

Welcome to Hogwarts

It is good to see that the best-selling series of books in the Western world is such a positive tale about witches and wizards.

—THE CHILDREN OF ARTEMIS
Wicca/neopagan Web site

One of today's most popular works of fantasy is the multivolume Harry Potter saga by Scottish author J.K. Rowling. It is about an orphaned boy-wizard, Harry Potter, and his struggles against the evil sorcerer, Lord Voldemort. Fans say it is a classic good-versus-evil saga, complete with lessons that exalt courage, loyalty, and selflessness. Rowling herself declares, "The theme running through all of these books is the fight between good and evil."¹

The story begins with the infant Harry being delivered to his relatives, the Dursley family: Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, and their son, Dudley, who is the epitome of a spoiled brat. Harry must live with them because his parents, James and Lily, have been murdered by Voldemort.

But Vernon and Petunia are hardly fitting stand-ins for James and Lily, both of whom were greatly beloved by their fellow

witches and wizards. The Dursleys, in fact, are thoroughly detestable *Muggles* (nonmagical people). They abhor and fear magic so much that they conceal from Harry his true identity and actually tell him his parents died in an automobile accident.

Harry lives a miserable and lonely life, oblivious to the magical world—that is, until he begins receiving mysterious letters just prior to his eleventh birthday. These turn out to be from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the same school his parents attended. He is to be a wizard-in-training at Hogwarts, which, as one character says, is “the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world.”²

The remainder of Book I (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*) follows Harry as he goes off to Hogwarts to hone his magical skills. This book also brings into focus the series’ villain, Lord Voldemort, explaining that his diabolical goal is threefold: 1) recover the power he lost by attacking the Potters; 2) kill Harry; and 3) draw to himself a band of followers through whom he can rule the world.

Subsequent volumes released thus far—*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*—detail Harry’s yearly activities. Each one covers another school term wherein Harry must face an array of predicaments that demand he solve mysteries and dodge dangers (often due to Voldemort’s nefarious schemes). Meanwhile, he and his friends continue learning how to be more powerful and competent witches and wizards.

Practical Magick

Unlike *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter* is set against the backdrop of *real-world*

occult traditions, beliefs, practices, and historical figures. (I am not referring to any of those things in *Harry Potter* that are plainly unrealistic: dragons, flying broomsticks, enchanted candies, magic mirrors, talking hats, invisibility cloaks, or other fantastic elements.)

The problem is the astrology, numerology, divination, potions, magick, clairvoyance, herbology, alchemy, spell-casting, necromancy (communication with spirits), and occult lore in the series³—all of which are listed in the *Encyclopedia of Wicca & Witchcraft*.⁴ Consider, too, this post from a Wiccan on a neopagan Web site:

There are things in Harry’s world that are “accurate” representations of what we believe....Animals are seen as valuable magical beings and partners. Study is encouraged; magic does not come easy and the principles must be learned. And...one should call all things by their real name, for fear of a name increases fear of the thing named. So, yes, there are some good parallels.⁵

According to Duke University’s Thomas Robisheaux, history professor and teacher of magick/witchcraft courses, “Rowling discusses alchemy and the whole range of occult arts—including natural, or ‘good’ magic, and divination—so well known in the Renaissance.”⁶ Her use of occult concepts and symbolism makes for some striking parallels to real-world magick.

For instance, the school supplies for Hogwarts students match what most neopagans use: cauldrons and magick wands, among others. The pets owned by Rowling’s characters hearken back to medieval associations between witches and animals and reflect the value of animals to Wiccans.⁷ Additionally, Hogwarts classes

mirror courses offered by some occult groups, like London's *Ordo Anno Mundi* (see note 8).⁸ Even the names of books read by Rowling's characters closely match books that have been circulating in the neopagan/Wiccan community for many years (see note 9).⁹

Compliments of the Dark Side

The realism permeating Harry Potter comes from the well-spring of occult knowledge its author possesses. She has admitted quite openly to having “done research on witchcraft and wizardry” in order to find material consistent with her plot. Rowling also has said that “some of the magic in the books is based on what people used to believe really worked”—about “one third” of it.¹⁰

Harry Potter also contains the basic occult definition of magick (“Magic is magic—it is neither good nor bad, it just is!”).¹¹ This belief, which has been advanced by innumerable persons from the occult tradition, is voiced by one of Voldemort's followers: “There is no good and evil; there is only power and those too weak to seek it.”¹²

Although the words come from an evil character, they convey the similarity in how magick is 1) depicted in Harry Potter and 2) viewed by real-world neopagans, witches, and occultists. Consider the comment made by one practicing neopagan:

“There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.”... This might actually offend some, but it hides one of the great truths of Witchcraft, that there is no White or Black Magick, there is only Magick, and it is the use we make of it that defines its purpose, although, we usually see a dark use of Magick as weakness, rather than strength.¹³

Given such parallels, it is no surprise that *The Sorcerer's Companion* (a fan-written reference guide to Harry Potter) lists dozens of occult entries relating to the series: amulets, arithmancy (divination with numbers), astrology, charms, crystal balls, divination, magick (ritual, natural, high, low), mandrakes, palmistry, poltergeist, talismans, and female sexual demons (called *veela*).¹⁴ And the delineation between our world and Rowling's “fantasy” fades yet further thanks to the occult figures referenced:

- ❖ Vablatsky, an anagram for *Helena Petrovna Blavatsky* (1831–1891), founder of Theosophy, an occult blend of Eastern philosophy, metaphysical thought, mental healing, spiritualism, and pseudo-science¹⁵
- ❖ *Paracelsus* (1493–1541), a Swiss alchemist who stands as “one of the most striking and picturesque figures” in occultism¹⁶
- ❖ *Cornelius Agrippa* (1486–1535), an occultist whose writings “influenced generations of thinkers that followed and became part of the heritage of folk magic practiced by witches” and who “embraced astrology, divination, numerology and the power of gems and stones” and of whom “it was said that he practiced necromancy [or communing with the dead] for divination”¹⁷

The agreement between Harry Potter and occultism was highlighted in a 2001 article wherein neopagans Lisa Braun and Michael Sichmeller said the first Harry Potter movie, although a bit exaggerated, embodied their beliefs respectfully and accurately. The interviewer reported that the occultists were “particularly impressed with the characters' use of wands, which wiccans believe ‘can direct energy.’”¹⁸

A similar comment appeared on the “Pagan Perspectives” message board at witchvox.com. Although spells are not cast simply by the flick of a wand, noted the writer “the overall depiction of magick and witchcraft, though, is as accurate a reflection of our knowledge of them as could be asked for.” She added, “The lessons about proper use of magick, etc., are realistic and perfectly placed in the story.”¹⁹ Another enthused that the Potter

books and in the movie form, are a wonderful metaphor of how we, as Witches/Wiccans/Pagans/Magickal people, perceive our own spirituality/work/studies, and our vision of the world. The symbolism is strong, and I have found myself reacting so many times, by reading between the lines and looking beyond the exaggerated way their magical acts and spells is depicted, and reacting positively, mostly thinking “This is SO right!”²⁰

Particularly noteworthy is yet another Web site, “The Harry Potter Witchcraft Spellbook,” designed by a Harry Potter fan whose screen name is “IO.” The site is subtitled “Wherein is Explained Old Magical Secrets the Likes of Which J.K. Rowling’s Book Series Was Based Upon.” IO declares,

Rowling has done her homework. Her hidden references are so numerous, and her knowledge so deep, that I’m certain she has done much research on the subject of real sorcery. Many of her characters are named after famous occultists of the past, many of her fantastic spells actually exist, and her magical creatures are straight out of ancient mythology. She is writing about the same witchcraft that I study at home, far away from Hogwarts!...I recognise much of

J.K. Rowling’s work from Middle Age grimoires [spell-books] I’ve read. These charms and spells are more than just mere fantasy! They have a historical basis. And I will be more than happy to share it with you, here, on my website.²¹

Such close associations between Harry Potter and witchcraft may be why celebrated witch Phyllis Curott, in referring to her own Wiccan volume, *Book of Shadows*, said, “I wouldn’t mind titling my book Harry Potter for Adults.”²²

The “W” Dilemma

An important word of clarification is needed here—Rowling’s novels do not teach “Witchcraft” *per se*. Nowhere do they present or promote Wiccan doctrines or “deal with the philosophical precepts of Wicca.”²³ This must be emphasized. Harry Potter does not outline the *technical* teachings of Wicca or instruct children to study Wicca.

But the series does contain witchcraft. How is such an apparent inconsistency possible? It all involves terminology. Although Harry Potter makes no reference to the technical doctrines *specific* to Wicca, it does include *generalized* practices and concepts inherent to Wicca.

These two categories of “witchcraft” are differentiated by Wiccans and neopagans through use of either a capital or lowercase “w.” One Witch gives these explanations:

Witchcraft, spelled with a capital “W”—A religion recognizing the divine in nature and following the seasonal changes and moons.

witchcraft, spelled with a small “w”—A magickal system which may or may not be used within a religious framework.²⁴

Most neopagans practice witchcraft, but not necessarily Witchcraft (or Wicca). Wren Walker, a practicing Wiccan and cofounder of The Witches Voice (an organization for Wiccans worldwide), sought to dispel the confusion, noting that Rowling’s books

really don’t have anything to do with a “capital w” witchcraft as practiced by a large number of people. It’s something more to do with a “small w” witchcraft, which can be done by any other religion.²⁵

Simply put, Harry Potter presents *witchcraft* while simultaneously avoiding *Witchcraft*. By doing so it gives a sketch of *real* magick and occultism, but does not necessarily provide a narrowly-defined religious belief system (namely, Wicca).

Way of the Witch

Failure to make this crucial distinction has led many persons, including J.K. Rowling herself, to misunderstand the heart of concerns being expressed over Harry Potter. “I absolutely did not start writing these books to encourage any child into witchcraft,” she has said. “I’m laughing slightly because to me, the idea is absurd.”²⁶

The famous author, however, is missing the obvious—just because she did not intentionally write the books to “encourage” children “into witchcraft” does not mean that her fantasy will not motivate kids to dabble in it. The fear that Harry Potter *might* inspire *some* children (even *some* adults) to experiment with witchcraft is far from “absurd.”

Experimentation and investigation of anything usually springs out of a curiosity or interest that has been aroused. In this case, the stimulus is Harry Potter, as a 2002 article, “Potter Prompts Course in Witchcraft,” revealed:

A growing interest in sorcery and witchcraft generated by Harry Potter stories has prompted an Australian university [Adelaide University] to launch a special course....[It] will explore the witchdoctors of Africa, shamans...witches...and others who practice magic.²⁷

If Harry Potter is getting college students and other adults interested enough in occultism to begin studying it, then common sense tells us that at least some children reading Harry Potter might also become curious about occult-related issues. However, Rowling’s fantasy exerts a particular influence over children because the series so perfectly mirrors several aspects of childhood: school, friendships, a longing for autonomy, and peer rivalry.²⁸

Even older children, who know it is just pretend, may become so enthralled with magic and wizardry that they will seek out neopaganism, witchcraft, or magick in the real world. Kids are already dressing up like Rowling’s characters at bookstore-hosted parties. Many stores hold “wizard breakfasts.” And some children are actually trying out Harry Potter spells. “I have met people who assure me, very seriously, that they are trying to do them,” says Rowling. “I can assure them, just as seriously, that they don’t work.”²⁹

But adults must ask, Will the ineffectiveness of Rowling’s silly spells put an end to every child’s desire for magick, or will it only be the start of a child’s drift in that direction? Where will the fascination and emulation end? With playing dress-up? With

dabbling in “fun” occult practices like divination and spell-casting? With signing up for college courses on magickal phenomena? As Harry Potter fans mature, will they desire to delve deeper into occultism?

Multiple studies have proven that media images of violence and sexuality affect the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of kids (see chapters 10 and 11).³⁰ Is it really so absurd to theorize that exciting images and depictions of occult spirituality might also have an affect of some children? Many Christians think it is possible that Harry Potter and similar works could influence a whole generation. And they are not alone in holding this opinion.

What Do Witches Think?

Ultimately, Rowling’s books could desensitize tens of millions of children to the dangers of occultism (see appendix A), which in turn could create in them a general curiosity about witchcraft. This concern is being voiced by many respected and nonextreme observers of the Harry Potter phenomenon.³¹

Interestingly, neopagans and Wiccans too have theorized that untold numbers of children, teens, and adults will probably be influenced by the Potter books to investigate occultism and magick—perhaps to join the Wiccan fold:

- ❖ “Harry Potter happens to be one of the best things for witchcraft, and the understanding of it.”³²
- ❖ “Will it draw people to the craft[?] It will probably make some people very curious and therefore more open.”³³
- ❖ “I think that more people will start exploring witchcraft because of the movie [Harry Potter].”³⁴

- ❖ “As to whether Harry Potter generates interest in Paganism, of course it does! Many people will explore Paganism because of Harry Potter.”³⁵
- ❖ “[Harry Potter] will bring more attention to Paganism and the study of Magick....The open-minded people will go out and buy a few ‘Wicca 101’ books to learn more about witchcraft in the real world.”³⁶

At witchvox.com, a self-described “urban witch” named Henbane explained how Harry Potter mirrors in some ways her own concept of how youths could be taught Wicca:

You can imagine my delight when I read of “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry” which is basically an over-the-top, whimsical fiction of my dream. Imagination is the first step to actualization, so it thrills me that children are reading these books. Someday, perhaps there’ll be a “Henbane’s School of Witchcraft and Magick.”³⁷

But is there any real evidence that children may be venturing toward occultism due to Rowling’s material? Yes (see pages 16–17 in “To Be a Child Again”). And the data is continuing to mount as Rowling’s fantasy spreads from country to country.