

INTRODUCTION



The Riddle House

An hour later, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in.¹

I first encountered Harry Potter when I served as an Anglican vicar on the outskirts of Nottingham – Robin Hood territory. On Wednesday afternoons I would visit a local school to help as a classroom assistant. One of my tasks was to hear children read. And – yes, you’ve guessed it – I suddenly found myself confronted with a stream of children reading snippets of the Potter series to me. At the time, I didn’t grasp the significance of this. I certainly had no idea that Joanne Rowling’s creation was to become the worldwide success it has, still less that I would end up writing about it. But I guess that’s when it all began.

As a theologian interested in contemporary culture, I’d like to think that my continuing interest has been driven by the need to understand what has become not just a literary and cultural trend but a real popular sensation. As the principal of an Anglican theological college, it would be impressive to say that my motivation has been to help future Church of England clergy engage in a meaningful and relevant way with society. As a grandfather, I might want to suggest that I am

anxious to know more about a craze that promises to be even bigger and more influential still in a few years' time, when my young grandchildren will be school age and reading books for themselves rather than merely following a story through pictures. As an intelligent and rational person, I could certainly argue that my reasons have had nothing whatsoever to do with the enormous shop window display designed to publicize *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the fourth book in the series. But while I suspect that all these factors have played their part, the main reason I bought and began reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and the rest of the series was probably nothing better or loftier than a sense of intrigue. I wanted to know, to satisfy my own curiosity, what all the mounting fuss was about. And once I began reading, like the children in that Nottinghamshire school, I found it hard to stop.

Aboard the Hogwarts Express

In the weeks and months that followed my trip to the bookshop, the hype and controversy surrounding Harry Potter grew and grew. The publication of *Goblet of Fire* had been something of a national event, at times more reminiscent of a carnival than a book launch. Great secrecy had shrouded the contents of the book, such that even the title was under wraps until the week before D-Day. Prepublication sales and orders were so high that *Goblet of Fire* was guaranteed the number one spot on the bestseller lists. Even so, the publishers, Bloomsbury, had still gone to the length of conjuring up a scarlet 'Hogwarts Express' steam locomotive for the four-day publicity tour from London's King's Cross Station all the way to Perth, chugging along an approximation of the real Hogwarts Express route. The American film studio Warner Brothers then announced that it would be transferring Harry Potter to the silver screen, starting with a big-budget

adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (the US title given to the first book). Every detail of the film's production, from cast and crew to sets and merchandise, was subsequently judged newsworthy, trickled or trumpeted to an extraordinarily enthusiastic public, young and old.

Meanwhile, having consumed *Philosopher's Stone*, I moved on to the second book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, before embarking on the slightly longer third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. If the hype and sales techniques surrounding Harry Potter often made me wince, the same can't be said of the books themselves. I found, to my surprise, that I was wholeheartedly enjoying Potterworld. Having written and taught about children's spirituality and faith development for well over a decade, my surprise had nothing to do with the fact that the Potter books are *children's* books. Unlike those bashful adults who were willing to pay extra for paperback copies of the first three books with serious, adult-looking covers, I had no problem being seen clutching a brightly coloured children's book, even in the hallowed halls of a university-level theological college. Instead, what surprised me was just *how much* I was enjoying Harry Potter, and how much I was finding to be of real note in the books, both as an academic and as a Christian minister.

Nevertheless, as my enjoyment and appreciation of Potterworld was growing, storm clouds were brewing elsewhere. As a Christian I wasn't by any means alone in enjoying Harry Potter – tens of thousands of sincere Christian mums and dads were, at the same time, finding themselves actively looking forward to reading their children the next instalment of Harry's magical adventures as a bedtime story (sometimes whether their children wanted it or not!). Still, opposition from some Christians was mounting, both in the UK and America, and also in Australia where Pottermania was just beginning to break out. The Bible, they argued, denounces witchcraft and the occult, and since Harry Potter is all

about witchcraft and the occult, Harry Potter must be denounced and the books targeted for banning, burning or (at the very least) labelling with warning stickers. As a result, much to my embarrassment, I found that as a Christian I was increasingly being expected by friends and certain sections of the media to be actively opposed to Harry Potter. I have to say that I could not, in all good conscience, comply with this demand. Not only was I enjoying the books too much but I felt (and continue to feel) that it would be scandalous to write them off simply because of a surface association with witchcraft, when they contain so much of value – both insights and ideas that can serve as a basis for debate and discussion.

Potter fever shows absolutely no signs of dissipating – at the time of writing the final three books are still to be penned by J. K. Rowling, the first film is due for release and the anticipation surrounding them all is palpable. What is more, secondary literature on Harry Potter has already begun to surface – both hagiographic or analytical books like this one, and what we must hope will be the first of many companion works by Rowling herself (*Quidditch Through the Ages*, written under the penname Kennilworthy Whisp, and *Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them*, written under the name Newt Scamander, both created and sold in aid of the charity Comic Relief). Harry Potter has all the makings of a classic and there's every reason to believe that Rowling's creation will be as read and loved in 50 years' time as C. S. Lewis' Narnia books (currently enjoying their golden jubilee) are now.

Cracking the Code

This book is not written in praise of Harry Potter, though it does indeed contain a great deal of praise. Nor is it written in reproach, though it contains a little bit of that as well. I write as a theologian, a Christian, a pastor and a grandparent, and find myself engaging with Potterworld on all four levels.

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The books, not to mention the extraordinary and at times obsessive following they've attracted, offer us a snapshot of contemporary society, good and bad. For me, this is their most valuable attribute, and my principal reason for writing. Like all good stories, the Potter books not only keep us thoroughly entertained, they also tell us a considerable amount about ourselves – our characters, our relationships, our priorities, our communities and even our spirituality.

Of course, explaining all this isn't straightforward. Unlike Lewis' world of Narnia, Potterworld isn't allegorical. There's no simple equivalence between Lord Voldemort and the devil, for instance, as there is between Aslan and Christ in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The symbols, imagery and plots used in the Potter books, and the issues dealt with, are more complex than those in Lewis' ground-breaking work. They present us, to some extent, with what Churchill (speaking about Russian foreign policy at the outbreak of World War II) called 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'.

The conclusions I've reached, therefore, are in many ways subjective ones. They are what have struck me personally during the course of my reading. I certainly don't imagine, for example, that every Potter reader will have seen in the wizard gaol Azkaban a reflection of the Christian idea of hell, or that Joanne Rowling had hell in mind when she created Azkaban. (As we'll see, she actually had something else in mind.) Nevertheless, Azkaban *does* provide us with a window into hell – a way of exploring the bundle of themes that have traditionally been grouped around the doctrine, as well as the various secular equivalents that have come to take the place of hell in what is now increasingly a post-Christian society. In Azkaban, as in so much else in Potterworld, we can see not just the vestiges of a largely disappearing Christian world-view but also some of the new ways people have found for expressing and exploring the kind of key spiritual issues (justice, judgement and the debilitating effects of evil) that, a

A Charmed Life

century ago, were clustered around established views of heaven, hell and eternal damnation.

A last word: in interviews, articles and reviews, the majority of writers and journalists – as well as Joanne Rowling herself – have been very careful to avoid giving away too much of the plot of the books so as not to spoil the enjoyment of first-time readers. Even when it became clear that a favourable character would die in the fourth book, for example, considerable care was taken *not* to say which one. In a book like this, however, which aims to discuss the Potter series in some detail, that kind of circumlocution is simply impossible. I apologise in advance if this hinders your subsequent enjoyment of the novels, like knowing the identity of the murderer before embarking on a ‘whodunnit’ story. All I can say by way of defence is that, since the books hold up extremely well to a second reading – as I myself and literally millions of children will testify – I won’t have spoiled *all* your enjoyment by giving things away.