

# Harry Potter and the Witch Hunters: A Social Context for the Attacks on *Harry Potter*

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The following letter, one of many similar letters, appeared in *The Roanoke (Virginia) Times* on December 9, 2001: "I don't know if J. K. Rowling is deliberately trying to indoctrinate our children in witchcraft and satanism or whether she's simply a deluded tool herself. However, I urge parents to listen to the voice of God and say no to Harry Potter for their children's spiritual welfare." What is it about Harry Potter? What makes a fundamentalist American reading (or nonreading) public, who never got upset over the magic godmother in *Cinderella*, or Glinda the Good Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, or Gandalf the Grey, complete with magic staff and wizard's hat, in *The Lord of the Rings*, book and films, draw the line at Harry Potter?

One reason may be the popularity. Harry is everywhere. Bookstores stayed open all night to sell the first copies of the penultimate volume in the saga, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and adults and children alike lined up by the hundreds. A handful of hapless Canadians mistakenly allowed to buy the book ahead of its release date were sworn to secrecy and threatened with legal action if they did not return the illicit volumes (Canada Newswire par. 3). Fan sites abound on the Internet, including *The Harry Potter Automatic News Aggregator*, which offers

"Harry Potter News and Rumors—complete Harry Potter coverage collected from various news sources." Considering Harry, Jack Zipes asks, "How is it possible to evaluate a work of literature like a Harry Potter novel when it is so dependent on the market conditions of the culture industry?," and maintains that, "Today the experience of reading for the young is mediated through the mass media and marketing so that the pleasure and meaning of a book will often be pre-scripted or dictated by convention" (171–72). So may also be the deploring of Harry, when the Internet gives his detractors as well as fans as wide a scope as the books themselves.

Another reason may be a recent shift in the focus of censorship efforts from sex to the occult. As Mark West has pointed out, "During the 1980s, most of the censorship cases were anything that pertained to the body, sex, and swear words. [Now], although books like those written by Judy Blume are still under attack, what has taken over is fantasy stories" (qtd. in Dunne par. 4). Complicating this issue is the fact that there are significant differences in what may be considered fantasy from one religion to the next (or between differing denominations of the same religion). As an example, Marjorie Taylor and Stephanie M. Carlson studied parents' reactions to the topic

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*The Journal of American Culture*, 29:1

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of imaginary companions. While mainstream Christian parents regard imaginary friends as harmless or at worst a nuisance, as when their child insists that the friend must have her own place at the dinner table, Taylor and Carlson note that many fundamentalist Christian parents associate them with the devil, particularly if the companion talks back to the child, while in India a child with an imaginary companion is considered to be remembering a previous life (248–54). Plainly, the border between what is real and what is fantasy is a shifting line that is culturally dependent.

In addition, Deborah J. Taub and Heather L. Servaty's study of Harry Potter notes that another prevailing belief among fundamentalist parents is that fantasy equals deceit, that fantasy and storytelling "will lead to lying and other deceitful behavior," and this factor combines with the necessity "to protect their children from evil forces in the fantasy world" (54).

However, a great deal of modern children's literature is fantasy, and it is primarily Harry who seems to be the lightning rod for these fears. A quick cruise through the Internet produces dozens of Web pages devoted to warning parents of the pitfalls awaiting the child who reads *Harry Potter*. In 2001, *exposingsatanism.org* saw a satanic "S" in Harry's scar (Shores par. 9), and *demonbuster.com* offered an e-mail communiqué from a reformed witch who once could "fly upon the night winds transcending the astral plane" (Last Trumpet Ministries). Given this expertise, she assured us that, "These books are orientational and instructional manuals of witchcraft woven into the format of entertainment. These four books by J. K. Rowling teach witchcraft! I know this because I was once very much a part of that world,"—a career path she blamed on the 1960s.

Focus on the Family's Web page, despite a generally favorable review admitting to many virtues in the books, laments of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* that "Rowling persists in the imaginary distinction between good and bad witches" (Beam, *Goblet of Fire* review par. 24). The American Family Association's page, speaking of

the first movie, a remarkably faithful adaptation of book one, reports that "Harry Potter's world may be fictional, but the timeless pagan practices it promotes are real and deadly . . . The movie's foundation in fantasy, not reality, doesn't diminish its power to change beliefs and values" (Kjos par. 5–6).

In 2001, *Cuttingedge.org* offered an ad for a four-part video (now expanded to six) entitled *A Christian That Knows Witchcraft Looks at Harry Potter*:

This 4-Part series provides you with the specific information about Harry Potter books that will enable you to understand that Scripture forbids the reading of such Satanic material . . . You will also understand how Harry Potter books are leading the way in conditioning young kids for the Antichrist and for taking the Mark of the Beast. Our final tape demonstrates that the vivid colors used in Potter novels are the precise colors witches use in Ritual Magick!

Deploring Harry Potter is big business.

What is it specifically about this series that makes Harry's (generally American<sup>1</sup>) detractors attack a work of literature on the grounds that it is not literature at all, but a manual for the evil arts? I would suggest that there are two reasons behind this distinction between Harry and other practitioners of fictional magic. The first, that Harry is too close to home, builds upon the second, that Harry's detractors are skillfully parodied in Harry's books.

To begin, Harry lives in our world, making him more of a threat. Rowling has abandoned the realm of high fantasy and laid her story in contemporary England, rather than in the imaginary and mediievally flavored otherworld of Tolkien's Middle Earth, or in a place like Baum's Oz, which can only be reached by tornado and that proves in any case to be all a dream.

J. R. R. Tolkien, whose works are generally considered more palatable to fundamentalist Christians than Rowling's, laid down criteria for fantasy worlds that require those worlds to be independent of our own and as Julia Šarić notes, "emphasize the distance needed between the

readers' actual lives and the material they are reading" (21). Rowling suggests the existence of witches and wizards, and of workable magic, in the world we inhabit here and now: unseen by Muggles (nonmagical folk) but here nonetheless, existing on another stratum. This is more or less the image that many fundamentalist Christians also have of witchcraft that, like angels or the voice of Satan, it is out there, unseen but ready to swallow up the hapless child who can be turned toward its seductive allure, and that it actually works. Writing in defense of the anti-Harry camp in *The Horn Book Magazine*, a well-respected journal of children's literature, conservative Christian librarian Kimbra Wilder Gish points out that "one of the most antagonizing responses one can give in responding to a challenge based on these beliefs is to say, 'But they (demons, witches, etc.) aren't real!' They may be very real to the person challenging the material." She concedes that "when you believe that witches and occult practices are real, and contrary to God's laws, those books are quite different from what the authors probably intended" (264), but makes it clear that author intent does not matter. The books remain dangerous, like a load of dynamite concocted accidentally.

With this in mind, the idea of encouraging one's child to tap into those forces is indeed frightening. As demonbuster.com asks, "Hey parent, what are you going to do when your child puts a spell on you?" And what child would not relish the thought: turn Mom into a toad, and dad into a concrete lawn gnome. Harry Potter does it. He explodes a wine glass in his horrible aunt Marge's hand and then inflates her like a balloon, bewitching her into "a vast life buoy with piggy eyes," and departing as she begins to bump against the ceiling (Rowling, *Prisoner* 25–29).

This may be an unsettling example for parents already feeling their control over their children being snatched away daily. Exposingsatanism.org laments that the Harry Potter books encourage children to rebel against their parents, to question their values, and to assume power for themselves—precisely what scholars of children's literature have long recognized as the *purpose* of children's books. As Alison Lurie says:

Most of the great works of juvenile literature are subversive in one way or another: they express ideas or emotions not generally approved of or even recognized at the time; they make fun of honored figures and piously held beliefs; and they view social pretenses with clear-eyed directness, remarking—as in Andersen's famous tale—that the emperor has no clothes. (4)

Why then, has Harry Potter been singled out for this subversive agenda, when all good children's books do precisely that? Perhaps because, again, he lives where we live, not in Narnia or Earthsea, but in London, on Privet Drive, a world in which it is becoming increasingly impossible to insulate children from unwanted influences, despite parental encouragement to, as David Watt says, "accept a certain set of teachings about what the world is like and about how people should live their lives" (27). Popular culture is everywhere: on television, at the mall, in magazines, on bus stop billboards, on 30-foot giant lighted signs beside the freeway—Marlboro men and nearly naked models with come-hither glances, increasingly frequently lettered in alphabets not our own, against a skyline marked with the domes of mosques, or the oak groves of dancing goddess worshippers.

All these things, which have fragmented our culture to the delight of some and unease of others, cause a greater fear of fantasy in the uneasy, even though most children's fantasies and Harry Potter in particular, are as Zipes says, "clearly moralistic and didactic and preach against the evil use of magic" (174). Any use of magic is too close to the edge of the pit, particularly for parents already feeling marginalized by their unpopular beliefs (Šarić 11).

Worse, like those other influences from which religious conservatives wish they could shield their children, the magical dimension cannot be shut out, in or out of the books themselves. As the envelopes from Hogwarts begin to arrive for Harry, the Dursleys resort to sealing up the mail slot, boarding up the house, then retreating to rooms in a shady hotel, and finally to a deserted shack perched on lonely a rock in the sea

(Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone* 40–44). The letters arrive anyway, and finally so does Hagrid, magic's messenger. The magical world is not in Middle Earth, it is here, in our world, and at any moment it may manifest itself. There is no escape. If it wants to find you, it will find you.

This magic is a “device, not a philosophical or spiritual system of beliefs” (Šarić 17) and is not the equivalent of Wicca, despite its equation with Wicca by many fundamentalists.<sup>2</sup> It is studied as one might study algebra, with much moaning about assignments, and equations or spells gone wrong. Rowling insists that magic in Harry's world is a skill to be mastered, that it has no connection with religion or theology, or with supernatural spirits good or bad. It is the wizard, the practitioner of the magic, who makes it good or evil, in the way that any science may be turned to bad ends. On the other hand, Focus on the Family's Web page asserts that the fact that magic is *not* portrayed there as a supernatural force (Beam, *Prisoner of Azkaban* review par. 25), masks its true nature and true danger. The insistence that magic is by definition of supernatural origin is at the heart of the fear that Harry arouses. To present it as a science is either a trick, luring the susceptible into wickedness with harmless-seeming stories, or else a delusion, a manifestation of the author's ignorance and the devil's power.

The American title change of the first book from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* robbed the books of the connection Rowling is at some pains to make with the alchemists who were the precursors of modern science, and may be responsible for the fact that anti-Harry fervor is much stronger in the United States than the United Kingdom. As Robert Scholes has pointed out in *The Crafty Reader*:

Before the attempt to gain power over nature fragmented, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, into the empirical sciences on the one hand and fruitless magic on the other, the study of alchemy was a kind of magical or fantastic science. It was the ancestor of modern chemistry and the physical sciences in general, which were

called “natural philosophy” for some time before being given their modern names. (209)

As McVeigh points out, Rowling does write from within a Christian literary tradition, but “[t]hat tradition is one whose High Church roots—Anglican and Roman Catholic—make assumptions built into Rowling's use of it inaccessible to a significant segment of American Christianity” (199).<sup>3</sup>

Scholes goes on to suggest that Rowling's equation of magic with science is rooted in the tradition of natural philosophy, and that she has in a sense constructed an alternate history of scientific thought:

It is as if, in this universe, when science and magic parted company they did not turn into true and false natural philosophy but into two true and different visions of the world. As a character remarks in the fourth novel, Muggle science is a substitute for magic. (209)

The loss of this connection may have fueled the religious fears of Harry Potter in this country. Given the Christian fundamentalist assumption that the monsters and miracles of the Bible are literally true, in all their ferocious splendor, then the unseen world must indeed exist, and the separation of fact from the fiction that deals with that world becomes shaky. With this in mind, a feeling of vulnerability to the supernatural is not surprising. Fiction must conform to perceived fact, and when it does not, strange contortions arise.

It is precisely fiction's refusal to mirror accepted fact and Harry Potter's subversive placement within *perceived* fact that make him so slippery and troublesome to readers who already feel bombarded with information they do not want. As Ursula K. Le Guin says:

A novelist's business is lying ... In fact, while we read a novel, we are insane—bonkers. We believe in the existence of people who aren't there, we hear their voices, we watch the battle of Borodino with them, we may even become Napoleon. Sanity returns (in most cases) when the book is closed. Is it

any wonder that no truly respectable society has ever trusted its artists? (qtd. in *The Utne Reader* 112)

If art may make the unreal real, it may also disguise the real as fiction, and teach witchcraft in the guise of fantasy. Whose truth is the true truth? The idea that there may be more than one truth is disturbing to those whose religious faith rests on an unchanging world, where facts stay still.

In Harry's world, very little stays still. The subjects in photographs and oil paintings move about, the latter occasionally leaving their frames entirely to visit other artwork. Hogwarts itself is enchanted so that it cannot be plotted on a map, and even its architecture is unstable:

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone* 131)

Rowling says to her reader from the start: Do not count on anything staying still. This may look like your world, but do not count on it being what you thought it was.

It is the urge to force their world into being what they think it should be that drives the Dursleys, Harry's aunt and uncle. In the Dursleys, Rowling has painted an unfortunate picture of the very people who see the Mark of the Beast in Harry's magic.

The Dursleys are parodies of every child's most awful relatives: the brother-in-law who thinks you should be sent to military school, the aunt who disapproves loudly of your hair, your skirt length, and your morals. The Dursleys are also parodies of thought-with-blinders-on, of the idea that there is one proper way to be and that they know what it is. Uncle Vernon, a law and order type, advocates hanging for petty criminals (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 17) and his sister, Aunt Marge, believes in beating out of Harry whatever aberrant tendencies he possesses (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 25). The Dursleys react to magic as religious conservatives react to Satan: "They . . . hated and despised

magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as dry rot" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 19).

This scene occurs when Harry prods his dreadful cousin Dudley to say please:

"You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

"I meant 'please'!" said Harry quickly. "I didn't mean—"

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "ABOUT SAYING THE 'M' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?"

"But I—"

"HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist. (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 2)

I disagree with Jack Zipes' contention that "Rowling misinterprets history when she criticizes the Dursleys' attitude toward magic as 'medieval,' a period that evidenced a strong belief in magic and an acceptance of miraculous happenings, [but] we get the picture: the Dursleys are coarse, pragmatic materialists . . ." Coarse, pragmatic materialists the Dursleys are, but medieval they also are. They *believe* in magic, and therefore fear it deeply (178).

The Dursleys consider magic a loathsome, degenerate practice, and their frothing rage on the subject takes on the same tone as that of the anti-Harry Web pages. "We swore when we took him in," says Uncle Vernon, "we'd put a stop to that rubbish, swore we'd stamp it out of him!" (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone* 53). They forbid Harry even to mention magic in the house, referring to it as the "M-word" as if even the word carries power of its own (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 2), and refer to witchcraft as "that unnaturalness" and Harry's "abnormality" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 33).

In this belief, the Dursleys are linked to the parents of Voldemort, the villain of the series, an evil wizard whose name most legitimate witches and wizards are afraid even to speak. Voldemort was born Tom Riddle, a boy whose Muggle father abandoned him and his mother before his birth upon the discovery that the mother was a witch (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 317). It is this event that marked Tom Riddle, and twisted him into Voldemort:

“You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was . . . . He didn’t like magic, my father. . . .

“He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born, Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage . . .” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 646)

The fundamental intolerance of the Muggle father for something he could not understand, for that which was different, was the instrument by which Voldemort was created. Thus, Rowling suggests that those who are too convinced that they know evil when they see it, and know it only by its difference from themselves, unwittingly create a greater evil. This is not a comfortable notion for true believers of any stripe.

It is also the characters, like the minister Cornelius Fudge in the fourth book, who can see only the view they have already decided upon, and will not take into account information they do not wish to hear, who leave the world on the brink of disaster, unprotected from Voldemort’s return, at the end of Book Four.

There is always something to be learned, Rowling tells us, and that interconnectedness is at the heart of Harry’s saga. Dumbledore, the Hogwarts headmaster, tells Harry that in essence, there is no sure thing and that that knowledge is the heart of magic: “This is magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable, Harry” (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 427).

Dumbledore makes magic indeed sound like philosophy, and Rowling’s magic, although it may

behave like a science, is in itself a mystery, as most advanced science is. There are things in theoretical physics more difficult to imagine than the miracles of the Bible. But this magic lacks a god or a devil at the heart of it, another dangerous idea. At the heart instead lies mystery, which many theologians of the more experimental stripe tell us *is* God. For this reason, liberal theologians have no trouble with Harry. Harry frightens only those who want the answers to be the same every time the question is asked. In Rowling’s world, the answer is not the same.

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## Notes

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1. Dan McVeigh notes that Christian Potter-phobia is primarily an American phenomenon. “In present day England there seems little pressure on writers for children to sound Christian; Philip Pullman trumpets his atheism, for instance” (215).

2. Despite the contention of Šarić, herself a student of Wicca, that “Once the truth-of-correspondence argument regarding allegations of witchcraft has been disproved, we are left with books that have managed to attract the attention and loyalty of millions of young readers” (23), it is not disproved to the satisfaction of the objectors, who generally know little about Wicca and would still disapprove of it if they did. In any case, the magic in *Harry Potter* does not need to be “real” to a Wiccan to be “real” to a conservative Christian.

3. McVeigh goes on to demonstrate the power of semantics: “It should be acknowledged that in terms of connotation ‘witches’ are not equal to ‘wizards.’ The former is habitually a negative term and the latter a positive one; ‘Liz is a real witch at the office’ hardly implies the same thing as ‘Rich is a wizard at what he does.’ Inevitably, given the contemporary world, Hogwarts is coeducational, which means that in these books ‘witch’ does equal ‘wizard.’ In contrast, Tolkien and Lewis are traditional in their usages, so that the witches in the Narnia series are malevolent, and a female who wields magic in Middle Earth must be an elf-queen. Hogwarts gains much in interest by its coeducational status, but the positive portrayal of ‘witches’ is an insuperable obstacle for some readers with a more traditional notion of who witches are. One may suspect that were Hogwarts to accept only boys, half the hubbub would die down” (214).

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