



Gods of Manhattan

By Scott Mebus

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Thirteen-year-old New Yorker Rory Hennessy can see things no one else can. When a magician's trick opens his eyes to Mannahatta, Rory finds an amazing spirit city coexisting alongside modern-day Manhattan. A place where Indian sachems, warrior cockroaches, and papier-mâché children live, ruled by the immortal Gods of Manhattan - including Babe Ruth, Alexander Hamilton, and Peter Stuyvesant. But Rory's power to see Mannahatta brings danger, and he is pursued by enemies, chasing history and trying to free those who have been enslaved. And when he is given the chance to right Mannahatta's greatest wrong, seeing Mannahatta may not be a gift after all. . . .

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Gods of Manhattan By Scott Mebus Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #109176 in Books
- Brand: Puffin
- Published on: 2009-03-05
- Released on: 2009-03-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.80" h x .90" w x 5.10" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Along with plenty of action, Mebus stuffs his pages with references to New York's history, draws most of the threads together in a suspenseful climax and provides a satisfying sense of resolution at the end. "Kirkus Reviews"

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About the Author

Scott Mebus lives in Manhattan.

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THE MAGICIAN

Adriaen van der Donck raced over the Henry Hudson Bridge at the northern tip of Manhattan, urging his steaming horse to go faster as he made a break for the Bronx. Maybe he'd be lucky. Maybe his enemy had neglected to pick an assassin with the right kind of blood. He heard the sound of a horn in the distance. Was that the Trumpeter? He hadn't known the old fool was still haunting the river where he'd met his death centuries before. Oh well, no one had heard the man then and no one hears his ghost now. Just like nobody heard Adriaen. And now it might be too late.

His horse weaved around the cars whizzing across the bridge. None of the drivers even glanced in his direction. Adriaen had known his rival was planning something, but he'd never imagined anything like this. He needed to reach his farm, where he could get some sort of message to his daughter, warning her and the rest of his allies of their enemy's new, impossible weapon. If only the river would buy him some time—

Glancing over his shoulder, his spirits sank. The assassin smoothly galloped across the bridge without pausing, meaning he must have Bronx blood. Adriaen's enemy had planned for everything. Urging his horse onward, he flew down the side streets, the assassin hot on his trail. Now he could only hope to gain enough time to send a message off. But his horse was tired while the horse behind him was fresh. He'd only just crossed the boundary of his own farm when the assassin reached him.

A hard push knocked Adriaen off his horse. He landed heavily among the rows of towering cornstalks.

Pushing himself to his feet, Adriaen turned to face the assassin, who had dismounted and was approaching him warily, knife in hand. That knife. How had his enemy made that knife? Killing Adriaen, or any god, was supposed to be impossible.

But everything was different now.

No time to warn his compatriots, not anymore. The only message he could send would be back to this killer's master. He gave a silent prayer for his daughter and the rest of the Rattle Watch. Look after my city, he whispered, and keep watch over the hidden Light. All will be for naught if he is taken. The assassin shifted his grip, getting ready to strike. Adriaen braced himself as he readied one last, desperate ploy. Maybe he'd save his city, though he couldn't save himself. The assassin sprang, and Adriaen van der Donck stepped forward to meet him, his final trick ready to be played.

"I think this is yours!" the magician exclaimed as he held up the undamaged dollar bill he had cut into shreds just two minutes before.

The girl sighed in wonder and took the bill back as the small crowd of children sitting in the Hennessy living room clapped loudly. Every eye was on the short magician in the long blue robe as he bowed at the applause and began his next trick. He pulled out a dove and called upon a boy to place the bird in a box. The children held their breath as the magician pulled out a match and waved it through the air.

Rory Hennessy, thirteen years old and never fooled, leaned in closer to watch the magician at work. There had never been a magic trick, or a sleight-of-hand maneuver, or any other so-called illusion, that had not been picked apart, seen through, or laid bare by the eagle eyes of the elder Hennessy. He could always spy the magician slipping the twenty-dollar bill into the volunteer's pocket. He unerringly knew where the five of spades was hidden. He would point to the shell with the marble under it every time. He couldn't really explain how he knew. He just did. Rory would look a magician in the eye and suddenly the performer would no longer be a mystical practitioner of wonder, he'd be a sad little man with a weird hat. He'd start to stammer, his rabbit would fall out of his sleeve, and he'd press the wrong button and pour water all over his pants. Rory didn't do it on purpose. It was just his gift.

Therefore, Rory had long ago decided to give magic shows a miss. He'd only agreed to attend this particular performance because it was his sister Bridget's ninth birthday party. She had begged and begged for a magician, and since Mrs. Hennessy could never resist her daughter's pouting, a magician was hired and a brother was warned to keep his big mouth shut. Rory promised, and so far so good. He should have just hung out in his room, but instead he found himself leaning against the wall and watching intently. He couldn't help himself; he had to see. And up until now, he'd been less than impressed, as usual. Bridget's oohs and ahs got on his nerves, but he said nothing. Sometimes it seemed like she wanted to be fooled. She couldn't wait to be fooled. But not him. He saw the world the way it was. Somebody had to.

Sure enough, he picked out the moment when the magician—Hex was his name—slipped the dove into his sleeve, just before setting the box on fire. Rory shook his head in disgust as Bridget whistled in awe when the bird reappeared, magically unharmed. Bridget's cardboard sword lay in her lap, the word BUTTKICKER written on the side in Magic Marker. She never went anywhere without the stupid thing. She liked to say their father left it behind for her when he disappeared, but Rory knew that wasn't true. She'd only been a baby when their father left, walking out on the three of them and leaving then four-year-old Rory as the man of the family. Bridget loved to make up intricate stories starring their father as the magical knight doomed to wander, or as the wretched prisoner of the evil dragon, always fighting to come home to his beloved children. But Rory didn't buy it. It was just another fantasy, a trick to see through, and he saw through all the

tricks.

“I need another volunteer. How about you?”

Hex pointed past the sea of raised hands right at him. “Pick my sister,” Rory said, nodding at Bridget, whose arm was waving crazily like she’d stuck her tongue in a socket. Hex smiled slyly, winking at Rory as if they were the only two in the room.

“You’re the one with the storm-cloud face. I think you need a little magic.”

Rory didn’t like the way Hex was smiling, as if he knew something Rory didn’t. Rory glanced over toward the kitchen, where his mother stood with arms crossed. Her face silently begged him to play along. He sighed.

“Fine.”

He stepped forward as Hex held a deck of cards in front of him.

“Pick a card.”

Rory grabbed a card, making a face. Hex made a big show of turning his head.

“Show everyone your card. Let them see it!”

Rory turned the card toward the kids and let them see that it was the eight of clubs. Hex pointed to his table.

“If you’ll look down at my special table, you’ll see a Magic Marker, black in color. This is an ordinary Magic Marker, much like you’d find at any stationery store. Please pick it up, Rory, if you would be so kind.”

Rory picked up the Magic Marker. He looked it over closely but could see nothing strange about it. Hex kept his head turned away.

“Now, Rory, I want you to write something on the card with this ordinary Magic Marker. Make it very personal, something only you would think to write. All right? Are you done?”

Rory finished writing on the card and nodded.

“Good,” Hex said. “Now place the card back in the deck.”

Rory did this, sighing to himself. Hex wasn’t even going to stick it in a little envelope and burn it up. This really was amateur hour. At last Hex turned to look at Rory. “Now shuffle the cards. Go on, don’t be shy. Shuffle away, young man.”

Rory carelessly shuffled the cards, rolling his eyes the entire time. Hex reached out and took the deck from him.

“And now the magic begins!”

Hex waved his hand above the deck, making a big show of casting his magic spell. Then he turned to Rory, asking a question that caught him off guard. “Rory, did you get your sister a present?” Unsure where this was going, Rory nodded.

“Could you bring it here?” Hex asked.

Rory paused, glancing over at his mother, not sure what to do. Mrs. Hennessy soundlessly pleaded with him, asking him not to ruin things. Shrugging, he headed over to his bedroom, returning a moment later with a small wrapped package in his hand. Hex pointed to Bridget.

“Why don’t you give it to the birthday girl?”

Even more confused, Rory handed over his gift. Bridget dug into it, tearing the paper to shreds. She suddenly stopped, gasping. The entire audience fell into an awed hush. Even Mrs. Hennessy couldn’t believe what she was seeing. But nobody was more shocked than Rory. He found himself fighting for breath as Bridget reached down and peeled the playing card off of the small book of scientific facts it was taped to, the one he had so carefully wrapped himself. He hadn’t put that card there. He was sure of it. Hex smiled triumphantly. “Which card is it, Bridget?”

Bridget’s voice came out small and filled with awe.

“The eight of clubs.”

“And what does it say?”

She wordlessly lifted the card into the air. There, written on it in black Magic Marker, were the words HEX IS FULL OF CRAP! She looked up at Rory.

“Did you write that?”

Rory couldn’t speak. He could only nod as the kids broke out into huge applause. Hex gave him a special smile, a satisfied smile, before moving on to the next trick. But Rory couldn’t move on. Because for the first time in his life, he was lost. That trick was impossible. No matter how carefully he went over each piece of it in his mind, he couldn’t figure it out. It wasn’t possible. Unless it wasn’t sleight of hand at all . . .

Rory’s world tilted, the blood roaring in his ears like he’d stepped into a waterfall. A face flashed in his head, a face he’d seen in his dreams, and he thought he heard a brief snippet of low chanting in a foreign language. No one seemed to notice his distress; Hex had moved on, taking Bridget and everyone else with him. But Rory stayed behind, that impossible feat of magic smacking him off his nice, predictable path into an unknown world he knew did not exist. It couldn’t exist. He wouldn’t let it. Breathe, he told himself. Just breathe. His head cleared as he regained his composure. He’d missed the moment when Hex had made his move, that’s all. That didn’t change the fact that it was just a stupid card trick. Convinced that he was convinced, Rory went back to looking for the holes in Hex’s magic, which he once again found easily. But the thrill was gone. All because of one stupid, impossible trick.

After the show, Hex packed up quickly as the kids moved on to a piñata on the other side of the room. Rory kept his distance, watching him from the corner. As Hex turned to leave, he glanced back at Rory and spoke softly, too softly to slip through the noise of the party. Yet somehow Rory heard him as if the magician stood right by his ear.

“What do you dream about, Rory?”

Rory jumped, too startled to reply. Hex couldn't know about his dreams, about the strange man, the mumbled foreign words, and the white circle. That was impossible.

“Does it frighten you?” Hex continued. “You need to see me at my shop. You have my card. We have a lot to talk about.”

He tried to say more, but by that point Rory had placed his hands over his ears and was humming loudly. Hex forced his way through with his urgent voice.

“You could be in danger. Don't be a fool.”

Rory hummed louder, pressing hard against his earlobes. Hex stopped talking and stood there staring, his eyes deep and unreadable. Then Mrs. Hennessy tapped him on the shoulder to give him his check, and his wizard's smile reappeared like magic. He gathered his pay and left without a backward glance. Rory tried to calm his pounding heart. The crash of the piñata bursting open made him jump a mile. He quickly headed for the door and the street below.

When Rory stepped out onto his stoop, his head was still reeling. His family lived on the second floor of a two-family house on 218th Street, way up on the northernmost tip of Manhattan in the small section of New York City called Inwood. His mom had grown up in Inwood, as had her father and grandfather and great-grandfather before her, and Rory could trust the familiar neighborhood to calm him down. If he didn't know Inwood, he didn't know anything.

The street was quiet except for the sounds of kids playing hoops down at the playground. He looked across at Columbia stadium, where the college students came to play football in the fall. It stood empty now, since summer had just started. Though lately, it always felt like summer. Rory used to sled down the hill to the river, but they hadn't had enough snow in years. This past winter, Bridget had even worn shorts in February! The whole world is going mad, his mother would say, and right now Rory believed it. He sat down, breathing in the scent of water coming off the river, trying to calm himself. He'd dreamed it. Maybe the guy snuck in while he was sleeping. But those words, in his handwriting . . . his vision blurred. When it cleared, he blinked once, slowly, then froze. At the foot of the stairs leading up to his front door, staring back at him without moving, stood a rat. And on the rat's back, holding reins in its hands like it was riding a pony, sat a cockroach. It cocked its head as if it was regarding him, watching him. It lifted one insect arm and waved.

Rory didn't know what to do. He was cracking up, obviously. That magician had broken his mind. But he refused to give in to the hallucination. He was in control here, and he knew what could be real. So without changing expression, he slowly looked away. He kept his eyes frozen on the apartment building next door, the one with the gargoyles on the roof. They stared out into nothingness, never moving, never changing. He could rely on them.

After a few moments, he couldn't stand it. He glanced back at the base of his stoop. The sidewalk was empty. The cockroach that couldn't be was gone.

Afraid the impossible thing would come back, Rory returned his attention to the roof of the old apartment building, trying to force the cockroach from his mind. He could make out a small pigeon hopping along the roof's edge. It was just a normal city pigeon. There wasn't a gerbil in a Robin Hood hat on its back or anything. It inched along the edge of the roof near one of the gargoyles, a lion's head with its stone mouth

open in a growl. The pigeon stopped just short of the gargoyle, looking away at something on the roof. Then, in a flash, the gargoyle head turned and gobbled the pigeon up in one huge bite. Feathers burst out of its mouth and floated softly down toward Rory's astonished face. He would have thought he'd imagined this, too, if the gargoyle wasn't still chewing. Finally, with a swallow, the gargoyle went back to stillness. If not for the falling feathers, nothing would have been different.

Rory let out a strangled cry. This was just too much. Something was happening to him. He was definitely cracking, going crazy, losing his grip. A feather floated down into his open hand. He stared at it, running his fingers over the soft down. It was real. He twirled around to see if anyone had witnessed his mental breakdown, but the street remained empty. Except . . . down the road, past the stadium and toward the river, where the old trees of Inwood Hill Park pushed right up to the sidewalk, he thought he saw something in the shadows. Someone staring at him from beneath the ancient branches. He took a step toward the woods, almost against his will. He could barely make the figure out. Then the wind blew, shifting the leaves and letting the sunlight fall on the dark form. Rory froze at the sight of that figure under the trees, shocked by what he was seeing. Finally, a loud horn sounded, startling him into action. Rory staggered back, tripping over his stoop in fright. He dropped the feather to the sidewalk and ran up the steps, diving back into the safety of his apartment, his room, his bed, his world—where everything was just as it was supposed to be.

He didn't dare look out his bedroom window. Who knew what else he might see? Instead, he put his head under his pillow and stayed there the rest of the day and night. He heard his mother call him in to dinner, but he ignored it, just as he ignored the faint horn he could still hear blowing in the distance. He pretended to be asleep when she peeked in to check on him. But the thought of that figure kept him awake long into the night. He replayed the moment in his head of when the light fell and revealed the tall, bare-chested Indian warrior standing beneath the trees, watching him. He could still see the feathers bound up in the Indian's hair, the bow slung over his shoulder, and the copper spear in his hand. But most of all, he remembered the feeling that came over him when the Indian was revealed. The warrior's face was . . . familiar. It was the face from Rory's dreams. But he couldn't be real. That was just a dream. This all must be one big dream. It had to be.

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