

## Introduction

# Harry Potter for Real Life?

Fairy Tales matter. That's quite the assertion, but there it is. Far from being cute, fanciful stories meant to excite kids or perhaps distract adults who haven't succeeded in growing up into what is called "real life," fantastic literature often imagines a more accurate and edifying vision of reality than what the so-called "realists" give us. Despite protestations from academics, realists, and religious zealots, *Harry Potter* is for real life.

When J.K. Rowling wrote the *Harry Potter* series, she wrote a beautiful, sprawling mess of a story that will undoubtedly have profound historical reverberations. What do I mean by "a beautiful, sprawling mess?" It defies one-volume analysis, unless that volume is a tome, because Rowling has drawn from so many different genres of fiction and strictly followed the rules of none. It would be folly to criticize Rowling for not being faithful to one particular genre, because in order to do that, a critic would first have to pin her down on a genre (fairy tale? mystery novel? school story?) and then deal with the very simple fact that Rowling did not intend to play by the rules of that genre. But somehow, it all works and tells a beautiful story. Other works will no doubt abound on the detective novel, the school story, and other elements of Rowling's fiction. This present work will explore *Harry Potter* as fairy tale and fantastic literature, which is both shaped by and a shaping force in culture.

It's impossible to say the series shapes "our" culture or "Western" culture exclusively, because the series has been an international success, serving as a veritable icon of postmodern multicultural sentiment. To examine the Harry Potter series as a global phenomenon is a work of its own, and this volume does not attempt that, either. Quite simply because its author is part of Western, U.S. culture, and because Rowling writes as

a Western person, *Harry Potter & Imagination* approaches the series from that point of view.

When approaching mythopoeic literature in the Western world, Tolkien is a great starting place. Since he wrote of the “Cauldron of Story” in his famous essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” the concept has been oft-used in the analysis of various works of literature. Tolkien believed that the fairy-story answers “primordial human desires,” and that each new fairy-story writer is not starting completely afresh, but is adding elements of each age and culture to an ever-brewing cauldron of a story which has been simmering since the beginning of human consciousness.

The cauldron is a particularly apt metaphor for Rowling’s work, since cauldrons themselves play an important role in the *Harry Potter* series. Rowling once explained that she viewed C.S. Lewis’s “world between worlds,” wherein portals to various worlds can be found, as a metaphor for a library (Fry, “Living with Harry Potter”). Perhaps her use of many ingredients producing a wide variety of fantastic potions is just as poignant a metaphor for the brewing of many good stories, all of which answer the longings and help to heal the hurts of human beings.

Tolkien did not write of many cauldrons, but of one, into which many ingredients were cast. He wrote,

So with regard to fairy stories, I feel that it is more interesting, and also in its way more difficult, to consider what they are, what they have become for us, and what values the long alchemic processes of time have produced in them. (9)

Tolkien explains, quoting Dasent, that “We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled” (9). A systematic sorting of all the ingredients, the “bones,” that are both in the cauldron and that have been added by Rowling has already been done in the plenty of guidebooks to the *Harry Potter* series.<sup>1</sup> This work is about the *Harry Potter* soup itself. Why does it taste so good? Why do readers keep coming back for more?

The answer to that question is that the soup satisfies what Tolkien called “primordial human desires.” The millions of excited fans who lined up for midnight releases of the *Harry Potter* books weren’t just looking for a good story; they were starving people, and the bookstores were the soup kitchens. A true fairy story isn’t just a fun distraction for children, and it isn’t just a morality tale; it is rooted in the human condition, the very

meaning of being a human.

Tolkien gets to the point of the Soup analogy:

Speaking of the history of stories and especially of fairy-stories we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty (12-13).

This Cauldron has “always been boiling” because it contains the stories that satisfy the ancient desires; the fairy-tale element of story “is there...waiting for the great figures of Myth and History, and for the yet nameless He or She, waiting for the moment when they are cast into the simmering stew, one by one or all together, without consideration of rank or precedence” (14). As such, the Cauldron exists independently of the writer; it is comprised of stories that existed long before the writer put pen to paper, and it will bubble on long after.

Into the Cauldron of Story, J.K. Rowling threw Harry Potter, perhaps the most potent ingredient to be added since Tolkien himself tossed in hobbits, orcs, a white wizard, and a ranger from the north. Rowling was fully aware of many of the ingredients already boiling in the soup; she borrowed from a vast array of fairy tale and mythological works and translated them into her own world. For example, her particular recipe has turned Cerberus, guardian of the Underworld in Greek mythology, into Fluffy the three-headed dog, guardian of the Philosopher’s Stone. Far from being simple “derivation,” Rowling has joined the circle of cooks around this Cauldron and done in the postmodern 21st century what greats like George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L’Engle have done in the past.

Those five authors, whose views on the fairy tale are invoked for Chapter One, were all writers who were also Christians. As Rowling has professed Christian faith, albeit one with which she sometimes struggles, it is not out of place in the least to put her work into the context of Christian thinking about fairy tales. The perception sadly exists that when one adds a Christian element to academic analysis, serious scholarship is being subverted by religion. Against that objection I submit the simple fact that it’s impossible to remove Rowling from her own tradition, being both a Christian personally and writing in a tradition of British literature which is manifestly Christian.

Part One of this book contains six chapters analyzing the way Rowling's world fulfills the call for the satisfaction of "primordial human desires." The nature of truth and truth-perception, the literary power of magic, and the resolution of fear and evil with courage and self-sacrificial love are examined in detail. As Rowling's books are primarily character-driven, Part Two examines, through the lens of mythological archetypes, the series' four primary characters: Harry Potter (hero), Voldemort (shadow), Albus Dumbledore (mentor), and Severus Snape (shapeshifter). Other characters and archetypes (trickster, mother, herald) are examined in the context of analyzing those primary four. We will look at the ways Rowling utilizes and transforms stock characters, or archetypes, to create a dynamic story. Part Three brings the *Harry Potter* series into conversation with postmodern social justice concerns by examining the social vision of J.K. Rowling's stories.

In Rowling's 2008 Harvard commencement speech, she quoted Plutarch: "What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality." That is the trajectory of *Harry Potter*, and that is the trajectory of this book: from the great themes of Part One through the character transformation of Part Two and into the social vision of Part Three, *Platform 9 ¾* sends the reader through the magical barrier between two worlds to be transformed inwardly, and so to become an agent of outward change.

Madeleine L'Engle, in her classic work on faith and art, *Walking on Water*, quoted Jean Rhys:

All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed that lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoyevksy. And there are mere trickles, like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don't matter. The lake matters. You must keep feeding the lake. (16)

Only history will tell the size of the river that Rowling has contributed to the lake with her *Harry Potter* series. Whatever the size, the purpose of the book you hold in your hands is to throw you into the River of Rowling, and to let it carry you to that lake.

Rowling made another important statement in that commencement speech, which captures the heart of *Harry Potter & Imagination*:

We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better. (<http://harvardmagazine.com/go/jkrowling.html>)

Imagine better. That is the great delight and duty to which fantastic literature calls us. Our imaginations are re-awakened by a journey into Faerie, and we return from there, with our vision transformed able to see our own world differently, and to imagine, and therefore to act for, a better world.

We begin with the journey into Faerie.

### **Introduction Notes**

1 David Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter*; George Beahm, *Fact, Fiction, and Folklore in Harry Potter*; Colin Duriez, *A Field Guide to Harry Potter*.

