Call to Adventure

In an article for *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Catherine Butler discusses Harry Potter and the adventure within. Butler explains that “In being taken to the wizarding school of Hogwarts, a place impenetrable to Muggles [non-magic folk], Harry is effectively transported to another world, with its own customs and history” (233). The wizarding world is completely new to Harry, a place just beyond the confines of his cupboard that gives him an escape from his depressive life with the Dursleys. Once Harry is introduced to the wizarding world, he is finally free to enjoy what life has to offer, to see the world as more than just Privet Drive. Butler relishes the tools J.K. Rowling uses to set up her new and exciting world. These tools include substitution, which replaces common features of our world, like qualifying exams, with their magical equivalent, O.W.L.S. and N.E.W.T.S. This substitution allows the wizarding world to be both foreign and familiar to Harry and the readers, and for it to easily parallel real-world exploration and escape.

Harry’s escape is a situation many children dream of. The desire for a letter from Hogwarts to come and whisk them away from their mundane (in comparison) lives is especially poignant for Black children who live their lives at the intersection of several different systems of oppression. For them, the ability to visit a new world is not just a welcome distraction: it could mean the difference between life and death. One need only look at the murders of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Jordan Edwards or the disappearance of Black girls like Jholie Moussa across the United States to see that it is not safe for Black children to venture beyond the barriers of their neighborhoods. Children who look like Harry are given the opportunity to explore their world and it be considered normal childhood curiosity, partly because it is so normalized. Such adventure must be normalized for Black children as well, and that normalization is only possible through centering them as fantasy in Black Speculative Fiction does. Black children’s escape, whether psychological or physical, must be encouraged. Simply asking them to empathize with Harry does not work when their cupboard under the stairs becomes the entire world, with no Hagrid or rescue in sight.

Such an understanding would require an understanding of Black culture(s), which thankfully adventure also advocates for. When fantasy protagonists visit other locales on their journeys, they invariably learn about their cultures. Percy Jackson & the Olympians does this a little differently,
however, as the new culture comes to the protagonist. Though none would claim that the fantasy series is an all-encompassing study of Greek mythology, in “Re-Discovering Mythology: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians Saga,” Alexander Leighton makes a point of noting how the series can expose newer audiences to different cultural practices and beliefs. Leighton writes that “The readers may better appreciate, through having already read an adaptation, itself a conscious engagement with an existing cultural viewpoint, that assumptions about culture and society, and their associated values and attitudes, are not immutable, but rather openly invite discourse and re-invention” (67). It is possible to accurately portray unique cultures through fantasy literature, as Rick Riordan, the author of the Percy Jackson saga, does to great effect.

In an interview with Sally Williams from The Guardian, Riordan discusses how adapting the Greek myths to a more modern sensibility has helped his son and others like him. He sees his books as being mainly about family life and its complexities, simply using the Greek aspects as a backdrop to expand the readers’ imagination, thus making reality more relatable. Riordan believes that “we tend to think of divorced or complicated families as a modern invention, and that is not at all true.” He goes on to say, “you only have to read the Greek myths to see broken homes, widows, divorce, stepchildren, children trying to get along with new parents.” Exaggerating the typical broken home into a mess of demigod-hood and global adventure may seem reductive, but in actuality it heightens not only the enjoyment of the adaptation but its educational value as well. Leighton states that “through the adapted and appropriated vehicle of pre-existing mythological narratives, Riordan constructs a pleasingly familiar narrative of his own, which, through its unique twists and endings, allows readers to make different intertextual associations and form meanings and understandings of their own” (66). The adaptation allows for readers to associate the mythos they are introduced to with their own experiences, bringing them closer to the culture that they have been exposed to and slyly normalizing their circumstances along the way.

Exposure to new cultures, like the diversification of exploration, is a must for Black children. This is not to say that the Percy Jackson saga, or the Harry Potter series for that matter, is devoid of characters of color. Both series feature characters of color sprinkled sporadically throughout the texts in various capacities. However, the focus and true inclusion of characters of color, particularly Black characters, is what the series fall short of. At best, readers can hope to see these Black characters given minor roles in the main plot, but few of them get the type of care or deeper investigation that any of the primary protagonists receive. It is truly a shame, as watching such a
multifaceted adventure unfold could finally make the necessary steps to seeing more Black heroes in fantasy literature.