Leah impressed me from the moment I met her. She has that sort of steel that makes her a leader, but there's a bit of vulnerability to her." He adds, "Now, again, does she look like Annabeth looks in the books? No. Was that important to me? No. If anything, it was a massive benefit to broaden the cast in terms of representation."

If Riordan sounds defensive about what his cast looks like, it's because he's been forced to be. Even in a mythological universe made up of bull-headed giants and three-headed dogs, fandom is a beast of its own. In 2010, fans took issue with the fact that Daddario was a brunette, unlike the blond Annabeth described in "The Lightning Thief." So it wasn't a total surprise that, when self-proclaimed purists learned that Scobell was blond, Simhadri was Indian American and Jeffries was Black, all hell broke loose. And not the kind overseen by Hades.

Lively sentiments poured out from the bleakest corners of the internet when Jeffries' casting was announced alongside Simhadri's in the spring of 2022. Less than a week later, Riordan turned to the blog through which he's communicated with fans since 2005 to say, "If you have a problem with this casting, take it up with me."

In the post, he condemns assumptions that he "must have been coerced, brainwashed, bribed, threatened" into choosing a Black actor to play the role, holding firm that Jeffries and her castmates "used their auditions to expand, improve and electrify the lines they were given." And he doesn't hesitate to label the backlash as racist several times before explaining that racism is an evil everyone, himself included, has to unlearn.

"It's something that we were well aware would be an issue as soon as we knew that she was the one," Riordan says of Jeffries. Being a middle school teacher

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