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## Is There a Text in This Advertising Campaign?: Literature, Marketing, and Harry Potter

**Philip Nel**

In July 2000, *The Boston Globe's* Dan Wasserman drew a cartoon that predicted what would become the most prominent threat to Harry Potter's literary legacy. Several months ahead of the beginning of the Harry Potter marketing bonanza and more than a year before the release of the first Potter film, Wasserman's cartoon shows two children walking down a city street. One child holds a Harry Potter novel; and everywhere they look, advertisements announce all variety of Harry merchandise. A shop's sign offers "Harry Wares." A restaurant offers "Potter Pies," "Wizard Fries," and "Happy Harry Meals!" An eyeglass store proclaims "Just In—Harry Frames." A poster (located, perhaps appropriately, on a trash can) invites them to "Visit the Harry Potter Theme Park." And a store's display window reminds passers-by that "We carry a full line of Harry schlock!", including robes, wands, and "muggle mugs." One child says to the other, "I can already see how it ends—the dark forces win." (Wasserman). In July 2000, such a cartoon was a satirical comment on the culture industry. Less than two years later, it became merely descriptive.

The aggressive marketing predicted by this cartoon also describes a critical problem: the novels and the hype become intertwined, resulting in analyses that fail to take into account the full complexity of either. Because Harry Potter is both a marketing phenomenon and a literary phenomenon, critical conflation of the two does not really advance the understanding of the marketing apparatus or the books themselves. Author J. K. Rowling herself appears to be aware of this problem, as June Cummins has observed. Citing Rowling's charitable work and critical comments about Potter merchandise, Cummins notes that the Harry

Potter author “seems determined to separate the books from the aggressive marketing pursued by Scholastic, Warner Brothers, and Mattel.” Cummins then asks, “But is her goal realistic? I say it is not” (20). I, however, would argue that it is both realistic and necessary to separate the books from the marketing. First of all, conflating the books with the marketing fails to produce a sufficiently sophisticated analysis of the latter. Second, such critical conflation leads some critics to overlook the novels’ considerable literary achievements.

Consider the marketing side of the question first. Jack Zipes, Andrew Blake, and John Pennington correctly underscore Harry Potter as a contemporary capitalist phenomenon. In his essay “From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the Aesthetic Trouble with Harry Potter,” John Pennington provides the most succinct version of this idea: “So what are the Potter books really about, then? Well, monetary success primarily” (92). Pennington has a point. It is difficult to talk about Harry Potter and to ignore the marketing. You can see the movies, you can buy the movies, you can buy Legos, action figures, stickers, notebooks, a card game, a board game, puzzles, address books, calendars, Band Aids®, toothbrushes, toothpaste, t-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, trading cards, greeting cards, Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans, a Nimbus 2000 broomstick, a Harry Potter wallet, wizarding-world money, and even piña colada-flavored “Dementor’s Kisses.” Much of the Harry Potter merchandising must make even the most ardent fan cringe just a little bit. And it is difficult to applaud the ways in which these Potter spin-off products encourage consumption for its own sake.

However, to say that the books are only about monetary success ignores the late capitalist conditions of their production. Zipes and Blake offer more nuanced versions of Pennington’s claim. As the reason for Harry Potter’s success, Zipes cites:

the conditions under which literature for the young have been transformed through institutional corporate conglomerates controlling the mass media, and market demands. Phenomena such as the Harry Potter books are driven by commodity consumption that at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste. Today the experience of reading for the young is mediated through the mass media and marketing so that the pleasure and meaning of a book will often be prescribed or dictated by convention. (172)

Judiciously placing his comments in the context of the changing children’s literature industry, Zipes points to “institutional corporate conglomerates,” and to the role of marketing in selling children’s literature. As Zipes explains in *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, the children’s-

book industry has grown more interested in creating marketable products than in nurturing good-quality books (51–2, 59). Andrew Blake's *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter*, a Potter-themed critique of Tony Blair's New Labour party, offers a version of this argument in the context of how Harry Potter has boosted the financial fortunes of Rowling's British publisher, Bloomsbury. According to Blake, "Capitalism is, as the truism has it, global; certainly, the much-translated Harry has repeated his Bloomsbury trick for child-consumer capitalism the world over" (88). As Gary Cross's *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*, Stephen Kline's *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*, and Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* have all pointed out, there has been a proliferation of child-targeted marketing over the last few decades. In the US, this phenomenon began to flourish in the 1980s, inspired by the deregulation of children's television (Cross 198; Kline 139, 278, 317; Kinder 40). Though these marketing practices began on TV, characters from children's books have with increasing regularity also been transformed into corporate pitchmen, selling all manner of "tie-in" products. Harry Potter is but part of a trend: Curious George appears in advertisements for Altoids (in the ad, the phrase "The Curiously Strong Mints" puns on George's name), and Winnie-the-Pooh sells his own brand of cereal, "Hunny B's." Following the 2000 release of Ron Howard's *Grinch* film, even the Grinch began selling credit cards, candy, and cereal; Dr. Seuss's original *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (1957) actively criticized commercial exploitation of the holiday. When the Grinch can change from anticonsumerist grouch to enthusiastic salesman, we know that Harry Potter is not alone. Harry Potter, then, may be seen as a very prominent example of current business practices in children's literature and culture.

However, it seems to me that citing mass media-controlled "institutional corporate conglomerates" as the primary reason for Harry Potter's success has the unfortunate effect of limiting one's analysis. If we share Zipes's concerns about corporate influences on children's literature (and I do), then we might find a critically productive approach to this problem where business and the entertainment industry meet: intellectual property law. Not coincidentally, the oldest case currently on file in Los Angeles' Superior Court involves intellectual property and children's literature: The heirs of A. A. Milne's literary agent are suing the Walt Disney Company for cheating them on the royalties for Winnie-the-Pooh merchandise (Toobin 58).

In the background of Wasserman's cartoon (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), a bus's billboard advertises "Harry Potter: The Movie." While Scholastic and Bloomsbury did promote the Harry Potter books in the US and the UK, respectively, the proliferation of mass-marketing Harry Potter tie-ins begins with Warner Brothers. Warner Brothers relies upon merchandising to help make back some of the extraordinary expense of making a film. If Rowling had not agreed to allow her characters to be merchandised, then the Harry Potter films might not have been made at all. Given Chris Columbus's rather tepid film versions of the first two books and all of their associated products, an absence of Harry Potter films may have been a good thing. However, since three films have been released and more are on the way, Warner Brothers' role must be addressed.

Warner Brothers markets such a wide variety of Harry Potter products because the American entertainment industry relies more on trademark law than on copyright law. It does so because it regards trademark as stronger than copyright, and the difference between these laws helps to explain why. Copyright law protects authors and artists, but trademark law protects products and the marks attached to those products. So, copyright protects the book *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, but trademark protects a Ron Weasley action figure or a Hedwig plush toy. Why, then, is trademark stronger? Two reasons. The first is that trademarks last as long as they remain in use, although they need to be renewed every ten years if granted on or after November 16, 1989 (as the Potter trademarks would have been). In contrast, copyright lasts for a fixed period of time. As per the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998, copyright on works published after 1978 now lasts for the author's life plus seventy years (US Copyright Office). The catch here is that trademarks *must* be attached to a product: in other words, for Rowling's work to gain protection under trademark law, she must enter into licensing agreements, allowing others to make spin-off products like hats, notebooks, toothpaste, and so on.

A second reason why trademark is regarded as stronger than copyright can be traced to a landmark case in entertainment law. As Jane M. Gaines points out in her *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law*, since the 1954 Sam Spade case entertainment lawyers have favored trademark over copyright. The case started because Warner Brothers owned the movie rights to Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, but Hammett wanted to make sequels using Sam Spade, the novel's main character. The Sam Spade case—officially known as *Warner Brothers, Inc. v. Columbia Broadcasting Co.*—"turned on whether Warner Broth-

ers' motion picture rights to the novel *The Maltese Falcon* included the right to enjoin author Dashiell Hammett from using the character in sequels" (Gaines 211). The court allowed Hammett "to continue to use his literary creation," but it also decided that characters were "mobile pieces in relation to the *work*, the wholeness and totality of which is crucial to copyright law" (211). The result was that the "Characters—the 'mere chessmen,' devices, or vehicles for telling the story—were now seen as less protectable as authorial creations than the work itself" (211–12). Where copyright law failed to protect the characters or title of a work, trademark, "with its emphasis on source, origin, and sponsorship, not authorship, protected both title and character" (212). To maintain protection under trademark law, one needs to enter into licensing agreements, permitting the creation of spin-off products.

These spin-off products—such as the Harry Potter paraphernalia—are symptoms of a legal system that has, in effect, reversed trademark law. As Gaines explains, trademark law is supposed to protect the public, guaranteeing that "the buyer could expect, from the source behind the goods, the same values and qualities received with the last purchase" (211). However, "the inversion of this principle in American common law" means that "the trademark comes to ensure *not* that the public is protected against fraud but that the merchant-owner of the mark is protected against infringers" (211). This "inversion" of trademark law leads to the increased production of mass-marketed Harry Potter merchandise. So, while one might reasonably be skeptical of Harry Potter as a manifestation of corporate marketing, Harry is an effect and not the cause.

Like the characters of Dr. Seuss, A. A. Milne, and H. A. and Margret Rey, Harry Potter has become a symptom of a legal system designed to benefit capitalism more than moral or artistic values. One practical consequence of this fact is that, should we wish to diminish the power that corporations have over children's literature, then the law is one place to begin. As I argue in *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*, were the United States to uphold the provisions of the Berne Convention, then we would remove the need for artists to seek legal protection under trademark law.<sup>1</sup> The Berne Convention recognizes the moral rights of the author over his or her creation, *even after* the copyright has been transferred to another party. For this reason, the copyright page of Bloomsbury's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*—and, indeed, the copyright page of virtually every book published in Britain—includes the following sentence: "The moral right of the author has been asserted." No such sentence appears on the copyright page of the American edition, *Harry Potter and*

*the Sorcerer's Stone*, nor does it appear on any other book published in the United States, because in the United States authors do not have moral rights. If authors and artists did have moral rights in the US, then intellectual property law would not rely so heavily upon trademark law. Another legal solution would be to change trademark law so that a trademark need not be constantly in use in order to remain enforceable. As Gaines reports, "American trademark law gives an emphasis to 'use' that it doesn't have in other countries, where, for instance, it is not necessary to demonstrate 'use' [. . .] *before* registering a mark. Whereas in other countries, first registration guarantees the monopoly [. . .] in the U.S., 'use' stakes out the owner's claim" (223). In other words, if US trademark law operated more like British trademark law, then Warner Brothers would need only *register* these Harry Potter items; it need not actually produce them.

While Rowling has followed standard entertainment law in permitting such merchandising, she has also taken the less common step of placing some restrictions on how her characters can be used. Though The Coca-Cola Company has a licensing agreement with Warner Brothers, Rowling has refused to allow her characters to be shown drinking Coca-Cola, so Coke instead agreed to sponsor a reading initiative. In cooperation with Reading is Fundamental, Coca-Cola underwrites "Live the Magic," providing "10,000 Classroom Library Collections for at-risk schools," and "Ingenuity Grants to help explore innovative ways to encourage children to embrace reading" ("Reading Is Fundamental"). In a *60 Minutes* TV interview prior to the production of the Potter toys, Rowling said, "I can only say now to all of the parents out there that if the action figures are horrible, just tell the kids: don't buy them!" She paused, then added, "Sorry, Warner's" (Stahl). In response to Rowling's concern that action figures may promote violent play, Mattel agreed to call its action figures "collectible characters" (Barnes). Changing a name from "action figure" to "collectible character" may not diminish the product's capacity to promote violent play. Similarly, Rowling's publicly expressed skepticism may not dissuade people from buying these products. However, she deserves credit for her attempts to control a marketing apparatus perpetuated by the American legal system.

Indeed, given that changing the American legal system is a rather tall order, another of Rowling's responses—focusing on how the money is used—may be a more effective approach to what we might call late capitalist children's culture. While Seuss, Milne, and the Reys are no longer among the living, Rowling is very much alive and actively involved in managing the profits generated by Harry Potter, donating

large amounts to charitable causes. So it seems a bit of an oversimplification to say, as John Pennington does, that Harry Potter is only about “monetary success” or, “If Rowling is out simply to make a buck, then she has succeeded spectacularly” (92). Capitalism is amoral, but what people do with their capital does not have to be. Rowling’s depiction of the Dursleys, the Malfoys, and Harry exemplifies precisely this point: all three have sufficient money to live comfortably, but the Dursleys and Malfoys like to lord their socioeconomic status over other people. The Dursleys go out into their front yard “to admire Uncle Vernon’s new company car (in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too)” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 8); similarly, Lucius and Draco Malfoy never tire of displaying their wealth to the Weasley family. In contrast, Harry uses his money to buy treats for his friends and gives his Triwizard Tournament winnings to Fred and George Weasley, making them promise that they will use some of the money to buy Ron new dress robes, and use the rest as an investment in their joke shop (*Chamber of Secrets* 48; *Goblet of Fire* 635–6). As Karin E. Westman observes in “Specters of Thatcherism: Contemporary British Culture in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series,” “An outsider to the Dursleys’ materialism, Harry comes to embody all that his relations are not: he is unselfish, compassionate and good-hearted” (310). Similarly, what Rowling has done with her money shows her to be an ally of Harry, not of the Dursleys or the Malfoys.

While Harry Potter functions as an agent of multinational capitalism, Rowling does her best not to. In September 2000, she donated £500,000 to Britain’s National Council for One Parent Families, and has taken on the role of being the organization’s ambassador, giving speeches on its behalf and even writing a foreword to the organization’s *Families Just Like Us: the One Parent Families good book guide*. In 2001, she wrote *Quidditch Through The Ages* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*—the two “Harry Potter Schoolbooks”—and donated all proceeds to Comic Relief UK, raising £15.6 million for fighting poverty and social injustice in Britain, Africa, and around the world (“Harry’s Books”). She also has helped to raise thousands of pounds for Maggie’s Centre, an Edinburgh organization that provides information and support for people suffering from cancer (McGinty, “The legacy of Harry”). In 1990, at the age of forty-five, Rowling’s mother died from multiple sclerosis. In addition to supplying Harry’s feelings of loss for his own parents, her mother’s death motivated Rowling to donate to the MS Society of Scotland in 2001, and to underwrite “a senior fellowship in MS research at Aberdeen University” (McGinty). For *MS Matters*, the magazine of



the UK MS Society, Rowling wrote an autobiographical article titled "I Miss My Mother So Much," in which she described her mother's decline and called for more government funding for both MS research and drugs that help MS patients live longer and healthier lives. That article was published in 2001; thanks to her advocacy, by 2002 Britain's National Health Service began prescribing disease-modifying drugs for people with MS (Reeves). So, while "commodity consumption" and a mass media controlled by "corporate conglomerates" do fuel the success of Harry Potter, the market forces that motivate the sales of Potter and his merchandise are *not* the same forces that motivate Rowling.

Another way in which Rowling has responded to the marketplace has been to include her own critique of conspicuous consumption within the Harry Potter books themselves. As Westman notes, when Harry is tempted to buy a Firebolt, his response offers a subtle critique of consumption for its own sake (311). Although he needs "to exercise a lot of control not to spend the whole lot [of his money] at once," Harry manages to be thrifty, recognizing that "he had five years to go at Hogwarts" and would need his money for school supplies (*Prisoner* 43). As he says to himself, "what was the point in emptying his Gringotts vault for the Firebolt, when he had a very good broom already?" (44). As Westman observes, "While the wizarding world offers a fantasy of consumer purchases, Harry remains wary of the conspicuous and selfish consumption embodied by the Dursleys he has left behind" (311).

While Rowling is by no means critical of all such commerce (she presents the enterprising Weasley twins' joke shop with an affectionate wink), she does remind readers that the pleasures of mass-produced tie-in products are often short-lived. The rapid decline of the green rosettes that Ron, Harry, and Seamus buy is a case in point. When it is new, a rosette keeps "squeaking" the names of the Irish National Quidditch Team: "*Troy—Mullet—Moran!*" (*Goblet* 97). However, the magic of a rosette soon wears off, and it becomes just an annoying little gimmick. When they meet Seamus on the Hogwarts Express a week after the Quidditch World Cup, he is "still wearing his Ireland rosette." However, "[s]ome of its magic seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking '*Troy! Mullet! Moran!*', but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way" (149). Rowling's (fictional) rosette seems a gentle parody of some of the (real) plastic gadgets spawned by the Harry Potter merchandising industry. If we listen closely, her rosette does not squeak Quidditch players' names; rather, it whispers "caveat emptor."

So, although Harry Potter is a capitalist juggernaut promoted by corporate conglomerates, it is also too complex to be written off as *only*

that. If we take into account the legal context of the merchandising, the charitable uses to which Rowling directs some of the profits, and the anticonsumerist messages in the books themselves, the Harry Potter phenomenon cannot be seen only as an example of corporations' latest attempts to sell stuff to children. Also, it is easy to forget that the film deals came well before Harry Potter became an international phenomenon and Rowling one of the wealthiest women in Britain. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published in the UK in June 1997; by July, Hollywood studios had already approached her with the idea of making a film out of her novel (Glaister). By 7 October 1998, reports from the Frankfurt Book Fair indicated that "Warner Brothers had paid 'a heavy seven-figure' sum to acquire the two books for at least one major film" (Alberge). At the time, the first Potter novel had sold 70,000 copies in the UK, the second novel had been released—promptly going to the top of the bestseller charts in the UK—and the first book had just been published in America. In December, the book began its ascent up the *New York Times*' list of hardcover bestsellers. In 1999, Harry Potter and Rowling would become superstars. However, when she began entertaining offers, the first book had only just been published, and when she sold the film rights, Rowling was only a few years away from being on public assistance. When considered in this context, her decision to agree to these marketing arrangements seems a very practical, responsible choice; after several years of scraping by, she found financial security for herself and her daughter.

It may also be worth mentioning here that, while it is now hard to imagine Harry without the hype, the books caught on well before the hype began. The marketing didn't really take over until 1999; the products didn't appear until the latter half of 2000; and the first movie (accompanied by its many tie-in products) didn't appear until November 2001. At first, the novel caught on because of strong reviews of two kinds: those in newspapers, and reviews by children themselves. By word of mouth, children told each other about Harry simply because they thought it was a good book. Even though it certainly contributes to the books' current popularity, hype alone is not a sufficient explanation for Harry's appeals.

Turning, then, to the second half of my argument, approaching the Harry Potter books solely as a contemporary capitalist phenomenon tends to cause even scholars of children's literature to overlook the literary merits of Rowling's series. As Lana A. Whited aptly observes, "the cloud of commercialism encircling the books" leads us away from "the serious discussion we ought to be having about the literary merits of

J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels" (12). For example, reasoning that "For anything to become a phenomenon in Western society, it must become *conventional*," Zipes claims that the novels "are easy and delightful to read, carefully manicured and packaged, and they sell extraordinarily well precisely because they are so cute and ordinary" (175). Making a similar argument, Philip Hensher claims that the Harry Potter "books virtually read themselves," but warned that we "shouldn't confuse the success of the pedagogic tool with literary merit" ("crowd-pleaser"). Echoing Hensher's remarks, Zipes suggests that the "Harry Potter books [. . .] will help children become functionally literate, for they are part of the eternal return to the same and [. . .] part of the success and process by which we homogenize our children" (188). Pennington is more direct: "Rowling [. . .] seems to purchase her marvelous assorted creatures from the Sears catalogue of fantasy clichés" (82). Or, as Suman Gupta puts it, the novels "often refer back to a shimmering vista of folklore, fairy tale and myth drawn indiscriminately from a range of sources and contexts" (97).

The Harry Potter novels represent the creative synthesis of a lifetime of reading, and to evaluate their literary qualities, we might consider how Rowling uses all that she has read. Asked about her influences, Rowling replied, "It is always hard to tell what your influences are. Everything you've seen, experienced, read, or heard gets broken down like compost in your head and then your own ideas grow out of that compost" ("Magic, Mystery, and Mayhem"). One key ingredient in this compost is Jane Austen, whom Rowling frequently mentions as her favorite writer, naming *Emma* (1815) as her favorite novel. Rowling has stated, "I reread Austen's novels in rotation," adding that she "must have read *Emma* at least twenty times" ("Let me tell you a story"). Rowling even names Mrs. Norris, Filch's snooping cat, after Fanny's nasty, bossy aunt in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814).

There are two stylistic tendencies that Rowling may have learned from Austen, the first of which is the art of satire. Doubtless, Roald Dahl influences Rowling's satirical view of the Dursleys—monstrous caricatures of bourgeois parents, who bring to mind Dahl's Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, the parents of Matilda. But Rowling gives most of her satirized characters a certain nuance usually absent from Roald Dahl's. Like James Henry Trotter's Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker in Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), the Malfoys and other Death Eaters seem irredeemably bad. However, as Sirius tells Harry in *Order of the Phoenix*, "Yes, but the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters" (271). Rowling's ability to provide some sympathy even to

characters she is mocking brings her type of satire closer to Austen's than to Dahl's—or at least places it somewhere between the two. In *Emma*, Austen gently pokes fun at Miss Bates, a gossipy character who “was a great talker upon little matters” (18), especially when she prattles on during Emma's visit to her apartment. However, Austen takes care to remind the reader that, while Miss Bates may be no great intellect, she is kind: after Emma makes a joke at Miss Bates's expense, she defends herself by saying that “what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her” (339). Knightley concurs, but lectures her for being “unfeeling”: Miss Bates “is poor,” he reminds Emma, and “[h]er situation should secure your compassion” (339).

A comparable character in Rowling's novels is the accident-prone Neville Longbottom. Though he at first appears to be a figure of fun—losing his toad, bungling his potions, constantly forgetting the password to Gryffindor tower—Rowling never allows him to be *only* a joke. As Harry learns in *Goblet of Fire* and his friends learn in *Order of the Phoenix*, a group of Death Eaters tortured Neville's parents into insanity. On holidays, when Neville visits them at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, his parents do not recognize him (*Goblet* 523). After learning this sad fact of his roommate's history, Harry looks over at the sleeping Neville, and “imagined how it must feel to have parents still living, but unable to recognize you. He often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Neville's snores, he thought that Neville deserved it more than he did” (527). Given details like these, Nicholas Tucker's claim that the Harry Potter characters “are on the whole two-dimensional, picked out by particular physical features plus one overriding personality trait” (228) falls a bit short of the mark. Rowling does have two-dimensional secondary characters, but her central characters are three-dimensional, and their complexities gives Rowling's satire a compassion that Dahl's novels often lack.

The second skill Rowling has learned from Austen is the subtle art of narrative misdirection. Rowling calls *Emma* “the most skillfully managed mystery I've ever read,” adding: “I must have read *Emma* at least twenty times, wondering every time how I could have missed the glaringly obvious fact that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax were engaged all along” (“Let me tell you a story”). To create their mysteries, Rowling and Austen give us third-person narratives that are closely aligned with a first-person perspective—a technique known as free indirect discourse. Although a third-person narrative may feel more objective or omniscient than a first-person account, a third-person narrative aligned with Harry's or Emma's point of view is actually rather

limited. This is how Rowling and Austen trick us: readers primarily see the world through the eyes of Emma and Harry and so are more willing to identify with them, missing their mistakes. For example, during the Box Hill picnic in *Emma*, Emma is so busy flirting with Frank Churchill that the reader may fail to notice Jane Fairfax's strong reactions to their behavior (337–8). In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, at the opening banquet, "It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes—and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead" (94). Because the third-person narrator is here aligned with Harry, we think that Snape (the hook-nosed teacher) is causing the pain in Harry's forehead. But he's not. This narrative method is subtle and effective. As Rowling says of Austen's novels, "You're drawn into the story, [. . .] and you know you've seen something great in action," but "you can't see the pyrotechnics; there's nothing flashy" ("J. K. Rowling's Bookshelf").

Those who find fault with Rowling's prose style often invoke the boarding-school novel. While Anthony Holden's description of Harry Potter as "Billy Bunter on broomsticks" seems a bit unfair, it's true that Rowling owes a debt to the English school story (1). Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; or Little Female Academy* (1749) is the first boarding-school story, and, as David K. Steege notes in his "Harry Potter, Tom Brown, and the British School Story: Lost in Transit?" (2002), some "ninety other school stories [. . .] appeared between that in 1749 and" Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* in 1857, but Hughes's is the most famous and the most influential (140). Hogwarts under Albus Dumbledore, like Rugby under Thomas Arnold and the Little Female Academy under Mrs. Teachum, seeks to provide its students not only with knowledge but with a moral education as well. What the characters learn inside the classroom is as important as what they learn outside of it. Just as it takes courage for Tom Brown to stand up to Flashman, so Harry shows his moral fiber by standing up to Draco Malfoy; as Tom excels at football and cricket, so Harry excels at Quidditch. However, beyond these generic similarities, the comparisons falter—Rowling's co-educational Hogwarts lacks the "muscular Christianity" of Thomas Hughes's all-boys Rugby or the relentless Evangelical moralizing of Fielding's Little Female Academy. Nor does Harry Potter replicate some of the racist ideologies of some boarding school books, such as Frank Richards's Billy Bunter tales. As Blake points out, Harry's classmate "Parvati Patil is an ordinary minor character, not a comic caricature like Hurree Ramset Jam Singh in the Billy Bunter stories, who is there to be laughed at because of his eccentric use of English" (107).

Rowling infuses the school story with a contemporary social conscience. Tom Brown has to learn to be a good Christian and a defender of the weak, not only because he must set an example to the younger students but because he must be prepared to become a future leader of Britain. As Hughes tells his readers, “The object of schools is not to ram Latin and Greek into boys, but to make them good boys, good future citizens” (63). Later he explains, “For boys follow one another in herds like sheep, for good or evil,” and “it is the leading boys for the time being who give the tone to all the rest, and make the School either a noble institution for the training of Christian Englishmen, or a place where a young boy will get more evil than he would if he were turned out to make his way in London streets, or anything between these two extremes” (168). Though Harry does defend those weaker than himself and is developing into a leader, a critique of racism is the central moral lesson of the Harry Potter novels. Voldemort and his followers believe in the superiority of “pureblood” wizards—that is, he and they think that wizards descended only from other witches and wizards are superior to those who have Muggles (nonmagical people) in their ancestry. Voldemort’s is an argument for racial purity. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when Draco Malfoy calls Hermione a “filthy little Mudblood,” all of the good characters react with shock and outrage (86). They can’t believe he would say something like that because, in the Potter universe, calling someone a “Mudblood” is the equivalent of using a racial slur. As Westman says, Malfoy’s “taunt has the cultural shock of the word ‘nigger’ in contemporary America” (314). In giving Muggle ancestry to Voldemort, the lead proponent of purebloods, Rowling deftly underscores the point that racism is an ideological condition. As Westman writes, “‘Pure blood,’ then, is a construction of identity based on the body, but upon a body that reveals the fissures such an ideology strives to occlude. To be ‘pure blood’ means not to be of pure blood, per se, but to subscribe to a particular set of ideological beliefs based on differences in social class and its concomitant power” (314–5). The good characters—Harry, Hermione, Ron, Dumbledore, for example—fight racism and bigotry in their battle against Voldemort and his followers. In showing her readers how racism works and how to fight it, Rowling provides some practical advice. Tucker’s claim that “contemporary social issues do not exist in Potter books” is simply not true. The Harry Potter books are antiracist novels. Promoting peace and understanding between people from different backgrounds is not only the goal of the Triwizard Tournament; it’s Rowling’s goal, because she trusts that her readers can deal with serious subjects.

In creating characters who are destined to tackle tough problems, the Harry Potter series falls firmly in the fantasy tradition. Like Taran in Lloyd Alexander's chronicles of Prydain (1964–68), Will Stanton in Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series (1965–77), Lyra Silvertongue in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000), and Buffy Summers in Joss Whedon's TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), Harry is the apparently ordinary child who turns out to be special. These are ordinary children, but also they are the chosen ones: Will has to defeat the Dark, Lyra has to fight for free will, Harry has to defeat Voldemort, Buffy has to find and destroy vampires—these protagonists all have to save the world. A young person who discovers his or her powers and grand purpose is a common feature of the fantasy novel and, very likely, a secret wish of many children. As Rowling has said, “I was aware when I was writing that this was a very common fantasy for children: ‘These boring people cannot be my parents. They just can’t be. I’m so much more special than that’” (Phillips). She has a point. While not all readers of Harry Potter may want to save the world, some may have wished for a life that is more than ordinary. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Taran, Will, Lyra, and Buffy are all special. Through the stories of fantasy heroes like these, readers may also experience the pleasures and perils of an extraordinary life.

Despite the novels' obvious investment in tropes of fantasy, Pennington's “From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the Aesthetic Trouble with Harry Potter” insists that Harry Potter is “fundamentally failed fantasy” because Rowling “violates the integral rules of the fantasy game, never capturing the integrity of the very fantasy tradition that she is mining for riches” (79). In arguing that Rowling does not create sufficiently original fantasy, Pennington is offering a more fully developed version of A. S. Byatt's claim that Rowling creates only “secondary secondary worlds” (A13) and of Harold Bloom's assertion that the first Potter novel lacks “an authentic imaginative vision” (A26). Pennington also echoes a review of *The Lord of the Rings* in which Edmund Wilson claimed that an “impotence of imagination seems to me to sap the whole story” (314). Of Quidditch, for example, Pennington says, “the game is certainly not fabulous or inventive, signaling Rowling's inability to depart from consensus reality and change givens so she can fabricate an original fantasy world” (80). Although Pennington's conclusion acknowledges that claims about aesthetics will always be somewhat subjective, the rest of his essay runs into a range of logical inconsistencies that undermine its thesis. His article both claims that Rowling is “mining” the “fantasy tradition [. . .] for riches” (79) and that Rowling “seems unaware that

there is a history of children's fantasy literature" (87). In addition to being self-contradictory, these are unsupported assertions about what Rowling thinks or feels. As Pennington sees it, the core of Rowling's "aesthetic troubles" is her tendency to read books other than fantasy novels. Rowling, Pennington argues, "is not necessarily true to the Tolkien fuzzy set that seems to be at the heart of her books" (82)—another unsupported assertion—and, furthermore, her "fuzzy set of influence constantly shifts" (82). If we are to take Rowling at her word, Tolkien has not been a major influence on her and therefore cannot be "at the heart of her books." Asked in an on-line chat, "What do you think about Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*?" Rowling replied, "I read it when I was about twenty, I think, and I liked it a lot although I've never re-read it, which is revealing (usually with my favourite books I re-read them endlessly)." As an afterthought, Rowling does add, "but he created a whole mythology, an incredible achievement," but her disinterest in rereading Tolkien suggests that other influences may have a greater hold on her imagination ("JK Rowling Transcript"). Rowling's wide array of influences, Pennington explains, confirms that she "does not have a firm footing in fantasy; her Potter creations are never certain about fantasy content, structure, theme, and how these components are essential to the reader's response to the fantastic" (82–3). These under-defined terms, logical contradictions, and a tendency to defend its points by deferring to "the reader" (always a synonym for "Pennington") render the quality of the essay's analysis mixed, at best. As Suman Gupta notes in his *Re-Reading Harry Potter*, "what I think Pennington says is, on close scrutiny, not coherent (it is difficult to understand Pennington's aesthetics)" (65).

While readers with so specific a set of aesthetic requirements may be troubled by Rowling's willingness to draw from a range of sources, other readers may find it more fruitful to at least try to meet the Harry Potter novels on their own terms. Rather than charge Rowling with writing books insufficiently like Tolkien's, we might look elsewhere to find her roots in fantasy. When asked to name her favorite authors as a child, Rowling frequently cites E. Nesbit, even going so far as to claim, "I identify with E. Nesbit more than any other writer" ("Let me tell you a story"). In E. Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), the children meet their phoenix on Guy Fawkes Day. It is no coincidence that Dumbledore's phoenix is named Fawkes; just as Rowling names Filch's cat Mrs. Norris as a tribute to Austen, naming Dumbledore's phoenix Fawkes is her tribute to E. Nesbit, author of the classic fantasy novels she read as a child. Rowling identifies with E. Nesbit, adding that one thing



Nesbit said has struck a chord with her: “By some lucky chance, I remember exactly how I felt and thought at 11” (“J. K. Rowling’s Bookshelf” 155). As in E. Nesbit’s novels, Rowling’s Potter series offers a matter-of-fact fantasy; secondary and primary worlds exist side by side, frequently overlapping with one another. Just as Platform 9-3/4 stands between the mundane Platforms 9 and 10, a sand-fairy might live in the back yard (as it does in Nesbit’s *The Five Children and It* [1902]), a phoenix can be your friend, or an amulet may transport you to distant times and places (in Nesbit’s *The Story of the Amulet* [1906]).<sup>2</sup> To claim that Rowling’s description “does not create that estrangement that evokes wonder,” as Pennington does (83–4), seems to miss the point. Following Nesbit, Rowling’s frequent juxtaposition of ordinary and extraordinary creates a fantasy that has a deliberately everyday quality. Indeed, Rowling’s secondary world gains credibility from the ways in which her characters accept the magical as normal. When Harry explains that in “the Muggle world, people just stay put in photos,” Ron’s response endows Rowling’s fantasy with a sense of reality: ““Do they? What, they don’t move at all?” Ron sounded amazed. ‘Weird!’” (*Philosopher’s Stone* 77). The close proximity of Muggle and magical communities highlights both continuities and discontinuities between the two: each world shares features in common (such as photographs), yet each looks strange to an inhabitant of the other.

Instead of asking whether or not Rowling writes “true” fantasy, we might instead evaluate the ways in which she blends her many influences. For example, Rowling frequently names Elizabeth Goudge’s *The Little White Horse* (1946) as a favorite book from her childhood. This novel combines fantasy with Austenesque social observation, as do all of the Harry Potter novels, most notably books four and five. The recurring figure of the unicorn in Rowling’s novels seems an almost conscious echo of Goudge’s title character, who at first seems to be a horse but proves to be a unicorn. For both novelists, the unicorn is sacred and glowing white: Goudge describes the unicorn as having a “perfect milk-white body” from which, “as from a lamp, there shone the light” (210), and Rowling’s unicorn is “so brightly white that it made all the snow around it look grey” (*Goblet* 379). Maria recognizes the “shining purity” and “perfection” of her “little white horse” (153). Similarly, Firenze describes the unicorn as an almost sacred creature: to kill “something pure and defenseless to save yourself” would give you “but a half-life, a cursed life” (*Philosopher’s Stone* 188). Goudge’s satirical sensibilities emerge in her portrayal of Marmaduke Scarlet, a dwarf servant whom Maria meets at the castle (which, like Hogwarts, is enchanted and

hidden) where she has come to live. When Maria offers to help him clean up the dishes, Marmaduke says, in a tone worthy of Percy Weasley, that she may dry them: “You may take one of those dishcloths from the line, fetch yourself a stool, and give me the benefit of your assistance during those ablutions that necessarily, though unfortunately, invariably follow the exercise of the culinary art” (86). After listening to this inflated speech, Goudge’s narrator observes, “Marmaduke Scarlet, it seemed, made up for the shortness of his stature by using very long words in conversation” (86). In terms of Goudge’s importance in Rowling’s imaginative life, when asked about her influences Rowling says, “Goudge was the only one whose influence I was conscious of. She always described exactly what the children were eating, and I really liked knowing what they had in their sandwiches” (“J. K. Rowling’s Bookshelf”).

Lavish descriptions of food are another trait that Goudge and Rowling share, but I suspect that the narrative tone is an equally strong attraction. In an interview with Amazon.com conducted in 1999, Rowling mentioned “three books [she] read as a child that stand out in [her] memory” (“Magic, Mystery, and Mayhem”). The first was *The Little White Horse*, the second was Paul Gallico’s *Manxmouse*, and the third was Clement Freud’s *Grimble*. On the cover of *Grimble* (1968) is the title character, a boy of about ten; his hair is combed but unruly, he is wearing glasses, and he is dressed in a schoolboy’s uniform. In other words, Grimble bears more than a passing resemblance to Harry Potter. Though Grimble’s parents are alive, they are absent for nearly all of the book, suggesting another parallel between Grimble and Harry. In identifying *Grimble* as one of her favorite childhood books, however, Rowling cites not the parallels with her own character but *Grimble*’s humor: she calls it “one of funniest books I’ve ever read” (“Magic, Mystery, and Mayhem”). In the opening page of the book, we learn that Grimble’s age is “about ten” because he has “rather odd parents who were very vague and seldom got anything completely right” (1). Freud continues, “For instance, he did not have his birthday on a fixed day like other children: every now and then his father and mother would buy a cake, put some candles on top of it and say, ‘Congratulations Grimble. Today you are about seven’, or, ‘Yesterday you were about eight and a half but the cake shop was closed’” (1). Introducing his central character, Freud also explains that his parents usually communicate with him by leaving notes:

Usually, when he left home in the morning, his parents were still asleep and there would be a note at the bottom of the stairs saying, *ENCLOSED PLEASE FIND TENPENNY FOR YOUR BREAKFAST*. As tenpence is not

very nourishing he used to take the money to a shop and get a glass of ginger beer, some broken pieces of meringue and a slice of streaky bacon.  
(1)

Describing parents who forget their only son's birthday as being "very vague" or "rather odd," Freud employs a bemused tone, and the humor of the line "As tenpence is not very nourishing" is a bit off-beat.

Although Rowling's narrative voice adopts a similar tone (notably, in the first chapter of *Philosopher's Stone*), Dumbledore is most likely to express himself using such a wryly absurdist sense of humor. At the banquet that kicks off the new school year in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Dumbledore says, "Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!" He then pauses and adds, "Thank you!" (91–92). During the beginning-of-term banquet in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, he says, "some of you will not know what the Triwizard Tournament involves, so I hope those who *do* know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely" (165). Playing on the literal meaning of "a few words" much as *Grimble* plays on "tenpence for breakfast," Dumbledore's speeches recall the amused narrator of Freud's novel. As a possible inspiration for Dumbledore's—and Rowling's—sense of humor and as a likely inspiration for Harry Potter himself, Clement Freud's *Grimble* is an influence that deserves further study.

Paul Gallico's *Manxmouse* (1968), a whimsical fantasy about a blue and tailless ceramic mouse who comes to life, has a gently humorous tone, suggesting that it, too, may be an influence on Rowling's narrative voice. On the night that Manxmouse leaves the ceramist's house, he meets a Clutterbump who "was looking for someone to entertain with a bad dream or a little agreeable terror in the night" (24). The Clutterbump, Gallico's narrator explains, takes the form of "[w]hatever it is that frightens one the most" and it "cannot exist to frighten anyone unless that somebody thinks of it first and decides what it is going to be like" (25). Since boggarts appear in novels such as Susan Cooper's *The Boggart* (1993), Gallico's Clutterbump may not be the sole source for Rowling's Boggart. However, a Boggart also takes "the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most," as Hermione explains in *Prisoner of Azkaban* (101). And successful encounters with both Rowling's Boggart and Gallico's Clutterbump always involve humor. As Professor Lupin explains, "the thing that really finishes a Boggart is *laughter*" (101). Neither Manxmouse nor any readers find the Clutterbump to be scary because Gallico writes the scene with abundant humor. After the

Clutterbump explains that his job is to inspire fear, Manxmouse apologizes, “I’m sorry, I really can’t think of anything I’m frightened of” (26). The Clutterbump suggests, “What about dark corners when you never know what’s going to jump out at you? That’s something I do beautifully, by the way. I was first in my class jumping out from dark corners” (27). When Manxmouse explains that he doesn’t now how to be afraid of that either, the Clutterbump suggests a cat: “Wait till you see the kind of cat I can be. Made the Honour Roll for it” (27). Their conversation continues in this vein until the Clutterbump wanders off, discouraged. While it is Gallico, instead of his character, who uses humor to drive off the shape-shifter, both his Clutterbump and Rowling’s Boggart remind readers that laughter can ward off fear.

Though the combination of humor, fantasy, and realism signals the influence of Freud, Gallico, Goudge, and Nesbit, the Potter novels’ mixing of fantasy with mystery suggests that Rowling may have been influenced by detective fiction, too. The quests of each book follow the patterns of both the fantasy’s epic journey towards fulfilling a grand purpose and the mystery’s progress towards uncovering a hidden truth. Like Arthur in T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* (1965) and Ged in Ursula LeGuin’s first *Earthsea* trilogy (1968–72), Harry is on a quest both for a goal and for self-discovery. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, he seeks to protect the Philosopher’s Stone; in the second, to stop the basilisk from attacking students; in the third, to elude and to be revenged upon Sirius Black, whom he believes was an accomplice in his parents’ murder; in the fourth, to win the Triwizard Tournament; in the fifth, to learn emotional self-control so that he may prevent Voldemort’s attempts to manipulate him. As the epic unfolds, Harry is also learning what he needs to know—about magic and about himself—so that he may succeed in the final confrontation between himself and Lord Voldemort. Although I would not be willing to say that all fantasy lacks any element of mystery, Rowling is perhaps more explicit in presenting each of these fantasy quests as mysteries. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and their friends are detectives, discovering clues and investigating what they might mean. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry’s visionary dreams offer glimpses of Voldemort’s activities in the Department of Mysteries. They discuss what this information might mean, seeking further evidence by reading between the lines of *The Daily Prophet*, and by eavesdropping on people with access to more information. In *Order of the Phoenix*, the trio and their allies wonder: Does the Department house the secret weapon that Voldemort seeks? What is that secret weapon? The mystery plots make these novels page-turners, endowing them with a strong narrative drive.

Contrary to Pennington's assertion, Tolkien is not "at the heart of [Rowling's] books" (82)—narrative is. Tolkien lets his narrative unfold as a history, and Rowling has her history unfold as a narrative. The increasing length of the Harry Potter books is not, as Pennington suggests, a sign of their "growing longwindedness" (86). Instead, the books grow longer because, with each new volume in the series, the arc of Rowling's narrative expands. Starting with the end of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the world beyond Hogwarts begins playing a larger role in the characters' lives, a trend that continues in *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix*. After Dumbledore announces that he cannot prove Sirius's innocence to the Ministry of Magic, Harry's thoughts offer a metacommentary on the tidy endings of the first two novels, and foreshadow the fact that the endings will no longer be so neat. Harry "had grown used to the idea that Dumbledore could solve anything. He had expected Dumbledore to pull some amazing solution out of the air" (*Prisoner* 288). Readers who had grown used to Dumbledore's solutions also may be surprised, but in all Potter novels after book three, Rowling cannot be accused of "remain[ing] within the predictable happy-end school of fairy-tale writers" (Zipes 182). As Rowling reveals more of the magical universe that she has created, her stories need to grow more complex and to become longer because she uses plot to convey the intricate and tangled histories of her characters. In contrast, the novels in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy are each of comparable length because, as books more invested in history than in narrative, they provide full details of Middle-earth throughout the series. Rowling's universe is no less fully imagined than is Tolkien's, as evidenced by the fact that the first Potter novel introduces Sirius Black, Arabella Figg, and the implications of Harry's scar hurting (in, respectively, chapters one, two, and seven). Instead of faulting Rowling for being long-winded or predictable, one might instead note that she reveals the full range of her inventive powers over time, preferring to guide us through Harry's world through the pleasures of narrative.

Her gifts as a storyteller may cause readers to miss the many games she plays with language. Suspense inspires rapid reading, as one turns the pages to find out what happens next. Yet there is much in these novels to warrant slowing down and rereading. Suggesting that he has done so, Zipes offers a gloss on the etymology of *Voldemort*, claiming that, since *mort* "is clearly French for death" and "the old Norse *vole* [. . .] means field mouse or rat," *Voldemort* is "evil as a death field mouse or death rat." However, rather than pursue the implications of this stimulating interpretation, Zipes concludes, "But the meaning is irrelevant. It is the

association of Voldemort with uncontrollable evil that is important” (181). Yet, since virtually all of Rowling’s names have symbolic significance, the meaning would in fact seem quite relevant. The French etymology of *Voldemort* suggests that it means not *death rat* but *flight from death* or *cheating death*, relevant because Voldemort so fears death that he has attempted to make himself immune to dying. When, in *Order of the Phoenix*, Voldemort claims, “There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!” Dumbledore replies, “You are quite wrong. Indeed, your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness” (718). In other words, the name *Voldemort* identifies the Dark Lord’s greatest strength (presumed immunity to death) and his greatest weakness (he assumes that there is nothing worse than death). As Zipes wisely notes before he dismisses his insight, “Rowling likes to play with names using foreign associations and phonetics to induce associations” (181).

Rowling uses names that connote character traits, as do Austen, Dickens, and Tolkien. There are too many examples of these names to cite them all in this essay, but here are some representative examples. Rowling, who at Exeter University majored both in French and in Greek and Roman Studies, seems quite familiar with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which (for example) tells of the hundred-eyed Argus, whom Juno ordered to watch Io. When coupled with “filch” (which means to pilfer, especially something of small value), we have Rowling’s character Argus Filch, the petty, vigilant Hogwarts caretaker, ever eager to punish students for the tiniest infraction of the rules. Narcissa Malfoy, Draco’s mother, is named for Narcissus, the man who fell in love with his own reflection. And Minerva McGonagall takes her first name from the Roman goddess of wisdom. Not incidentally, just as Rowling’s Minerva can change from human being to cat, so Ovid’s Minerva—like most gods—can transform herself, appearing disguised as an old woman when she arrives to challenge Arachne, for example. Hermione shares a name with the character who, in Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* (1610–11), is thought dead until what appears to be her statue comes to life—an appropriate name, given that she is petrified and then revived in the second Potter novel.<sup>3</sup>

Dolores Umbridge, the High Inquisitor who tyrannizes Hogwarts during *Order of the Phoenix*, has a first name derived from the Latin for *sorrows*, and a surname homophonic with *umbrage*. This noun can mean *offense*, *annoyance*, or *displeasure*, but also has the root of *umbra*, Latin for *shadow*. As an easily offended figure who attempts to shadow students’ and teachers’ every move, Dolores Umbridge spreads sadness

and suspicion, just as her name suggests she might. Borgin, the proprietor of Borgin and Burkes, a pawn shop that trades in items of dark magic, has a name derived from *borg*, an Old English word for *loan* or *borrow*—and an apt name for a pawnshop owner. Gilderoy Lockhart, the vain, fatuous writer who takes credit for other people’s heroic deeds, has a name suggesting both “gilding the lily” and “gilt,” or fake gold (Randall 4). As Jessie Randall notes, “Gilderoy Lockhart” also sounds like “a character in a Harlequin romance” (3). Street names and the names of objects have double meanings, too. For example, the Dursleys live on Privet Drive. *Privet* is a shrub often grown as a hedge (which Harry is forced to trim in the first book), and *Privet* also has connections to *Private* and to *privy*—the latter word can also mean *outhouse*. *Privet*, then, links the Dursleys to toilets and to hedges (“ridiculous and resonant with the orderliness and repression of a suburban English childhood,” as Gillian Lathey notes on page 146 of her essay in this issue), suggesting a sly criticism of the Dursleys’ faith in privacy and private property. And there is the pun in the “Pensieve” where Dumbledore collects his thoughts. As he explains,

I sometimes find [. . .] that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind. [. . .] At these times,” said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot the patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form. (*Goblet* 518–19)

In other words, Dumbledore uses the Pensieve when he is feeling pensive.

There is much in the Harry Potter novels to make us pensive, too, should we take the time to read slowly and to think as we read. In promoting the pleasures of slow contemplation, the Harry Potter novels can pull readers away from the consumerist pleasures of the Harry Potter merchandising industry. While it is true that, unless borrowed from a library or a friend, many will first need to purchase the books in order to read them, it is equally true that by rewarding rereading, the series may encourage us to enjoy what we already have, instead of spending more money on books, video games, or action figures.

Even the money in Harry Potter’s world has symbolic significance. In Harry’s very first visit into the wizarding world (which occurs during the “Diagon Alley” chapter of book one), he learns its monetary system: there are 29 Knuts to a Sickle, and 17 Sickles to a Galleon (*Philosopher’s Stone* 58). Twenty-nine and seventeen are both prime numbers, and the chapter is full of prime numbers: James Potter used an eleven-inch wand,

Harry's wand is eleven inches also; he pays "seven gold Galleons" for the wand, and gives the owl "five Knuts" for delivering a letter (*Philosopher's Stone* 63, 65, 50). Eleven, seven, and five are primes. Why all the prime numbers? As I suggest in my *J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Novels: A Reader's Guide* (2001), some people consider prime numbers to be mystical; so, the many prime numbers introduce the novel's themes of magic and the supernatural (31–3). When discussing the fact that there will be seven books in the series, Rowling has observed, "Seven is a magical number, a mystical number" (Mehren).

If the "magic" of prime numbers is one reference here, another is money itself. Rowling is poking fun at the British monetary system prior to 1971. Twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle and seventeen Sickles to a Galleon means that there are 493 Knuts to a Galleon. Before 1971, there were twelve pence to a shilling, and twenty shillings to a pound, which translates to two hundred forty pence to a pound. Today, there are one hundred pence to a pound—just as there are one hundred cents in a dollar. But the British system of coinage used to be quite complicated. Rowling, who was born in 1965, would have been familiar with the older British monetary system because the coins remained in circulation through the early 1980s. Whether the Sickles, Knuts, and Galleons make magical allusions or satirize an overly elaborate currency, numbers are some of the details that make rereading these novels fun. Rereading reveals other layers, changing the ways we think about the novels.

Her inventiveness notwithstanding, many have faulted Rowling's prose style, Pennington claiming that it fails to "induce wonder" (85), and Robert McCrum calling it "as flat (and as English) as old beer" (3). Offering a more diplomatically phrased version of this comment, Tucker says that the *Potter* books have been "[w]ritten up in good, workman-like prose with no frills attached" (228). Zipes observes, more critically, that "[t]here is nothing exceptional about Rowling's writing in comparison with that of many other gifted writers of children's and young adult literature," and he offers his own list of "gifted writers": Lloyd Alexander, Natalie Babbitt, Diana Wynne Jones, Francesca Lia Block, Philip Pullman, Jane Yolen, Donna Jo Napoli, and "many others who are constantly experimenting in innovative ways" (174–5). Claims of literary merit are closely linked to individual taste and therefore nearly impossible to prove. Admitting, then, that my own comments will be as subjective as those just mentioned, I would argue that Rowling compares favorably to most of the writers Zipes mentioned, though she may be surpassed by a few of them. At its best, Block's lyrical imagery exceeds that of Rowling, and Pullman's gift for writing beautiful sentences is unmatched by



Rowling or any writer on Zipes's list. Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy has both a more finely crafted style and a greater intellectual depth than does Rowling's series.

Tucker makes a good point in describing Rowling's style as "workman-like," but I would instead argue that she is an efficient writer, skilled at choosing each detail for maximum effect, and consequently able to create an extremely visual experience without indulging in long descriptive passages. Her skill at telling an engaging story allows readers to forget that she often tells by showing. In this sense, Pennington's claim that Rowling "tells but does not show" (83) is a natural assumption to make after experiencing Rowling's prose. However, upon closer examination, the showing is there, but it is all in the service of telling the tale. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Harry and Hermione mount Buckbeak so that they may fly up to Hogwarts' West Tower and rescue Sirius, Rowling's narrative tells us, "Buckbeak soared straight into the dark air. Harry gripped his flanks with his knees, feeling the great wings rising powerfully beneath them" (302). These sentences create an image synecdochally, selecting strong details to suggest the larger picture. Having fully described the Hippogriff on many previous occasions, Rowling here uses "flanks" and "great wings rising powerfully" to highlight Buckbeak's defining features. Referring to the flesh between ribs and hip, the word "flanks" remind us that Hippogriffs have the "bodies, hind legs and tails of horses"; the "great wings rising powerfully" remind us that they have the "wings and heads of [ . . . ] giant eagles" (87). That is, "flanks" and "wings" say just enough to convey each half of the horse-and-eagle combination. These details are sufficient because Harry and Hermione have spent the last ten pages with Buckbeak, during which time Rowling has Buckbeak breaking into a "trot" (294), "digging his beak into the ground, apparently searching for worms" (298), "cantering along behind them," and "fold[ing] his wings contentedly" (299). When she tells us that "Buckbeak soared straight into the dark air," we should already have a clear picture of the Hippogriff. The words "soared straight" convey his abrupt lift-off, and "dark air" frames the Hippogriff and his riders in black space, creating a sharp contrast between them and the surrounding night sky. In sum, Rowling writes sentences that are both vividly descriptive and actively propelling the plot forward. Every detail tells; nothing's superfluous.

This rescue of Buckbeak and Sirius calls attention to Hermione's centrality to the Potter epic: the combination of her intelligence and Harry's quick thinking are vital to the success of their mission. Harry realizes that they must rescue Buckbeak and fly him to Flitwick's office,

rescuing Sirius; Hermione, who understands the seriousness of meddling with time, makes sure that they do not exceed Dumbledore's mandate of "sav[ing] more than one innocent life tonight" (*Prisoner* 288). She also ensures that they time their actions carefully, moving Buckbeak after the executioner Macnair has seen him, but before Macnair leaves Hagrid's hut to do the execution (*Prisoner* 291–3). Despite Hermione's evident importance, Tucker and Zipes, Christine Schoefer, and Donna Harrington-Lueker all fault Rowling for her representations of girls. "Gender roles are stereotyped," says Tucker, "with boys out for action and the one salient girl character forever urging caution" (229); "the girls are always left to gawk and gaze at Harry's stunning prowess," observes Zipes (179).

As the title character, Harry Potter will of necessity be the series' main hero, but Hermione is the intellectual hero and possesses sufficient bravery—that defining Gryffindor trait—to break the school rules, to help Sirius escape, to protect the Philosopher's Stone, and to fight a band of Death Eaters. She does urge caution, but when she does, she is always right. In *Philosopher's Stone*, she's correct to warn Harry that Malfoy's challenge to a duel is a trap: it is, as we learn when Malfoy fails to turn up, but Filch does, nearly catching Harry. In *Order of the Phoenix*, she's correct to encourage Harry to study Occlumency; had he done so, Voldemort would not have been able to lure him to the Ministry. Her intelligence frequently saves the trio. At the end of *Philosopher's Stone*, only she knows how to stop the Devil's Snare from strangling them, and only she can solve the logic puzzle (202, 207–08). In *Goblet of Fire*, Hermione discovers the Four-Point Spell that helps Harry navigate the maze (608). In *Chamber of Secrets*, Hermione solves the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets (189, 215–16). Hermione is so well read that Rowling has appointed her the historian of the series. That is, whenever Rowling needs to introduce some of Hogwarts' history, she gives the job to Hermione. Rowling even makes a joke of this narrative tendency:

"Honestly, am I the *only* person who's bothered to read *Hogwarts, A History*?" said Hermione [. . .]

"Probably," said Ron. "why?" (*Azkaban* 123)

It is true that Hermione is made fun of for being a know-it-all, but it is equally true that Harry and Ron would have died several times over without her assistance. As Lupin tells her, "You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione" (*Prisoner* 346). As Eliza Dresang demonstrates in her thorough analysis of gender in the Potter series, "Rowling's Hermione is a strong, intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate female who is not only assisting the males with whom she has an

interdependent relationship but also working to become her own agent as well as a catalyst for social change" (242).

The Potter novels do have an activist spirit to them, but the agency of the books themselves—the way in which they act upon the reader—grows out of Rowling's provocative use of ambiguity. Far from describing "a world of simple heroics and moral absolutes" (Tucker 229),<sup>4</sup> the Potter novels endow all but the most villainous characters with a mixture of admirable and distasteful qualities; these complexities can prompt reflection, as readers are forced to think about what they read. Snape, the classic example of such a character, is neither the villain he at first appears to be, nor a particularly likeable fellow. Though a former Death Eater, he is also a member of the Order of the Phoenix; though cruel to Harry, he also saves his life. *Order of the Phoenix* gives us even more reasons for thinking about Snape; the memory of being bullied by James Potter elicits our sympathy, even as Snape continues to delight in bullying Harry and friends. As Rowling told a reader who inquired about Snape, "Keep an eye on him" (Barnes and Noble Chat).

I would suggest readers keep an eye on the Harry Potter phenomenon. It is, like Snape, more complex than it at first may seem. Harry is a marketing juggernaut, the most visible example of the least admirable trends in today's children's literature industry. However, we should be wary of conflating the Harry Potter novels with the Harry Potter hype. Although Rowling, Harry, and Warner Brothers may be complicit with the legal and market forces that create the Harry Potter phenomenon, Rowling and her books—to the degree that they can—do offer a limited resistance. Further, while reasonable people may disagree about the novels' artistic merits, the books have sufficient textual richness to warrant further study. As if to confirm this fact, three collections of critical essays have been published in the last three years: Lana Whited's *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*, Elizabeth E. Heilman's *Harry Potter's World: Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*, and Giselle Liza Anatol's *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*.

Given the appearance of these collections and of the many other books and scholarly essays on Harry Potter, the hypercommercialization of the Harry Potter franchise has not obscured the appeals of the books. In a scene often cited approvingly as a description of the Harry Potter novels' magical effect on readers, Ron warns Harry about an enchanted "book that you could never stop reading." As he explains, "You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed" (*Chamber* 172). When Rowling wrote Ron's admonition against be-

witched texts, Harry Potter was not the massive capitalist enterprise he is now, so the metaphor of the enchanted book seemed to represent the power of Rowling's literary art, how her words held readers' attention, making them reluctant to put the books down. Today, some look around at all the hype and say, reasonably, that the metaphor of the enchanted book dramatizes how people have been bewitched by advertising, lured into reading a popular but second-rate series. The confluence of cultural, fiscal, and legal forces in which Harry Potter is enmeshed may foster the belief that Harry's "magic" is nothing more than savvy marketing, but there *is* a magic beyond the marketing—the magic of good storytelling. Most of the literary criticism to date confirms this perception. That said, even if there comes a time when we are no longer bombarded with all manner of Harry Potter merchandise, the books will never be able to be severed from the vast commercial enterprise of which they are a part. However, the literary magic should never be confused with the marketing magic: if we are to fully understand either aspect of the Harry Potter phenomenon, the literary text and the marketing campaign must be given their due.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The United States signed the Berne Convention in 1988, but did so in a way that exempts itself from upholding it. See Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (166–7). See also Nancy Updike's "Green Eggs and Lawsuits."

<sup>2</sup> As Roni Natov observes, "Situating the train that takes people to Hogwarts at 9-3/4, between tracks 9 and 10, reinforces the central location of these stories as between the earth-bound and magical worlds" (318).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Hermione's name, see Dresang (212–14).

<sup>4</sup> Tucker echoes some of Wilson's criticisms of Tolkien. Of *The Lord of the Rings*, Wilson writes, "The hero has no serious temptations; is lured by no insidious enchantments, perplexed by few problems. What we get is a simple confrontation—in more or less the traditional terms of the British melodrama—of the Forces of Evil with the Forces of Good" (343).

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