

The Harry Potter Controversy

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The wildly popular Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling has caused controversy for many families over the past five years. These novels according to some critics are harmless, adventurous, children's tales. Others choose to portray them as stories that inspire children to become involved in the occult and serious witchcraft. The Harry Potter novels chronicle the life of a young wizard whose wizard parents were killed by the evil Lord Voldemort. On his eleventh birthday he receives invitation to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Each of the five books represents a year of his life there (Walker). This essay will discuss whether the Harry Potter novels are a suitable read for children and why despite what some critics portray, Harry Potter can be a positive role model for youth.

In recent history a cultural phenomenon has occurred. With the rise of Harry Potter, this nation's youth have displayed a "mania" that has not been seen in reference to books for a long time. For example, Barnes & Noble America's largest bookseller has recently declared that Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix will be their "largest seller in the history of the entire company" (Mangan). In light of this rise to fame one should note that Harry Potter can and will impact modern culture.

In the "age of electronic entertainment", Harry Potter novels sharply contrast by luring children away from the internet, and away from video games and the television. Children across the globe are rapidly becoming interested in reading the novels. Katherine Thompson, owner of Frugal Frigate Bookstore, declared the series a "literary phenomena." She noted that children as young as eight-years-old will devour the books over seven hundred pages long and "still be

hungry for more” (Kennedy-Ross). Thompson suggested that the Potter novels interest children in reading books other than just the Potter series. She said that children will come into her store between books and ask her “what can I read that's as good as Harry Potter?” (Kennedy-Ross). Elementary school principal, Dennis Edge, spoke about how the books have positively affected the reading at his school. He said that he would not suggest Harry Potter is “single-handedly solving our reading problems” but he did note that “once students become successful at reading that encourages them to read more” (Kennedy-Ross). Potter novels draw in children and adults with interesting and humorous story lines.

Even children that are too young to read can benefit from having Harry Potter stories read to them. Reading aloud humorous and exciting stories like Harry Potter allows for a “myriad of shared emotions” (Giorgis 82). Interesting books read aloud leave kids wanting to hear another. Janet Seden, professor of the School of Health and Social Welfare at Open University concluded that enjoyable fictional experiences as a child “create empathy in the reader and enable us to confront the need for imagination as parents and practitioners” (Seden 296). Some parents are pleased by the way that Harry Potter has interested their children in reading, but others find the novels to promote good morals.

Harry Potter is a good role model for children. Harry is a boy wizard that despite all the hard breaks he has in his life still manages to prevail over his adversaries. The stories are full of universal themes. Learning to face up to fears, standing up for what one believes in and realizing that people with different backgrounds can work together and become friends are skills that everyone could use reminding of (Walker). In J. K. Rowling's first Harry Potter novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry and his friends are faced with challenges to overcome the evil Lord Voldemort. They must work together in order to fight the villain. Hermione, the

diligent student, overcomes a puzzle using her logic. Ron uses his game skills to advance through a chess obstacle. Their help allows Harry to venture on to fight his enemy (Sorcerers). What eventually gives Harry the ability to prevail against Voldemort comes from his spirit. His pure intentions and desire “for the good of all” ultimately enables him to do what is right for the situation (Sorcerers). Julie Foster, author of *Potter Books: Wicked Witchcraft?*, believes that contrary to opponents claims, Potter books “promote through their characters, love, bravery, self-reliance, the importance of family, and tolerance of those different from us” (Foster). Harry and his friends learn through their adventures to trust themselves and value one another.

Some characters in the Harry Potter novels are evil. This is a fact that J. K. Rowling says was intentional. Lord Voldemort is a non-physical “dark magic” that has the ability to make others his slaves by inhabiting their bodies. Rowling said in an interview for *Time Magazine*, “If you're choosing to write about evil, you really do have a moral obligation to show what it means” (Rowling). If evil was not present in children's literature, then children would have no basis for conception of the sacred. In *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*, Connie Neal suggests that the evil wizard Voldemort “represents Satan, in a struggle between good and evil that helps young readers make moral decisions” (Pearson). Rowling stated that she made a conscious decision at the start of her writing that she wasn't going to lie about evil. She said that she couldn't pretend that when dealing with evil no one gets hurt (Rowling). Julie Foster suggests that Rowling's depictions of evil are comparable to characters in the Bible. The characters “struggle within themselves. But no worthwhile book, the Bible included, has only plastic people. Life is played for keeps. Good books reflect that” (Foster). The graphic evil characters and scenes portrayed in Rowling's books confront children with a strong moral drive.

Children are often required to use their imagination to draw a picture or write a story. Using one's imagination is an essential part of the learning process for a growing child. Part of a child's imagination includes a fantasy world (Booth 311). Chuck Colson, author and broadcaster of the radio series "Breakpoint" commented on Harry's affiliation to fantasy. "What the fascination with Harry Potter really illustrated is the longing for the mysterious, the wonderful and the otherworldly that our daily experiences does not supply" (Colson). He also notes that this desire should not be crushed but met with some type of gratification. Colson suggests wanting to read and hear about a fantasy world is healthy for children. Christian parents that desire to can match the fantasy appeal of Harry Potter stories with God's wonder. Colson plans to "use the Potter craze" to tap into what will "lead kids to the real thing" (Colson). This illustrates how some parents choose to use Harry Potter stories as a springboard for other discussions about their faith.

Some may have a tendency to trivialize Harry Potter considering it is a children's novel. The novels' sheer popularity and success displays it can not be ignored that Harry Potter will affect modern culture whether or not it is written for eight to twelve-year-olds. The Harry Potter books have sold an estimated one hundred and seventy-five million copies worldwide and have been translated into at least 43 languages (Kennicott). These novels will be introduced to children around the world.

Many people support J. K. Rowling's efforts to improve children's literacy but her critics are quick to object to the novels use of witchcraft and wizardry. Occult expert and filmmaker, Caryl Matrisciana, conveys in her movies that some children who read the books may become attracted to the "magical world Harry lives in." In their interest, they may subsequently attempt to create their own spells or turn to other books of witchcraft (Foster). Focus on the Family

magazine's author Lindy Beam agrees. She argues “children who become fascinated by charms and spells could eventually stumble into a very real world of witchcraft and the occult” (Kennicott). This possibility is considered unacceptable to many parents who have children in the age group which the novels are aimed at.

According to John Monk, a writer for The State of Columbia Newspaper, S.C., the claim that Harry Potter novels lure children to dabble in the occult is “poppycock.” He declared “You might as well say ‘Gone with the Wind’ teaches young readers to be slave owners, or ‘Treasure Island’ entices children to be pirates, or ‘Peter Pan’ urges children to run away from home” (Foster). Monk believes that not only will the novels not entice children to experience witchcraft and wizardry first hand but that the book will enforce morals in the kids. Monk claims the books condemn bullies, rudeness and greed. Although Monk is a strong supporter of the Harry Potter novels he said he does understand why some people dislike the books. He wrote that many people don't realize that “writers use the supernatural as a prop. That's different from luring kids into the occult” (Foster). Rowling's “prop” of the supernatural is one of the major reasons she receives such negative publicity.

Harry Potter books have made headlines ever since the first installment was released in 1999. Parents and religious groups have expressed concern that these stories can not be considered a simple children's fantasy. These critics disapprove of the novels' portrayal of the occult as a positive lifestyle (Booth 310). Matrisciana points out a quote from Harry Potter and the Sorcerers Stone that is particularly dark. In chapter five, Harry discovers a dead unicorn in the forbidden forest. Out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast....The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound

in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood...The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry – unicorn blood was dripping down its front (276).

Matrisciana believes that this particular quote can draw many parallels to Christianity. She believes the cloaked figure to be symbolic of Satan. Through stories about Harry Potter, children are “being introduced to human sacrifice, the sucking of blood from dead animals and possessions by spirit beings” Matriscinia states (Foster). Regardless of religious affiliation, and even if Rowling's character aren't Biblical symbolic many parents may not desire for their children to read about evil characters who drink blood to gain power.

Even J. K. Rowling acknowledges that her books are not for everyone. Some children are not ready for this type of literature. In light of requests people have made to have her books banned she became unabashedly displeased. She argues “people have the right to decide what they want their children to read, but in my opinion they do not have the right to tell other people's children what they should read” (Rowling). This has specifically become an issue in school systems.

While some parents do not allow their children to read Potter Books because of their graphic content, others accuse the books of being “anti-Christian” (Nel 57). Richard Abanes, a self-proclaimed conservative Christian and critic of Harry Potter, attacks the books by saying, “they pretend to set up a clear opposition between good and evil” (Blake 96). This would be similar to that of the The Lord of the Rings or the Narnia series. What Abanes suggests is different with Harry Potter books is that we usually “identify with the good and rejoice when the bad gets its comeuppance at the end. But if we identify with Harry we are supporting a hero who lies, cheats, and breaks school rules as and when he feels like it” (Blake 97). Potter critics would

suggest that because Harry Potter takes part in these activities children who read the books will want to as well. Lying, cheating and stealing are exactly the opposite of how many Christian parents want their children to behave. “Anti-Christian” is how Harry Potter novels are labeled.

It is easy to understand why some Christians are frightened of Harry Potter, but it's not acceptable for them to apply the label “anti-Christian.” In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, when Harry shops for wands in Ollivander's shop there is a sign in the window that reads “makers of fine wands since 382 BC” (Sorcerers 86). Yet nowhere in the books is there any reference to the ‘C’. The young wizards and witches at Hogwarts are always excited by the holidays including Christmas and Halloween. However, in the stories there is no mention of the meaning of either. Satanic Pagan rituals are no more a part of the stories than the Christ child. Andrew Blake, author of *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter* concludes, “Harry Potter isn't anti-Christian – the faith just isn't there” (Blake 98). Children can enjoy Harry Potter books along with the plethora of other children's novels that avoid discussing religion.

It is intriguing that people with fundamentally opposing beliefs can come together to agree on controversial topics. Wren Walker is a practicing witch and co-founder of *Witches Voice: a Group for Witches and Wiccans Worldwide*. Walker firmly believes that Harry Potter novels “offer a lighthearted view of witchcraft and wizardry.” She notes that Potter stories are unlikely to convert anyone to occult and that Harry Potter “does not glorify violence, advance Witchcraft, or promote anti-family sentiments” (Walker). Reverend Peter Fleetwood is a Vatican representative. He acknowledged that the novels are consistent with Christian morals. When questioned on whether the novels added glamour to occultist beliefs he said, “I don't think there's anyone in this room who grew up without fairies, magic and angles in their imaginary world. They aren't bad. They aren't serving as a banner for an anti-Christian ideology” (Guardian).

Fleetwood also noted that J. K. Rowling's books will help children see the difference between good and evil. Prominent figures of both the Christian and Wiccan societies believe in the good of Harry Potter.

It is apparent that Harry Potter novels are a controversial topic and people will continue to disagree on their appropriateness for children. Though many parents understand the stories as fantasy tales, others believe the books are a gateway to involvement in the occult. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels have the ability to provide millions of children with the fantasy they desire and to display a good role model for their everyday lives.

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