

Episode 22 - Disability Representation in The Lightning Thief

w/ Fay Onyx

If there is a mistake or mis-translation in this transcript please feel free to reach out to Mike for clarification! (thenewestolympian@gmail.com)

FAY: I will say that Dr. Brunner does do, Dr....? Mr....? oh gosh.

MIKE: Mr. Brunner! Dr. Chiron, Mr Brunner.

[INTRO MUSIC 0:09]

MIKE: What's good? Thank you so much for tuning in to another episode of The Newest Olympian. My name is Mike Schubert. I'm the titular newest Olympian. I'm a 29-year old man who never read the Percy Jackson series as a kid. But I read the first book as an adult. And I'm going to keep going to see if this is a book series that we've all been sleeping on. On this very special episode, we're going to do a little bit of learning about some things that we saw in the first book. I'm not on this quest alone, and I am joined by a wonderful guest today. Fay Onyx, a disability consultant and accessibility advocate, podcaster, writer, artist and game designer. Fay, how is it going?

FAY: Well, I'm doing great. And I'm really excited to be here.

MIKE: I am excited to have you. You had reached out earlier about being a disability correspondent of sorts, and here we are, months later making it happen.

FAY: Yeah, well, I'm really excited to talk about this in particular, because one of my areas of specialty is disability representation in speculative fiction storytelling. So I have a lot to say more than there's actually time. But well, I'm sure we'll get through a lot of good stuff.

MIKE: Yes, I think we should get right to the good stuff, so that we have as much time to talk about it as possible. Just to give people a sense of where you're coming from and your expertise here. Do you want to talk a little bit about yourself and why I'm talking to you in particular, today?

FAY: Yeah, absolutely. So I guess for me, it kind of all started with my podcast. I'm disabled, and I basically wanted to expand authentic disability representation. So I started using tabletop role playing games with disabled participants to kind of create new stories with authentic representations of disability. And I kind of realized that there weren't a lot of resources out there for a lot of topics. And I just kind of started writing articles and got to the point where I have a lot of thoughts and ideas about things that I don't actually see other people talking about, like how disability gets represented when you start bringing in speculative fiction elements like magic and superpowers, and how that mixes in. So I just started writing articles on it, and I haven't stopped.

MIKE: Nice. Well, that's fantastic. I think you bring up a great point that it does get tricky when magic and magical elements get into the mix. So I'm glad that you are going to be able to talk about that today.

FAY: Absolutely.

MIKE: I'm very excited to get to some of these topics. The first of which you've identified is ableist language, I think that is a great place to start. Because it's something that I think is very

important. It's important for me as a podcaster. I have made it very public that I am constantly learning to be better at this. Over the course of podcasting. I have weeded out words like crazy and lame from--

FAY: mmmm.

MIKE: --my vocabulary. And I think that it is something interesting to talk about, especially for this book, because from what I heard from various listeners. Some of the words used aren't what we would use today. Maybe they were what we would use in 2005.

FAY: mmmm.

MIKE: The first of which, that I brushed up against and I asked folks, is this not the right word to use? And people did confirm, crippled gets used a couple different times--

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: --in the story. The first instance is on page 10. When Percy as the narrator is describing Grover, and he talks about him being an easy target for being bullied. He says on top of all that he was crippled. He had a note excusing him from PE for the rest of his life. Because he had some kind of muscular disease in his legs. He walked funny, like every step heard him, but don't let that fool you. You should have seen him run when it was enchilada day at the cafeteria. So I guess right off the top, crippled not a word to use anymore, right?

FAY: No, and this is the one that actually surprises me. Because I'm not like a huge expert on what language was okay, you know, almost 20 years ago. But I'm pretty sure people knew about crippled.

MIKE: I thought so as well, because I did work with a charity with folks with disabilities in college. So I think it was like 2011? And by then for sure, crippled was not the rule. Like--

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: --the folks at the camp there right away were say disabled. Like it wasn't even a hesitation. But I don't know how much could have changed in 6-ish years.

FAY: Yeah, yeah. I think crippled is one that probably he should have known better. But he was trying to really capture a boy's voice I think.

MIKE: Okay.

FAY: And the fact that a young boy might use words that weren't fully appropriate. But I think it would have been more important to be respectful.

MIKE: And also you could have had something where he got corrected, right? If--

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: --if that is the point you're trying to make, you could have him say, wait, you can walk? I thought you were crippled. And then Grover could say you shouldn't say that Percy, you know?

FAY: Or he can even correct himself and be like, oh, I shouldn't be using that word.

MIKE: Sure.

FAY: Trying to remember not to use it. Like, that's definitely something kids will do.

MIKE: Yeah, totally.

FAY: And someone kind of really surprises me with a lot of the other stuff words like lame and use of crazy and all of the references to straight jackets.

MIKE: That does happen a lot in this book.

FAY: Yeah, right now is when we're in the middle of that shift with a lot of those terms. And so it doesn't surprise me that those show up because that shift is happening right now. You know, there's still people in the mainstream who do not have not even heard about this conversation.

But there's full communities that are on board with changing this language already. So we're like, this is the moment when it's happening.

MIKE: Oh, question that I have, I guess, just to keep it at the simplest level, just so anyone listening can walk away understanding, disabled would be the proper term here, yes?

FAY: Yeah, absolutely.

MIKE: It seems like disabled is the easiest one to say. And the one that I've never heard anyone have problems with. I know there's other ones like saying physically impaired or visually impaired or those ones we should avoid?

FAY: Interesting story with the word impaired, because that's one where in some cases, visually impaired most people feel okay with. But hearing impaired, folks in the deaf community find it very insulting. So I just generally try to stay away from the word impaired. But most other terms end up being kind of euphemistic and that kind of makes them like we're treating disability like it's something to be ashamed of.

MIKE: Okay.

FAY: So disabled is actually generally what we want to go with.

MIKE: Okay. Is there a reason why exactly that phrase is good? Sometimes it's hard, I guess, for people to get like, why this one is better than another one, as opposed to just a group of people deciding that that word is not the proper term.

FAY: I think it just kind of comes out of the history of other words, having coming from time some places and having uses that are really stigmatizing and insulting. And disabled is the one that we have that's much more neutral. And that we're working with as a disabled community and disability advocates and activists and it's kind of the settled on one that is respectful.

MIKE: Okay. And handicap is certainly another one to avoid, yes?

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: Okay, that's what I thought especially because that one implies like you are set back because handicap can also I don't know, chicken or the egg, but handicap is sometimes used in sports to to inherently put someone at a disadvantage.

FAY: It's not one that I would use.

MIKE: Okay. And then you had mentioned something being euphemistic I guess, phrases such as turn a blind eye or fall on deaf ears are these idioms that we should get rid of?

FAY: Yes.

MIKE: It it, I've okay--

FAY: Absolutely.

MIKE: --I was gotta say, I've caught myself saying some of them and just thought, no, uh uh uhm, shouldn't be saying that. So I'm glad to know that that is a good instinct of mine, I guess.

FAY: Yeah. Because how is a, you know, a a blind person supposed to feel about a metaphor, where it's basically using blindness as a synonym for not noticing things?

MIKE: Yeah, that sucks.

FAY: Yeah, it's it's not a good feeling, you know. I think a lot of folks are really focusing more on the specific ableist words. But I definitely think removing ableist metaphors as much as possible is definitely something worth working on as well.

MIKE: Okay. And then a similar thing in terms of words to not say, I think this would be the case for lame or for dumb, saying something like that so lame, or that's so dumb.

FAY: mmmm.

MIKE: Because those words were used for actual disabilities. Is that the problem with the words themselves? Or is that the problem with you're taking a word that was used to describe a disability and now you're equating it with that's so silly, or that's so ridiculous, or that's bad, etc?

FAY: Well, it's kind of both, right?

MIKE: All right.

FAY: It's just like how people used to say, that's so gay and--

MIKE: Right.

FAY: --it's like, well, if you're saying it, like it's a negative thing, then you're making gayness like this metaphor for bad things. So it makes a negative connotation for the word gay. It's the same thing with disability. So if you're using a word for a disability, for something negative, then we're creating that negative association that it's lesser to be disabled. But I think also I wouldn't call someone with a mobility disability lame.

MIKE: It is that because it's just gone too far in the zeitgeist of lame became too popular as a word to say that this sucks. So now it's kind of ruined.

FAY: Well, that's an interesting question.

MIKE: I would find it very strange for someone who can't speak or some like mute feels better than saying so and so is dumb.

FAY: Absolutely. So the terms themselves kind of have a little bit of this kind of historic stigmatized idea of what it means to be disabled. The word insane is in particular, really prominent of that. Because--

MIKE: mhmm.

FAY: --insane is not a specific condition. It's some sort of giant mush. And whenever people use insanity and like storytelling and stuff, you can tell that there's not a specific condition or even multiple conditions that are being referenced. And it's kind of this idea of like this giant mush of every symptom ever, plus any behavior that's considered not normal. All kind of mushed together in this giant soup of stuff with this kind of idea, that person who was insane, could just have any of these things. And you can see that this idea of what insane is does not match our current understandings of things like mental illness, nerd divergence. And it is inherently kind of a stigmatized, historic concepts. So I think that's a really great example of how the word itself has this whole history and this whole concepts deep inside it, that themselves are inherently stigmatizing. Yeah,

MIKE: that makes sense. I mean, we definitely see this with race in America, where it depends on how it was used and the time it was used.

FAY: Yes.

MIKE: When there was a lot of segregation, you would see colored water fountains, colored seats on the bus. And that is certainly something where it's more of just like it was used in such a terrible way.

FAY: mhmm.

MIKE: That we can't do it similarly with the word oriental. Like things you just--

FAY: Uh-huh.

MIKE: --you just cannot, you just can't say it now.

FAY: Whereas in other countries, there's different relationships to those words. And other words that in those countries were used as the more stigmatizing words. That that's when I briefly ran

into with the international thing once where I was just like, oh, that's a current term. Okay, not an America, but okay.

MIKE: Yeah, I should definitely preface that anything I say has the understood, I've lived in America my entire life. So I'm saying is American English specific. So another phrase that was used early on in the book that I got a lot of feedback about, I had just said this in the episode and folks reached out to me is when narrator Percy's talking about Mr. Brunner and his use of a wheelchair.

FAY: Hmm.

MIKE: He uses the phrase wheelchair bound. So he says, "A shadow slid across the lighted glass of Brunner's office door. The shadow was something much taller than my wheelchair bound teacher holding something that looks suspiciously like an archer's bow." So what I received in terms of feedback was people saying that you don't really say wheelchair bound anymore, you would say wheelchair user. Because wheelchair bound implies that someone who uses a wheelchair is always in a wheelchair, as opposed to someone who is a wheelchair user uses a wheelchair to move around. Is that the correct breakdown of it?

FAY: Yeah, I mean, I think the big thing that I think about with this is that there's the experience of wheelchairs that the experience from a disabled person who uses wheelchairs. And then the mental image of it from the mind of like, a non-disabled person. And like, especially historically, that's like, oh, wheelchair bound, you can't walk. That's the idea. A lot of people who use wheelchairs can walk, but they maybe have pain, or can only walk a short distance. But there's that kind of idea. But from the experience of disabled person, wheelchairs are freedom, right? That's kind of like a slogan that a lot of people use, like it's a mobility device. People use it to move through the world. That's why a wheelchair user is a much more respectful and appropriate term. And wheelchair bound is kind of this more historic, non disabled view of what it means to be disabled of like, you're trapped.

MIKE: That makes sense. No, that totally makes sense. So I think that this can get into something that you had mentioned when we were talking before recording here is what's very interesting about Grover and Chiron/Mr. Brunner. In this story is that they aren't actually physically disabled, but it's more of they are using disability as a way to mask their true Greek forms.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: So that's something that I've always found interesting. And a big reason why I wanted to talk about this with you is, I guess, first off, is that good representation? Does that make a bad representation? Is it somewhere in between? And I know that you have a lot to say about just in general how nonhumans representing a disabled person would go and how it is done in storytelling. So can you just touch on those things because that's the thing that I just as someone who is not disabled. I just have not a good sense of if this is good, bad in between, etc.

FAY: Right. So I think the first thing I would say is that there is a pretty significant negative storytelling pattern which is the able bodied person pretending to be disabled. Though it's not always able bodied people. In this case, we're thinking about bodies, but it can also be a neurotypical person pretending to be neurodivergent usually leaning heavily on negative stereotypes about being crazy.

MIKE: In air quotes for the folks listening--

FAY: Yes.

MIKE: --at home.

FAY: Literally did air quotes, absolutely. This pattern happens so often in storytelling, and it's really a big problem. Because what happens is there's actually a lot of harassment of folks, especially folks who are wheelchair users, who can walk so often called ambulatory wheelchair users. And so what will happen is, you know, they'll park in the accessible parking space. They'll maybe step out of their car to go get their wheelchair out of the back of the the car. And people will write the most nasty notes say horrible things. I think there have been cases where people have their cars key,

MIKE: Som, because they think they're faking it?

FAY: Yes.

MIKE: Oh, my gosh.

FAY: You know, in the placards like right there, or people will be in a grocery store shopping and want to reach something on a high shelf. So they'll stand up out of their wheelchair, or they'll use the scooter and stand up to read something on a high shelf. And people will give them dirty looks, be mean to them, cashiers will just be super hostile to them. Because they stood up from a wheelchair. And everyone knows that if you use a wheelchair, you can't stand at all. You know, it's the stereotype, right?

MIKE: Yeah.

FAY: So that's what I mean, it's that sort of, they don't match a stereotypical idea of what it means to be a wheelchair user. So people think they're faking it.

MIKE: Yeah. I mean, I will be honest, as a kid, that is something I for sure thought was a thing. It took me learning firsthand from people who use wheelchairs that this is the case. So I'm not surprised that that is pervasive. And I hope more people realize that you don't have to be completely unable to use your legs in order to use a wheelchair. You pointed out before, it could just be pain or fatigue, stamina, whatever.

FAY: Absolutely, lot of reasons. That's kind of a reason why this storytelling pattern is considered particularly negative. Because it's connected to so much real world harassment of disabled people. But I think the one thing that is a bit different is that unlike a non-disabled human pretending to be a disabled human, for whatever reason, we have nonhumans. And this is where we kind of get into some of those interesting aspects of speculative fiction and how that interacts with disability. Because there's actually kind of a big pattern of disabled folks specifically using nonhumans to represent disabled experiences. In many cases, able bodied non-humans, one of my favorite examples is kind of the mermaid in a wheelchair, basically. So if you have a mermaid, who doesn't have that situation where the moment her tail dries off, she magically gets legs, she always has a tail. That's what her body's like, and she wants to get around on land. And, you know, meet folks, and this is, you know, on a fantasy world where mermaids are normal, or whatever. A wheelchair is a really great option for her to move around on land. And at the point where she's using a wheelchair, then she has all of the accessibility needs of wheelchair users, because she is a wheelchair user. And that's kind of a situation where it kind of shows that although she is able bodied. Because her body is different from a standard human body. She has all the same accessibility needs. And that's kind of one of the interesting things about non-humans and using non-disabled non-humans, you can show how many barriers that disabled people encounter are created by society. So, you know, whether or

not this mermaid can get into a building, you know, that depends on are there ramps? Are there elevators? Are there wide enough doors? And so all of those things in the physical social environments affect this non-disabled person's access. And so basically, this is kind of a illustration of what is called the social model of disability. Which is basically something that was created by disability activists to basically push back against the idea that disability is only about the disabled person's body. The idea is, hey, actually, there's a lot about society that creates the experience of disability. If you have all buildings are fully wheelchair accessible, then the experience of someone who uses a wheelchair is just being a normal person.

MIKE: Yeah.

FAY: Because they can access everything they need to access and they're not experiencing barriers. But if you have a situation where it's like today in the US, where some buildings are accessible, some aren't, this experience of, hey, this is a building I can't get into, can we held move the meeting to a different place? Having to think of that ahead of time, all of these things, all of these barriers people encounter, those are created by society and how it physically organizes itself. And we can change that. And so I think this is why people really like using nonhumans because you can have someone who's non-disabled in their own species and have access needs. And it really highlights the social component of disability.

MIKE: Yeah, I think that's a good point. I think it definitely makes you feel more about the social element as opposed to the big air quotes, "Something's wrong with them"--

FAY: Right.

MIKE: --element because with the mermaid in a wheelchair, you would say nothing's wrong with the mermaid. The wheelchair just doesn't have access to where she wants to go.

FAY: Exactly.

MIKE: In the case of Mr. Brunner, though, is it worse because he's just using the disability as a way to fit in and hide who he truly is? As opposed to the mermaid case of she cannot get around? So she needs to get around. Is it worse because of Grover and Chiron are using it just to be incognito Greeks?

FAY: Yeah. So I think that is the big problem is that we do have this hiding component. And it almost feels to me like a missed opportunity. Because especially with Chiron, we see in Camp Half-Blood, he has access needs that aren't being met. As a Centaur, he has some access needs that are in common with wheelchair users. And I think that's where this is like so close and yet so far, because he's got a horse's body. horses aren't crate on stairs.

MIKE: Yeah, you could make some sort of allegory of of this camp is only built for the demigods, even though we have other beings you know, there's allegories to be made. I also like that you said missed opportunity, because it also sounded like you said missed opportunity, which it does feel like a missed opportunity of just, can you just use the mist to hide your horseliness as opposed to--

FAY: Right.

MIKE: --needing to use the wheelchair, I don't know.

FAY: Right. And I think if he had an illusion that made him look like he was in a wheelchair.

MIKE: mmmm.

FAY: But he was using his horse's body. I think that would, and there's a little height stuff going on there for sure. But it can use, I mean, magic hand wave, right?

MIKE: Exactly.

FAY: You know, wheelchair users need doors that are wider than folks who aren't using wheelchairs. He also needs wider doors. He has so many accessibility needs in common with wheelchair users. If it in adjustment illusion, but he had those same accessibility needs. Like he's not wanting to use the stairs, he wants to use that elevator, it would be so much better. But because he's hiding his body inside this wheelchair and he's faking things. All of a sudden he has that, quote, "wheelchair bound experience"? Because when he gets out of the wheelchair frame, it's not really a real wheelchair.

MIKE: mhmm.

FAY: But when he gets out of his frame, it's a relief. Like he was confined to that it's--

MIKE: Ohhh.

FAY: --it's literally taking those words wheelchair bound. Confined to a wheelchair, those negative ideas about what it means to be in a wheelchair. And that's literally his experience as an able bodied Centaur inside a fake wheelchair. Whereas if it just been an illusion, he could be like, no, I have the same access needs as someone in a wheelchair or not quite the same, but similar, right?

MIKE: Sure. Yeah. A missed opportunity for sure. Moving from Chiron/Mr. Brenner to Grover though. in Grover's case, he's just wearing fake shoes to cover up his hooves, which then as narrative, Percy says, "Makes him walk funny". I don't think--

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: --they ever actually call it a limp or tried to give any sort of medical sounding phrase to it other than that initial instance where narrative Percy says, that he walks funny and then sometimes saying he's stumbling stuff like that. How do you feel about the Grover situation as opposed to Chiron/Mr. Brunner?

FAY: Yeah. What what's interesting about Grover is that he doesn't seem to have as much in the way of access needs that are different from a non-disabled human. He's just hiding the physical appearance of his legs. There's a little bit you can get into in terms of kind of metaphors around how many disabled people, especially folks with invisible disabilities, may make efforts to pass is non-disabled in certain circumstances, for jobs, housing, anything that you need access to. I've I've definitely seen some people draw like parallel close to that experience of hiding. And like Grover needing to hide, and even seeing kind of interesting elements in the fact that when a disabled person is pretending to be non-disabled, for the purposes of avoiding stigma and accessing resources, that that's treating being non-disabled as normal. Whereas if a non-human is hiding as a disabled human that's in some senses normalizing being a disabled human. For me, the faking it is such a big issue that kind of overrides some of those little interesting details of it's not as bad as if it was an able bodied human pretending to be someone with some sort of what did they say? He thought Grover had some sort of muscular disease?

MIKE: His quote is, "He had some kind of muscular disease in his legs, he walked funny, like every step hurt him."

FAY: It's one step less badge. But overall, it's definitely a concern. Because it is such a big issue in terms of the everyday lives of a lot of disabled people.

MIKE: And in terms of trying to fit in to society, does that just come down to personal preference for someone who's disabled? I had a friend from back in my vine days who had a prosthetic leg from basically the knee down, and he would just roll his pants all the way up to his knee to make it very clear. Hello, this is prosthetic. On the flipside, I could see someone maybe

not wanting to bring that much attention to them having the pants go all the way down. Because otherwise you would not really be able to tell unless you looked really closely.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: Is that just up to the person? And it's just their comfort level? Or should we try to be moving society to a place where we just think you don't have to hide? How should we feel about that?

FAY: Well, it does have a lot to do with discrimination. And there's a lot of people with visible disabilities where there is no hiding. Having an invisible disability is a situation where you kind of have this double edge sort of situation. Because when people pass and probably the better term would be passing as nondisabled--

MIKE: Okay.

FAY: --rather than hiding. So I was using the term too, but probably should shift over to passing as the more respectful way of talking about this.

MIKE: Yeah, sure.

FAY: So when a disabled person passes as non-disabled, sometimes that's people are making assumptions and their disability is invisible. But sometimes it is for like, if you're in a space where there's, you know, a lot of stigma going on, or you have a job interview or something, it's very real, that if you show up visibly disabled, that's going to affect how likely you are to get a job. So there's definitely a situation of people might choose to pass as non disabled in order to access resources that should be accessible to everyone. And if we can do away with all that stigma, then that's going to be very important for visibly disabled folks having equal access to resources that they deserve to have. And for folks feeling like they don't have a pressure to pass. But I will say there is also a thing with folks who have invisible disabilities. They may also choose at certain times to try to make their disability more visible if they need to access resources that come along with being a disabled person. As we've mentioned, there's a lot of stuff if you don't match the stereotype of a disabled person visibly. There's can be a lot of harassment when you want to go to access resources that you shouldn't be able to access in order to get assistance and various things like that accommodations. So there's this kind of interesting back and forth thing that some people have to do in order to access resources. And it is certainly a privilege to be able to pass as non disabled because there are definitely people who don't have that. So it's important to recognize that but it is an experience that many disabled people have. And so it is interesting how it does kind of reflect some of those experiences in an interesting way. But overall, pretending is bad.

MIKE: Okay, okay. And trying to shift towards aspects of the representation here that felt better as opposed to things that made me wince a little bit while reading. I think one thing that is nice is just the not making a big deal of it all.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: He is never bothered by the fact that Grover walks funny as he says the narrator he's not making a big deal that Mr. Brunner uses a wheelchair.

FAY: Absolutely.

MIKE: Sure. Narrator Percy/Rick didn't use the most proper term but at least in the sentiment of it, Percy seems like a nice accepting kid that doesn't try to say, oh, whoa, he's so weird because, so is that at least a good thing that was done in the books in terms of just Percy's general acceptance and not trying to act like these people are in a bad situation?

FAY: Absolutely. And I think there is some power that it starts out with the reader thinking that these are humans with disabilities, in terms of the normalization part of it. Because that is part of probably why Rick did do a lot of this is he wanted to create a lot of sense of disability as a normal part of everyday life. And hey, in the US, 1 in 5 people has a disability. But yeah, disabilities are super common and super normal. But also, a lot of them are hidden, but some of them are visible. And it is a contrast to a lot of stories where it's just like, there's like just no disabled people in the entire world, except for the one blind seer or some other horrible stereotype. It's nice that he really made an effort to kind of normalize disability. His uses Percy as a very close, intimate narrator is actually one of his storytelling techniques for really communicating a neutral, accepting attitude about disability. And also communicating Percy's personal experiences with disability. Because if it wasn't such a close narration, or we get all of his thoughts, it would be hard to understand how his behaviors relate to his ADHD, especially. Because that was the one that was really portrayed pretty well, overall, not perfect, but pretty well. And because it's such an intimate perspective, he has his own thoughts about that. And his own thoughts can be like, this is part of me. And this is affecting how I make choices. But he's not getting down on himself, right? He's saying, like, oh, I just did a really risky thing, you know, and he's recognizing that that's part of his ADHD and how that affects his risk assessment. And we get his own disability normalized, and his acceptance of other people being disabled and having a world with disability in it. And we see a couple little points where he just thinks about disability here and there were again, it's really, an effort is being made to normalize it. So I definitely think Rick was trying really hard. And I think that there is some power in that normalization. Even if he included an actually very negative trope, and got so close to something so much better.

MIKE: Yeah. I think the general feedback that I've gotten and from what people have told me is that they could tell Rick's heart was in the right place.

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: And I think that he has said things about how he could have done better. I've personally avoided reading this stuff, because I'm afraid of--

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: --a spoiler.

FAY: Sure.

MIKE: Because it would be terrible if he he wrote something about disabilities like, yeah, when Grover dies, and book 3, you know, I don't want to accidentally read anything. So my understanding is that he had his heart in the right place. He's trying to do his best. He recognizes it wasn't perfect. And he's admitted to that. So doing the best he can sort of thing like, what else can we ask folks except for that they try their best. And if they make a mistake, own up to it, and then move forward.

FAY: Absolutely.

MIKE: So I think that's where it's at. I do want to talk a little bit more about Percy, but I'm actually going to take the time here to do a natural transition for the Lightning Brief or mid-roll break. Woahoho!

[LIGHTNING BRIEF 33:30 - 37:08]

MIKE: And we're back. Wow. So you touched a little bit about Percy. I do think talking about how he fits in to the story because ADHD is certainly disability and Percy runs into struggles with it. So, moving a little bit away from the physical disabilities. I think it's still relevant. As far as how Percy fits in you talked about him as a narrator and how that affects his general acceptance of Grover and Mr. Brunner. But as far as Percy in the story, how do you feel like he felt in his representation, any element related to him as a character or a narrator? Or both?

FAY: Well, one of the things that I really noticed, this is actually a problem with the representation of Chiron as well. And still very pervasive problem in disability representation is the lack of tools and accommodations for disabilities. And I think this really comes in with people wanting to show how disability impacts people's lives, or in the case of Chiron, inadvertently showing a bunch of accessibility barriers, just to take a moment to talk about Chiron he can't get inside the cabins. Apparently he has no table at the eating Hall because the tables are all too low for him. And for some reason no one built a Matala table.

MIKE: I was gonna say that feels wild. You know Chiron is gonna be here all the time.

FAY: Also the big house. Okay, we have this big house. And when Percy goes to see the Oracle, it specifically says he went up four flights of stairs. How did Chiron go to see the Oracle?

MIKE: I would hope that there's an elevator. But I don't know. Maybe someone with flying powers flew up? I don't know. But that's a great question that you raised and I didn't even think about so I'm glad you're bringing it up.

FAY: And there's no mentions of the oh, this house has extra tall wide doors sized for centaur.

MIKE: I'm also imagining someone playing a mediator as someone goes up the stairs and is in the mummy and then is yelling out the window to Chiron on the ground for, the mu--the mummy said, they said that there's gonna be a big bad guy.

FAY: Right. And it's just like, there is no reason Chiron is the head teacher or something. And he's always hanging out on the porch.

MIKE: He's very important. made accommodations for him make accommodations for anyone but Chiron, come on, you know he's gonna be there.

FAY: And also he's apparently their best healer, which then makes the fact that he can't go into the cabins. A little--

MIKE: Oh my gosh, you're right.

FAY: --bit more concerning.

MIKE: You're right, my goodness.

FAY: I mean, it would be nice for the doors to be tall enough for him to go in and chat with someone. But he's not living there. So it's less of an issue, but because he's the main healer all of a sudden It's like, well, what if someone's incapacitated?

MIKE: mhmm.

FAY: You don't necessarily want someone without healing skill to move someone just so the healer can examine them.

MIKE: Right. Because you can move them in the wrong way.

FAY: Right. Especially if you had a spinal injury.

MIKE: Sure, yeah.

FAY: So it's just like, oh, dear, oh, dear. So these are all accidental. I think Rick didn't really fully understand. We've identified access barriers. That's not the end of the story. That's the first step.

MIKE: mhmm.

FAY: Step two is addressing them.

MIKE: Right, right.

FAY: This is often an issue. And this is an issue with Percy's representation, too. He's clearly struggling in school. And his struggles are very real. And they're based on Rick son's struggles, I imagine. Those are all very real. And this, especially with ADHD, I think the accommodations were probably a lot less good than they currently are. But there is this thing of like, I think authors still have this issue. Where they'll want to show how disability causes struggles. So they'll show a person struggling with something and there's no tools and accommodations. There's nothing in place to help them. So we know that he's having trouble reading the books at his school. He's having trouble remembering stuff he learns in class. But he's not getting a note taker to take notes for him. I will say that Mr. Brunner does some things that are actually good for ADHD students. I think it says that they play games in class.

MIKE: Yes.

FAY: Which gamified learning is actually a really great thing for folks with ADHD.

MIKE: Oh, cool.

FAY: He brings in a sword and does stuff. So it seems like there's more physical movement going on in class, which is also really good for students with ADHD. But it's not something that's part of his school. And everyone knows he's got ADHD, but there seems to be no attempt to be like, okay, how can we help these students succeed? And I think the thing is, others want to show the struggle of disability. But just because you have tools and accommodations doesn't mean there's no struggles. The tools and accommodations don't erase the struggle necessarily. So if you have a wheelchair accessible building, that's fully accessible to folks, but maybe the person has chronic fatigue, and that's still going to be a struggle in their life. At least for right now, we're going to be constantly coming across aspects of society that don't quite fit our needs. And even just taking the time to do things a different way, that in itself can be surprisingly time consuming. So he would still have struggles if he got accommodations. You know, the ADHD doesn't go away, because you've got tools, but the tools help you achieve results. And, for example, a separate room where he can take tests so that he's not distracted while being tested. That is something that would be very helpful for him, probably, and would probably help him achieve more on tests. And it's simply because the way his brain is, the distractions in the environment of just other people doing things are going to have a disproportionate impact on him. But you know, for example, I think y'all talked about executive function a bit when you're talking about ADHD, folks with ADHD have a harder time with those sort of planning, dividing things up into tasks and stuff. But a lot of people have said that this, this really does help them be creative in ways that maybe a neurotypical people find a little more challenging to do. So there are benefits and and challenges. But it's like the challenges don't just go away. There's less stories, showing people struggling with those challenges, while also having tools and accommodations. And I think there's just less knowledge of what that even looks like, and how to portray that.

MIKE: Yeah, it's one thing just to have the struggle, but if the books and not saying that these books have to get super deep into best teaching practices. But if there was something that kind of showed what you can do to make things easier for someone with whatever the disability is. That allows people to learn a little bit more, what options are out there in order to make people's lives a little bit easier?

FAY: Absolutely. And for me, this is something I really care about in terms of disability representation. Because one of the things that I have, I have anxiety and I have panic disorder, it really impacts my life. It took me so long to learn that there even were techniques that could be used. So breathing exercises don't work for me for various reasons. But pretty much all of the the first pass exercises people give for anxiety are breathing exercises. And I've never heard of anything else to help with anxiety. And so when COVID started my panic disorder got really bad. It took me a while to learn, like, here are specific things I can do to help my brain calm down when I'm having a panic attack. Or when I have some symptoms that make me feel like, oh, my brain just got triggered for a panic attack. But I have a few moments to try to head that off. You can do these different counting techniques where you go through your different senses and count objects. And there's different things like that. And that there's these actually quite sophisticated tools that science has helped us come up with, that really make a huge difference. And even knowing that they exist, and I think that's what hurts my heart in stories is when I see that character with anxiety, just suffering with it. And people may be comforting them. But they're just struggling with intense anxiety their whole life, and they don't even, they're not getting any help. And it just hurts my heart to know that because I've been there in a situation where I had doctors and stuff. But there was so much help, I didn't even know that I could get. To bring it back to Percy's struggles, my heart hurts for him too. Because I have quite a few people with ADHD in my life. And I've done some research on different things that help people. And it just hurts my heart. He doesn't have a little book that he's carrying around to write important things in. Like there's just nothing happening to help him with these struggles. And my heart just hurts for him. Because I really identify with that myself.

MIKE: Someone, someone help Percy, please. So we're running out of time here. But one thing I did want to talk with you about just because I think it's something that a lot of folks have conflicting opinions on. So I think getting as many voices around this as possible is helpful. In terms of the ADHD and dyslexia of Percy and other demigods being sort of explained to be, what makes them a demigod? Do you think that this is good, bad in between?

FAY: It's complicated. Like so much of what Rick is doing in these books, he's trying really hard. He doesn't know all that he needs to know to really do it as solidly as he could be. And part of it's the time period. And the thing that I would say is with disability and superpowers, there's actually a whole bunch of disability and superpowers, storytelling patterns that just come out a lot. And two ones that kind of get close to what's going on with Percy. One is the disability causes the super power, every time I've run into it, it's been a problem, let's just say that.

MIKE: Okay.

FAY: The really gross way it can come out, which isn't in the story. But just to give it a contrast, disability makes someone kind of incomplete almost. And somehow magically, they just develop a superpower to complete them.

MIKE: Uhm.

FAY: Which is a problem. But it also can just be like, oh, this person has a disability. And they're given a superpower that just so happens to perfectly make up for their disability.

MIKE: mhmm.

FAY: Which again, implies kind of a lack. But where this gets close to what Rick's doing here? Is because a lot of these ideas of superpowers making up for disability are based on a tiny grain of real stuff in disability. Which is, you know, the plasticity of the brain with people who are blind,

the whole visual cortex, that brain space gets used for other things. And also because blind people pay more attention to their hearing, they have the same kind of hearing that any other average person has. But because they pay more attention to it and develop it. You know, it's just like how a musician who's trained can hear things in music that I certainly could not hear.

MIKE: It's like how I can hear mouth clicks and mouth sounds--

FAY: Ohh.

MIKE: --really well after editing myself--

FAY: Oh gosh.

MIKE: --and other people podcasting for the past five years. It's rough, if I try to watch something with low quality microphones, like when they're doing the stuff on C-SPAN in the Senate, they've got those really crappy, tiny little microphones. Oh-o, it's nails on a chalkboard everywhere. I just made a mouth sound, but no one at home will hear it because Sherry editing will have edited it out because I've bestowed my curse onto her. When I taught her how to hide mouth sounds in audio. That yeah, that's just my my trained ear, unfortunately trained too well.

FAY: Identify with this, so hard. Yes, the mouth sounds.

MIKE: mhmm, mhmm. mhmm.

FAY: Oh my gosh, I'm losing my headphones. That's how much that identify with this. So there is some realness to brain plasticity. And there's also you know, hyperfocus, great example of a disabled experience that feels like a superpower to some people. So there's these grains of real things. But then there's kind of this ablest interpretation of it, that these are almost intended to make up for disabilities and goes off in that direction. But I think the kind of idea is almost like, well, if we take these real things and exaggerate them. And I kind of feel that's almost what's happening here, almost maybe unintentionally, because I think we got to be real. There's a reason why battlefield reflexes and ADHD have different names.

MIKE: mhmm.

FAY: Are using literally different terms.

MIKE: Yeah.

FAY: There is an actual difference there. And saying they're the same thing doesn't make them actually the same thing. And he's definitely trying to take experiences from ADHD, and being like, here's how it would apply to a battlefield. And that's cool. But I think there is this element of he's trying to add in this magical element that's kind of interfacing with the ADHD. And he's trying to, as much as possible, make that into the ADHD, I think. And I think that's where it gets a little weird for some folks, because he's kind of maybe exaggerating things a little bit or tacking on fictional elements. That's where it gets messy, because he's trying to replicate the experience of maybe hyperfocus. But he's tacking on these other things. When you take a real experience, and you directly put fictional elements in, you end up in a situation where some people will still identify with the real experience. And be like, oh, this fictional elements are fun for me. But some people are like, that's not my experience anymore. And I think that's part of what's going on, because the other one is superpower causes disability. Which is one that can go good or bad, depending on how it's implemented. And I think in this case, that's also sort of what's happening, even though it's not at all stated. He's trying to say they're the same thing. But real people don't stand in water and get super combat abilities.

MIKE: Right.

FAY: So there's obviously super powers happening here. And I think if we look at the actual implementation, there is some elements of we've got the super powers and the super battlefield reflexes, which could be thought to be the super instant combat ability. Which is great fictionally, we don't have to have a weird explanation for how he's instantly good at sort of fighting, it's magic, done, go wreck. But if we save that's also the battlefield reflexes, then it's a little more like the battlefield reflexes somehow causes ADHD. And if he was really clearly saying, somehow this thing causes the ADHD. And sometimes ADHD merges with it really well and sometimes it doesn't, that could actually work. And that's where if you keep them separate, or you have the superpower, kind of causing the disability, but the disability itself is represented fully, accurately to how it is in the real world. I think it would probably be a lot less weird for folks, than kind of pretending that the same thing when they're not, and kind of stitching in a little bit of fictional elements into a real experience.

MIKE: Yeah, I think you make a really good point there because Annabeth when she's explaining it to Percy, basically says, no, no, no, your ADHD is your battlefield reflexes. But what you're talking about here does make sense that it does kind of feel like two different things. Because it doesn't just exist when he is using it as battlefield reflexes when he's in a battle.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: It still manifests into his everyday life. So you do get a bit of an interesting situation where, oh, when it's good, it's battlefield reflexes. But when it's bad, it's ADHD. So I can see how them being the same but different is, as you said, at the very top, it is complicated. It kind of feels like the way that the superhero pneus of it comes through is good in terms of the attitude similar to trying to act like the physical disabilities of Grover and Mr. Brunner aren't a big deal.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: I think it does do a good thing for not being ashamed of it and trying to say, look, it can be a a thing to be more proud of, or something that just makes you different, not necessarily making you worse.

FAY: mmmm, mmmm.

MIKE: But I think what you pointed out and made clear to me here is that it can fall short in terms of explaining someone's experience.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: Because the way that Percy struggles with ADHD might not be the same for everyone.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: We see him hyperfocus in a good sense, we don't see him hyperfocus in a detrimental sense anywhere. So--

FAY: Right.

MIKE: --I think that the representation of it, Rick's heart was in the right place, trying to do good things for acceptance. But in terms of the actual details of it, maybe that fell short a little bit,

FAY: Right. And I think that's the thing that happens with disability representation and superpowers so much is there's so many people doing it with good intentions, but who aren't fully aware of all of the common patterns that can become negative. That people just keep recreating those unintentionally thinking that's fully good representation. For me, the big thing is, it's great to have disabled folks with superpowers. Superpowers are fun.

MIKE: Yeah.

FAY: Who doesn't want to have a superpower?

MIKE: Right.

FAY: That's great. I think the thing is keeping if it's a real world disability, keeping that pure in terms of its representation, matching what real people experience. And then you can have it bounce off of the superpowers. I don't know if you've ever listened to The Bright Sessions, but--

MIKE: I have, I know, Lauren Shippen is a great friend of mine.

FAY: Oh, right. Of course, I think you've had her on.

MIKE: A couple of times--

FAY: Yeah.

MIKE: --on this podcast, yes.

FAY: Absolutely. And it's just a exceptionally good version of having disabilities and superpowers deeply entwined. But the disability itself is represented accurately. And so they bounce off each other in really interesting and complicated ways. But the disability itself is still represented accurately to the real experience of it.

MIKE: Yeah.

FAY: So it's possible. But I think, you know, I'm not surprised for struggle with that a bit. Because he's trying so hard to give a positive version of what it could be to have ADHD to his son, 20 years ago. When there was so much less known about how to do things, right?

MIKE: Yeah. And I know what Lauren has done and what people are doing more. And I think Rick is done now is talk to people who are actually affected by whatever you're trying to write.

FAY: Yey!

MIKE: And then that way, you know, you're doing it in an accurate way. And I've done the podcast version of this, where I tried to talk to folks who know what's going on, so that I don't try to straight white sis man it.

FAY: Right.

MIKE: Just be like, here's what I found on Wikipedia for an hour. So thank you so much Fay for joining and explaining all of this so thoroughly in a way that is easy to understand. And we can all go forth and get a better appreciation for the good and a better understanding of where things fell short. And I'm excited to see how this continues to develop over these five books in later in the series. But if people want to find you doing more stuff, where can they find you?

FAY: Yeah, so my website is writingalchemey.net. I have a massive resources tab that has all sorts of stuff about disability representation, and all sorts of things there. Also my podcast is called Writing Alchemy. Right now it's focusing on using tabletop role playing games, with disabled participants to tell stories of disabled heroes. That are authentically represented and show some of these, both struggle of disability but also having access needs and things met. And to just have more and more of this authentic representation of disability. And I will say, I have a long term project coming out, which is called The Adventures Academy. It's going to be well before it comes out. But if you follow my podcast, or follow me on social media, like with Twitter, [writing_alchemy](https://twitter.com/writing_alchemy), The Adventures Academy is all about creating a magical school that really focuses on creating a healthy learning environment and making the education aspects of the school really fun and exciting. Rather than having the drama be about bullies and unhealthy environments.

MIKE: Love that.

FAY: And that's going to have disabled participants, disabled characters to really create these positive representations of disability.

MIKE: Fantastic. Well, I look forward to that. Thank you again so much for joining. Listeners, Thank you so much for listening and until next time when we begin the Sea of Monsters.

FAY: Oooh.

MIKE: Which is a wild thing to say, already moving on to book two. Until then, I'll Per-see you later.

FAY: What a sign-off, okay.

[OUTRO 58:33]

Transcriptionist: Vernon Bryann Casil

Editor: Krizia Marrie Casil