

"Are the Harry Potter books worthy of sustained scholarly attention? Yes, and then some, argues John Granger. 'Serious' thinkers who shun Harry Potter are denying themselves a serious intellectual and scholarly challenge. Christian thinkers who eschew the Potter series because they find it grates on their theology miss the opportunity to take up once again the daunting question of evil. Wisdom often comes through the eyes and thoughts of children and, in this case, 'children's books.'"

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

Professor of social and political ethics, the University of Chicago
Author of *Just War against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*

"John Granger's thorough knowledge of classical literature, combined with a beguiling writing style, makes this study of Harry Potter's hidden themes not only enjoyable but persuasive. Parents will find here a useful tool, and any Christian curious about Harry will find much to think about."

FREDERICA MATHEWES-GREEN

Columnist for Beliefnet.com and author of *The Illumined Heart: The Ancient Christian Path of Transformation*

"John Granger calls upon his gifts as a classicist, a student of Scripture and Christian literature, a teacher, a parent, and a detective to answer the question, Why are the Harry Potter books so popular? He develops a thorough case that the Harry Potter books are essentially Christian fantasy and their popularity can be attributed to human longing for the Christian truths that hide just beneath the surface of the stories. Mr. Granger presents a preponderance of evidence from the text itself, translates advanced literary concepts with ease, and addresses sensitive issues with forthrightness and clarity. Christians who love the Harry Potter books will love them more; Christians who oppose them will have a lot to think about."

CARRIE BIRMINGHAM, PH.D.

Pepperdine University

"John Granger has emerged in recent years as one of the most important voices in the literature concerning J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. *How Harry Cast His Spell* offers Granger at his most accessible and compelling. His careful analysis provides an exceptional guide to the content and meaning of the Harry Potter novels, as well as practical suggestions on how to approach the books in a meaningful way with children. Those who know and love the Harry Potter series will find that this volume adds a new dimension to their understanding and reading enjoyment. Those who are new to or undecided about the series will gain a great appreciation for what Rowling accomplishes in her novels and for the larger religious tradition that informs her stories. Granger writes with clarity and conviction, and his work is

both a joy and an education for the reader. All of those interested in the ways that fiction and faith intersect owe it to themselves to read this book."

AMY H. STURGIS, PH.D.

Liberal Studies Program, Belmont University

Author of various books and articles, including "Harry Potter is a Hobbit: Rowling's Hogwarts, Tolkien's Fairy-Stories, and the Question of Readership"

"No one puts the case for Harry Potter better than John Granger. This book is full of wisdom and insight. . . . The Potter books are much deeper, and a great deal more wholesome, than the critics realize. If Granger is right, J. K. Rowling is writing in the same tradition as the Inklings. Probably millions of Rowling fans knew it all along, but even longtime readers of Harry Potter will find their appreciation deepened by this eye-opening analysis."

STRATFORD CALDECOTT

Author of *Secret Fire: The Spiritual Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien*

"John Granger says a 'Great Book' must do three things: (1) ask the big questions about life, (2) answer the questions correctly (in harmony with Christian tradition), and (3) support the answers artistically. According to these guidelines, the Harry Potter books can be celebrated as great fiction. Granger's engaging application of literature, language, and the logic of Christian belief in his book *How Harry Cast His Spell* may likewise be celebrated as great commentary. Readers will discover in these chapters the essential truth of J. K. Rowling's fictional world—that Love conquers all, even death!"

ROBERT TREXLER

Editor, *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*

"Joanne Rowling is the greatest international 'smuggler' in history. She is smuggling thousands of pages of Christian theology into the hearts and minds of millions of people, both young and old. John Granger's book leaves no doubt whatsoever that this is the case. Will Ms. Rowling be unhappy that John has let the cat out of the bag?"

DON HOLMES

Retired Christian bookstore owner and distributor



How
Harry
Cast
His
Spell

the meaning

BEHIND THE MANIA FOR

J. K. ROWLING'S BESTSELLING BOOKS

JOHN GRANGER



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This book is dedicated to my wife, Mary.



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How Harry Cast His Spell: The Meaning behind the Mania for J. K. Rowling's Bestselling Books

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How Harry Cast His Spell is the fourth edition and third title of a book I wrote in 2002 called *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter*. Way back then, my thesis that Potter-mania was the product of the religious meaning and Christian content of J. K. Rowling's books was considered a ridiculous projection of my beliefs forced into the text. Rowling, however, has put the question of my sanity, at least on this count, to rest. On her Open Book Tour of the United States in 2007 after *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* had been published, she told a press conference that she thought the Christian symbolism and meaning of the stories was "obvious" and that the scriptural passages in the last book "epitomized the whole series."

I will always be grateful for the confidence Tyndale had in my arguments and for the editorial insights of Janis Harris and Lisa Jackson.

Kathryn Helmers of Helmers Literary Services, my literary agent, and Robert Trexler, editor of *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* and at Zossima Press, also deserve special mention here. Ms. Helmers opened the doors at Tyndale and has kept me from many more mistakes than I care to admit here. Bob Trexler is the best friend and kindred spirit every

man needs and no one deserves. His example of the life in Christ is an everyday challenge.

I blog at www.HogwartsProfessor.com; I have taught classes at Barnes and Noble University online; I've been a keynote speaker at Harry Potter conferences in Orlando, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Toronto; and I've communicated via e-mail with many people who read my books. (I welcome you to e-mail me; my address is at the bottom of this page.) The community of friends I have in Harry Potter fandom, consequently, has grown to the point that listing their names would constitute its own chapter. My Harry Potter friends and correspondents have been the best part of this seven-year adventure.

Last on this short list but first in my heart is my family. Thank you, Hannah, Sarah, Sophia, Methodios, Anastasia, Timothy, and Zossima for letting me share what were originally just our Potter conversations with the world. We've largely grown up together with Harry and friends since our Harry Potter adventure began in 2000, and I like to think our happiness is another demonstration of what I argue in this book.

John Granger
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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Dear Reader,

Some may wonder why a publisher of distinctly Christian books would publish a book about the Harry Potter series, which, while phenomenally successful, has been criticized by some groups within the Christian community. The answer is really quite simple.

Millions of young people are reading the Harry Potter books, providing parents with a wonderful opportunity to use stories their children love to read to start discussions with them about Christian ideas and values—and about how to evaluate the worldview embedded in any piece of literature. We hope *How Harry Cast His Spell* will serve as a catalyst for such discussions and as a bridge to growth in faith and spiritual understanding.

THE PUBLISHER



INTRODUCTION

Imagine yourself walking in the park with your dog in the cool of the evening. Just like in the movies, a flying saucer descends from the skies and lands gently on the empty softball field behind the vacant warehouse. A little green man drops from a metal ladder under the craft and scurries toward you. You and the dog have seen this played out so many times on late-night television that you almost yawn.

The little guy doesn't threaten you or order you to take him to your leader. As you may have expected, the Dobby look-alike just wants to talk with you about Harry Potter. After all, doesn't everybody?

J. K. Rowling's seven Harry Potter novels sold more than 375 million copies and were translated into more than sixty languages between the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (the original United Kingdom title) in 1997 and the end of 2007, the year in which *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was published. The first five Harry Potter movies each set records for opening box office, and the

series as a whole had, by early 2008, already surpassed both the twenty-one-film James Bond series and the six Star Wars films as the most successful movie franchise of all time. The alien, like all good travelers, has done his homework about his planet vacation, and I'm betting that all the interplanetary guidebooks these days are urging earthbound tourists to talk about Harry with the natives this year. What else are they all sure to know about?

I first heard about Harry Potter and his friends in 2000. I was the homeschooling daddy to seven young children ages one to twelve years old, and I didn't want anything to do with the young wizard-in-training. From what I had heard from a coworker (whose judgment on literature I thought was not to be trusted), I assumed the books were serial schlock on the order of R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* novels. Being something of a snob, I read the first Potter paperback just so I could explain to my oldest daughter why we don't read trash like this.

She calls it my "green eggs and ham" moment. Overnight, I was transformed from "I do not like them in a box; I do not like them with a fox" to reading the stories aloud to the younger children and discussing them at length with the older girls. I remember in that first week of Harry excitement when another colleague at work told me that Christians "as a rule" despised the books. You could have knocked me over with a feather.

What's Your Favorite Scene?

Back to the little green space guy in the park.

My bet is that the question his earth guidebook recommends he ask you is about your favorite scene in the books. Why would he want to know that? Because, besides being a great opening for conversation, unlike Earth's academics, our friend from outer space probably wants to learn something he can take back to the planet Zenon. I'm betting he wants answers to the big question, the only question that really matters about Harry Potter. He wants to know

what it is about these books that has made them the “shared text” of children, parents, and grandparents on every continent and archipelago of the planet.

So why do readers young and old love Harry Potter? This is an important question, and the answer is a bit of a shocker. Before I share it with you, though, let me explain something I said earlier.

I said you could have knocked me over with a feather the day I heard Christians didn’t like Harry Potter. You might recall that quite a few Christians in 2000 were, in fact, burning the books and asking that they not be allowed in public or school libraries funded with their tax dollars. Why was I so surprised by that? Because the reason I liked the Harry Potter books so much and the reason I was reading them to my children was the implicit, explicit, and very traditional spiritual, even Christian, content of the books, which I thought was as obvious as it was edifying.

I was interested enough in this subject that I gave a series of lectures on it at a C. S. Lewis Society gathering and at a local library. Before I knew it, ideas that had been floating around in my head found their way to book form. And in something like a Walter Mitty transformation, I morphed from Latin teacher to Harry Potter expert and media go-to source.

How Does Harry Cast His Spell?

Someday soon, folks who track this sort of thing to write about the intellectual history of popular culture will be sitting down to put together their notes on prevalent ideas about Harry Potter. What they will find, I’m pretty certain, is an arc of change much like the one described by J. B. S. Haldane: “Theories pass through four stages of acceptance: (1) this is worthless nonsense; (2) this is an interesting, but perverse, point of view; (3) this is true, but quite unimportant; (4) I always said so.”¹ The historians of popular culture tracking how people understood Harry will discover that folks thought Harry Potter was (1) anti-Christian, even demonic; (2) anti-Christian

in the sense of being an invitation to the occult; (3) not Christian, anti-Christian, or spiritual—just magic; (4) profoundly Christian, like C. S. Lewis (“I always knew it”).

As broad as the always growing consensus about the depth of the Christian content of the Harry Potter novels now is—broad enough that in a recent documentary about her work, Rowling felt it necessary to deny at length that her purpose in writing was to convert readers to Christianity²—it bears recalling that even five years ago Christian critics of the series had convinced most people (and, it seemed, all journalists) that Harry was anything but Christian and that these books were dangerous for children to read.

How could they have gotten it so wrong? And why did readers believe them?

Answering the question “Why do readers young and old love Harry Potter?” explains the others because if they had gotten that one right, they couldn’t have asserted what they thought about Harry and his author. The answer, believe it or not, is very simple, if frequently misunderstood. Readers love Harry Potter because of the spiritual meaning and Christian content of the books.

Let me explain what that doesn’t mean before I jump into what it does mean.

First, it doesn’t mean that the Harry Potter novels were written especially for Christians, with Christians in mind, or most important, for the sole purpose of evangelizing nonbelievers into accepting the Christian faith. None of those things are true, and none of them have anything to do with the answer to the important question of why we love Harry Potter.

Harry Potter is not the Left Behind series or even the Chronicles of Narnia in terms of being an in-your-face Christian drama or altar call.

Even now that J. K. Rowling has discussed the scriptural quotations in *Deathly Hallows*, I doubt that her readers would say they love her books because of their Christian meaning, especially her

non-Christian readers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and around the world. My guess is that few if any readers, adults or children, responded to their first or last Harry Potter adventure with a whoop about the traditional Christian imagery or the literary alchemy that in many ways structures each story.

So how can the Christian content of the stories be the reason people love the books if they don't understand this content for what it is and if evangelization wasn't the author's point in writing the novels?

The answer to that question is pretty straightforward, but it takes a couple of steps to get into—and the rest of this book to explain in detail. Religion and literature have a long history, but almost none of us, even the English majors, studied that relationship in school. So let's start with an expert.

The argument begins with Mircea Eliade, a professor at the University of Chicago. In *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion and the Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*, Eliade explained that “non-religious man in the pure state is a comparatively rare phenomenon, even in the most desacralized of modern societies.”⁵

Eliade's point is pretty simple. Human beings are spiritual by design, whether you believe that design is an accident of evolution or straight from God. By our very nature, humans resist an exclusively secularized world in which our faculties for perceiving a reality “saturated with being” have no play. It doesn't matter that schools, courts, and lawmakers have made the “G word” something taboo in education, government functions, and public discourse outside of presidential elections; human beings live on myth, religion, and spirituality because we're hardwired for it.

Modern and postmodern secular cultures that have driven the sacred from the public square are fighting the tide. Our world may be radically different from traditional, God-focused civilizations, but it is still crowded with religious elements. As Eliade wrote, “a

small volume could be written on the myths of the modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads."⁴

Even the act of reading serves an important religious or mythic function:

Even reading includes a mythological function . . . because, through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an "escape from time" comparable to the "emergence from time" effected by myths. Whether modern man "kills" time with a detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another "history."⁵

Accepting Eliade's premises that (a) humans are designed to experience the sacred and (b) humans will pursue this experience even in a culture that denies both a human spiritual faculty and a spiritual reality per se, answering the question about why we love Harry Potter is a slam dunk. The act of reading itself serves a religious function in a secular culture, but Harry gives us much more than that. Reading about Harry and the world of magic qualities is a respite from a universe without ennobling truth, beauty, or virtue. But more important, in image, character, and theme, these stories are the vehicles of spiritual meaning and specifically Christian artistry from the English literary tradition.

We love Harry Potter because we are designed for religious experience—and these books deliver religious experience the way coal trucks used to deliver fuel into people's basements: in a barely controlled avalanche. This isn't an evangelistic mountain slide meant to catch you off guard and force your conversion. It is the rhetoric of great storytelling with a host of religious and mythic hooks to catch on your Velcro heart, a heart designed to capture and resonate with these hierophanies, or intrusions of the sacred.

The business of this book is to peel away the layers of that rhetoric so you can understand the various symbols J. K. Rowling uses, the themes she develops, and the many traditional devices and structures she borrows from English “greats.” Almost all these tools are Christian, but much more to the point, the English literary tradition in which she writes—twelve centuries of it, give or take a few hundred years—is exclusively Christian.

This bothers quite a few readers, so it is worth spending a moment to explain. Myth and archetype are okay to these readers, but once something becomes one specific religion, all their defenses go up. I don’t know if it is fear of being converted or simply narrow-mindedness, but the heels go in deep against the idea that Harry Potter is written in religious language that is almost exclusively Christian. Even so, there’s just no getting around this.

It is true that a phoenix, a unicorn, and a griffin are symbols found in cultures around the world. It is true, too, that these magical creatures are understood differently by different cultures compared to the way they are understood by English writers and readers. But in English stories, these symbols have specific Christian meanings (see chapter 9). Not knowing this meaning or insisting on a plurality of other meanings is not broad-mindedness or religious pluralism. It’s just ignorance and, if I may be so bold, perhaps a little Christ-o-phobic.

If Rowling were an Islamofascist, Hindu Brahmin, or Buddhist ger dweller, when writing an epic adventure in English and within English traditions, her hands would still have been essentially tied to writing a Christian story. This huge monocultural sow that is the English literary tradition cannot be butchered in such a way that gets you Parliament of Religions bacon in slabs.

My job in *How Harry Cast His Spell* is to act as your guide through what I assume is already familiar territory, the seven Harry Potter books, and to point out all the religious and mythical elements specific to the tradition in which J. K. Rowling did her writing. Unless

you're a very unusual reader indeed, this will be an eye-popping ride your first time through, so we give it a double pass to make sure you don't miss anything essential.

In the first ten chapters, we'll hit the high spots of alchemy, themes, and symbols, with a chapter-by-chapter introduction that takes a large view of the whole series, one subject at a time. We start, for example, with magic in literature because many readers don't see how that can be "religious" in any way when every revealed tradition forbids playing with magic. After that, we take similar long-range looks at the hero's journey, literary alchemy, and how symbols work. Then when we've made the first trip through and we understand what all the little marks on the Marauder's Map mean, we'll jump into the seven Harry Potter novels themselves one at a time to see what we can make of them. I'll explain the religious meaning and Christian content of each book, as well as why I think readers respond to them the way they do. Your job is to grasp what I explain and to see what I missed. This is the fourth edition of this book, and every update has been improved by readers who have written me to share something meaningful I missed.

Where Does This All Come From?

Before we dive in though, I am obliged to answer three questions I am inevitably asked at public talks I give:

- ❖ Do I really think Rowling intentionally gave the books all this meaning?
- ❖ Have I ever met Rowling? Has she confirmed that this was what she was doing?
- ❖ How did I figure all this stuff out?

DO I REALLY THINK ROWLING INTENTIONALLY
GAVE THE BOOKS ALL THIS MEANING?

This is a polite way of saying, "John, could you be imagining all this?" I have three reasons for thinking J. K. Rowling is a profound

writer who writes at several levels, some of which are well below the story line.

First, the woman has a first-rate education. Many readers familiar with the Cinderella story of her being a single mum on the dole when she wrote the first book imagine she was a welfare mother without a high school diploma who just got lucky. The truth is that she has an education and a degree equivalent to graduating from a prestigious American liberal arts college, say, Middlebury or Wesleyan, with a major in French and a minor in classics. She has said her stories come from the compost pile of books she has read, and I'm guessing this pile is several stories high.

Second, Rowling didn't dash off these stories. She claims she first thought of Harry Potter on a train in 1990. In the seven years before the first book was published and in the ten years it took to write and publish the seven books, Rowling planned, replanned, and filled notebooks with backstory she would never use in the published novels. "Planning" is her recommendation to all young authors, and it is the signature of her genius as a writer. There is nothing accidental or off the cuff about her work; if it's in there, she put it in there deliberately.

And third, the suggestion that Rowling didn't mean the books to be as profound as they are misses out on something essential. A lot of the most profound meaning of the books is in the formula of how the books are written, the things that happen again and again in every book. Harry's resurrection from the dead in the presence of a symbol of Christ could be accidental once, granted. But his doing it seven times without a variant is hard to scratch off as something unintentional. Rowling is, first and last, an accomplished storyteller—and the profound meaning of her writing is evident in the weave of the story fabric she creates.

HAVE I EVER MET ROWLING? HAS SHE CONFIRMED THAT THIS WAS WHAT SHE WAS DOING?

In words of one syllable, no, I have not met Rowling, and no, she has not told me one thing about her books. I think these questions are also polite ways of saying something completely different from the surface meaning. Folks who ask me this, as a rule, believe that only authors understand their books, and anyone else who interprets their fiction is just guessing. Having just written that Rowling is a very intelligent and very intentional, even formulaic, writer, let me rush to add that she would be an unusual writer (perhaps the first in history) if she understood her books' meanings comprehensively or even much better than very intelligent readers. She certainly does not have a monopoly on interpreting her books.

I like to think, in fact, as neat as it would be to talk with Rowling someday, that our conversation wouldn't be about the meaning of Harry Potter. From what I understand of such things from reading other authors, talking about her books' meaning would be just about the most insulting thing I could do.

In other words, asking Rowling what she meant in her stories is insulting; if what she meant is not discernible to a serious reader, I would be saying implicitly that she is a poor writer. And by restricting the meaning of the works to the author's intention and understanding of them, I would be suggesting that she as author is a god, fully conscious of her influences, prejudices, and meanings to every reader and aware of every valence and meaning of her stories' symbols.

I admire Rowling enough as an artist and a person that I do not want to diminish her remarkable literary accomplishment or suggest she is something more than human. Two of the themes within the Harry Potter novels are that we respect people for who they are and that we struggle to come to terms with the limits of individual understanding. Let's avoid the celebrity school of inter-

pretation that believes only writers understand their books; it leaves all the fun to the writers and insults them horribly in the bargain.

HOW DID I FIGURE ALL THIS STUFF OUT?

Here at last is an honest question! The answer will probably disappoint you. Not only have I not spoken with Rowling, we also grew up on opposite shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Not much common ground there, then, at least in a literal sense. Comparing and contrasting our worldviews and educations, though, I think it's fair to say that, despite significant differences, our ways of looking at the world have been calibrated with similar prescription eyeglasses.

Examples?

- ❖ Rowling grew up as something of a Hermione, a nerd who studied more than her share of classical and modern languages. I studied Latin, Greek, and German in high school and was certainly a geek.
- ❖ She chose to go to church (Anglican Communion) even though her parents and sister did not and sought baptism and confirmation on her own as an adolescent. I was baptized as an infant into the Anglican Communion (ECUSA), and when my family stopped going to church when I was in high school, I continued to attend and was confirmed alone among my siblings.⁶
- ❖ We both read and reread C. S. Lewis, Jane Austen, and the rest of the English greats because we loved the stories and the genius of the storytellers.
- ❖ I became interested in esoteric and literary alchemy while still in college and have continued to study its history and place in literature since. Rowling said in 1998 that she “read a ridiculous amount” about alchemy before writing Harry and that alchemy set the “magical parameters” and “internal logic” of the series.⁷

I could go on, but let's leave it at this. Both in interpreting what Rowling is saying and in the rather more bizarre field of guessing

what she was going to write, my track record since 2002 has been good enough that I have been a keynote speaker at every Harry Potter conference of any size in the last five years, not to mention being interviewed by more than one hundred radio stations, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine. Odds are pretty good you've even seen my face as well, because I've been on national television to answer Harry questions on CNN and MSNBC, and for an A&E special that eventually became a DVD extra in the *Order of the Phoenix* movie package. I've taught online classes to international audiences at Barnes and Noble University; I blog daily on Harry subjects,⁸ and I've written a book about how Rowling does what she does: *Unlocking Harry Potter: Five Keys for the Serious Reader*.

But to answer your question about how I figured all this stuff out, it always comes back to that fact that we share a similar eye-glasses prescription. Same church upbringing, same kind of classical education, same nineteenth-century dinosaur reading list, same interest in—can you believe it—alchemy.

Which brings us back again to our overarching question: Why does everyone love Harry Potter? Believe it or not, the answer is that it's the transcendent meaning of the books and, specifically, their Christian content, with which readers resonate. Go on to the next page and let's begin our trip through the mythical and religious meaning that drives Potter-mania.



1

MAGIC, FANTASY, AND
TRANSCENDENCE

*The magic in Harry Potter is traditional literary
spellwork that acts as a counterspell to the
materialism of our times.*

More than any other book of the last fifty years (and perhaps ever), the Harry Potter novels have captured the imagination of the reading public worldwide. Hundreds of millions of copies have been sold to date. However, although the books have been wildly successful, no one as yet has been able to explain their popularity. The aim of *How Harry Cast His Spell* is to answer the question “Why do readers young and old love these stories?” The answer, believe it or not, is not great marketing, movie tie-ins, or product placement; it’s the transcendent meaning of the books, and more specifically, their Christian content.

The Harry Potter books, in case you have lived on the planet Zeno since 1997 or have recently come out of a coma, recount the adventures of an English schoolboy as he advances from grade to grade at Hogwarts School. Hogwarts is no ordinary boarding

school, however, and Harry Potter is no typical student—the former is a school for witchcraft and wizardry, and Harry is not only a wizard-in-training, but the target of attack by the worst of evil wizards, Lord Voldemort, and his followers, the Death Eaters. Each book ends with a life-or-death battle against Voldemort or his servants and enough plot twists to make you dream of saltwater taffy.

I am convinced that the fundamental reason for the astonishing popularity of the Harry Potter novels is their ability to meet a spiritual longing for some experience of the truths of life, love, and death that are denied by our secular culture. Human beings are designed for transcendent truths, whether they know it or not, and they pursue experience of these truths and some exercise of their spiritual faculties anywhere they can. Mircea Eliade suggested that modern entertainments, especially books and movies, serve a mythological or religious function in a desecralized world.¹ *That the Harry Potter stories “sing along” with the Great Story of Christ in the tradition of English literature is a significant key to understanding their compelling richness and unprecedented popularity.* We love these books because they satisfy our desire for religious experience in a big way.

Sound loony? I take hits from both sides of the Potter wars for this thesis—from Potter fans who are shocked by the suggestion that they have been reading “Christian” books and from Potter foes who are shocked by the thought that there could be anything “Christian” or edifying about books with witches and wizards in them. But like it or not, Harry’s Christian content and the fact that he takes us out of our materialist mental prisons are what keep his readers coming back again and again.

As the magical setting of the books has caused the most controversy in religious communities and has the most important and obvious spiritual significance, I’ll start with the setting and several formulas Rowling observes in every book to begin the discussion of what drives Potter-mania.

Magical Setting

Some Christians have objected to Harry Potter because Christian Scripture in many places explicitly forbids occult practice. Though reading about occult practice is not forbidden, these Christians prudently prefer (again in obedience to scriptural admonishments to parents) to protect their children because of the books' sympathetic portrayal of occult practice. These Christians believe that such approving and casual exposure to the occult opens the door to occult practice.

Reading the Harry Potter books myself has convinced me that the magic in Harry Potter is no more likely to encourage real-life witchcraft than time travel in science fiction novels encourages readers to seek passage to previous centuries. Loving families have much to celebrate in these stories and little, if anything, to fear. What they have to celebrate is the traditional, edifying magic of English literature—a magic that fosters a spiritual worldview that is anything but occult oriented.

I say this without hesitation because the magic in Harry Potter is not “sorcery” or *invocational* magic. In keeping with a long tradition of English fantasy, the magic practiced in the Potter books, by hero and villain alike, is *incantational* magic, a magic that shows—in story form—our human thirst for a reality beyond the physical world around us.

The difference between invocational and incantational magic isn't something we all learned in the womb, so let me explain. *Invocational* means literally “to call in.” Magic of this sort is usually referred to as sorcery. Scripture of every revealed tradition warns that “calling in” demonic principalities and powers for personal power and advantage is dangerously stupid. History books, revealed tradition, and fantasy fiction (think *Dr. Faustus*) that touch on sorcery do so in order to show us that the unbridled pursuit of power and advantage via black magic promises a tragic end.

But there is no invocational sorcery in the Harry Potter books.

Even the most evil wizards do their nasty magic with spells; not one character in any of the seven books ever calls in evil spirits. Not once.

The magic by spells and wands in Harry Potter is known as incantational wizardry. *Incantational* means literally “to sing along with” or “to harmonize.” To understand how this works, we have to step outside our culture’s materialist creed (that everything in existence is quantitative mass or energy) and look at the world upside down, which is to say, God-first.

For some, the distinction between invocational and incantational magic is a new idea. I’ve been asked how prayer fits. “Isn’t prayer invocational? Aren’t we calling out to God with this concept—invoking his name—when we pray? How is this ‘bad magic?’”

Calling out to God isn’t bad magic, of course, and the reason helps to clarify the difference between sorcery and the “good magic” of English literature. It is the difference between the psychic and the spiritual realms.²

In a materialistic age such as the one in which we live, the distinction between the psychic and the spiritual is hard to keep straight, though it is an understanding all traditional faiths have in common. We struggle to hold on to this distinction because we have been taught that everything existent is some combination of matter and energy. Everything that’s not matter and energy, consequently, is lumped together as “peripheral stuff” or “delusion.” It’s hard to remember the differences between things thrown together in the garbage can of ideas!

The distinction between the psychic realm and the spiritual realm is critical. The psychic realm—accessible through the soul and including the powers of the soul, from the emotions and sentiments to the reason and intellect—is home to demonic and angelic created beings and is predominantly a fallen place apart from God. The spiritual realm is “God’s place”—the transcendent sphere within and beyond creation and the restrictions of being, time, and space.

Invocational magic is calling upon the fallen residents of the psychic realm. Prayer is the invocation of God's name that we might live deliberately and consciously in his presence within time and space.

Incantational magic in literature—a harmonizing with God's Word—is the story-time version of what a life in prayer makes possible. Invoking the powers of the psychic realm is universally forbidden in both literary and revealed traditions. However, calling on the spiritual realm and pursuing graces from it are the tasks for which human beings are designed, insofar as we are *homo religiosus*. One function of traditional English literature, of which Harry Potter is a part, is to support us in this spiritual life.

Christianity—and all revealed traditions—believes creation comes into being by God's creative Word, or his song. As creatures made in the image of God, we can harmonize with God's Word and his will, and in doing so, experience the power of God. The magic and miracles we read about in great English literature are merely reflections of God's work in our life. To risk overstating my case, the magic in Harry Potter and other good fantasy fiction harmonizes with the miracles of the saints.

C. S. Lewis paints a picture of the differences between incantational and invocational magic in *Prince Caspian*. As you may recall, Prince Caspian and the Aslan-revering creatures of the forest are under attack from Caspian's uncle. Things turn bad for the white hats, and it seems as if they will be overrun and slaughtered at any moment. Two characters on the good guys' side decide their only hope is magic.

Prince Caspian decides on musical magic. He has a horn that Aslan, the Christlike lion of these books, had given to Queen Susan in ages past to blow in time of need. Caspian blows on this divinely provided instrument in his crisis.³ By sounding a note in obedience and faith, Caspian harmonizes with the underlying fabric and rules of the Emperor over the Sea, and help promptly and providentially arrives in the shape of the Pevensie children themselves.

Nikabrik the dwarf, in contrast, decides a little sorcery is in order. He finds a hag capable of summoning the dreaded White Witch in the hope that this power-hungry, Aslan-hating witch will help the good guys (in exchange for an opening into Narnia). Needless to say, the musical magicians are scandalized by the dwarf's actions and put an end to the sorcery lickety-split.

In the Narnia stories and other great fantasy fiction, good magic is incantational, and bad magic is invocational. Incantational magic is about harmonizing with God's creative Word by imitation. Invocational magic is about calling in evil spirits for power or advantage—always a tragic mistake. The magic in Harry Potter is exclusively incantational magic in conformity with both literary tradition and scriptural admonition. Concern that the books might “lay the foundation” for occult practice is misplaced, however well intentioned and understandable, because it fails to recognize that Potter magic is not demonic.

Perhaps you are wondering, *If Harry Potter magic is a magic in harmony with the Great Story, why are the bad guys able to use it?* Great question.

Just as even the evil people in “real” life are certainly created in God's image, so all the witches and wizards in Potterdom, good and bad, are able to use incantational magic. Evil magical folk choose of their own free will to serve the Dark Lord with their magical faculties just as most of us, sadly, lend a talent or power of our own in unguarded moments to the Evil One's cause. As we will see, the organizing structure of the Potter books is a battle between good guys who serve truth, beauty, and virtue and bad guys who lust after power and private gain.

Some fans of Lewis and Tolkien contrast those writers' use of magic with Rowling's, arguing that, unlike the world of Harry Potter, the subcreations of these fantasy writers had no overlap with the real world. They suggest that this blurring of boundaries confuses young minds about what is fiction and what is reality.

But Lewis and Tolkien blurred boundaries with gusto in their

stories—as did Homer, Virgil, Dante, and other authors whose works regularly traumatize students in English classes. Certainly the assertion that Middle Earth and Narnia are separate realities is questionable, at best. Middle Earth is earth between the Second and Third Ages (we live in the so-called Fourth Age). Narnia overlaps with our world at the beginning and end of each book, and in *The Last Battle* is revealed as a likeness with earth of the heavenly archetype, or Aslan's kingdom. Singling out Rowling here betrays a lack of charity, at least, and perhaps a little reasoning chasing prejudice.

That the magical world exists inside Muggledom (nonmagical people are called "Muggles" by the witches and wizards in Harry Potter), however, besides being consistent with the best traditions in epic myth and fantasy, parallels the life of Christians in the world. I don't want to belabor this point, but C. S. Lewis described the life of Christians as a life spent "in an enemy occupied country."⁴ What he meant is that traditional Christians understand that man is fallen, that he no longer enjoys the ability to walk and talk with God in the Garden, and that the world is driven by God-opposing powers. Lewis's Ransom novels illustrate this idea.

Why do we love the magic of Harry Potter? I think we have three big reasons to be excited by it. First, we live in a time in which *naturalism*, the belief that all existence is matter and energy, is the state religion and belief in supernatural or contra-natural powers is considered delusion. The incantational magic in Harry Potter, because it requires harmonizing with a greater magic, undermines faith in this godless worldview. Harry's magic, even if only experienced imaginatively in a state of suspended disbelief, gives our spiritual faculties the oxygen our secular schools and the public square have tried to cut off. And by undermining the materialist view of our times, it can even be said that the books lay the foundation for a traditional understanding of the spiritual, which is to say "human," life.

Next, because there is overlap between the "magical" and "Muggle" worlds of Harry Potter, there is the edifying suggestion

that the prevalent bipolar worldview of Americans, in which the world is divided by an arbitrary state versus church dichotomy, not to mention the secular versus sacred illusion, is just so much nonsense. The spiritual and traditional understanding of the world is a *sacramental* one, in which the spiritual suffuses the material (just as the human person is a psychosomatic unity with spiritual faculties). The breakdown of the Muggle/magic divide helps readers see that existence itself (in not being matter or energy) unites all reality and that “greater being” is found only in pursuit of the sacred, not the “scientific” and profane.

And third, we love the magic in Harry Potter because it helps us exercise those atrophied spiritual powers we have (as we identify with Harry and his friends), while at the same time encouraging us to be heroic and good alongside them. This is no small thing, and we’ll be returning to it in the coming chapters.

Have you heard stories of children being sucked into witches’ covens because they want to be like Harry? Reports of rising membership in occult groups since the Harry Potter books were published inevitably turn out to be generated by proselytizing members of these groups. People who track the occult for a living explain that, despite Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Harry Potter, membership in these groups in Europe and the United States are minuscule and are in decline despite a decade of Harry, Buffy, and occult milieu entertainment.⁵ Children are far more likely to become Hare Krishna, gynecologists, or members of a Christian cult than real-world witches or wizards.

And even if children *were* being seduced into the occult because of their desire to do spells, I have to hope this would be understood by thinking people as a shameful, tragic aberration, more indicative of the child’s spiritual misformation than a danger in the books. The Dungeons and Dragons craze in the sixties and seventies and its attendant occult paraphernalia sprang from an unhealthy fascination and perverse misunderstanding of *The Lord of the Rings*, an

epic with clear Christian undertones. If we were to avoid books that could possibly be misunderstood or whose message could be turned on its head, incidents like Jonestown would logically suggest thinking people should not read the Bible.

What about the title of the first book in the Potter series? If there's no sorcery in these books, how come the first book and movie are titled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*? Well, because that isn't the title of the first book. Arthur Levine, under whose imprint the books are published by Scholastic in the United States, changed the title from *Philosopher's Stone* to *Sorcerer's Stone* because he was sure that no American would buy a book with *philosophy* in the title.

An Orthodox Christian bishop has noted that Harry haters "have missed the spiritual forest for the sake of their fixation on the magical imagery of the literary trees."⁶ If there is anything tragic in this misunderstanding of Harry Potter by well-intentioned Christians, it is the tragedy of "friendly fire." Just as foot soldiers are sometimes hit by misdirected artillery fire from their own troops, so Harry has been condemned by the side he is serving. Because some Christians have mistaken fictional magic for sorcery, they have misconstrued what is a blow at atheistic naturalism as, of all things, an invitation to the occult.⁷ If the "magical trees" in Harry Potter are of any help in retaking ground lost to those who would burn down the spiritual forest, then Rowling has done human communities everywhere a very good deed.

I receive e-mail from readers almost daily about the "problem" of reading Harry Potter in light of its transcendent meaning and specific Christian content. They insist that the symbols, themes, and meanings of the books are perfectly comprehensible without any reference to an imaginary Christian subtext that believers are projecting into the books.

The mistake these readers make when they insist that the symbolism of Harry Potter is not "exclusively" Christian is that they just don't understand a disturbing fact about English literature.

I have friends who teach and write about Saudi Arabia and Arabic culture in general. Their work is not restricted to Islam, certainly, but they wouldn't be experts in their field if they weren't aware of the tremendous influence of the Koran and the Islamic worldview on culture, politics, and everything Arabic. This, I hope, is a no-brainer.

Unfortunately, in a post-Christian era (culturally speaking), and one in which universities are in large part overly hostile to religious meanings (mine certainly was!), the simple, disturbing fact that English literature until the last fifty years was (ahem) "exclusively" a Christian field escapes people. Christian authors writing for a Christian reading audience—and writing books, plays, and poems that would edify them in their spiritual and workaday lives as Christians—was the rule of English letters until well after the first World War.

In explaining the popularity of the Harry Potter novels as a function of the response of a spiritually deprived world for edifying, transcendent experience (even experience limited to entertainment), I am frequently accused of proselytizing and forcing Christian meaning into the text. What a hoot! No one accuses my friends who are Saudi scholars of trying to convert people to Islam because their reports on Middle Eastern current events and trends are heavy on the place of Islam in Arabic culture.

If some Harry fans are uncomfortable because other readers, Christian or not, are interpreting the Potter books in a Christian light, I beg these readers to ask themselves where the problem exists. Reading books within a Christian literary tradition (if *not* for an exclusively Christian audience and *not* in a manner that is overtly Christian in any denominational or parochial sense) invites discussion of the Christian elements of the story and of the tools from the tradition the author uses. Literary alchemy, religious symbolism, and doppelgängers, for instance, don't make much sense outside of the tradition in which these books are written and in which these tools are used.

I have no evangelical cause or agenda here in discussing the Christian content of these books. My only hope is that readers will come to a greater appreciation of these works via the discussion of Harry Potter as traditional English literature, which, again, is an overwhelmingly Christian subject. William Shakespeare's plays and James Joyce's novels are impenetrable outside some appreciation of their spiritual context and the traditions of English literature. J. K. Rowling's stories are no different.

If readers want an exclusively secular view of the books—that is, a reading of them outside of the context and traditions in which they are written—this is probably not their book. English literature (Harry Potter is undeniably root-and-branch English literature) is as Christian as Tibetan culture is Buddhist and Saudi politics is Islamic.

Denying this is not “having a broad mind” but living in a fantasy. Likewise, refusing to see the Christian elements in Harry Potter and insisting it is demonic is not a greater piety or fidelity to the faith; it is just a reflection of not understanding the place of literature in the spiritual life, of not understanding the Christian tradition of English literature, and of not understanding the popularity of Harry Potter.

Let's move on from Harry's edifying incantational magic to the battlefield of good versus evil in these stories.



NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹ "The Truth about Death," *Journal of Genetics* 58 (1962-1963): 463-464.

² J. K. Rowling: *A Year in the Life*, a documentary by James Runcie (December 30, 2007), ITV1

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1957), 204.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ J. K. Rowling: *A Year in the Life*.

⁷ *Face to Face with J. K. Rowling* (December 7, 1998), <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/1998/1298-herald-simpson.html>.

⁸ See www.HogwartsProfessor.com.

CHAPTER 1

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 205.

² For more on the confusion between the psychic and the spiritual realms in our time and the dangers of occultism, please see Charles Upton's *The System of Antichrist: Truth and Falsehood in Postmodernism and the New Age* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 134-137.

³ See C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, chapters 7 and 12. Readers of the Narnia books remember from *The Magician's Nephew* that Aslan created that world with his song—as does the divinity in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 51.

⁵ "Fundamentalism Afoot in Anti-Potter Camp, Says New-Religions Expert: Popular Culture Enjoys an Autonomy, Explains Massimo Introvigne," *Zenit News*, December 6, 2001, http://www.cesnur.org/2001/potter/dec_03.htm.

⁶ Bishop Auxentios, *Orthodox Tradition* 20, no. 3 (2003): 14-26.

⁷ See C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair* for this modern tragedy told in story form. *The Silver Chair* is a vibrant story of the confusion and modern enchantment with materialism or "life underground." Is there any Narnia moment greater than Prince Rilian's victory over the Emerald Witch in chapter 12?

CHAPTER 2

¹ Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 147.

² Perry Glazer, "The Surprising Trouble with Harry," *Touchstone* (November 2003): 13.

CHAPTER 3

¹ David Colbert, author of *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter*, thinks the formula is the universal hero pattern described by Joseph Campbell in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Joan Acocella in the *New Yorker* magazine traces the pattern to Vladimir Propp's 1929 book, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. Elizabeth Schafer believes Rowling is a fan of Carl Jung; she cites Lord Ragland's work on archetypal heroes, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, as a guide to the formula Rowling follows.

CHAPTER 4

¹ For more information on alchemy and its use in classic literature, please read *Darke Hieroglyphicks* by Stanton Linden, a history of alchemy and its usage in English literature, or subscribe to *Cauda Pavonis*, an academic journal on alchemy in literature.

² *The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Comedy of Errors, Love's Labour's Lost, and The Merchant of Venice* come to mind. In her book *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), Dame Frances Yates demonstrated that Shakespeare built the Globe Theatre on alchemical principles for the proper staging of his alchemical dramas.

³ Anne Simpson, "Face to Face with J. K. Rowling: Casting a Spell over Young Minds," *The Herald* (December 7, 1998).

⁴ Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Mircea Eliade and Stephen Corrin, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 153.

CHAPTER 5

¹ For more on this, see the discussion of the spell in chapter 13 on *Prisoner of Azkaban*.

² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003), 607.

³ *Ibid.*, 841.

⁴ PotterCast 130 (December 2007), <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/2007/1217-pottercast-anelli.html>.

⁵ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Scholastic, 2005), 511.

⁶ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 710.