Demigods on Speedway
Teaching Guide

Demigods on Speedway is a collective portrait of a city—in this case, Tucson, Arizona. Inspired by tales and figures from Greek mythology, the characters reflect a gritty, recession-era Tucson populated by everyday heroes and heroines. While many of the stories feature the same characters or constellation of characters, the deepest narrative movement within the book is thematic: the cumulative sense that here is a city with its own demigods, individuals not only struggling to survive under siege, but passionately and imperfectly seeking to make something immortal in their lives.

Discussion topics:

The retelling of myths and fairy tales comes fast on the heels of the telling of myths and fairy tales. Consider the ways a myth or mythological figure might come back to life in another era or place. How can you make an ancient story relevant today? When does a myth enter the public domain? How true to the “original” does the writer need to be?

Sheehan invokes The Odyssey in the epigraph (“When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more…”) and, thematically, in her section headings (Journey, Story, Escape). How do the stories in Demigods on Speedway “speak back” to The Odyssey? Where do the themes of journey, story, and escape emerge in individual stories?

In “Rock” a schoolteacher is engaged in a Promethean struggle. In “The Lotus Eaters” a group of teenagers runs wild through an abandoned mini-golf course. Many of the stories in Demigods on Speedway pull out one aspect of a myth and re-imagine it. How do these mythological underpinnings impact your sense of character? Are there “demigods” in your own life, in your family, neighborhood, city?

Demigods on Speedway is a linked collection of stories. That is, the stories stand alone but may also be read together to create a larger whole. What creates a sense of unity in the collection? Why is it not a novel?

What does it mean to write a portrait of a place? Sheehan asserts that Demigods on Speedway is not “the” portrait of Tucson but one of many. What does that mean? Who has the right to create a portrait of a particular city, town, country, family?

What are the components of a portrait of a place? Landscape, inhabitants, cultural norms? Consider the aspects of a portrait. Which are most relevant and why?

These stories are set in 2008, in the heart of the recent U.S. recession. What is the role of economics in Demigods on Speedway? How would this collection be different if it were set ten years before, or ten years after?

Tucson, Arizona has been the stage for recent national debates on immigration, academic freedom, and gun rights. The first story in this collection even opens with one character’s monologue/rant against U.S.
immigration policy (and immigrants themselves). What is a writer’s responsibility when it comes to national or local politics? When is it important to express, expose, or convey viewpoints or character traits that are divergent from the author’s own?