

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter

CAPITALISM

MAGIC

HEROICS

FEAR

POWER

RACE

KNOWLEDGE

MONEY

CLASS

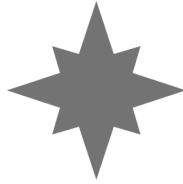
IDENTITY

CENSORSHIP

Edited by
Elizabeth E. Heilman



Critical
Perspectives
on
Harry Potter





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2nd edition

Edited by
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To Alex, my amazing son

**To my spirit filled daughters,
Anneliese, Kathleen, and Maryrose**

**To book reading sons and daughters everywhere
and the parents and teachers who guide them**



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Introduction

Fostering Insight Through Multiple Critical Perspectives

ELIZABETH E. HEILMAN



Harry Potter has become more than just a book; it has become an icon, a Michael Jordan, a Coca-Cola, a Pop-Tart, in modern pop culture. The Potter books are now ubiquitous early texts for children, and are also a popular choice for many adults. As the most commercialized books in recollection, the phenomenon deserves multidisciplinary analysis. While the first edition of this volume addressed cultural themes, literary analysis, and critical perspectives, this second edition book speaks as well towards the phenomenon that Harry Potter has become, including the expansion into film, internet, and computer games, and also the increasingly wide array of theory that can be productively engaged to explore the texts.

The latest Harry Potter book sold nine million copies within the first 24 hours of release. There are now seven books, and multiple video games and movies (each ranking in the top 20 of all time highest grossing films), the Harry Potter iPod has recently been licensed, as well as more than 400 other Potter products. The Harry Potter brand is worth an estimated four billion dollars, which makes J. K. Rowling, by some reports, more wealthy than Queen Elizabeth II. While the first edition examined the first novels as an emerging cultural phenomenon, we can now examine Harry Potter and Pottermania as a whole. With more than 420 million copies of Rowling's books in print worldwide in some 60 languages, Harry Potter is present in most of the public and cultural spaces in which we live. In 1998, there were no spin-off products; by 2001, I was already able to find an entire aisle of toys in a major department store devoted to a mind boggling array of Harry Potter paraphernalia, and as the decade has progressed, there are spin-off products that go well beyond toys and include expensive jewelry, special vacations, a wall clock, tiffany lamps, and more. You can even get a Harry Potter cell phone cover and ring tone.

This phenomenon has grown into the biggest children's publishing and

merchandising phenomenon of modern times. It has also been credited for a renaissance in reading for children all over the world—but this is largely a folk legend. Though indeed many children read the Harry Potter series, an extensive analysis of research on reading trends supported by the National Endowment for the Arts shows that most of these children do not go on to read many other books outside of school or become teens and young adults who read. Others will remain reading strictly in fantasy/mystery genres. More than half of American adults won't read a single novel in a year according to the National Endowment for the Arts and, in the last decade, as millions of Harry Potter books have sold, the decline of reading has almost tripled. The Harry Potter series hasn't spawned a new generation of readers, and many literary critics find the series comparatively unimpressive. As Ron Charles (2007) observed, "Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' is a dazzling fantasy series that explores philosophical themes [including a scathing assault on organized religion] that make[s] Rowling's little world of good vs. evil look, well, childish." Still, there is no question that the Harry Potter series is important.

The narrative story, images, and lessons of the books are infiltrating the lives and imaginations of readers and consumers of related products. We encounter Harry Potter in all sorts of places—the bookstore, the software dealer, the library, the card shop, and the local schools. Harry Potter is discussed in coffee shops and on public radio. We encounter the face of the Harry Potter actor peering out from prosaic magazines such as the *American TV Guide*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Vanity Fair* and many similar publications around the world. There are references to Harry Potter in the more cerebral offerings of the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Salon* as well. When narrative text and images become such a pervasive part of the cultural environment, they also become part of the identity of the people who read and consume the images and narratives. Harry Potter then is not just books we read or movies we see or things that we buy. The text and images of Harry Potter become part of who we are. This is true of individuals and it is true of "us" as a global culture. Harry Potter books have been read, discussed, celebrated, and vilified in Taiwan, Mexico, Mozambique, and Russia. They are read by children in Harlem, children on Indian reservations, and children in Siberia. To a large degree (as Jorge Luis Borges has famously suggested) we are what we read. So, what does the popularity of Harry Potter suggest about who we are? What do the books themselves have to say and how do they say it?

These works contain powerful, thought-provoking literary themes as well as portrayals of social and cultural normalcy. They cumulatively serve as a powerful form of social text and deserve serious critical attention. The view that literature and cultural products can simultaneously represent, reproduce, and transform cultural, political, and institutional norms has become an increasingly important perspective in literary theory, cultural studies, curriculum theory, art, and aesthetics. This book brings together scholars from a

diverse set of academic specialties to provide literary, cultural, sociological, and psychological examinations of the Harry Potter books as both cultural products and literary texts. Our new edition is more international, featuring five non-American scholars—Alice Mills from Australia, Peter Ciaccio from Italy, Maria Nikolajeva and Anna Gunder from Sweden, and Taija Piippo from Finland—and draws on a wider range of intellectual traditions by including a moral–theological analysis, psychoanalytic perspectives, and philosophy of technology. Authors make use of formal and structural analysis, archetypal criticism, psychological analysis, genre criticism, historical criticism, and critical theory. Since these novels engage the social, cultural, and psychological preoccupations of our times, we examine worlds of consciousness and the construction of cultural worlds, and how modern anxieties about subjectivity and individuality are reflected in these texts. Such an interdisciplinary presentation is emblematic of the ways in which approaches to literary discourse and other cultural discourses have become increasingly rich and entwined. The book is divided into four inter-related parts, yet these theories and the chapters organized accordingly are not mutually exclusive nor competing interpretations.

Perspectives on Identity and Morality

While most readers see the books as engaging fantasy, Christian censors around the world see the books as diabolic stories encouraging occult practice, magic, and witchcraft. Some parents, who may not be concerned about magic and witchcraft, see the books as yet another example of overly scary and violent media that children should not be exposed to. These matters are important not only for cultural theorists to ponder, but are of concern to psychologists, and teachers as well. Exactly how are children influenced (or not) by what they read? In Chapter One, “Controversial Content,” Taub and Servaty-Seib explore these issues. They explain that children’s responses to literature varies a great deal according to the developmental and psychological contexts in which they are reading.

Most Christians do not seek censorship, however. In “Harry Potter and Christian Theology,” Chapter Two, Rev. Peter Ciaccio writes from the perspective of a Southern European Protestant theologian and details the role of magic, charisma and identity, overcoming dualisms, the notion of treasures, death, curses, sin, and the temptations of power—a panoply of Christian themes. Nicholas Sheltrown also reads the series as a morality tale. In Chapter Three, “Harry Potter’s World as a Morality Tale of Technology and Media” he reveals Rowling’s critical engagement with the role of technology in shaping personal lives and collective destinies. Personal lives are also examined through Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s poststructuralist theory in Chapter Four, “Is Desire Beneficial or Harmful in the Harry Potter Series?” where Taija Piippo explores the

connection between desire and identity development, and more broadly as a driving narrative theme.

Peter Appelbaum, writing in Chapter Five, locates another narrative theme related to identity development. The Harry Potter books belong to the genre, *Bildungsroman*: a young man is led by a collection of hands higher than he is aware of toward his destiny. The surface story is the main character's maturation, but the underlying themes address his apprenticeship and the decisions that are made in the crafting of it. The character of Snape is the under story in the Harry Potter books and raises the notion of the "good teacher" in terms of pedagogical techniques, the creation of the perfect society, and of individual moral character. These are explored in "The Great Snape Debate."

Each author writes convincingly from very different standpoints. The psychoanalytic view that responses to literature are highly variable and that meaning is a product of individual psychic response to a work is consistent with a broad body of literary theory in which literature is understood as that which is received by the reader rather than that which is created by the author. Reader response theory, introduced by Stanley Fish (1980) focuses on "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time" (p. 27). At its most extreme, this theory suggests that the reader is really the author. This idea is consistent with philosophical postmodernism, which emphasizes "local knowledge" and questions the truth of any collective authoritative interpretation or "meta narrative."

Reader response theories suggest that each reader creates a text as they read. Yet, the texts certainly seem to exist on their own. Readers cannot read in a void. Readers' and authors' interpretations are intimately tied up with all previous experiences, including experience with other texts. Anytime we understand something, it is because we relate it to an idea, a text, or category we have already seen. Thus, each text and each reading of text is actually intertextual. A book, and even a paragraph, is chock full of direct and indirect references to these other texts, media, and experiences. There is nothing new under the sun. The debts of texts to other texts seems endless. As Barthes (1977) describes this:

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture . . . the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always interior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.

(pp. 146–147)

From this point of view, a literary work is no longer the product of an author's original thoughts. Instead, the author is a recycler who is limited by the availability of a pre-existing language system with words, signs, and symbols, and a pre-existing literary system with conventions for things like plot, genre, characterization, images, and narrative voice. These ideas about

literature fall within the broad category “poststructural,” which is not a single theory but a group of theories that share similar ideas and a rejection of earlier “structural” approaches to literature. In its most narrow sense, structuralism assumes that a work has intrinsic meaning that pre-exists the realization of any meaning. If nobody is around to hear a tree falling in a forest a structuralist would say that there is still a sound, but a poststructuralist would not. Furthermore, a structuralist believes that the individual, the unconscious, and the social and cultural world are all composed of the same signs, codes, and conventions, all working according to similar principles. Literary texts are also structured according to these same signs, codes, and conventions. Literature then is best understood as a complete system of reference. Individual works can be studied according to the ways in which they participate in this complete system and possess identifiable literary conventions.

Critical and Sociological Perspectives

Chapters Six through Ten of this book examine the treatment of particular themes: schooling (Six), home and family (Seven), gender (Eight), animals (Nine), and public culture (Ten). These chapters are written in ways that combine elements of both structuralism and cultural studies. Structuralism tends to be a comparative methodology in that a close reading of the text reveals the use of literary themes, patterns, systems, and structures. A critic then compares the use of these elements in one text with other texts. Cultural Studies, however, also consider texts in terms of their social, political, economic, and cultural influence rather than their literariness or comparative use of theme alone. Texts inevitably contain ideological messages about who has power and why, what is of value, and commentary on normalcy and success. Ideological critique aims to show how ideology functions within texts and, also, around texts, since texts are also produced in the midst of certain social, economic, and political contexts. What is allowed to be in print and what is collectively considered to be literature at any given historical point is related to these ideological and power-driven contexts.

Ideological critique encourages critical reading, which enables the reader to understand the subtle and overt ideologies of the text. Ideology can be hard to see because the most compelling ideology comes in the form of the more subtly suggestive and pleasurable reading. Readers can be ideologically influenced without being aware of it. As Foucault describes, in modern society, power can be hard to recognize because “a relationship of power is that mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions” (1983, p. 229). Yet, readers also respond to ideological messages in different ways. Ideological texts, like other texts, are multivalent. They can be read in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. Also, there are multiple ideologies, not just one ideology.

A postmodern critique of ideology aims to reveal systems of thinking that legitimate particular worldviews and enable oppression, but, at the same time, acknowledges that there is no ideologically free reality to compare it to. In addition, post-Marxist cultural studies of literature attempt to recognize that literature and cultural products can simultaneously represent, reproduce, and transform cultural, political, and institutional norms. They can be both literary and ideological and text can promote both liberation and oppression.

In Chapter Six, “Schooling Harry Potter,” Megan L. Birch details the series’ mockery of schools and teachers and the suggestion that teachers have very little power to shape instruction or the institution of schooling. She questions the implicit claim that being a good teacher is about who you are as a person rather than what you know and that who you know is profoundly more valuable than what you know. In “Comedy, Quest, and Community: Home and Family in Harry Potter,” Kornfeld and Prothro examine home, family, and leaving home. Harry’s quest of self-discovery, which parallels his quest to defeat Voldemort, forms the basis of all young adult coming-of-age literature, in which protagonists create their own version of home out of the strangeness they encounter when they are in exile.

In Chapter Eight, Trevor Donaldson and I examine gender identity conventions and hierarchies in the Harry Potter books and reveal that the Harry Potter books often feature females in secondary positions of power and authority and replicate some of the most demeaning, yet familiar, cultural stereotypes even though the later books feature comparatively less sexism. The girls still often giggle, cry, and gossip and are obsessed with, and even crippled by, their relationships. The strong, adventurous, independent boy serves as a heroic expression of masculinity, while the weak, non-successful male is mocked and sometimes despised. Peter Dendle, writing in Chapter Nine “Monsters, Creatures, and Pets at Hogwarts” shows how the responsibilities of stewardship over the realm of subordinate creatures of Rowling’s making is a continuous anxiety in the Harry Potter series, and one that maps shrewdly—in capturing many of the same successes and hypocrisies alike—onto the actual human relationship with animals at the turn of the third millennium. In Chapter Ten, “Harry Potter, the War against Evil, and the Melodramatization of Public Culture” the Harry Potter series is examined by Marc Bousquet as a significant artifact in the contemporary resurgence of the melodramatic in mass-mediated public culture including the conviction that evildoers are less than human, that they can and should be tortured to clarify the plot, and that there can be no relief to good until the evil other is destroyed.

Literary Perspectives: the Hero, Myth, and Genre

Structuralist literary critics believe they can dissect, evaluate, and describe a text’s literariness and importance. What seems tricky here is that this often requires an analysis of the ways in which the text is intertextual or related to

other texts. These chapters are critiques that fall, to some extent, within the structuralist tradition. As Genette (1988) describes in *Structuralism and Literary Criticism*, the structuralist critic analyzes the “themes, motifs, key words” that create the text.

In Chapter Eleven, “Playing the Genre Game,” Anne Alton reviews “Rowling’s incorporation of a vast number of genres in the books in the tradition of genre criticism.” She explains that genres often dismissed as “despised” genres—including pulp fiction, mystery, gothic and horror stories, detective fiction, the school story, the closely related sports story, and series books—appear throughout the Harry Potter books, along with more “mainstream” genres (at least in children’s literature) such as fantasy, adventure, quest, romance, and myth” and concludes that ultimately, “Rowling has fused a number of genres to create something new: a generic mosaic which is a composite, made up of numerous smaller pieces combined in a way that allows them to keep their original shape and structure and yet changes their individual significance, and thus the meaning of the whole. In Chapter Twelve, “Harry Potter and the Secrets of Children’s Literature,” Maria Nikolajeva considers the tremendous success of Harry Potter and suggests that in contemporary Western children’s fiction, most of the child characters seem to appear on low mimetic and ironic levels and these books are a fortunate attempt to reintroduce the romantic character into children’s fiction. She also makes use of carnival theory to examine how the novels empower children and have a subversive effect, showing that the rules imposed on the child by the adults are arbitrary. Alice Mills provides a critical analysis of classical allusions in Chapter Thirteen, “Harry Potter and the Horrors of the *Oresteia*,” and details what she effectively argues is Rowling’s profoundly anti-Oresteian view of human life. Chapter Fourteen, “Philosopher’s Stone to Resurrection Stone: Narrative Transformations and Intersecting Cultures across the Harry Potter Series,” by Kate Behr reviews transformation on the surface level, in the details of the wizarding world, in its language and customs, and, at a deeper level, in Harry Potter’s character as he moves through adolescence to adulthood, making more and more difficult choices. She argues that transformation is at the heart of the series itself.

Cultural Studies and Media Perspectives

In the final part of this book, authors explore Harry Potter as a cultural phenomenon. Their work is a form of “cultural studies,” a critical tradition that draws from the fields of anthropology, communications, history, literary criticism, political theory, sociology, and psychoanalysis in order to explore relationships among texts, media, and cultural practices. The cultural studies movement has redirected literary criticism more broadly into cultural criticism, which considers a wide range of texts in terms of their social, political, economic, and cultural influence rather than their literariness alone, and

encourages the study of mass culture and popular forms in addition to elite genres and canonical works. These chapters are not focused so much on looking inside of the books. Instead, they are looking at the ways in which the books and the Harry Potter phenomenon fit into contemporary culture and the ways in which Harry Potter has been interpreted in various new and different media beyond the novels. When I watched the films I was struck by how novels with slowly developing mystery, suspense, and a feel of everyday school life occurring over a year were transformed into action movies.

Books that didn't seem horrific became scary movies not suitable for many elementary schoolers. Philip Nel describes what is "Lost in Translation" in Chapter Fifteen. Anna Gunder, in Chapter Sixteen, provides a fascinating comparison of the books and video games, exploring how the Harry Potter series is particularly well suited for ludolization, i.e., transposition into game form. In Chapter Seventeen, Ernest L. Bond and Nancy L. Michelson explore the theoretical underpinnings for the participatory authoring of literary worlds and then examine a vast array of student writing, blogs, vlogs, song fic, video trailers, bands, and more in response to the Harry Potter series. Finally, Turner-Vorbeck's chapter, "Pottermania: Good, Clean Fun or Cultural Hege-mony?," critically examines the intensive marketing efforts related to the Harry Potter books, and product spin-offs, and considers issues of imagination, power, and control. Reading, along with other aspects of child culture, is increasingly becoming an opportunity for marketing and consumerism instead of a private, relatively low cost pleasure.

Conclusion

I have assembled this collection as a curriculum theorist dedicated to the notion that democracy and social justice must rely on the critical intellectual insights, civic courage, and imaginative power of communities, rather than the best ideas of any authority. The critical study of literature and culture is essential to such a vision. In the postmodern context in which we live, cultural products promoted by multinational corporations can serve as a powerful form of authority promoting unequal relations of power and a dreary aesthetic. Yet, literature and culture can be read in many ways, particularly with assistance from critical works such as this. We can talk back to Harry Potter. In order to have rich conversations and develop critical insight and imagination, I contend that the engagement of popular and literary texts should draw from multiple paradigms and employ multiple theoretical lenses.

In this collection, I have tried to provide a multidisciplinary framework that can bring interesting and potent theories to readers and students of literature, to children, their parents, and their teachers. I hope this text helps to bridge the gap between critical theory and critical pedagogy. Though literary theory has moved away from structuralism and New Criticism to include psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and cultural studies analyses, these approaches

have had little effect on the ways in which literature is taught in undergraduate studies and even less in K-12. Similarly, though there is an increasing body of scholarship on critical pedagogy, critical literacy, multiculturalism, and critical and reflective social studies, things have changed very little across the curriculum.

Thus, in addition to the literary and cultural studies significance of this collection, this book is important because it can help parents and teachers to make school curriculum and conversations about books more meaningful. Exploring critical and liberating ways of reading is certainly a valuable goal, but it is hard to do, even with support.

Chapters providing psychoanalytic perspectives can help teachers think about the complexity of readers' motivations and responses. Chapters on hero, myth, and genre can help children understand literary structures and allusions. The "Critical and Sociological Perspectives" chapters can help parents and teachers stimulate powerful discussions and integrate powerful curricular themes to consider who has power in society. These chapters can give support for discussions about the construction of identity, the meaning of home, the difference between schooling and learning, and what it means to be a leader.

Curriculum—especially Social Studies and English—can potentially serve as a vehicle for deconstructing these complex issues. Without support, teachers developing curriculum around these books sometimes focus on trivia, for example, having students create models of Hogwarts School or invent their own flavor of Every Flavor Bean. Much critical scholarship asks teachers to use powerful critical themes, address popular culture, and make meaningful connections to students' interests. This book gives teachers a tool to do so on a range of levels, examining the relationship among cultural products and power at the macro level of political and economic structures—but also at the micro level, considering cultural and aesthetic nuances in language, texts, and personal responses.

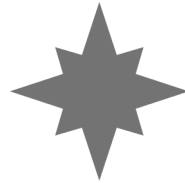
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Part I

Perspectives on Identity and Morality





Chapter One

Controversial Content

Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children?



**DEBORAH J. TAUB AND
HEATHER L. SERVATY-SEIB**

The publication of the seventh and final Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, set publishing records, selling 8.3 million copies in its first day of release (Blais and DeBarros, 2007). Even as the Harry Potter books have been heralded as a publishing and cultural phenomenon, they also have been the subject of challenge and controversy from the publication of the first book through the last. The Harry Potter books were the seventh most frequently challenged books of 1990–2000 (up from forty-eighth on the 1990–1999 list) according to the American Library Association (ALA, 2007a). Objections to the books stem from their controversial content—from the centrality of magic to the topic of death to scenes that some believe are too violent, intense, or scary for children.

Controversy over children’s books is not new. According to Shannon (1989), “The history of the struggle over the content of children’s and adolescents’ reading material is nearly as long as the history of schooling in America” (p. 97). One of the bases for this struggle is the view of “children-as-innocent-and-in-need-of-protection” (Dresang, 2003, p. 21). In this view children need to be “protected from certain kinds of literature” (Stevenson, 1996, p. 305) that could be harmful to their innocence. Challenges to children’s books center on “what knowledge they [the challengers] think is valid, valuable, and virtuous for school curricula and library shelves” (Shannon, 1989, p. 97); those who challenge books “may believe that the materials will corrupt children and adolescents, offend the sensitive or unwary reader, or undermine basic values and beliefs” (American Library Association, 2006).

This chapter explores the controversial content of the Harry Potter series and whether the books might be harmful to children. Focusing particularly

on the themes of magic, religion, violence and scariness, and death, the chapter concludes with guidelines for teachers and parents.

Challenges to Harry Potter: the Religious Argument

In his book about censorship in schools and public libraries, Foerstel (1994) states “there is no hotter topic among today’s bookbanners than the devil and witchcraft . . . materials about witchcraft and the occult account for the largest number of challenges to resources in libraries today” (p. 109). During the period 2001–2005, witchcraft was a major concern in challenges to books (American Library Association, 2007b). This is reflected in the many challenges to Harry Potter based on religious objections.

Most religious objections to the magic in Harry Potter are based on various passages of scripture, most commonly Deuteronomy 18:9–12:

When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord; and because of these abominable practices the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

(Revised Standard Version)

The dangers of Harry Potter from a Christian perspective can be found on the Internet under such titles as “The Harry Potter Series: A Vision of the Antichrist” (Chambers, 2007); “Bewitched by Harry Potter” (Kjos, 1999); “Harry Potter Lures Kids to Witchcraft—with Praise from Christian Leaders” (Kjos, n.d.); “Harry Potter: A New Twist to Witchcraft” (“Harry Potter: A New Twist,” n.d.); and “Harry Potter and DandD—Like Two Peas in a Pod?” (Kjos, 2000). The religious concerns include assertions that the books portray magic as harmless, fun, or good and that they may encourage children to dabble in the occult. Similar arguments have been made about the role-playing game “Dungeons and Dragons” (“D and D”) and certain rock music (Blimling, 1990; Hicks, 1991; Hunter, 1998; Kjos, 2000, 2003).

The rhetoric of many of these websites is extreme, and both the reasoning and the interpretation of scripture frequently is convoluted. For instance, Joseph Chambers (2007) wrote, “Without question I believe the Harry Potter series is a creation of hell helping prepare the younger generation to welcome the Biblical prophecies of demons and devils led by Lucifer himself.” He continued by suggesting that the source of the inspiration for the Harry Potter books, which are widely reported to have just popped into author J. K. Rowling’s head fully formed, is Satan. He concluded with his certainty that

“the Harry Potter books are just another means [of Satan] of blinding millions to the truth.”

Many may find it difficult to take such extreme ideas seriously or to believe that others might. To many it will appear ridiculous that so many are taking a fantasy seriously. To understand this perspective, it is essential to understand religious views on fantasy, magic, and the occult.

Religion is a critical factor influencing parental attitudes about children’s fantasy behavior in that there are stark differences between what is considered real and what is considered fantasy from one religion to the next (Taylor and Carlson, 2000). They continue by describing how specific religious orientations (e.g. Hinduism, fundamental Christianity, and Mennonite) affect parents’ views of childhood fantasy-related behavior. Taylor and Carlson address two primary objections to fantasy offered by parents with fundamental Christian beliefs. First, those with fundamental beliefs appear to equate fantasy with deceit and express concerns that fantastical activity and storytelling will lead to lying and other deceitful behavior. In addition, members of fundamentalist groups who are focused on issues of “spiritual warfare” believe that it is necessary to protect their children from evil forces in the spiritual world. Some in this latter group have even expressed concern about public elementary schools, stating that they expose children to dangerous ideas about witchcraft, occult practices, and Halloween.

In their research on the imaginary companions of children, Taylor and Carlson found a qualitative difference between the responses of parents with fundamental Christian beliefs and the other parent participants. In general, most parents who expressed concern regarding the behavior usually did so in relation to the inconvenience of including the imaginary companion in family activities and worries that the behavior was developmentally inappropriate and/or that it might indicate that the child was struggling with distinguishing fantasy from reality. In contrast, parents with fundamental Christian beliefs associated imaginary companions with the devil. Taylor and Carlson argue that these disparate views of the same behavior “reflect a divergent perception on the part of the adults of what is real and what is fantasy” (p. 248).

This divergence of viewpoints can be seen in the reactions to Harry Potter by members of various Christian groups and denominations. While some Christian leaders support and admire the Harry Potter books (Granger, 2006; Olsen, 1999), others condemn them as dangerous.

For fundamentalist Christians “witchcraft is as real to us as any other religion” (Gish, 2000, p. 263). This belief—that witchcraft is real and is necessarily evil—lies at the heart of the religious objections. To those who believe in the reality of witchcraft, the threat of the Harry Potter books is that they might desensitize children to the sinfulness of magic and that “children may learn to see them [occult or Satanic practices] as acceptable” (p. 264). (Those interested in a detailed and excellent description of the religious objections to

the Harry Potter books and other popular children's fantasy books are directed to Gish's article.) "Once again: 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" (p. 264). Gish provides a useful gloss of Deuteronomy 18:9–12 as those verses are applied to Harry Potter. She points, for example, to the Divination course offered by Hogwarts and, obviously, the fact that Harry and his friends are learning to be wizards.

Several Christian leaders who support and admire the Harry Potter books find the books promoting values such as courage, love, friendship, and loyalty, with a moral approach of good vs. evil. Granger, in his book *Looking for God in Harry Potter* (2006), asserted that "the Harry Potter stories 'sing along' with the Great Story of Christ [which] is a significant key to understanding their compelling richness" (p. 2). Although many writers have commented on the near total lack of the mention of any religion in the first six Harry Potter books, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* the reader encounters "whispers" of Christianity (Smietana, 2007). In the cemetery in Godric's Hollow on Christmas Eve, Harry and Hermione read the inscriptions on the graves of Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore and of James and Lily Potter—both passages from the New Testament. Shortly after the publication of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling, in a press conference, explained that she has always seen her series as based extensively on Christian themes, including questions about the afterlife and the power of love over death (Adler, 2007). According to Rowling, she hesitated to make the religious parallels too explicit as the series developed to keep readers from anticipating too early where the story was going.

Just before the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the Church of England published a guide to teach youth leaders in the church how to use the Harry Potter books to teach Christian messages to young people (*Use Harry Potter*, 2007). The author of the guide, Owen Smith, stated,

To say, as some have, that these books draw younger readers towards the occult seems to me both to malign JK Rowling and to vastly underestimate the ability of children and young people to separate the real from the imaginary.

The Occult

What about the concerns that exposure to magical ideas such as spells, wizards, and potions tempts young people to dabble in the occult or become members of a cult? On her website in her discussion of the dangers of Harry Potter, Kjos (2000) asserts,

For most children tutored in paganism by popular authors and computer programmers, there will be no turning back. . . . A little dabbling

in the occult usually fuels urges to explore other practices... Packaged for our youth as D and D [Dungeons and Dragons] or as Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, they desensitize their captive fans to the dangers of occult forces. They can become irresistible.

Hunter (1998) also cites the progression from fantasy role-playing games to dabbling in satanic rituals to cult membership. Some people even assert that satanists use Dungeons and Dragons to recruit members (Foerstel, 1994).

Hicks (1991), a law enforcement expert whose book, *In Pursuit of Satan*, addresses alleged satanic crime, debunks this notion of a causal link between fantasy games such as Dungeons and Dragons and occult dabbling. In a study of a stratified random matched sample of fantasy role-playing gamers, satanic "dabblers," and students who were neither game-players nor dabblers, Leeds (1995) found the gamers and the uninvolved comparison group to be similar to one another in terms of their beliefs in the paranormal and personal stability and the satanic dabblers to be different from the other two groups in both of those areas. Based on his study, Leeds concluded, "the occult and satanism are two distinctly different realms, and ... one does not necessarily lead to the next" (p. 158). He continued: "These results do not support popular media suggestions that involvement in fantasy role-playing games are the direct antecedents to satanic practices, beliefs in magical spells, and demon-summoning in impressionable youth" (p. 158). Hicks (1991) deplores the notion, suggested by the popular media, "that teens have so little judgment where fantasy is concerned that parents must absolutely control all that they read and hear" (p. 271). Can children and adolescents exercise judgment about fantasy?

Fantasy and Reality

Beyond the religiously based concerns expressed well by Gish (2000) are those of parents who do not believe that magic, of the type presented in the Harry Potter series, is real. These parents may express concerns that their child(ren), however, could begin to view such practices as real. Their concerns are grounded in the idea that reading books like the Harry Potter series, which include fantastical and magical content, could foster confusion regarding the distinction between fantasy and reality.

Although the subject of fantasy is still an emerging area within developmental psychology, there is valuable information to be gleaned from the research that has been done. The scholarly work reviewed here addresses developmental and methodological issues related to the fantasy–reality distinction, factors that appear to affect children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, and potential benefits of fantastical thinking and play.

In her thorough review of the fantasy/reality literature, Woolley (1997) indicates clearly that the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, at a very

basic level, is in place by three years of age. She and her colleagues have found that around the age of three years children express differences between reality and pictures, reality and pretense, and reality and toys in their everyday conversations (Woolley and Wellman, 1990). Skolnick and Bloom (2006) found that not only can children (aged three to six) distinguish between real and fantasy figures, they separate fantasy worlds as adults do (e.g., Batman does not believe that SpongeBob is real). Sharon and Woolley (2004) found that the three to five year olds in their study had some difficulty correctly categorizing real vs. fantastical entities, but that five year olds (closely followed by four year olds) were strikingly similar to adults in their attributions of the properties (i.e., physical, biological, social, and mental) of real and fantastical entities. Five year olds were much more likely to attribute human-like properties to real entities (e.g., a child of the same sex) than they were to fantastical entities (e.g., monster, fairy, Santa Claus).

The approach used to challenge and assess children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality is a significant issue (Bourchier and Davis, 2000; Sharon and Woolley, 2004). It is evident from reviewing the literature that researchers are continually fine-tuning their approach to assessment in an attempt to understand best what is occurring cognitively for children as they engage in the experimental procedures. Questions arise about numerous potential confounding factors (e.g., inclusion or exclusion of response choices, language used). For example, Sharon and Woolley (2004) provided children with the option to place entities in an "unsure" pile if they were not confident that an entity was either real or fantastical—an option that children used quite frequently. They reasonably argued that the failure to offer this option in previous research likely affected findings as children who were unsure were required to choose. Deák (2006) contends that current methods of investigation offer more information about children's "failure to understand the unfamiliar discourse format of the standard test" (p. 546) than they provide insight regarding children's confusion between fantasy and reality.

Keeping in mind the developmental and methodological issues noted above, there are factors that seem to affect children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality and their beliefs about magic. More specifically, the factors we discuss, primarily noted by Woolley (1997), include exposure to or engagement with fantastical material, the emotional tenor of the object/entity being considered, the interpersonal context within which objects/entities are considered, and children's knowledge of the physical world.

To begin, no evidence was located to suggest that the reading of the Harry Potter series or any other book with fantastical content disrupts children's basic ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Confirming Taylor, Cartwright, and Carlson's (1993) earlier work, Carrick and Quas (2006) recently found that children's report of enjoyment of engaging in fantasy play was not related to their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Sharon and

Woolley (2004) actually found that children who were more interested and involved in fantasy content and play were *better* able to distinguish between fantastical and real entities. They suggest, as do others (Taylor, 1999) that exposure to and engagement with fantastical material allows children to learn more about the fantasy world and, therefore, strengthens their understanding of the boundaries of imagination.

The emotional tenor of objects/entities appears to affect whether or not children will make accurate judgments regarding fantasy vs. reality (Woolley, 1997). In general, children tend to believe erroneously, regardless of the actual status of the entity, that positively charged entities are real and negatively charged entities are unreal (Samuels and Taylor, 1994; Phelps and Woolley, 1994) and that happy fantasy events are more possible to occur than frightening or angry fantasy events (Carrick and Quas, 2006). Woolley (1997) states the possibility “that children’s judgments about imagined entities may reflect whether or not they *want* the entity to appear” (p. 995). In relation to the Harry Potter series, children may be more likely to believe in the existence of the Marauder’s Map or the Patronus than they are to believe in Lord Voldemort or the Dementors.

Research also suggests that the interpersonal context within which fantasy or magical objects/entities are considered affects children’s ability to distinguish accurately fantasy from reality. Bateson (1972) described fantasy as a “communicational mode” and contends that it is actually the metacommunication (verbal and nonverbal) that accompanies an event that affects how that event will be interpreted. Vanderburg (1998) stated that “it is crucial that children know what is serious and what is not, and that they understand and trust the regularities and particularities of communication that are essential for appropriate participation in intersubjective mutuality” (p. 298). Golomb and Galasso (1995) found that when children were clearly informed in the midst of a pretending that “they had to end the game,” few made errors with regard to believing that fantasy could create reality.

Parents have a powerful role to play in influencing how children perceive fantastical or magical material and/or entities. Children are more likely to make errors about fantasy figures being real when they are figures for which parental and societal support is most common (e.g., Santa Claus, Easter Bunny) (Sharon and Woolley, 2004). Subbotsky’s (1993 as cited in Woolley, 1997) research suggests that children are more likely to espouse magical beliefs when they have first been exposed to another individual who endorses such beliefs. Rosengren, Hickling, Jurist, and Burger (in preparation, as cited in Rosengren and Hickling, 2000) asked parents to keep a record of their child’s questions and parental responses to these questions during the week following attendance at a magic show. They found that parents of preschoolers generally provided magical explanations and affirmed the existence of magic, while parents of older children tended to respond to children’s

questions by describing the events as tricks or by providing physical/natural explanations. Parents and other concerned adults need to become more aware of the informal messages they send to children regarding the actual existence of magical phenomena (Rosengren and Hickling, 2000). Subbotsky (1993, cited by Woolley, 1997) found that the presence of an adult can often inhibit children's use of magical thinking and subsequent behavior. This finding suggests that concerned adults might want to read the Harry Potter books to their children or at least be present during the child's reading of the books to be available for any questions that the child may wish to ask.

Phelps and Woolley (1994; as cited in Woolley, 1997) found that children's knowledge of the physical world greatly influenced their tendency to use magical explanations of events. The less information children had about a certain phenomenon, the more likely they were to incorporate magical concepts. Children with an understanding of principles and scientific facts such as gravity are, therefore, likely to recognize that the flying broomsticks and game of Quidditch in Harry Potter are imaginary.

The focus thus far has been on the distinction between fantasy and reality and has addressed concerns parents may have about fantastical thinking and variables that may be considered if one wished to minimize the level of fantastical thinking in which children engage. The flip side of this issue is presented by Johnson (1997) and Vanderburg (1998) who spoke to the *benefits* of fantastical thinking and play, respectively. They both addressed how these processes allow humans to think beyond the constraints of their culture in order to think more abstractly and theoretically. Johnson (1997) argued the need to acknowledge the positive and productive nature of fantastical thinking and the fact that it is not just mistaken thought processes gone awry, but is actually something that we as humans have the capacity to engage in and utilize intentionally as a tool. He offered Einstein as an example of his understanding of one who used fantastical thinking in its most productive sense.

In addition, Vanderburg (1998) noted that in play "real experiences are rendered 'not real,' and the serious made playful, thus allowing for it to be seriously reconsidered" (p. 300). Speaking in a similar tone about fantastical literature, Johnson (personal communication, April 26, 2001) offers that "it is a mistake to think that this genre is an escape from reality. Fiction/fantasy can vividly portray very real issues. In fact, it may amplify these issues, making them more vividly real." Perhaps the realistic issues faced by Harry (e.g., isolation, grief, conflicts with friends, difficulty with authority) could provide catalysts for discussion about issues that would be too difficult for children to discuss in a direct and personal manner (Taylor, 1999). It may be that the fantastical presentation of these topics can make such discussions more safe and possible for children. In fact, the books have been used to explore grief issues with bereaved children and teens (Markell and Markell, 2004).

Scary

It is common to refer to certain movies, television programs, and books as “too scary for children” or too scary for children *of a certain age*. However, adult perceptions of what is “too scary” for children may be inaccurate and may be based on flawed reasoning (Stevenson, 1996).

Adults label books as too scary based on an adult understanding of what is frightening to children; they also make the assumption that children need special protection from the content of such books. Often, adults make the argument that a given book or scene would have frightened them as children but, as Stevenson (1996) argues,

we can never really re-experience the children we were without bringing along the adults we’ve become; our adult-imagined children often do not judge or respond to books as would real contemporary children or even as our younger selves would have.

(p. 310)

As noted earlier, there is, in fact, no research on the effects of given books on children. Research on movies and television suggests that *visual images* have a much greater capacity to frighten children than do the word portrayals in books (Cantor, 1998).

Books are different from TV and movies because, for young children, an adult is present as the reader and provides a reassuring presence (Cantor, 1998). (This is similar to the findings reported earlier about the effects of the presence of an adult on magical thinking.) When reading aloud, the adult can edit and interpret as s/he reads. The child who is reading independently has the ability to control the pace of the story rather than being at the mercy of the pacing of the movie or TV show—pacing that often is designed to heighten the tension and suspense of scenes and is accompanied by a sound-track designed to further intensify the experience. The child has a number of options including putting the book down, skipping over the scary paragraphs or pictures, reading more quickly or more slowly, peeking ahead at the ending to reassure him/herself that everything comes out OK, and so on. (Stevenson (1996) gives the example of Ramona in *Ramona the Brave* opening and closing her book in which there is a frightening picture.) Furthermore, the images in movies and TV are larger than book illustrations and have the added power of movement and sound (Cantor, 1998).

What is specifically frightening to children appears to depend on their developmental level. According to Cantor (Cantor, 1998), young children (aged two to seven) are frightened of both realistic and fantastic visual images of frightening things, of physical transformations of characters, of the depiction of a parent’s death, and of vividly presented natural disasters. Children ages 7–12 (more the age range of Harry Potter readers) find realistic threats

and dangers, violence, and child victims frightening. Children ages 13 and older are frightened by realistic physical harm, sexual assault, and threats from aliens and occult forces.

There is no debate over the fact that the Harry Potter series includes numerous and horrendous instances of violence. Because violence, physical harm, and child victims are particularly frightening to children in the Harry Potter reader age range, the question is whether exposure to such depictions is harmful. Although research does suggest a positive relationship between exposure to violent acts in visual forms of media (e.g., TV, movies) and engagement in aggressive behaviors and positive attitudes toward violence, there is a lack of empirical evidence to suggest any connection between reading violent material and similar negative outcomes (Kirsh, 2006). It is important to note, however, that there is likewise no research support for recent anecdotal claims (Jones, 2002) that exposure to violent forms of media is somehow cathartic and/or beneficial to children and adolescents (Kirsh, 2006). Although scholars focused on examining the effects of violent media on children have varied opinions about its effects, they appear aligned in their emphasis on the powerful role that parents and other significant adults have in influencing the manner in which exposure to violence is processed by children (Eron, 2001; Jones, 2002; Kirsh, 2006).

It has been suggested that “scary” books intended for children can help them learn mastery and control of fear (Stevenson, 1996). (Similar results have been found with some movies and TV programs (Cantor, 1998).) These books typically portray protagonists who learn or demonstrate mastery over the threat present in the book. These protagonists can serve as models for children about controlling fear. As Johnson (personal communication, April 26, 2001) observed about the utility of fantasy literature, the ability to deal with issues of fear through books is an example of an opportunity for children to confront real issues in the safe venue of a book.

Death and Grief

Particularly powerful examples of the portrayal of real issues in fantasy literature are the representations of death in the Harry Potter books. In a number of media interviews, Rowling has emphasized death as a central theme within the series (Grieg, 2006; Jones et al., 2000; Vieira, 2007). This has raised concerns for both parents and teachers. Is death—particularly the vivid portrayal of death—too sad, too frightening, or appropriate for children’s books? Gray (1999) noted that Rowling indicated that the books become “darker” as the series progresses, noting particularly that “there will be deaths” (p. 72). Rowling has argued that “if you are writing about evil, which I am, and if you are writing about someone who’s essentially a psychopath—you have a duty to show the real evil of taking human life” (BBC, 2001).

A critical issue that must be addressed is the necessity to separate the topic

of death from issues of violence and evil. It is potentially problematic that nearly all of the deaths in the Harry Potter series do occur as the result of violence/evil, in that death cannot and should not be equated with these concepts. Death is not “dark” in and of itself. The inappropriate representation in Western society of these ideas as consistently merged has and is likely to continue to perpetuate the mistaken notion that death is some kind of abnormality of our existence: an evil force. In reality, death is the inevitable end for all living beings. It is a natural stage in development. Society’s continuing tendency to link the experience of death with evil fosters difficulties such as death denial (Becker, 1973), the avoidance of dying individuals (Kalish, 1966; Sweeting and Gilhooly, 1991–1992), and the isolation of grieving persons (Corr, Nabe, and Corr, 2000; Kastenbaum, 1998).

With this criticism of Rowling’s representation of death duly noted, the fact that she does address issues of death, dying, and bereavement is to be commended. The growing body of literature focused on the childhood experience of death is virtually unanimous in its recommendation for straightforward discussions about death at an early age, prior to the occurrence of a death-loss crisis (DeSpelder and Strickland, 1995; Fitzgerald, 1992; Silverman, 2000). In fact, Grollman (1990) contended that “death education begins when life begins” (p. 3).

Despite this call for openness and candor, adults continue to struggle with addressing the topic of death with children. This hesitancy is likely due to a number of factors including a desire to protect children from the pain of grief, an underlying philosophy of “let kids be kids,” and the fear associated with the direct death-related questions children are likely to ask (Schaefer and Lyons, 1993; Silverman, 2000). The paradox that arises when death-focused conversations do not occur is that children are left to make sense of death from the wide array of examples they are exposed to on a daily basis through media, such as cartoons, video games, and TV news programs. In reality, children are receiving education about death from multiple sources, the question, according to Grollman (1990), is “whether the education they are receiving is helpful and reliable” (p. 1). When children are isolated from the truth of death, they are likely to create “a wild fantasy, much worse than the facts” (Schaefer and Lyons, 1993, p. 5).

It is highly unlikely that the Harry Potter books will be children’s first exposure to the idea of death. Children are quite aware of and frequently experience death and dying within their own lives (Corr, 1996; Schaefer and Lyons, 1993). In their overview of the major research findings on children’s understanding of death, Speece and Brent (1996) concluded that despite considerable variability among studies, most children have a mature understanding of death by the age of seven years. The notion of a mature understanding of death hinges upon the idea that the concept of death is most accurately represented as incorporating the distinct sub-components of universality, irreversibility, nonfunctionality, and causality.

It is possible that death due to magical causes could be confusing for some children. They are in the midst of learning about the abstract and realistic internal (e.g., loss of blood) and external (e.g., visible cut) causes of death (Corr, 1996). Children often struggle with “magical thinking” when faced with death experiences, believing that their thoughts or actions actually produced the death (Grollman, 1990; Schaefer and Lyons, 1993; Webb, 2005). Although there are no clear cases of reversible deaths in the Harry Potter series, there are some elements that may be confusing for children. A vast number of ghosts roam the halls of Hogwarts. Rowling makes attempts throughout the series to clarify this issue with numerous statements about the finality of death and most explicitly at the end of *Order of the Phoenix* when Harry talks with Nearly Headless Nick about ghosts being imprints of departed souls. Nick stresses that Sirius will not return and will not choose the path of being a ghost. The scenes late in *Deathly Hallows* where Harry initially appears to die and speaks with Dumbledore may be confusing for children as well. Rowling has Harry directly ask Dumbledore whether Dumbledore is dead (yes) and whether he himself is dead (no). As with the distinction between fantasy and reality, parents have a significant role to play in children’s understanding of the causes of death, and these books could serve as catalysts for such conversations.

Rowling’s representation of child and adolescent grief experiences are accurate and insightful. There are a number of deaths throughout the series; some that are most personal and central for Harry (e.g., his parents, Sirius, Dobby) and others that affect Harry, but also have a broader impact on many characters (e.g., Cedric, Dumbledore). Rowling’s own experience of parental death seems to have informed and strengthened her portrayal of Harry’s experience, including his continuing connection with his parents and his grieving process over time (Oltjenbruns, 2007). In addition, as Harry and his friends work through their grief, their experiences highlight many contemporary issues in the field of thanatology including uniquely adolescent aspects of grief, distinct manifestations of grief (e.g., instrumental vs. expressive grievers), and the importance of mourning rituals.

The first death losses the reader is confronted with are those of Harry’s parents. Lily and James Potter are murdered by the evil Lord Voldemort. These deaths occur when Harry is just an infant, and he has no actual memories of his parents. It is realistic that Harry grieves the deaths of his parents even though they died before he knew them. Although not directly addressed within the parental death literature, Davies (2001) found that siblings who experienced the death of a sibling prior to their own birth grieved in similar ways to those experiencing the death of a sibling subsequent to their own birth. Harry cannot grieve actual, physical relationships with his parents, but he can and does grieve the relationships he was never able to establish with them.