

Nicholas Tucker is a lecturer in child psychology and children's literature at the University of Sussex in Southern England. Formerly a teacher and then an educational psychologist, he has written several books for both adults and children. He writes and reviews for a number of national newspapers and is much in demand as a conference speaker.

Nicholas Tucker

The Rise and Rise of Harry Potter

The phenomenal commercial and critical success of the first three Harry Potter stories is without precedent in twentieth-century British children's literature. Enid Blyton, a previous best-selling author, had to serve an apprenticeship papered by rejection slips before finally hitting the jackpot. Roald Dahl had less time to wait, but even so his first children's novel after years of writing for adults, *James and the Giant Peach*, won only modest success in America and could not initially find a British publisher. Other best-selling writers have made a lot of money quickly, but none has managed in a first novel to prove so instantly acceptable both to critics and to a vast international child and adult readership (the Potter series has already been translated into more than two dozen languages). In just two years, after being refused by at least two major publishers, J. K. Rowling is now the hottest property in children's literature and a serial prize-winner to boot. How has she managed it?

Her three stories published so far have a distinctly backward-looking quality. Could it be that modern children relish the chance to return to some of the popular themes and attitudes that used to be found in their fiction? Might the many parents and other adult readers who also enjoy these books do so because Rowling takes them back to the simplicities of the stories they read when young, at a time when children's books were generally less realistic and more concerned with pleasing fantasies? As it is, contemporary social issues do not exist in Potter books. Harry's fellow-pupils live in a world where drugs, alcohol, divorce, or sexual activity of any kind is simply not a problem. Difficulties instead arise from more remote, less instantly recognizable sources such as old-fashioned malicious teachers with dangerous-sounding names like Severus Snape, scheming young bullies from

moneyed backgrounds, and the odd villain pushed on by a terrifying wraith with murderous intent.

The constant sniping at various social and personality stereotypes set up by the author for readers' instant scorn also has an old-fashioned ring to it. Is there really any point, for example, in continuing to mock the type of blinkered suburban existence once, but surely no longer, thought to be self-evidently summed up by addresses like Number Four, Privet Drive? This is where Harry's detestable uncle, aunt, and cousin live a joyless existence looking out over their obsessively tidy front garden. Their neighbors also are shown leading mean and narrow lives. Harry himself is brought up in a dark cupboard, deprived of any affection. This is not a time or place for any moral ambiguities; Harry hates his environment, and so too will his readers. Melodrama once again stalks the stage, with the author herself cheering on the hero and booing the obvious villains. A popular formula often used in the past is once again pressed into useful service.

But perhaps the most determinedly old-fashioned aspect of these stories is the decision to set them in what in many ways is still a traditional gothic-style boarding school. Public school stories set in the deep countryside have had a long run in children's literature, providing escapist dreams to state school pupils and images of a more ideal existence to those with actual knowledge of such places. These stories could only thrive in a social climate which shared the snobbery associated with the perceived desirability of an exclusive schooling set well apart from other children. But within the last two decades, education away from home and friends in a toffee-nosed establishment where free-time activity is closely supervised came to be seen by many, either in books or in real life, not so much as a privilege for children as a form of deprivation. As a consequence, the whole children's boarding school fictional genre has now become a shadow of its former self.

Even so, once popular childhood dreams of social exclusivity die hard, and Rowling triumphantly resurrects this particular fantasy in her books. She manages this feat because Hogwarts School, complete with its coat of arms and Latin tag (*Drago Dormiens Nunquam*, loosely translated as *Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon*), is presented not as yet another snobs' school but as an Academy of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry's first glimpse of Hogwarts, "a vast castle with many turrets and towers," could have come from any boarding school story written fifty years ago. Pupils attend it because they have magical talents or backgrounds, not just because they are wealthy, although one of Harry's friends, Justin Finch-Fletchley, had originally been put down for Eton. Yet the sense of an overall élite remains very strong.

Without appearing overtly snobbish, the Potter books still celebrate the notion of a different and exclusive form of education for a privileged few.

Only a humorless ideologue would condemn the books specifically on this count, since Hogwarts is not offered as a social model for all fortunate children. It is instead an impossible school existing within an imaginary universe serving a unique group of pupils. Even so, these stories hark back affectionately to a time when a boarding school was seen as unquestionably the best place for children to be, however puzzling to the rest of the world. The scene where Harry goes to be kitted out for his new school, with the aged shopkeeper remembering Harry's father going through the same process, is familiar from many older rites of passage school stories. But Harry fares even better than the most highborn of young toffs: "Bless my soul," whispered the old barman, "Harry Potter . . . what an honour!" The journey to Hogwarts by steam train, allowing Harry a first encounter with other new and older pupils, is reminiscent of a similar scene in F. H. Anstey's classic school story, *Vice Versa*. Once there, the gamekeeper Hagrid is the image of those humble but loyal fictional non-academic appointments like ex-sportsmen turned groundsmen, barred from the teachers' common room but often confidants to school story heroes, especially when like Harry they are in a tight corner. In fact, Hagrid loves Harry like a son, both for the sake of Harry's parents whom he knew and out of sympathy for his years of neglect.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 54.

Harry's most powerful friend, however, is no less than the headmaster of Hogwarts himself, Professor Albus Dumbledore. The greatest wizard of modern times, this kindly figure knows everything and understands everybody. In this he fulfills the role of idealized authority figure familiar in public school fiction ever since the depiction of Dr. Arnold in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. A grandfather rather than a father figure, with his half-moon glasses, flowing silver hair, beard and moustache, he also has the air of an omniscient divinity about him. Inscrutable in his ultimate aim, he is always there in moments of greatest crisis, providing Harry and his readers with another reassuring and attractive fantasy figure.

Within the classroom, links with former school stories are harder to come by. This is another shrewd move on the part of the author, since traditional Greek and Latin lessons, now so utterly foreign to modern children's experience, are eschewed in favor of lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology (the study of magical plants), and Charms and Potions. School stories from Thomas Hughes to Anthony Buckeridge normally passed over close description of lessons, save when a joke or example of skulduggery needed a convenient class-

room link. It was otherwise assumed that young readers already had enough of their own enforced periods of learning to want to go through anything similar in their favorite stories. But at Hogwarts, lessons provide some of the best and most appealing fantasies of an existence so very much more interesting than ordinary, humdrum school life as it is normally experienced.

There are other ways in which Rowling improves upon the model of the traditional boarding school story while drawing on it at the same time. Visits to the local village and to any wider community of children are still limited, but within the school boys and girls now mix together as equals. They share common rooms, although not dormitories. Best of all, and what makes Hogwarts different from any other school, is the way that nothing can ever be taken for granted. Pictures talk, ghosts and poltergeists are around, keys fly, doors disappear into walls, monsters invade the girls' lavatories, books hide themselves, and secret passages beckon.

Food, outside midnight feasts one of the traditional banes of fictional boarding school life, is also uniformly excellent. At Harry's first meal at Hogwarts, "He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup and, for some strange reason, mint humbugs." This is later followed by the type of tea that Billy Bunter would once have slavered over: "Blocks of ice-cream in every flavour you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate éclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, jelly, rice pudding."

Lavish descriptions of food were once thought of as an important part of the appeal of children's fiction, with the various feasts described by authors like Richmal Crompton and Enid Blyton becoming even more meaningful to young readers during times of general austerity. It is less clear how popular such descriptions are with children today, at a time when there is plenty of attractive food around and fewer adult-imposed restrictions on what children are allowed to eat. Could the vast meals consumed at Hogwarts be one of those details that appeal more to adults, remembering tougher times at the home or school table? When the Hogwarts children buy sweets, it is their magical qualities that are stressed, not their delicious tastes. By returning to a more traditional mode of writing for children, Rowling once again has provided fantasies that many older adults are able to share in as well.

Nearly all Harry's teachers are fair but strict, which means that his various transgressions stand a good chance of getting him into real trouble. This is in contrast to the disciplinary measures imposed by

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 92.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 93.

the less formal, more amiable teachers found in today's schools and school stories, and serves to heighten the tension. The way individual teachers at Hogwarts regularly subtract House Points from pupils as a punishment is another example of almost dead school practices brought back to fictional life. Arbitrary punishments like these, administered by teachers addressing pupils curtly by their surnames, distance child characters and their readers from the feelings of guilt that arise when teachers react more personally to their various transgressions. One of the attractions of the traditional boarding school story was the way in which it described the exploits of lively, mischievous children while also ignoring any of the emotional problems occurring on both sides when children living at home get into trouble with their parents. Disobeying a teacher, knowing that the result is a fixed punishment rather than a guilt-inducing interview, offers a potentially less painful prospect for readers, both in fiction and in real life.

Harry's teachers also show a decidedly old-fashioned devotion to the School House to which they and their pupils are affiliated. Winning the House Cup at the end of the academic year is made all the more fulfilling because teachers cheer as well as pupils. The same teacher involvement is found in the various closely fought games of quidditch: a spectacular contest played on flying broomsticks. Hogwarts pays almost as much attention to success at quidditch as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* does to winning on the rugger field. Harry turns out to be a natural star at this game, and duly comes in for extensive praise from pupils and teachers on numerous occasions.

Before getting to Hogwarts, Harry had disliked his primary school because he was constantly bullied by his cousin Dudley and his gang. Although he feels it will be nice to get away from them when he goes to his local comprehensive and they go to their private schools, there is no enthusiasm as such for the state schools Harry has attended so far and also plans to attend in the future. Hogwarts, with all its advantages, provides him with a dream solution. Young readers, faced by the same comparative lack of glamor in their own day schools, will almost certainly side with Harry on this. They will be responding to a very beguiling fantasy. It is of course also possible to make the mundane seem dramatic and exciting, but this usually means harder work all around for both reader and writer, and is not a course Rowling from the first pages of her books shows any interest in following.

Accompanying this return to traditional school story narrative is a moral framework that is also a throwback to older, more easily judgmental times. In these stories, to look bad is to be bad. Harry's uncle has "hardly any neck," but his wife has "twice the usual amount . . . which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p. 8.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, p. 7

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, p. 22

over garden fences, spying on neighbours." Their son Dudley is a spoiled, petulant mini-tyrant. He is "so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair," and he is given to complain loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the living room. He also has "piggy little eyes" plus five chins that wobble as he eats. His particular gang "were all big and stupid," though one of them, Piers Polkiss, is more scrawny, "with a face like a rat." They are, in short, the sort of unpleasant characters that Roald Dahl would have flushed away into oblivion along with his own dislikable creations Augustus Gloop and Violet Beauregarde in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Other children's books have come some way since this famous story was published over thirty years ago, particularly in terms of trying harder to understand exactly why the bully, sneak, or glutton becomes what he or she is. In America now there is a National Association to Advance Fat Awareness; anyone who thinks this is a self-evidently absurd organization might like to imagine what it is like to be a fat child when certain children's authors, as well as other pupils, still sometimes seem intent on making life extra difficult for you. There is not much of this new thinking in the Potter stories; Dudley and his two repellent parents are wheeled out for readers' scorn and hatred, very much as Roald Dahl—again—does with the loathsome parents in *Matilda*. These are condemned not just for looking bad and behaving worse, but also for social habits such as watching television while consuming "TV dinners." Dudley, in his turn, tries to pack his television, video, and computer into his sports bag before setting out on a brief family holiday.

While Mr. and Mrs. Dursely undoubtedly adore their oversize son, this love is always mocked by the author. When addressing 10-year-old Dudley, they use ridiculous epithets like Dinky Duddydums or Ickle Dudleykins. Harry's love for his dead parents, and theirs for him, is treated very differently. This is hardly fair, but these are not stories eager to embrace some of the difficulties inherent in making judgments about what is good or bad. There are, however, occasional suggestions of more complexity: Severus Snape, the unpleasant Potions Master, is regularly made to appear more malign than he really is. But Harry learns nothing from his mistakes about this teacher. Such errors become clear when each story is nearing its end, but any process of rethinking is forgotten. The first two stories prefer to concentrate on the details of a final Hogwarts feast, accompanied by admiring looks and full-throated applause for Harry from fellow pupils and occasionally from teaching staff too.

Harry himself comes from the same stable that produced *Cinderella* and subsequent stories featuring badly treated orphans or step-

children born to great things. Their initial suffering is amply compensated for when they finally come into their own, duly exulting over those who had previously scorned them. The telltale scar on Harry's forehead—a legacy of his infant encounter with the evil Lord Voldemort—is as big a giveaway as any significant birthmark or cache of letters eventually testifying to a downtrodden orphan character's true nobility. Once safely at Hogwarts, he is treated as a hero before he has done anything heroic: a gratifyingly effortless example of virtue rewarded at no initial cost. Harry of course goes on to justify his reputation with acts of daring and courage. But readers know he is safer than he sometimes supposes. With seven planned books in this series, there is no way Harry is going to disappear halfway through.

He is, in short, an easy hero for readers of all ages to identify with. In looks, he is no film star, although in successive book jackets by different artists his initial, nerdy, train-spotter face has been transformed into something more flattering. As an orphan, he only knows his parents as figures so ideal they actually laid down their lives to save his. Such parents can be loved without the sort of qualification inevitably brought about by day-to-day reality. They also give Harry extra justification for hating his uncle and aunt, so extra nasty by comparison. No room for guilt here, for even though they did bring him up, it was in such a mean, neglectful way that gratitude is never an issue.

Harry's relationship with his own destiny means that the main events in his life often happen because they have to, rather than through his individual choice. This romantic difference from others is reinforced in two other ways. Like all pupils at Hogwarts, he is separated from the rest of the human race, or "muggles" for short, because he is a wizard. This in itself represents a most agreeable fantasy: many other children's books have capitalized on the way young readers like to share the imaginary experience of feeling exclusively different from others. Enid Blyton's Secret Seven gang and Arthur Ransome's young seafaring adventurers, who so enjoy the contrast between themselves and all the other "natives" on the shore, are just two of many possible examples. But Harry is also separated from other wizards because of his birthright. Young readers, accustomed to their own essential ordinariness, are thereby offered a heady mixture when it comes to identifying with Harry. Personal fantasies do not come much more appealing than this, especially when they are embodied in someone who up to the age of 10 was treated as of no account at all.

Those heroes who always win at games, beat up bullies, and later go on to explore remote territories while forever setting a good example can be rather dismaying to young readers all too aware of their own deficiencies by comparison. As Graham Greene once wrote about

Graham Greene, *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays*, p. 15

Rider Haggard's characters, Quatermain and Curtis, "They were men of such unyielding integrity (they would only admit to a fault in order to show how it might be overcome) that the wavering personality of a child could not rest for long against those monumental shoulders. A child, after all . . . is quite well aware of cowardice, shame, deception, disappointment. Sir Henry Curtis perched upon a rock bleeding from a dozen wounds but fighting on with the remnants of the Greys against the hordes of Twala was too heroic. These men were like Platonic ideas: they were not life and one had already begun to know it."

Harry and his friends avoid such painful comparisons since they mostly excel in magical areas where readers cannot feel in competition. Magic is the most effective compensatory fantasy ever invented by humans, precisely because in real life we cannot do all those things we most wish for. The next best thing, however, is to create imaginary magical powers for ourselves, either through our own fantasies or via those of someone else. The success of the Potter series shows that the central need of humans, especially when they are young, to transcend reality in the imagination has not diminished since the early days of folktales and fairy stories. Flying like a bird, turning invisible, eating from a plate that always refills itself are age-old imaginative motifs also found in the Potter books along with many others.

I would suggest therefore that the popularity of the series so far owes a great deal to the way that the author has breathed new life into traditional forms of writing for children. A Cinderella plot set in a novel type of boarding school peopled by jolly pupils already has a lot going for it. Add in some easy stereotypes illustrating meanness, gluttony, envy, or black-hearted evil to raise the tension, round off with a sound, unchallenging moral statement about the value of courage, friendship, and the power of love, and there already are some of the important ingredients necessary for a match-winning formula. Written up in good, workman-like prose with no frills attached and with an excellent feeling for plot-driven, often highly suspenseful narrative, and here are stories to satisfy both 9-year-olds and many older readers—adults included—also in search of a return to melodrama, moral certainty, and agreeable wish-fulfillment.

The Potter stories to date could therefore be described as good rather than great literature. They whisk readers along without hinting at any particular depth of argument or description. They entertain richly, but rarely provoke, question, or inform. Characters are on the whole two-dimensional, picked out by particular physical features plus one overriding personality trait, such as adventurousness, scholarship, or general timidity. Gender roles are stereotyped, with boys out for ac-

tion and the one salient girl character forever urging caution. Harry himself is pleasant enough but hardly a well-rounded personality. His adventures so far are largely external to himself; there are few moments of inner exploration or any serious reorganization of values, priorities, or relationships. Elsewhere, centaurs, unicorns, and phoenixes abound along with a Cerberus-type three-headed dog and an equally mythological snake who, like Medusa, can kill with a single glance. But unlike the classical creatures in C. S. Lewis's Narnia stories, they exist here as walk-on parts, rather than as members of their own separate universe following its own rules.

*Harry Potter and the
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Rowling is closer to Lewis, however, in her robust attitude toward dealing with Harry's enemies. Filch, the malicious school caretaker, possesses an equally unpleasant cat named Mrs. Norris. For the pupils, "it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick." Later in the same story, Ron Weasley pleads with Harry, "Oh, let's kick her, just this once," but is refused. Is this casual endorsement of thoughtless cruelty to animals a throwback to the prewar days of Richmal Crompton's William stories, where his dislike of certain cats occasionally extended into outright killing? It would be foolish to labor this point: Mrs. Norris, after all, is no ordinary cat just as Hogwarts is not an ordinary school. The point remains, however; evil in the Potter books, whether in human or animal form, is there to be punished rather than understood or—perish the thought—even occasionally forgiven. If that means conveying a basically intolerant, judgmental attitude to readers, young as well as older, so be it.

Does it matter that these books describe a world of simple heroics and moral absolutes? This depends entirely on a critic's expectations of children's literature. For some, the best children's books contain the finest writing, most sophisticated characterization, and an ability to help children grow in understanding. For others, the best children's literature is that which most successfully understands and caters to a child's state of imaginative immaturity. On this latter reckoning, the Potter stories come through with flying colors, since they undeniably provide young readers with flattering, highly acceptable fantasies of heroism, exclusivity, melodrama, and wish fulfillment. For sterner critics, these same fantasies are basically facile, representing a talking down to the very children whose lives we should be taking more seriously for what they really are.

Both points of view could be argued. But writing off the Potter series as little more than an inspired return to a regressive story-telling mode linked to an equally old-fashioned black-and-white moral universe would be doing the author an injustice. For one thing, the series is not over; four more titles remain. Each story shows Harry one year

older than the last, which means that our hero, far from existing in a timeless vacuum of endlessly repeated birthdays and Christmases, will actually be 18 when his schooldays and story finish. By this time, Harry and his author will have to face up to the existence of adolescent questioning and uncertainty, whether in the field of morality, sexuality, friendship, or indeed over the problem of defining what exactly twentieth-century heroism truly consists of. While the stories so far have been set in traditional mode, those to come will have to make more acknowledgment of modern psychological realities if Harry and his friends are going to look, sound, and behave like convincing turn-of-the-century teenagers.

Harry began his stories at age 10; it could be argued that the early books deliberately tie themselves to the more limited vision and expectations of a small child, and that this situation will change as Harry himself gets older. To criticize them for moral simplicity without knowing the whole picture would therefore be unfair. The author could easily have produced more Potter stories where Harry and his friends stay basically the same age in the manner of previous successful series by Enid Blyton and others. The decision to make him grow older with every book, and coping with the problems that will arise while still trying to satisfy younger readers, suggests a serious and committed novelist who deserves respect and, so far, the benefit of any doubt.

In fact, there are already some signs of greater depth and levels of understanding in these earlier stories. Harry, for example, has to school himself not to gaze forever into the magical Mirror of Erised, within which he can see his dead parents smiling and waving at him. As his headmaster explains, "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live." While the mirror "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest desire of our hearts," it is never certain that it is telling the real truth. "Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible." This is the most moving and thoughtful scene in the Potter books so far; there could be others to come.

*Harry Potter and the
Philosopher's Stone,*
p. 157

Where Rowling has already excelled beyond argument is in her extraordinary powers of invention. There have been many ingeniously inventive children's authors before, but seldom one with an imagination so endlessly fertile. The specialized vocabulary she invents is entirely convincing: "Floo Powder" (magic substance that transports you through chimneys); "Howler" (an exploding letter of complaint); "Parselmouth" (someone who can talk to snakes). When it comes to names, vicious Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia may be old hat, but are well compensated for by immediately exciting and evocative names

like Lucius Malfoy, Miranda Goshawk, Adelbert Waffling, and Bathilda Bagshot.

The author is also expert in thinking up new ways of turning everyday reality on its head. This happens so often in her books it almost becomes a matter of course, though nonetheless impressive and entertaining for all that. Here, for example, is Harry faced by the normally rather dull subject of staircases:

*Harry Potter and the
Philosopher's Stone,*
p. 98

"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."

And here in the next volume is Ron Weasley on the topic of dangerous books:

*Harry Potter and the
Chamber of Secrets,*
p. 172

"There was one that burned your eyes out. And everyone who read *Sonnets of a Sorcerer* spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And some old witch in Bath had a book that you could *never stop reading!* You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed."

*Harry Potter and the
Prisoner of Azkaban,*
p. 15

The third story contains a typically spirited inventory of a Broomstick Servicing Kit: "A large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tail-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass to clip onto your broom for long journeys, and a *Handbook of Do-it-Yourself Broomcare.*"

*Harry Potter and the
Philosopher's Stone,* p.
212.

In these and other ways, the author successfully incorporates the fizz and excitement of the modern video game into the prose page. Hogwarts itself is an example of virtual reality, existing alongside the normal world but only familiar to those in the know. The suspension of time, and the way that Harry and his friends can chart everyone's current movements on their special Marauder's Map are both familiar devices from video games. Pages of description in a Potter book can be as active as any of those screen games where clicking on to a particular feature reveals some unexpected, hidden secret within. The game of quidditch could come straight from any video arcade, with scores rattling up on the side as broomstick riders swoop in search of the elusive Golden Snitch, avoiding the assaults of aggressive Bludgers on the way. Harry's encounters with absolute evil ("The most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake") are already familiar to most children from dungeons and dragons-type computer games.

This ability to rival the energy of the video games on the printed page while adding in a consistently brilliant line of jokey inventiveness is surely Rowling's most innovatory literary gift, and one which marks her out for critical as well as popular acclaim. Her prose style is not always impressive—pupils “chortle” as they once did in Billy Bunter stories, eyes are clapped on, chins are weak, and blushes extend to the roots of the hair. Other lazy school story clichés sometimes crop up, including formal handshakes and curt compliments like “Good man!” Yet the pace of her writing, the abundance of magical detail, and the consistency of invention and energy are all the author's own.

The great popularity of her series to date is particularly interesting. The days have long past, if indeed they ever existed, when favorable press notices significantly helped a book's popularity with children. Appearing on the Carnegie and *Guardian* Book Award short list certainly helped *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, with already good sales climbing sharply as a result of the publicity after it won the Smarties Award in November 1997. But fundamentally it is children and their parents who turned the Potter series into a best-seller. This happens every now and again when authors are taken up in a big way, with news of their books spreading throughout playgrounds and drawing rooms the length of Britain. Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, and Judy Blume have all had this treatment. Other series also come to mind: Goosebumps, Sweet Valley High, My Little Pony. All of these have had a time of immense popularity, although almost entirely with children, before beginning to fade away.

The way that Rowling's books have been seized on by the young as well as older readers reminds us that there is still—in a television age—a significant link between society and literature, and sometimes very good literature at that. The existence of the special vocabulary of the Potter books known only to those who read the books could have helped children spot other fans and thus helped spread the word. The increasing input of publicity merchants, such as putting the third eagerly awaited Potter book in a chained cage on display in a bookshop window until the day of sale, certainly ensured frequent newspaper coverage for the book and the author all over Britain.

Rowling's success, however, was never merely the result of good publicity. It also had nothing to do with government initiatives like the literacy hour or the specially designated Year of Reading. To an extent, her triumph is all her own, confounding certain contemporary clichés about children's supposed reading taste on the way. The Potter books, for example, run from 223 to 317 pages, at a time when we are assured that the young have decreasing time for reading and a poorer concentration span than before. The books feature a boy as

the main character, although it is known that the majority of young readers are female. While there is an important girl character, the Potter books to date are ultimately very much boys' stories, their emphasis far more on action than feeling.

Even so, they proved to be the right titles at the right time. Where children lead, literary critics do not always want to follow. Roald Dahl was one such flawed genius, delighting the young while sometimes upsetting reviewers and librarians. It is too early to say whether Rowling possesses anything like the same mixture of literary populism linked to an extraordinary ability to get through to children. What is certain is that she has done more than anyone else in the last two years to spread the idea that it is books themselves that can be truly exciting rather than an amorphous concept like "reading." The fact that she now attracts an adult audience as well is equally impressive. To succeed as she has done with books that in many ways remain a critical success is an astonishing achievement in a new writer. While Harry Potter excels through an accident of birth, Rowling has made it by hard, professional work.

It is always cheering for children's literature critics when young readers show that they can still become totally hooked on fiction. Descriptions of children utterly absorbed in a Potter book are very heartening at a time when the joys of reading are so often challenged by other juvenile habits and activities. It is also good for the morale of all "books people" when others get interested in their particular topic. Seeing the Potter stories at the top of various newspaper best-seller lists means that there are now more adults taking an interest in what their children read even to the extent of enjoying some of the same books for themselves. As it is, adult editions of all the first three Potter books also exist, bearing a different book jacket that does not immediately denote "children's book" to casual onlookers. If all this results in more shared enthusiasm and family time for reading in general, who could possibly complain?

On the other hand, are the Potter stories, with their old-fashioned plots, settings, and characterization, necessarily ideal titles to reintroduce parents and other adults to what is best in contemporary children's literature? For me, it would be sad if these books came to stand in the popular imagination for "children's books," in the way, say, that Enid Blyton's stories did for so long among all but the relatively well informed. Whatever their accomplishments, the Potter books to date do seem in many ways to be looking back. Other contemporary writers who are pushing forward with something very different are equally deserving of such a huge take-up. If Rowling's success marks a new beginning for all children's literature so far as adult

attention is concerned, well and good. If the result is fame for her but continuing adult indifference to the best of her many competitors, then an opportunity will have been lost.

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