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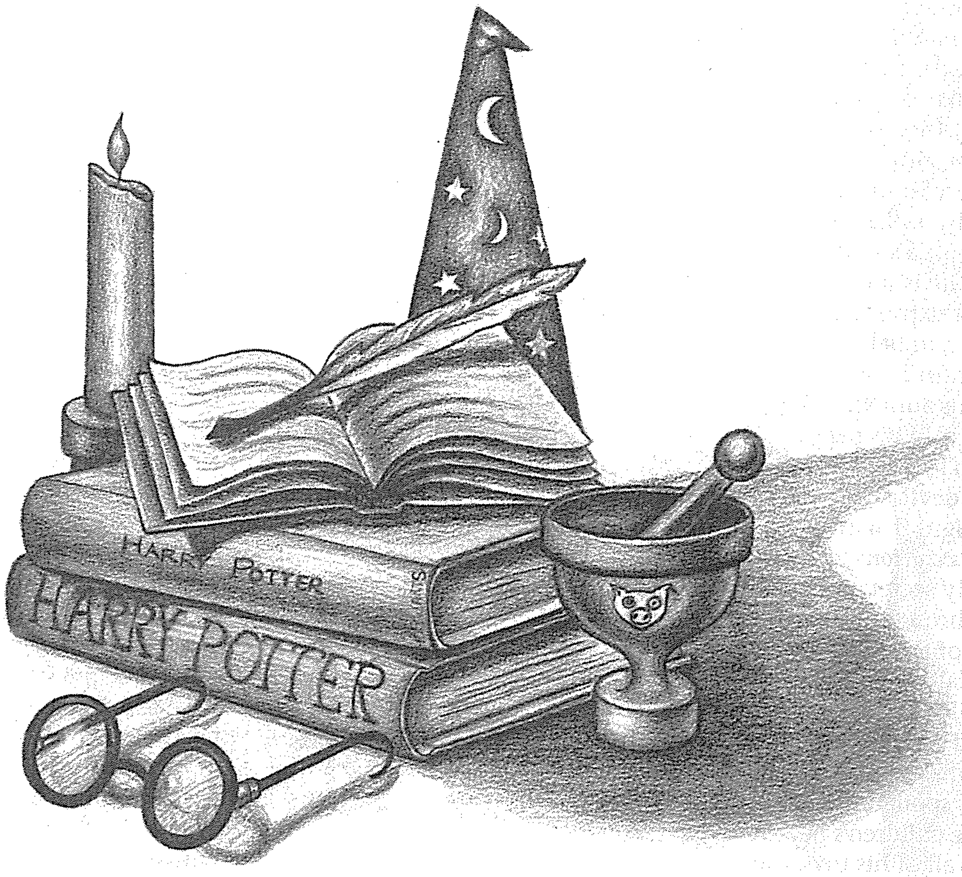

The Magic of Harry Potter

If you have not yet heard about the Harry Potter books (four published so far, with three more to come) then you probably have not been getting much news recently. A genuine publishing phenomenon, these books are the most popular children's books in a decade; printed in thirty countries, the series has inspired fan clubs, poetry, short stories, birthday party themes, web sites and soon a movie scheduled for release in 2001. The author, J. K. Rowling, has said that she never had a "target audience" in mind when she began to write the first book.[1] The themes of the series are loyalty and betrayal, love and loss, and all the while, the forces of evil creep closer. In the end the good people win, not just because they are good or have magical powers, but also because they are brave and clever.

The Appeal of Harry Potter

From the time he receives his invitation to join his fellow wizards- and witches-in-training at Hogwarts' School, Harry finds himself in a fantastic world. Mail is delivered by owls, boats follow verbal commands, and ghosts teach classes and join you at dinner — all things ordinary are transformed by magic into the extraordinary.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim relegated most literature for children to the status of entertainment, lacking in psychological meaning. His sole exception to this rule was fairy tales, which Bettelheim viewed as filled with magical power and great meaning. "More can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings," he wrote, "and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension."[2] Bettelheim's primary concept was that children live with greater terrors than most adults understand (or remember), and that fairy tales not only give expression to that terror, but also provide encouragement that there will be a better future.

The *Harry Potter* books fulfill these very needs, which could be why the four books published so far have consistently occupied the top of the New York Times hardcover fiction best-seller list. These stories aren't fairy tales in the style of the Brothers Grimm — Harry Potter is more like Indiana Jones than the original primal, brutal terror of Cinder Ella. Yet the same fundamental themes reverberate here in a way that continues the power of the form and archetypes that those long-ago Germans perfected.

The key here, not surprisingly, is the hero, Harry Potter. Harry, a ten-year-old boy in the beginning of the first book, is a lonely, orphaned boy being raised by his evil aunt and uncle in a situation completely beyond his control. Naturally, he is miserable, but helpless; Harry's life illustrates (in the extreme) the desire every child has, at one time or another, to belong to another family. But what Harry does not find out until later is that (unlike the story told by his aunt and uncle that they were killed an automobile wreck) his parents were murdered by an evil sorcerer, still so feared that his name is rarely spoken. With this plot device, the adventure takes on a primal quality that aligns it with many classic adventure stories, from *Great Expectations* to *Star Wars*: there is a family secret and a struggle passed down through the generations. Each member of the Potter family is therefore special and a hero.

Harry is skinny and weak and wears glasses patched together with scotch tape; he lives in a cupboard under the stairs, since his spoiled, brutish cousin has both of the children's bedrooms in which to keep all of his toys. Harry represents the epitome of vulnerability: the powerless, unwanted, orphaned child.

Then, on his eleventh birthday — O joyous magical news! — Harry discovers that he is a Wizard and is invited to go to Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for his education and training. But, despite his relief at leaving the Dursley's, Harry discovers that his new life, however exciting, isn't entirely happy. Harry discovers that everyone else seems to know more than he does. Even more importantly, Harry has dangerous enemies; Professor Snape and the entire Slytherin House are all seemingly out to get him, and he is the focus of the hatred of the most powerful evil wizard of all time, a man so feared that most wizards will not even speak his name. Gradually Harry assumes his true identity and gains the courage to win a battle against the very wizard who destroyed his parents.

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Harry's story reminds us that an intrinsic part of life is to struggle with unexpected and unjust hardships; but with the assurance that if one deals with these hardships directly, one can emerge victorious. "Morality is not the issue in these tales," Bettelheim said, "but rather, assurance that one can succeed."[3]

Magic in Fiction and Reality

As a real-life Witch I view the world as a living entity, part of a larger system in which there are intimate connections — visible and invisible — between all things. Doing magic is a part of my method of worship, much like sitting zazen is for Zen monks, or going to Mass on Sunday is for Roman Catholics. For many Pagans, including myself, Witchcraft is a celebratory experience, which frequently brings practical results.

Harry's magic is purely mechanical, as opposed to occult. That is to say, Harry and his friends cast spells, read crystal balls, and turn themselves into animals — but unlike real Witches, they experience no Divine presence, no God or Goddess. The terms "Wizard" and "Witch" are labels of gender rather than religion, and magic appears to be the result of genetic trait or random mutation; though the students can be trained, without inborn talent, they can do nothing and are condemned to live in the mundane (Rowling coins the ingenious term "Muggle") world. The most ignoble fate for a prospective Witch or Wizard is to be termed a "Squib", a non-talented person born into a Magical family. This is not a sweetness-and-light world, even at Hogwarts; neither the magical or Muggle worlds are depicted with rose-colored glasses. Unlike many fantasy novels, where "magic solves everything", Rawlings deals with contemporary themes and problems in a realistic way even within her "alternative" world. Issues of racial purity (magical vs. Muggle bloodlines) figure prominently in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, while questions of justice, animal rights, and capital punishment are subtly woven into the plot of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, making this series much deeper and slightly darker than is usual in this genre.

Despite all the controversy about how the Harry Potter books "promote witchcraft", these books don't give children the faintest idea of what it's really like to be a witch. The books are fun, yes, but they are not realistic, nor spiritual in any way. While most Pagans would say that the goal of magical learning lies in the promotion of personal growth and spiritual development, Harry and his friends would say that passing their exams and getting their degrees is the point of their magical education. (Making the members of Slytherin House miserable would be more of a bonus than a goal.)

Rowlings' treatment of magic has created a controversy in the press, schools, and online, as some parents say the books are immoral, anti-God, and liable to promote rebellion against parents. This situation is not new; even the Christian writer Madeleine L'Engle has taken heat for the "magic" elements in her classic series of books beginning with *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Harry's stories are derided for "promoting witchcraft" and although no well-known group or individual has publicly criticized the books, some evangelical ministers have begun to preach against him. Some say that the stories of a boy who plays games while riding a broom is too close to Wicca, (a recognized religion) and in their formal

complaints asking school districts to remove the materials, such parents argue that since Wicca is a religion, books about it do not belong in public schools.

I would answer this argument by pointing out that the witchcraft found in the Potter books bears no resemblance to that practiced by Witches in the real world. Remember *Alice in Wonderland*? *The Lord of the Rings? The Chronicles of Narnia*? How about *The Wizard of Oz*? All of these classic children's books have similar themes of magic, fantasy, and the occult. Yet these classics also show the development of courage, loyalty, and a willingness to sacrifice for one another — all laudable themes. Literature is full of such heroes whose values are so human that they rise above any religious label; not bad lessons to portray in a self-centered world.

The critics are right in thinking that fantasy writing is powerful and needs to be taken seriously, but I strongly doubt that fantasy — or its near-cousin, the fairy tale — fosters an attachment to Evil Powers. To the contrary, these stories serve as models for displaying honor, strength, and courage. One of the beneficial effects of fantasy writing is that it removes us from the everyday world and prompts us to look at the ordinary in fresh ways. We see that the world is precious but puzzling, coherent but mysterious, full of unseen connections and decisive truths. Playing with things you do not fully understand can get you into trouble, and strangers may help you out of it.

One of the things that the Pagan side of me likes about the Harry Potter series is that magic is not the solution to all of Harry's problems. Instead, magic is something you learn that requires lots of hard work to master and may bring more trouble than it is worth. In fact, the primary continuing dramatic tension of the series is linked to Harry's ongoing battle with the evil wizard Voldemort, who is seemingly magically invincible, and whose reappearance and rise to power threatens not only Harry, but the entire magical world. Harry's ability to survive Voldemort's repeated attempts to kill him are linked, not with magic spells (Harry is hopelessly outgunned by the evil mastermind) but by his quick wits and good heart.

Even in more mundane problems, like why his friend Hermione is so tired all of a sudden or who is trying to frame him for the petrification of his fellow students, magic often assists Harry, but it does not give him the answers. As a Witch, this rings true to my experience; I have often learned the hard lesson that the God/dess helps those who help themselves.

In a recent CNN interview, author J. K. Rowling was asked about the "occult" themes of her books. "I have met thousands of children now," she responded, "and not even one time has a child come up to me and said, 'Ms. Rowling, I'm so glad I've read these books because now I want to be a witch.' They see it for what it is. It is a fantasy world and they understand that completely. I don't believe in magic, either."[4]

Free will and choices made from the heart — an open, loving heart, informed by an intelligent mind - are Harry's true magical qualities. As Z Budapest puts it, "I love the Harry Potter books! As a Dianic Witch I appriciate that the book makes the Craft nonthreatening to boys. I think fostering the magic of nature is a good trade off for not having the goddess mentioned. I love the humor in the books, which I think is an other great tool to make everybody feel included. I think as witches we owe Ms.Rowland a big kiss on the third eye. "[5]

Backnotes

[1] "The Wizard of Hogwarts — A novice sorcerer's exploits are magical to kids and adults" by Elizabeth

Gleick, Time Magazine, vol. 153, no. 14, April 12, 1999.

[2] Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantments: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales,* Vintage Books, New York, 1977 p. 5.

[3] Ibid p. 10.

[4] CNN, 10/21/99; online at: www.CNN.com/books/news/9910/21/rowling.intvu/index.html

[5] Email to *PanGaia* editorial staff, May, 2000.

For More Information

See also "Spellbound – Modern-day Witches Charmed by Harry Potter" by Deepti Hajela on the Associated Press Website at: www.oweb.com/newslink/national/PotterWitchesP0212.html.

For conservative Christian objections to Harry Potter see www.cwfa.org/library/family/1999-11-24_disenchant.shtml; www.crossroad.to/text/articles/Harry9%2D99.html; and www.landoverbaptist.org/news1199/potter.html.

For non-sectarian anti-censorship articles on Harry Potter, see www.ncac.org/harrypotter.html or contact the National Coalition Against Censorship, 275 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York 10001 or contact www.mugglesforharrypotter.org/index.htm

Last, but not least, an over-the-top parody of the Harry Potter uproar appears in Internet humor magazine *The Onion* at www.theonion.com/onion3625/harry_potter.htmls. This parody of the controversy is ribald, even profane, and has already become a chain email which explicitly blurs the line between reality and humor. (It contains language not suitable for children.) ▲

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A Real Wizard on Harry Potter

Everybody I know in the Pagan community loves the "Harry Potter" books; we are all delighted to see them, particularly the Witches and Wizards among us. The consensus seems to be amusement at the magic portrayed in the books. But I think it important to note that what the Harry Potter books depict is less Witchcraft than Wizardry: sorcery, arcane lore, alchemy, spells, etc. The religion of Wicca, with the Goddess, Horned God, rituals, etc. simply does not enter into the story at all.

Personally, I am fascinated by how closely the basic premise of the Harry Potter books parallels *The Books of Magic* comic books (originated by Neil Gaiman, now written and drawn by Peter Gross), one of my favorite titles. No one in the public media seems to have noted this. This comic book series has been running for quite a few years, and has just concluded with its 75th monthly issue.

The main character, Timothy Hunter — who looks, talks, thinks and acts exactly like Harry Potter — is an orphaned teenager whose true parentage has been somewhat ambiguous. Destined to be the greatest magician the world has ever known, Tim must still deal with the trials of adolescence and finding himself. Like Harry, he was raised in a nonmagical family featuring a vile and obese foster brother and hostile foster parents.

In the final issue of *The Books of Magic*, Tim Hunter is shown receiving the same letter of acceptance to Hogwarts that Harry Potter got in *The Sorcerer's Stone* and departing through the barrier between train platforms 9 and 10. In a farewell to the readers, the current writer and artist, Peter Gross, says: "So here's to the writers: Neil Gaiman, who created Harry Potter years before he was called Harry Potter — and must wonder what might have been if only he'd made Tim into a novel..."

The anti-Potter reaction reminds me of the reaction a hundred years ago against L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* books. For over a thousand years now, some people have tried to stamp out all manifestations of magic and imagination (note the same root in both words). For a long time, this effort was apparently successful, as there was no limit to the brutalities that it could bring to bear including tortures, confiscation of property, and burning at the stake. Happily, such murderous oppression is no longer tolerated. As a result, imagination has flourished in this country, and with it, a resurgence of interest in mythology, magic, and Witchcraft.

Naturally, those repressionists are not pleased to see such things resurfacing. So they will react negatively — especially when they see their own children captivated by vistas of fantasy and imagination they thought they had obliterated. There are those who are xenophobic — fearing and hating everything strange and different; and there are those of us who are positively xenophilic — being fascinated and delighted with the strange and unknown.

Xenophobes always try to destroy what they can neither understand nor control. But in the USA in the year 2000, they cannot succeed. They see their dominion over the minds of others slipping away, and they can't stand it. Nor is their fear without reason, for their world is indeed coming to an end. A new Vision is awakening across the face of Gaia. Truly, the Goddess is alive and magic is afoot! ▲

— Oberon Zell-Ravenheart co-founded the Church of All Worlds in 1962 and was the publisher of Green Egg from 1968-1975 and 1988-96.) He may be reached at: Monkeyo@aol.com.