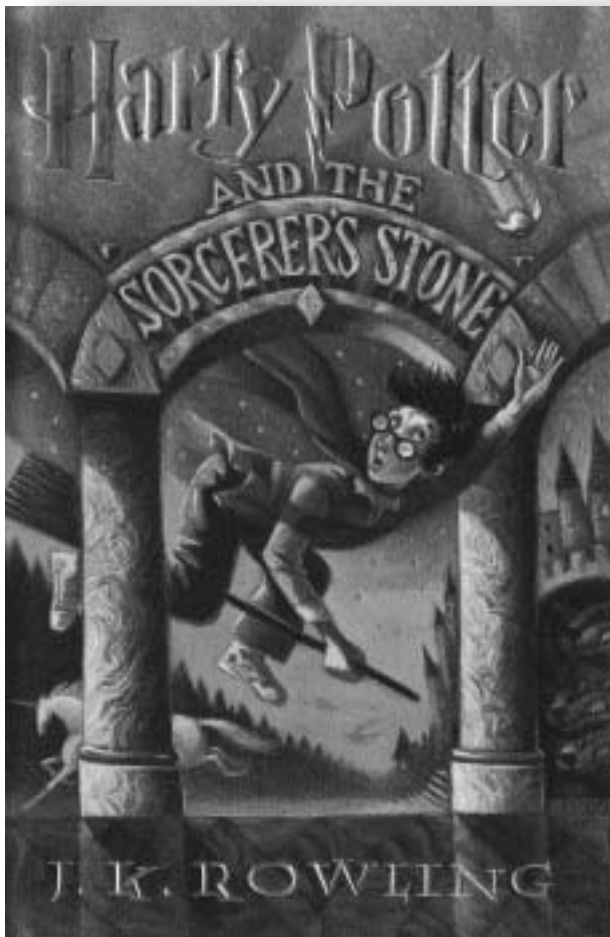


# The Power of Harry

The Impact of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Books on Young Readers

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*I don't usually like to read, matter of fact I don't like to read. I thought Harry Potter was going to be an ordinary book, but it isn't. . . . When my teacher says that it [is] time to stop reading, me and my classmates would groan.*

— Jennifer, age 10

JENNIFER'S WORDS characterize the response of many children to the phenomenon of Harry Potter, boy wizard, and his adventures with his friends Ron and Hermione at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Beginning with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (known in the U.K. as *The Philosopher's Stone*), J. K. Rowling's tale about an adolescent boy's life in a parallel world of magic spells and fantastic creatures has captivated young and old alike. Children like Jennifer who had previously not read for pleasure are standing in line at bookstores and libraries to get the next book in the series. Adults are placing advance orders on the Internet to obtain the books as soon as possible. To find out how the Harry Potter books have turned nonread-

ers into readers and why children and adolescents are enthralled by the series, we asked fifth-, sixth-, and eighth-graders to tell us what they thought. Based upon their writings and our own reading (and rereading) of the four books published to date, we believe that the answer is rooted in the magical world and story created by Rowling, the richness of her characters, and the respect she exhibits for her readers.

### A Parallel World of Magic

Rowling's world takes the natural and the supernatural, the real and the mythical, and juxtaposes them. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* begins in a manner reminiscent of stories by British children's author Roald Dahl. Harry Potter, an orphan with a distinctive lightning-shaped scar, living in a suburb of London, is downtrodden and marginalized by the cruel Muggle (nonmagical) aunt and uncle who have taken him in after his parents' untimely deaths. Harry's life changes on his eleventh birthday, when he is notified that he has been accepted into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. What follows are adventures in which Harry explores his past and his affinity for the world of magic, finds friendship for the first time, and connects his past with his possible future.

Rowling has planned seven volumes, one for each of Harry's years at Hogwarts. In the first book of the series, Harry, his best friend Ron Weasley, and the brainy but slightly priggish Hermione Granger succeed in capturing the sorcerer's stone from the evil Lord Voldemort (He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named), Harry's archnemesis, the murderer of his parents, and the one responsible for the scar on his forehead. Harry returns to Hogwarts for his second year in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. As the year commences, a pall of suspicion cloaks the school as students are turned to stone under bizarre circumstances, and Harry and friends must discover the culprit. As the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, begins, the vile criminal Sirius Black has escaped from the wizard prison of Azkaban and is feared to be headed toward Hogwarts and Harry. However, things are not as they appear. In a strange turn of circumstances, Harry and his friends discover the truth about his father, his godfather, and



J. K. Rowling, 2001

Lord Voldemort. Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts is chronicled in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, by far the darkest and most complex novel in the series so far. The reader is introduced to two more schools of witchcraft and wizardry whose students journey to Hogwarts for the ancient Triwizard Tournament. Lord Voldemort's return, foreshadowed during the Quidditch World Cup, unexpectedly thrusts the unprepared Harry into a perilous fight for survival.

The magical world created by Rowling draws young readers into the books by connecting aspects of the world in which they live with a world that transcends reality. Harry and his friends participate in such everyday activities as buying school supplies, sending and receiving letters, going to classes, and playing sports. However, school supplies are not pencils and notebooks, classes do not include science and mathematics, letters are not delivered by a mail carrier, and the main sport is Quidditch, a cross between rugby and basketball played on broomsticks. For school supplies, Harry and friends head to Diagon Alley, the equivalent of a wizard mall, to purchase wands.

The nonhuman characters that inhabit both Hogwarts and the wizard world are the creatures of myth and fantasy, creatures that fascinate young readers. Familiar and unfamiliar beings appear that either thwart Harry and his friends or help keep him safe from harm. As the young reader Kirk states, "You don't know what creatures are next." A huge three-headed dog incongruously named Fluffy guards the entrance to the chamber where the sorcerer's stone is kept. Unicorns and centaurs inhabit the Enchanted Forest on the edge of the school grounds. Goblins run Gringotts Bank, which holds the wealth of the wizarding world. The school headmaster Dumbledore's pet is Phoenix, who regularly bursts into flames and then rises from the ashes.

Perhaps the most powerful hold on readers young and old, however, is not just in the magical world created by Rowling, but in the story that she weaves and the language she uses to craft the compelling saga. While each book in the series can be read and enjoyed independently, as Harry learns more about his past and his parents, his life becomes increasingly complicated and the plots grow more elaborate. What begins as a seem-

ingly simple story of a boy's entry into an unknown world of magic turns into a search for identity, a battle between good and evil, a maze of moral decision-making, and a quest for the meaning of human relationships. While it may be predictable that Harry will always triumph in the end, it is not predictable how he will do so or how very close he may come to failing. Just as in real life, relationships change and may follow a bumpy path, events don't always turn out the way we like, and the characters make choices that may not turn out to be the best.

One essential element of the story is the adventures of Harry and his friends. Interspersed in the day-to-day routine of classes, weekends filled with homework, and occasional outings to visit the huge but gentle game-keeper Hagrid or the wizard village of Hogsmeade are encounters with flying keys and life-size moving chess pieces, forays into the forbidden Enchanted Forest, meetings with trolls and dragons, and escapes from detection by the dreaded Professor Snape. As another young reader, Lauren, writes, "The best things about the Harry Potter books are that they are exciting, full of adventure, magic, and breathtaking moments."

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Rowling's books, for children, is the supernatural power the characters possess. The website of Rowling's U.S. publisher, Scholastic Books (<http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter/author/index.htm>), quotes her as saying, "The idea that we could have a child who escapes from the confines of the adult world and goes somewhere where he has power, both literally and metaphorically, really appealed to me." As witches and wizards, Harry and the rest of the children slowly acquire power over their world as they learn about different spells and potions. In contrast to the lack of power most children have in their own lives, Harry and his friends master the natural world and make it behave in ways that are most unnatural. In addition, they are able to use their power to frustrate those adults who do not have children's best interests at heart. Rowling opens the door for adolescent readers to share the characters' power while experiencing a connection to literature that has the potential to enrich their lives.

### **A Host of Bewitching Characters**

Characters jolt, slither, and poof to life under Rowling's pen. Because she has complete personal histories developed before they become a part of the tale, even minor



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characters such as Sirius Black, Neville Longbottom, and Gilderoy Lockhart have a richness not always seen in fantasy writing. Their unusual names elicit such responses from young readers as this from Zach: "I like the people's names because they are communicating with what they do, and I have never read a book when the author does that."

Of course, Harry Potter himself merits the most comment from young readers. He is likable and self-effacing, in some ways similar to Marc Brown's Arthur. Harry's moments of uncertainty make him attractive to adolescents who themselves are continually facing crises of self-confidence. The fact that Harry continues to develop and change throughout the series helps young readers identify with him, as Morgan notes: "If I were in Harry's place, I would have felt like I could do anything that I wanted to do because I had powers but I wouldn't know how to use them, so I would be very eager to get to Hogwarts to learn how to use them."

Readers strongly identify with other characters as well. Young Kelsey, for example, writes: "I think Hermione has a great personality. She seems like a great girl to be around," and we are reminded that an abundance of lively and worthy supporting personalities mirror Harry's development. Ron Weasley proves to be both loyal friend and brave partner, not only following Harry but also questioning his decisions. Neville Longbottom, the inept misfit befriended by Harry, draws some interesting suggestions from young readers. Robert considers the nervous Neville as "actually brave. And what if he serves some main part in some brave deed in a later book?" Morgan sees Neville's past as an explanation for his present behavior: "Maybe when Neville was a kid he was brave, but kids made fun of his name so he lost his bravery because he was put down so many times."

Adults as well as young readers respond to the characters in the Harry Potter books. Sally feels a kinship with Hermione, saying, "I was Hermione when I was a child. I was the one who read all the books before class even started and who desperately wanted to give every answer." Liz, on the other hand, has a soft spot in her heart for Ron, who is a full partner in so many adventures, yet always gets second billing: "In the fourth

book, I think Ron is justified in his feelings of resentment toward Harry's fame, yet I do admire the compromises each must make to maintain their steadfast friendship."

Rowling's characters have fully rounded personalities that are unique yet universal enough to transcend the boundaries of fantasy. They possess the qualities of heroes, but also have their faults and make very human errors in judgment. They are not just brave and beautiful; they are our friends and family members personified. Adolescents and adults across the globe (an estimated 120 million people have read at least one Harry Potter book) take firm hold of their power as readers to appreciate the author's attention to detail in creating these intriguing characters.

### R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Rowling's respect for her readers is evident in the intricate world of magic and the strong characterizations in her writing. Despite the fact that even the first volume in the series, *The Sorcerer's Stone*, was unusually long for a children's book, she has increased the length and density with each new installment. Young readers such as Nathan have risen to the challenge: "I was glad to get to read that big a book. It made me feel important." Nick and Brent appreciate the work that is left for the reader to accomplish, noting that the books are like puzzles, and "you never know what's going to happen next." Ian recognizes that "you have to pay attention or you don't know what's going on." Paying attention, a skill that many view as drudgery and which is often "taught" in schools, is relished by the fifth-, sixth-, and eighth-graders who wrote for us.

Young readers also see the books as invitations to be creative. Robert imagines a spell he would use to "make a giant wave of lava shoot out of my wand." Morgan contrives an elaborate explanation of the password she would devise for the fat lady in the picture that guards the entrance to one of the houses or dormitories, explaining it would be *chimney-soot*, because "her best friend's cousin's mother-in-law's dog's favorite



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brand of dog treats are manufactured by a man who has a part-time job as a chimney cleaner and is often covered from head to toe in soot after he cleans his local diner's large chimney." Morgan here is delightfully mirroring the humor modeled by Rowling, who, after all, conjured up Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as a favorite snack of magic youth (in chocolate, peppermint, and marmalade, but also liver, tripe, and booger).

Humor is woven into the four volumes, but so are serious considerations of universal human concern. Some young readers choose to take a particular "lesson" from their reading, but seem to recognize that the reader is the one who decides if there is something to be learned. Literacy-related learning does in fact take place for the many young readers who are impressed with Rowling's writing. Other readers choose to focus on moral and ethical considerations inherent in the Harry Potter series. "The thing that I like about the story," writes Nathan, "is that it teaches you that if you need something you have to work for it." Amber's concern for Harry, Ron, and Hermione's being caught by the castle caretaker as they are attempting to do something good shows her understanding of the sometimes blurred lines between good and evil. Robert delves into the dilemmas presented when Hermione takes up the cause of the enslaved house elves: "You know, I myself think that house elves deserve to be paid. I mean, how would you feel?" He also draws parallels between the situation at Hogwarts and the U.S. Civil War. It is doubtless a pleasure for adolescents to escape the feeling of being pandered to, while being allowed the freedom to make literary and moral decisions.

### What Next, Harry?

Now that the Harry Potter series has been translated into more than twenty-five languages and the movie version of the first book is currently in theaters, Rowling wields considerable economic as well as literary power. Despite readers' captivation with the books, there is a danger of overexposure that could potentially diminish the powerful effect Rowling's writing has had on adoles-

cent literature. One can visit the Harry Potter website, buy Harry Potter dolls, and play the Harry Potter game. Another potential danger is that younger and younger readers are devouring these books, which are aimed at adolescents, and this makes them "uncool" for their intended audience. In addition, as Harry ages, the content becomes more mature. Later volumes touch on dilemmas that resonate with readers going through puberty, who are able to make reasoned judgments about controversial issues, but these same issues may render the books inappropriate for the very young and the prepubescent.

Adolescents have responded with enthusiasm to Rowling's writing. Participants in a poll conducted on the Scholastic Books website, when asked what books they were planning to read other than the Potter series, produced a list that was encouragingly varied. Many of the books mentioned are of the same genre, such as *The Hobbit*, the Red Wall series, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*; but others represent a very different type of reading, such as *Mr. Popper's Penguin*, *Anne of Avonlea*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It may be that Rowling's work is shaping the choices her young readers make about other literature. Adults ask children to read a well-balanced array of books, but seldom do so themselves; so it will be understandable if young people abandon other books in midparagraph in order to queue up again overnight when the next Potter installment arrives. Like young Nicole, we ourselves can't wait to read the three remaining books, although we have not gone to the lengths that Nathan has: "I called the public library in June and got myself put on the waiting list. If I'm not the first one to get that book, then the person before me had better hurry up!"

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