Shabti Robots and Hieroglyphic Spells: Rick Riordan's Egyptians Egypt for a young audience

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Abstract

Rick Riordan is best known for his *Percy Jackson* fantasies, in which the Greek gods are alive in the modern world, but his spin-off series *The Kane Chronicles* is set in the same universe with an Egyptian focus. Riordan transposes the Egyptian gods, pharaohs and world-creation legends into the present, closely engaging with ancient material. *The Kane Chronicles* focus on ancient artefacts (imbued with magical powers), language (particularly hieroglyphs which "turn words into reality") and stories of the gods and pharaohs. Shabtis become mystical robots, the Duat holds secret locker spaces, and museums become sites of violent magical combat. But images of Egypt are as powerful as the ancient materials and Riordan presents the modern world as a global Egypt. This essay examines how Riordan transforms Egyptian materials (artefacts, culture and reception) to construct a modern ancient Egypt.

Keywords

Rick Riordan; *The Kane Chronicles*; *The Red Pyramid*; *The Throne of Fire*; *The Serpent's Shadow*; hieroglyphs; magic; fantasy; mythology; museums.

Young people in the UK often first encounter ancient Egypt in primary school, where they are typically fascinated by the mummification process, delighting in visceral details such as the draining out of brain matter through a dead body's nose. Fantastical images of mummies and other mysterious ancient artefacts, the strangeness of hieroglyphic writing and magical stories about Egyptian afterlife rituals all hold rich potential for children's literature. Popular images of ancient Egypt appear in a number of science-fiction texts produced for children, which often capitalise on the supernatural and fantastic potential of the material. One example of this appropriation is *Star Ka'at* by André Norton and Dorothy Madlee (1976), in which domestic cats turn out to be distantly related to a race of extra-terrestrial super-cats—Ka'ats—whose ancestors were respected in ancient Egypt, and even worshipped as the goddess Bast.[1] *Star Ka'at* contains only scattered, and sometimes slightly covert, references to Egypt, since the Ka'ats work through their own powers of telepathy and telekinesis, rather than any inherited powers

1 Norton and Madlee, *Star Ka'at*, 43, 62, 79.

Aegyptiaca (8) 2024, 214–238
https://doi.org/10.11588/aegyp.2024.1.105657

from their Egyptian ancestors. Other authors have more recently made more extensive use of ancient Egypt in work for young people, such as Julia Jarman's *The Time Travelling Cat and the Egyptian Goddess* (1992) and Dugald Steer's *Egyptology: Search for the Tomb of Osiris* (2004). Crucially, these texts also show evidence of some engagement with Egyptological scholarship.

The twinning of Egyptological information and children's writing in English stretches back to Lucy Sarah Atkins Wilson's *Fruits of Enterprize Exhibited in the Travels of Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia: Interspersed with the Observations of a Mother to her Children* (1824), and such noteworthy fictional examples as E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* (1906). The latter was dedicated by Nesbit to the Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum, Ernest Wallis Budge. Virginia Zimmerman points out that Nesbit relied on Budge for Egyptological details,[2] grounding her fantasy novel in her readers' contemporary reality by merging aspects of contemporaneous Egyptological thought with its more imaginative elements. Work on children's literature and ancient Egypt has so far largely focused on texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably for example, in Joanna Paul's, Eleanor Dobson's and Victoria Zimmerman's analysis of Nesbit's *Story of the Amulet*.[3] The field of Egyptology has of course changed dramatically during the intervening century, and thus the engagement of twenty-first-century children's writers with Egypt and Egyptological information equally deserves critical attention, bringing our understanding of the intersection of Egyptology and children's literature up to date.

An example of a more recent author working within this tradition of Egyptological children's writing, and on whom this essay focuses, is the American Rick Riordan, best known for his middle-grade *Percy Jackson* fantasies, in which the Greek gods are alive (and having children) in the modern world. His spin-off mini-series *The Kane Chronicles* (2010–2012) is set in the same universe, but with an Egyptian focus. Riordan transposes the Egyptian gods, pharaohs, artefacts, and legends into the present day, reframing his established formula to fit this material. Riordan's books are fast-paced adventures, with weird events on almost every page, and *The Kane Chronicles* follows the patterns Riordan previously set up in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* pentalogy (2005–2009). The narrative is action filled, and this is reflected in both the speed and the frequency of incidents and action. The books follow conventions borrowed from role-playing video

2 Zimmerman, "Excavating Children", 76.

3 On Nesbit's novel, see Paul, "'Time is only a mode of thought, you know'"; Zimmerman, "Excavating Children"; and Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*, 108–111.

games (themselves often rooted in science-fiction or fantasy worlds) in their narrative structure. The teenage protagonists of all of Riordan's mythological books acquire special skills and weapons, use healing potions, and spend considerable time killing monsters, often multiple times, in order to gain experience to fight a bigger monster in the next encounter. The monsters themselves always vaporise in some manner appropriate to the mythological context after they have been killed, and in *The Kane Chronicles*, monsters disintegrate into desert sand. Robert K. Ritner observes that, because it emerged from receding flood waters, sand was associated in ancient Egypt with the creation of the Egyptian cosmos and "all creative acts",[4] making it mythologically appropriate for Riordan's narrative—just one instance of Riordan's attentiveness to Egyptological scholarship. Each book in each series ends in a climactic battle in which the characters fight to save their families, friends, and homes, while each series models itself on a grander mythological quest to save the entire world. The *Kane Chronicles* trilogy comprises: *The Red Pyramid* (2010), in which the protagonists discover their heritage and learn Egyptian magic, finally defeating Set at his red pyramid; *The Throne of Fire* (2011), which sees them travel on Ra's night boat and attempt to restore Ra to his throne; and finally, *The Serpent's Shadow* (2012), in which they defeat Apophis and restore Ma'at. A spin-off mini-series, *Demigods and Magicians* (2016), finds the protagonists from *The Kane Chronicles* teaming up with Percy and Annabeth from the *Percy Jackson* series. The two sets of characters meet monsters who mix Greek and Egyptian gods into a Ptolemaic mash up, and they need to combine forces to defeat their enemies through an amalgamation of their own special powers.

Despite this fantastical approach to antiquity, the books closely and directly engage with ancient literary, visual, and material artefacts. The *Kane Chronicles* makes explicit use of the Ancient Egyptian language—particularly in written hieroglyphic form—which, we are told, has the power to "turn words into reality".[5] Likewise, the action of *The Kane Chronicles* regularly involves ancient artefacts and archaeological sites, which are always imbued with magical powers. The mythical stories of gods and pharaohs provide an overall narrative structure for each book and for the trilogy as a whole. Shabtis become mystical robots, the Duat holds secret locker spaces, and museums turn into sites of violent magical combat. Yet later images and receptions of Egypt are as powerful as the ancient materials in these narratives. Riordan constructs ancient Egypt as both global and transhistorical, through the dispersal of its artefacts around the world and its

4 Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 155.
5 Riordan, *The Red Pyramid*, 187; Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 224, 11.

resulting currency in popular images and culture from the Roman period to the present. Riordan thus blends evidence with fantasy, capitalising upon his novels' potential not only to transport his readers to archaeological sites far removed from their own experience, but also to the kinds of artefacts that they may well encounter in museums more local to them given the global distribution of ancient Egyptian material culture across such institutions.

In this article, I examine how Riordan transforms Egyptian materials (material artefacts, literary culture, and later receptions) to construct a modern—and global—ancient Egypt. In examining the novels' depictions of magic, the significance of hieroglyphs and artefacts, and charting a movement outward beyond the confines of individual museum spaces to the broader global proliferation of ancient Egyptian symbolism, I suggest that, in *The Kane Chronicles*, ancient Egypt's material culture, its mythology and iconography, as well as its later receptions, hold power for the protagonists once they are able to access and use their understanding of this knowledge. Riordan's readers are, likewise, themselves encouraged to become participants in the pursuit of this knowledge, learning along with the protagonists, and ultimately encouraged to understand antiquity and its continued power in the modern world.

Magicians and the House of Life

Egypt is often appealing for modern audiences because of its magical, supernatural and fantastical connotations. This aspect is consistent with earlier receptions of Egypt from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. David Gange demonstrates how occultists and mystics drew on ancient Egyptian material and on the work of contemporary Egyptologists like Flinders Petrie and Wallis Budge to enhance their spectacle.[6] Similarly, Eleanor Dobson argues that the association between ancient Egypt and magic, in the forms of illusion and occult power, were vital to Egypt's continued relevance in the late nineteenth century.[7] These associations have permeated children's literature, from Nesbit's magical amulet which functions as a time-travel device to Norton and Madlee's extra-terrestrial Ka'ats who practise telepathy. In the twenty-first century, this association becomes more complicated, as ancient Egypt is one of many themes to which authors might turn to evoke supernatural powers, and there is evermore Egyptological scholarship

6 Gange, *Dialogues with the Dead*, 264.
7 Dobson, *Victorian Alchemy*, 20.

on which authors may draw and to which they have unprecedented access as a result of the internet. Riordan's response is one which is aware of this history of Egyptian reception as well as to ancient Egyptian materials themselves; as such, in his works, magic is a recognisable manifestation of ancient Egypt's power not only limited to genuine ancient Egyptian sites and artefacts but to modern replicas, receptions, and reimaginings from the nineteenth century to the present.

The British Sadie Kane and her American brother Carter are the teenage protagonists and narrators of *The Kane Chronicles*. Their first connection with Egypt is through their parents, who were both Egyptologists (or so they are led to believe): their father Julius was an archaeologist and their mother Ruby an anthropologist. However, Sadie and Carter's uncle Amos reveals to them that this was a "cover story" for their parents' real work as magicians. Their father specialised in translating ancient spells, which, Amos explains, are very difficult to understand unless the translator can themselves work magic. Surviving Egyptian "spells" do indeed employ cryptic and symbolic language which obscures their meaning, such as cryptic words claiming to be the secret names of gods and demons.[8] Thus, the narrative grants supernatural powers to Egyptologists and academics, and fictionalised descendants of some of the most historically famous Egyptologists feature in the series. We learn that Jean-François Champollion, who was vital in the modern European decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs, "died before he could join" the magicians' organisation,[9] but that he was nonetheless "a great magician—respected by mortals and magicians alike".[10] Subsequently, Champollion's fictionalised descendants become trained magicians, including his fictional great nephew Michel Desjardins, who plays a significant role in the series' first two books. Amos goes on to explain how Egyptian magic and the gods function in this universe:

> In the old days, the priests of Egypt would call upon these gods to channel their power and perform great feats. That is the origin of what we now call magic. Like many things, magic was first invented by the Egyptians. Each temple had a branch of magicians called the House of Life. Their magicians were famed throughout the ancient world.[11]

8 Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 68.
9 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 230.
10 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 309.
11 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 72–73.

Amos anchors the supernatural element in the past, relating magic back to the ancient priests. He also makes an explicit link between the supernatural and the divine because he defines magic as channelling the power of the gods to perform supernatural acts. He equates early priests with magicians, but subsequently only uses the word "magician" to talk about those who "channel" the gods' power. Riordan also introduces the House of Life—often referring to it by its Egyptian name, *Per Ankh*, sometimes in hieroglyphs,  —as the organisation which still operates to train magicians and for which they afterwards work. Sadie and Carter discover that their parents were magicians working for (and sometimes against) the House of Life, and their uncle Amos is another powerful magician. They find that they must also train to use magic effectively and to channel the powers of the gods to perform more powerful magic. Sadie is chosen to channel the power of Isis, while Carter is chosen for that of Horus. The magicians in the series can perform magic in several ways, particularly through the Egyptian language, using ancient artefacts, at archaeological sites or in locations which evoke the reception of ancient Egypt. They interact with the Duat, "the world of spirits and magic", which "exists beneath the waking world like a vast ocean, with many layers and regions".[12] Only magicians, gods and monsters can access the Duat, and the lower layers are where most of the gods and monsters exist much of the time when they are not interfering with the ordinary world. The Duat allows magicians to travel across the world, to see the monsters as they really are and to interact with the gods, mythological narratives, and also the land of the dead.

Mythology is a recurring phenomenon in children's literature, partly because of its fantastical and frequently unexpected narratives. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum argue that mythology remains popular for children because the narratives are powerful and young readers feel attraction towards the "strange alterities" that these stories offer.[13] Nonetheless, as Sarah Iles Johnston observes, the idea of myth is "a notoriously slippery beast";[14] she examines mythology both from antiquity and from modern popular culture in an attempt to explore how mythology functions. Since ancient Greek mythology is "often far from morally uplifting" in ancient sources, Lisa Maurice notes that its frequent inclusion in texts for children is surprising.[15] Dobson, meanwhile, shows how nineteenth-century retellings of the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris concealed sexual elements

12 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 81.
13 Stephens and McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture*, 62.
14 Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 1.
15 Maurice, "Children, Greece and Rome: Heroes and Eagles", 1.

not considered appropriate for a young audience.[16] The fluidity of mythological stories allows authors considerable flexibility to use and adapt stories to suit their purposes, as indeed, many of the modern narratives inspired by ancient Egypt considered in this special issue attest.

Riordan is flexible with his material in many ways, both in terms of the mythology and even in terms of what "counts" as Egyptian. Katja Goebs describes the structure of Egyptian mythology as composed of so-called "mythemes", episodes and images which formed a varied body of materials allowing the selection in antiquity of whatever was especially appropriate to the circumstance of a particular spell or ritual. She suggests that these myths were probably not fixed in terms of structures "and were thus adaptable to a wide range of contexts".[17] Riordan uses this flexible potential in reworking the stories of Isis, Osiris and Horus—they can be brother and sister like Sadie and Carter, or husband and wife, like Sadie and Carter's parents. On several occasions figures of authority remind the teenage magicians (and indeed Riordan's readership) that "conflicting stories can be equally true" in Egyptian mythical culture.[18] Such flexibility is often embraced in twenty-first-century children's literature engaging with the ancient world, for example in Vicky Alvear Shecter's series *Secrets of the Ancient Gods* (2013–15). Shecter prefaces each book in the series with a "caution", in which she draws attention to the adaptability of Egyptian mythological narratives: "ancient Egyptian stories and beliefs often changed by district or divinity and […] often contradicted each other".[19] Riordan applies a similar flexibility to places, objects and artefacts, where modern objects, such as the glass pyramid outside the Louvre, function as essentially "Egyptian" and hold the same power.

Riordan uses a broad range of ancient Egyptian materials and their subsequent reception to create his magical world. He makes use of the language and hieroglyphic writing system, ancient Egyptian mythology, artefacts, and ancient sites in Egypt, as well as drawing on the legacy and receptions of Egypt in later imaginations. However, he also draws on contemporary Egyptological scholarship, with the result that his readers may be empowered to understand those elements they might encounter in museums, books, and other media. Riordan's books encourage readers to engage with antiquity in very contemporary ways, as ancient Egypt's power and magic become embedded in the everyday lives of the protagonists, and, in turn, his readers themselves.

16 Dobson, "The Language of Dreams", 606.
17 Goebs, "A Functional Approach", 58.
18 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 339.
19 Shecter, *Anubis Speaks!*, 7.

Writing and language

Language and writing are often linked to magic in fantasy texts, whether characters use bespoke magical languages (such as Elvish in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth) or written signs (such as the rune Gandalf inscribes on Bilbo's door in Tolkien's 1937 novel, *The Hobbit*). Li Cornfeld asserts that in *Harry Potter* language "carries tremendous power", so that Voldemort cannot be named, letters speak and students at Hogwarts learn "how to do things with words".[20] J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series draws on the magical potential of the ancient world via Latin, which is the linguistic root of most of the universe's spells, perhaps a nod to the Classics-based education of British grammar and public schools across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.[21] Although Hogwarts does not charge fees, it is nonetheless an elite British boarding school, and Latin's cultural place in this world is palpable. Nesbit's magic is also connected to the act of utterance, so that the hieroglyphic incantation on the amulet releases power when someone speaks it aloud. Dobson notes that the moment in which reading aloud occurs —which is more often than for adult fiction the mode of reading of children's literature, either by the child reader themselves or by an adult reading with them —dematerialises the text on the page.[22] Magic is thus linked to written and spoken language, and especially to the moment the written word is uttered aloud, in fantasy texts across the twentieth century.

In the popular imagination, the most familiar form of the Egyptian written language is hieroglyphic text. The strange and mystical appearance of hieroglyphs gave rise to various stories about their magical power, both before and after their decipherment. As early as the Middle Kingdom, writings emerge which play with the appearance of hieroglyphs, occurring more frequently in the New Kingdom.[23] For example, Richard B. Parkinson shows how Papyrus EA 10303 in the British Museum from the Third Intermediate Period contains some words which use figurative rather than phonetic hieroglyphs.[24] These figurative or cryptographic uses of hieroglyphs vastly increased during the Ptolemaic period. John Baines has argued for an understanding of restricted knowledge in Egyptian society and suggests that the increasing complexity of Ptolemaic writing was accompanied by

20 Cornfeld, "How to Do Things with Magic Words", 125.
21 Maurice, "Children, Greece and Rome", 10.
22 Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*, 110.
23 Gaudard, "Ptolemaic Hieroglyphs", 173.
24 Parkinson, *Cracking Codes*, 81.

a reduction in the numbers trained to understand it.[25] There are Egyptian inscriptions and treatises dating from the Roman Imperial period which play on ideas of power and mysticism embedded in the written forms of words. An inscription of part of the temple of Esna, probably dating from the reign of Domitian, serves as a good example of highly cryptographic Ptolemaic hieroglyphs.[26] Similarly, Papyrus Carlsberg VII, a fragment from a hieroglyphic dictionary probably dating from the first century CE,[27] provides etymologies that do not reflect the linguistic aspects of words but instead focus on the hieroglyphs as representing objects with mythical connections.[28] Pieter W. Van der Horst has suggested that Egyptian priests may have been responsible for some of the stories about the cryptic knowledge contained within hieroglyphic writing to preserve their own prestige.[29] The stylised formation of the symbols adds to the cryptographic element, since it is often difficult to identify what some of the hieroglyphs might have portrayed. While Alan Gardiner's sign list classifies all Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs into groups according to what the signs (seem to) depict, this list contains a category of "unclassified" signs that still defy identification of what they may have represented.[30]

Riordan places considerable importance on the Egyptian language and hieroglyphic writing. This in itself is not original to Riordan's work, since it is a feature of earlier children's literature, including Nesbit's aforementioned *The Story of the Amulet*. But although Nesbit includes a line of hieroglyphs in her novel and her protagonists learn to speak the phrase aloud, the hieroglyphs' relation to sounds and words ultimately remains mysterious. Dobson notes the handwritten quality of the hieroglyphs as they appear in the novel, which allies them to the transcription process undertaken by Egyptologists.[31] By contrast, Riordan's hieroglyphs are printed in a dedicated font rather than rendered as illustrations, and his protagonists explicitly link individual hieroglyphs to their phonetic values and explain their meanings. We see in Riordan's fiction a greater attentiveness to conveying an educative experience for his readership, who come away with an introduction to hieroglyphs which they can apply long after their readerly experience with these texts has drawn to a close.

25 Baines, "Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy and Decorum", 17.
26 Leitz, "Die beiden kryptographischen Inschriften aus Esna", 252.
27 Iversen, *Papyrus Carlsberg nr. VII*, 4.
28 Iversen, *Papyrus Carlsberg nr. VII*, 13.
29 Horst, "Hierogliefen in de ogen van Grieken en Romeinen", 52.
30 Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 539–543.
31 Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*, 103.

For instance, he explains modern identifications of some of the more abstract symbols within the narrative, rather than leaving them as cryptic symbols. The first word written in hieroglyphs in the text is the word "open", —  — *wp*. Carter describes the hieroglyphs as "ram's horns above a box", while Sadie unconsciously translates the word.[32] The protagonists encounter the word as a magical command, and the narrative focuses our attention on the supernatural events, including the appearance of hieroglyphs glowing in mid-air, rather than the mysterious shapes of the hieroglyphs themselves. Riordan purposefully plays down the strange visual appearance of hieroglyphs, instead focusing on their meaning. Similarly, Sadie explains the symbol for the House of Life—  —*pr ʿnḫ*: "the top one is shaped like the floor plan of a house", "and the bottom picture is the ankh, the symbol for life".[33] Carter confirms that Sadie has described the symbol  *pr*, indicating a house, accurately, even though it is not the way that a house would be typically rendered in a modern illustrative approximation. In this way, the narrative keeps the appearance of the hieroglyphs themselves within the realm of modern Egyptological scholarship. The magical properties of hieroglyphs are not contained in their mysterious or cryptic appearance, but in other aspects of the language and writing system.

Egyptian accounts of magical practices emphasise the link between language and magic, since speaking the appropriate words can trigger a magical action. For example, the magician Djedi in the tale of *King Kheops and The Magicians* in *Papyrus Westcar* performs his magic through his words:

 [34]

ʿḥʿ.n ḏd.n Ḏdi ḏdt.f m ḥk³

Then Djedi said his magic spell.

The connection between magic and language is explicit in the words used to describe Djedi's action. Djedi "said" (*ḏd.n*) his "spell" (*ḏdt.f*), and the repetition of the sound *ḏd* (both words are etymologically linked) emphasises the interrelationship between the two acts: speaking and magic. Djedi's name is from a different root and does not relate semantically to the root *ḏd* for speaking (it is written using  rather than ). Nonetheless, the alliteration of the sound *ḏd* is part of

32 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 25.

33 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 55–56.

34 Blackman, *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians*, 11. Transliteration and translation mine.

a reference to magical utterance, which consists of the verbal action, speaking, and its object, the magic spell. Riordan picks up the link between language and magic in ancient Egyptian sources in the way that magic functions in *The Kane Chronicles*.

At the start of their training, Carter and Sadie are told that the "Egyptian word *shesh* means scribe or writer, but it can also mean magician. This is because magic, at its most basic, turns words into reality".[35] Sadie, in particular, turns out to have a natural ability to read Egyptian hieroglyphs, and hieroglyphs form a central part of the magic that all of the characters perform. There is no etymological link between the Egyptian word for scribe, *sḫ*, and that for magician, *ḥkꜣw*, but Riordan draws on the idea that practitioners of magic in ancient Egypt were commonly priests.[36] Chief Lector priests and those who gained the title Scribe of the House of Life were particularly associated with magic, perhaps because of their skills in writing.[37] Thus, the link between language and magic is central to Egyptian religious practices, in which language and writing are creative, active forces which can shape reality. For example, spell 449 in the *Pyramid Texts* reads,

ppy sḫ-nṯr ḏd ntt s-ḫpr iw ntt
Pepy is the divine scribe who says what is and brings into being what is not.[38]

Here, the text ascribes the power of creation to language, since language does not just describe what already exists, but is also able to bring new things into existence. As the divine scribe, Pepy can verify what exists and also create new things, thus shaping the world. Early in their training, Sadie and Carter are instructed to create magic through the written word: "You will create a scroll. Using your own magic, you will send power into the words on paper. When spoken, the words will unleash the magic".[39] The words they write bring into being the things that they describe: a bird, a sword and fire. As she becomes more skilled, Sadie learns to use hieroglyphs to create actions.

35 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 187.
36 Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 50.
37 Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 52.
38 Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 153. Transliteration and translation mine.
39 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 187.

The creative power of hieroglyphs forms the basis of the way in which magic works in *The Kane Chronicles*. Riordan follows the pattern of Latin spells in *Harry Potter*, in which spells may be enacted by uttering a particular word in Latin, rather than in English. Riordan's Egyptian magicians similarly often perform magic by speaking the appropriate word in Egyptian, which causes glowing hieroglyphs to appear. The hieroglyphs are reproduced in the text for the reader to see the visual appearance of the words as well as to enhance the magic behind the symbols, and the words are transliterated in a form which allows the reader to say them aloud easily. For example, two of the most frequently used "spells" in *The Kane Chronicles* are "destroy" to break down locked doors and "join" to repair damage—caused either by monsters or teenagers. Amos demonstrates how magic can be used to mend a broken plate when he says "*hi-nehm*", and the appropriate hieroglyphs for the word *ḫnm* appear glowing in the air and are printed on the page—  .[40] When Sadie needs to break down a locked door, she recalls the correct Egyptian word for "destroy", and declares "*hadi*", as the hieroglyphs for the word *ḥḏ*—  —explode the door rather dramatically.[41] This reflects our understanding of the ways in which Egyptian writing held cultural and religious significance. Francesca Iannarilli observes:

> Writing can be laden with strong sacral connotations, often regardless of its content, and this is particularly true for Egyptian writing, where signs are not only the messengers of a spoken language but can come into existence and act in the very moment in which they are engraved on stone.[42]

This close relationship between the written and the spoken language is emphasised in *The Kane Chronicles* as the signs appear in the air when the words are spoken. The hieroglyphs then trigger the action, which is enacted at the same moment. Hieroglyphs are always powerful in *The Kane Chronicles*, regardless of the meaning they may convey, and they allow the magician to exert power and control over actions. Sadie and Carter are told that hieroglyphs are "the language of creation, of magic, of Ma'at", and the connection with Ma'at as divine and universal order gives the magician power to control reality.[43]

40 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 74.
41 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 87.
42 Iannarilli, "Write to Dominate Reality", 41.
43 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 187.

In *The Serpent's Shadow*, Sadie and Carter face the chaos magic of Apophis, which the narrative presents as the antithesis of Ma'at, divine order. When Sadie faces an early attack by Apophis, she has to push back the chaos that the monster brings by restoring divine order. She does this by speaking the word *Ma'at* so that the hieroglyphs form the written version of the word—  —in the air in front of her.[44] She then focuses on the glowing hieroglyphs, because they are the "symbol for order and creation".[45] The magic here depends on Sadie speaking the word and then internalising the action, thus performing it. Nils Billing notes how, in the *Pyramid Texts*, the words and images together "create space-bound performatives", in which a recitation mark "word to be spoken" (*ḏd mdw*) precedes every spell or unit of spells or "has been arranged atop every single column on a separate wall section".[46] The relationship between speech and hieroglyphic writing is closely intertwined in the magic of *The Kane Chronicles*, and Riordan draws on the performative nature of Egyptian spells. The magicians must speak the word, thus creating the hieroglyph, but then need to focus on the meaning that the hieroglyph creates. In the case of more complex spells, such as Sadie's *Ma'at* spell, the magician needs to perform the action the hieroglyph creates. The magicians' power lies in their ability to form, control, and perform the language, both spoken and in written hieroglyphs.

The use of ancient languages in children's fiction drawing on antiquity has evidently grown and developed in recent years, particularly where the writing system is different to that of the language used in the text. The visual appeal of hieroglyphs and their symbolic value adds mystery to their use as a magical language. Riordan also employs and explains the phonetic values of the hieroglyphs, enabling his young readers to identify written words and empowering them to voice the spoken words. He draws closely on scholarship and ancient evidence about how Egyptian writing was used and the powers ascribed to it. As such, the Egyptian language offers him the possibility of communicating for his young readers the relationship between magic, language, and the written word.

44 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 26.
45 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 27.
46 Billing, *The Performative Structure*, 29.

Artefacts

Ancient Egyptian texts often appear on objects, whether carved into stone or painted onto walls and coffins. In *The Kane Chronicles*, these objects also accrue power, like the language itself. Amos tells Sadie and Carter that "as Egypt faded, its magic collected and concentrated into its remaining relics", and magicians "can use these artefacts as focal points to work more powerful spells".[47] Artefacts are therefore as important as the language for the magical adventures in the series and its spin-offs, as each holds the potential to unleash various divine and other magics. For example, in the mini-series *Demigods and Magicians*, in which Sadie and Carter meet Percy Jackson and Annabeth, Sadie observes that the canine monster she is holding with a magic rope had been "a harmless artefact, a stone fragment from some statue" sitting on the library table. It suddenly came to life when it was awakened by a powerful magician and broke through all of the spells that she and her fellow magicians had cast on it.[48] This borrows from ancient Egyptian burial customs in which objects are attributed power and life for the deceased, particularly when objects bear hieroglyphic inscriptions.[49]

The narrative does not only rely on the power of objects and artefacts that survive from antiquity, however, as the magicians continue to create objects that relate to those featured in ancient stories and legends. Sadie and Carter each wear an amulet that their father gave them: Carter's is the eye of Horus  , signifying his link to the god, while Sadie's is the *tyet*,  , linking her to Isis. The *tyet* is also the titular amulet in Nesbit's novel, providing Riordan's *tyet* with a magical precedent, which seems to speak with the voice of Isis herself. Sadie thinks that her amulet looks like a "killer alien robot", but these amulets hold both linguistic and material power for their wearers, protecting them as well as helping them to channel the power of the divinity with whom they have formed a connection.[50] Amos keeps a white crocodile called Philip of Macedonia swimming in the pool on the terrace of his house, which is the Brooklyn branch of the House of Life. He explains that in antiquity "no temple would be complete without a lake full of crocodiles", because they are "powerful magic creatures".[51] Later, Amos reveals that Philip is actually a wax crocodile, as real crocodiles "are much too difficult

47 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 75.
48 Riordan, *Demigods and Magicians*, 76.
49 Forman and Quirke, *Hieroglyphs and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 32.
50 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 31.
51 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 71.

to keep", pointing out that he did tell Sadie and Carter earlier that "he's magic".[52] Amos imitates the magician Weba-iner from *Papyrus Westcar* who constructs a wax model crocodile, which transforms into a full sized animal when it is thrown into the water. Weba-iner goes on to transform it back:

kst pw ỉr.n Wb³-ỉnr ʿḥʿ.n ẖ³.n.f sw wn.ỉn.f m ḏrt.f msḥ n mnḫ
Weba-iner then bent down and picked it up and in his hand it was a crocodile of wax.[53]

When Sadie and Carter return to their uncle's house at the end of *The Red Pyramid*, they take on the role of Weba-iner by throwing the wax crocodile into the pool, and watching it turn back into Philip of Macedonia. Many Egyptian crocodile figurines survive among burial equipment,[54] and also as amulets, such as this Ptolemaic faience amulet of a crocodile now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (fig. 1). Philip may represent both Weba-iner's literary crocodile and the physical objects that have survived from antiquity.

When they find a strange small wax figure in their father's magic box, Carter explains to Sadie that it is a *shabti*, a wax or clay model, and that Egyptians made them as "servants to do every kind of job they could imagine in the afterlife".[55] In the same way that Amos keeps his wax crocodile, the teenage magicians learn to create and use *shabtis* as magical robots to fetch materials in the library and do the cleaning. There is humour when four *shabtis* return to their pedestals as clay figures, but "one was still wearing rubber gloves and holding a feather duster, which looked a little odd".[56] Sadie makes several attempts to create a *shabti* of herself so that it could "do all her chores like a remote-controlled robot".[57] Unfortunately, these are not entirely successful, and one such attempt creates "a magical Thermos with googly eyes that levitated around the room, yelling, 'Exterminate! Exterminate!'", a reference to the antagonistic extraterrestrials known as the Daleks in the science-fiction television series *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-).[58]

52 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 401.
53 Blackman, *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians*, 4. Transliteration and translation mine.
54 Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 99.
55 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 94.
56 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 45.
57 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 141.
58 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 142.

Fig. 1: Ptolemaic faience amulet of a crocodile, Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public Domain: http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544910.

Doctor Who is a distinctly British cultural icon, appropriate for the British Sadie. More advanced magicians can use *shabtis* as "stunt doubles" to take the place of another person, and this is successful enough to be convincing for anyone who interacts with the *shabti*.[59] Carter inherits his father's wooden magic box, which contains a lump of wax, a wooden stylus, a palette, some jars of ink, some brown twine, an ebony cat statue, a roll of papyrus and a wax *shabti*.[60] Additionally, the magicians use ivory wands and keep a resident baboon. These items echo those identified in the Ramesseum so-called magician's box, which contains reed pens, papyrus, and figurines, as well as ivory wands and baboon amulets.[61] Riordan's magicians create objects which relate to antiquities from ancient Egypt, particularly small everyday objects or common objects of which multiple examples have survived into modern times, such as *shabtis*. These are the types of objects that readers might be able to see in museums or find pictures

59 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 313, 487.
60 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 91.
61 Miniaci, *The Middle Kingdom Ramesseum Papyri Tomb*, 16–20.

of from collections around the world on the internet. It is critical, however, that these objects are magical because they imitate antiquities and ancient practices, rather than because they are themselves ancient.

Riordan's use of artefacts provides his narrative with a kind of Egyptological authority, since he has taken care to draw on surviving artefacts and scholarship in conceiving of them. In addition, the ways in which the protagonists describe and understand the artefacts suggest a very contemporary appreciation of their place in the twenty-first century. Sadie's description of her *tyet* amulet as a "killer alien robot" and the *Doctor Who* reference her magical thermos evokes both underscore a contemporary perspective—even a futuristic aesthetic. This shifts the artefacts between their ancient past and their contemporary re-use within the fantastical mythological world Riordan creates, emphasising the artefacts' ancient past and the significance they have accrued during their extensive receptions.

Museums and sites

When Amos describes the magical power contained within ancient Egyptian artefacts, he points out that although many relics are still in Egypt, many are elsewhere, and as a result "you can find some in almost every major museum".[62] Therefore, museums—as well as ancient sites—are a rich source of magical potential in *The Kane Chronicles*. Sadie and Carter visit several major museums to consult particular artefacts or to collect magical items locked within the artefacts, such as a papyrus scroll magically concealed within a statue of Khnum.[63] The first magical scene in each of the three books takes place in a museum: the British Museum,[64] the Brooklyn Museum,[65] and the Dallas Museum.[66] The museums provide access to many Egyptian artefacts, but the density of antiquities packed into the space also turns the museums into arenas for combat as the gods and monsters aim to destroy artefacts while the magicians try to use the magical power of those artefacts. This usually results in the apparent destruction of the objects themselves—only for them to be magically restored afterwards. Sadie and Carter's first such encounter is when their father uses the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum to summon Osiris—but he releases five gods, rather than just one.

62 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 75.
63 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 14.
64 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 17.
65 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 9.
66 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 5.

Sadie and Carter watch as the artefact seems to explode into smithereens, but Amos later assures them that magicians in London will have magically restored it. Sadie and Carter later find out that this action released Set, who in turn released many other gods "from artefacts all over the world".[67] The artefacts are powerful not just for magicians but also for any other gods, monsters, or magical remnants of ancient Egypt.

The artefacts hold clues for understanding mythological stories as well as providing magical power. In *The Throne of Fire*, when Sadie and Carter are instructed to locate the Book of Ra, they find they need to examine a black stone statue consisting of two figures in Brooklyn Museum. Clues on the statue help them to work out that the larger figure is Khnum, who "made humans on a potter's wheel", while the smaller figure, who wears a scarab amulet, represents the new life that Khnum creates, so that together the two figures portray rebirth.[68] This allows Sadie and Carter to understand that the object they want must be magically concealed within the smaller figure, since Ra takes the form of a scarab when he is reborn at dawn. However, whenever they need to use an artefact within a museum to locate a magical object, the magicians also trigger various magical traps, and these transform the museum into a battleground as they are forced to fight against both artefacts and monsters. In the Dallas Museum of Art, as Sadie, Carter and their trainee magicians search for a particular version of the spell against Apophis, various objects come to life. An "army of tiny *shabti*" surround one magician while a statue of Anubis chases another around the room, "smashing things with its fists".[69] Statues of monsters are particularly dangerous since they can materialise into physical monsters or release the spirits of those monsters. These artefacts turn from being relics of antiquity, which visitors are supposed to study and examine and instead embody parts of ancient legends which need to be controlled.

Ancient sites also contain power, but the power here is as much in the location as in the artefacts that remain there *in situ*. The temple in the remains of the city of Thebes (Luxor) was "one of the most important in Egypt" and is therefore the "best place" to practise combat because "it is still full of magic".[70] Sadie and Carter are instructed to practise their combat skills in Luxor because the site was sacred to the pharaohs, and their family descends directly from those pharaohs. The magic of Luxor is as much rooted in the place as in the ruined

67 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 167.
68 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 12.
69 Riordan, *Serpent's Shadow*, 23.
70 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 191.

architecture remaining there. However, artefacts and ancient sites can do even more than conceal magical objects, enhance magical power, and provide clues about mythology to help the magicians confront their enemies. Magicians can also use sites and artefacts to provide doorways or portals through the Duat to other locations. Gates play a key role in Egyptian funerary literature and may be represented by various geographical features. They are important symbols of transition, and John H. Taylor points out that they are all "places of supernatural power" where the deceased faces challenges.[71] Riordan's portals contain supernatural power, but primarily they function in a similar way to teleportation systems in computer games. Games with a large playable area often provide a system of internal teleportation to allow the player to move around swiftly once enough of the world is playable. The structure of *The Kane Chronicles* requires the characters to move quickly between Britain, America, and Egypt, and portals are one way of achieving this. Sometimes, the characters travel directly between distant places by entering the Duat magically, although this is often dangerous. Portals generated from artefacts are also a convenient way of escaping danger, since museums and archaeological sites provide both danger and the means of escape. In this way, the remains of the temple of Dendur dedicated to Isis in the Metropolitan Museum has "enough power to open a gate" to Cairo, while the Luxor obelisk provides a portal to its former partner obelisk which is now situated in Paris.[72] Because the artefacts and remains of buildings are now situated all over the world, they allow the action to move swiftly across continents. Artefacts become key points of travel as well as potential danger, but they also link up areas of the world to create a global Egypt.

Alice Stevenson has noted that by the twenty-first century Egyptian antiquities have become a "staple part of the museum viewing experience".[73] Certainly, Riordan makes even greater use of museums and ancient sites in *The Kane Chronicles* than he does in his other franchises. Museums provide access to a specific—and widely popularised—image of ancient Egypt, as a culture richly illuminated with gold and precious materials, one which is obsessed with death and the supernatural. Stevenson argues that these popular museum displays "constitute a form of hyperreality in which the Egypt that is encountered is conceptual, detached in time and space from the modern country".[74] Riordan plays with these familiar tropes of ancient Egypt in his magical elements, but he also engages

71 Taylor, *Journey Through the Afterlife*, 134.
72 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 137.
73 Stevenson, *Scattered Finds*, 242.
74 Stevenson, *Scattered Finds*, 242.

with modern Egypt's relationship with its own past. The protagonists first travel to Egypt through a magical portal, arriving at Cairo airport because it was built over the ruins of the ancient town of Heliopolis.[75] They find that the entrance of the House of Life's headquarters in contemporary Egypt is positioned in a hidden but not ruined part of ancient Heliopolis, as Sadie and Carter are told that archaeologists have only discovered a small proportion of the ancient ruins.[76] Their guide is a modern Egyptian teenager who is also a scribe of the House of Life. During those episodes of the narrative which take place in modern Egypt, Riordan draws his readers' attention to the changes in Egyptian society over the intervening centuries. Riordan's contemporary Egypt controls its heritage, not only by concealing most of its antiquities from intruders and archaeologists over the ages, but also through those antiquities that lie dispersed across the globe. Ancient Egypt becomes a cultural force which permeates societies across the world, and potentially unites them under a common inheritance.

The Globalisation of Ancient Egypt

Early in their adventures the protagonists learn about the legacy of ancient Egypt in the contemporary world. Amos tells them that a "legacy that powerful does not disappear", and as evidence he tells them to "look at the pyramid on the dollar bill", as one-dollar American bank notes feature the image of this Egyptian structure. Amos describes the Washington Monument as "the world's largest Egyptian obelisk" and he concludes that all these signs indicate that "Egypt is still very much alive".[77] As Heather K. Cyr points out, "[b]y mixing authentic antiquities"—obelisks among them—"with modern and nineteenth century recreations and making each equally magical, Riordan's use of settings displaces age as an inherently powerful force".[78] The Washington Monument is indeed shown to be a potent neo-Egyptian site later in *The Red Pyramid* when Sadie and Carter need to travel from Paris to Arizona in the moments before sunset while they are chased by magical fruit bats. They reach the plaza outside the Louvre where a glass pyramid serves as the entrance to the museum. Sadie protests that the glass structure is not a "real" pyramid, but she is informed that "the *shape* gives a pyramid its

75 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 148.
76 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 156.
77 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 72.
78 Cyr, "Pyramids in America", 131–132.

power", because it is "a ramp to the heavens".[79] In her panic over a combination of magical fruit bats and the impending sunset deadline for travel, she opens the portal to America in general rather than Arizona specifically. Sadie and Carter land inside the Washington Monument, as it turns out this is "the largest single source of Egyptian power in North America", and thus is the default portal for the North American continent.[80] The two artefacts they have used as portals—the glass pyramid at the Louvre and the obelisk-shaped Washington Monument—are both relatively modern buildings, but their shape represents ancient Egyptian architecture, and thus they still function as ancient Egyptian structures in the narrative. Their chaperone, the goddess Bast, explains that the Egyptians "picked shapes—obelisks, pyramids—that were charged with magic", and as a result, it "doesn't matter when the structure was built: it is still Egyptian".[81] This invests Egyptian buildings with mystical significance of the sort which was often applied to the mysterious appearance of hieroglyphs. It also ascribes the same power to the legacy of Egypt as to artefacts surviving from Egypt's antiquity.

The artefacts themselves, which are scattered across the world in museums, and the legacy of Egypt, which pervades cultures across several continents, enable Riordan to create a global ancient Egypt. The places Sadie and Carter visit are often linked through the artefacts and buildings which are from Egypt or represent its legacy. As they pass the obelisk in Luxor on their way to the temple ruins, Carter observes that the missing second obelisk is in Paris, and the Luxor obelisk subsequently provides their portal to the French capital.[82] In *The Throne of Fire*, Sadie and Carter travel from London to St Petersburg in Russia. The pair of Victorian sphinxes left over from the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in London take them to a pair of Egyptian sphinxes from Thebes outside Russia's St Petersburg Hermitage.[83] Their companion for this journey, the god Bes, tells them that these sphinxes are the "furthest-north Egyptian artefacts in the world", since they were pillaged from Luxor and brought "to decorate Russia's new imperial city".[84] They use a legacy artefact to leave Russia for Egyptian Alexandria: the two sphinxes which stand on each side of the nineteenth-century Egyptian bridge over the Fontanka River. The Egyptian artefacts and mock-Egyptian items which represent Egypt's legacy serve to connect different parts of the world through a global

79 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 235.
80 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 239.
81 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 242.
82 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 191.
83 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 150.
84 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 151.

Egyptian inheritance. In response to this globalisation of Egypt, Amos explains to Sadie and Carter that the modern House of Life has also "gone global".[85] It is no longer divided into just 42 ancient nomes (provinces), but now comprises 360 nomes that cover the whole world, the last one in Antarctica.

The globalisation of Egypt connects countries that, at different points in their history, desired to demonstrate their prominence. The god Bes explains that "Every empire is a wannabe Egypt. Having Egyptian stuff around makes them feel important. That's why you've got 'new' Egyptian artefacts in Rome, Paris, London—you name it".[86] The Duat, the world of spirits and magic, is another tool that enables the magicians to work globally. It also provides secret locker spaces for the teenage magicians to store their snacks and magical weapons, as well as a recording of their story. The Duat allows the magicians to travel across continents: London and Paris in Europe; Cairo, Giza, Luxor and Alexandria in Egypt; St Petersburg in Russia; and many locations in America, from New York to the White Sands of New Mexico. These places also merge and overlap within the Duat, since their resemblance to Egypt's geography or artefacts gives them power. For example, White Sands in New Mexico is a sandy desert, and therefore resembles the desert sands of Egypt's Red Land. As Carter and Sadie travel down the River of Night in the Duat, their demon captain explains that the River of Night is "every river and no river—the shadow of the Mississippi, the Nile, the Thames".[87] Sadie and Carter's travels in *The Red Pyramid* have taken them past the Nile in Egypt, alongside the Thames in Sadie's home in London, and down the Mississippi as they searched for the god Thoth in the American Memphis. Thoth makes a joke about the Mississippi flowing south instead of north, complaining that "everything is backwards" in America.[88] Thus, their journey down the Duat's River of Night becomes a global journey through ancient Egypt and its legacy across the world.

Conclusion

The two protagonists of the series, Sadie and Carter, continually protest that their work as magicians in the House of Life is dangerous. However, Sadie in particular regularly dismisses ancient Egyptian culture and artefacts as boring and irrelevant

85 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 52.
86 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 146–147.
87 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 338.
88 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 317.

("don't know, don't care").[89] Nonetheless, the narrative presents the language, artefacts and stories from ancient Egypt not just as desirable but also relevant to modern life. The same applies to Egypt's wider legacy, which allows the influence of ancient Egypt to become global. The language and hieroglyphs are powerful when used appropriately within *The Kane Chronicles*, but the secret code they create for readers also allows them a share in that power. Riordan's Egyptian spell commands function like the Latin spells in *Harry Potter*, but the idea that the spoken and written forms of the words perform the actions and create reality draws closely on the ways in which ancient Egyptians understood the power of the written word. The narrative uses the ancient artefacts which the modern magicians encounter in museums and heritage sites to play on popular ideas of the magical powers that might lie within such objects, while also highlighting the dispersal and reception of Egyptian heritage. It capitalises on the mystical appearance and the strangely impractical potential of many of the smaller items, such as miniature wax crocodiles and baboons. Riordan recasts the stories to give them personal relevance to the protagonists, who need to engage with the figures of Isis, Horus and Apophis if they are to save the world, and particularly their families and friends. Egypt's global appeal allows readers from different countries to identify with the Egyptian past, since they may find something Egyptian in a nearby museum, or even an object which imitates or draws on Egyptian culture, even if that is simply a banknote.

Riordan's success is evident in the global sales of his own books, which are translated into multiple languages and sold across the world, and to which he taps into in these globetrotting narratives. His novels promise that ancient Egyptian culture and its legacy can empower his readers. When they are properly crafted, *shabtis* can make excellent robots; if it is masterfully controlled, the Duat does indeed hold secret storage spaces. Ancient artefacts can be used for efficient magical travel, while museums and archaeological sites are anything but boring, since they form role-play-gaming-style battlegrounds for magical conflicts. Especially for the child reader, given to excitement, ancient Egypt's remains and legacy act as a reminder of Riordan's characters and their adventures, as "every new empire wants a piece of Egypt".[90]

89 Riordan, *Red Pyramid*, 17; Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 191.
90 Riordan, *Throne of Fire*, 151.

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