

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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April 1, 2005

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The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Seven

The *Harry Potter* Books

Harry Potter has become a phenomenon. These books have provoked unbelievable enthusiasm among both children and adults. They have also provoked unbelievable controversy from some on the religious right.

The enthusiasm is understandable. J. K. Rowling has captured the whimsy of a generation in the *Potter* series, especially in the earlier volumes. Much of the series is simply a delightful romp, almost a parody of the fantastic genre. Witches ride broomsticks, but mainly to play airborne soccer (quidditch). Trolls are discovered to have boogers. Characters move from fireplace to fireplace through the “floo network.” Much of the charm of *Harry Potter* comes from its quality as a spoof. It is a cross between J. R. R. Tolkein and *Mad Magazine*.

The appeal of the series also stems from Rowling's ability to choose themes that resonate with contemporary adolescents. Harry Potter is lonely and alienated. He yearns for the comfort and structure of a world with authority, yet he is suspicious and resentful toward authorities. He wants enough morality to be justified in feeling wronged, but not so much as to keep him from doing wrong when wrong seems useful. These are moods that seem to prevail among juveniles in today's postmodern, no-parent-household, grow-up-too-fast world.

Harry Potter finds his escape (and readers find theirs) in a world populated by fantastic diversity. Rowling has scoured every corner of myth, legend, and literature to populate Potter's world with the richest array of fantastic creatures and objects. She has supplemented her discoveries with a smorgasbord of her own invention, from multi-flavor beans to a flying Ford Anglia (that goes feral, no less), to portraits that can move from frame to frame, to a willow tree that bats everything within reach. The variety is bewildering and (so to speak) enchanting.

The characters in the series are engaging and believable. Who hasn't met a snob like Malfoy, bullies like Goyle and Crabbe, an incompetent like Lockyear, or a "brain" like Hermione? Who wouldn't want a friend like Hagrid? And who would not wish for a wise, old Dumbledore somewhere in his or her life? Rowling introduces us to characters who display depth, texture and even contradiction.

What about the witchcraft in the *Harry Potter* stories? This is where most of the controversy has been aimed. Is it cause for concern?

Nearly half of Rowling's witchcraft is drawn from various mythologies. Trolls, werewolves, vampires, centaurs, pixies, and veela reflect mythology from Greek, Germanic, Celtic, and Baltic sources. None of this is any more objectionable than *Grimm's Fairy Tales* or Homer's *Odyssey*.

Another big part—nearly half—of Rowling's witchcraft is unadulterated malarkey. She invents wry spells in faux Latin. She brings lawn gnomes to life as stupid little creatures which have to be tossed out of the garden. She depicts immature mandrakes as infant-shaped vegetables which utter an incapacitating cry when plucked from the soil. Again, nothing here is objectionable.

That accounts for nearly all of the magic in *Harry Potter*—but not quite all. The bit that is left over seems more serious than most of Rowling's inventions, but lacks the fairy-tale quality of her mythological borrowings. Does she actually employ elements from real witchcraft? Getting an answer to this question would require a person who knew witchcraft. Possibly, however, Rowling may have imported this remnant of magic from the real world of occult observances. To the pure, all things are pure, but the possibility of real world witchcraft should be enough to give Christian readers pause.

What is more disturbing is the stories' lack of a moral base. To be sure, Rowling does present virtues such as loyalty, courage, and compassion. She also depicts vices such as murder and torture. In between, however, the moral ground gets quite foggy. Even the "good guys" engage in a fair amount of deception, larceny, trespass, smuggling, and a variety of other unseemly activities. *Harry Potter* leaves a key question hanging: how much evil can be justified in the pursuit of a good end? In fact, even the virtues in *Harry Potter* appear to be relative. Loyalty to Dumbledore is good; loyalty to Voldemort is bad. Voldemort's followers lie constantly, but they dare not lie to him. Harry and his friends also lie constantly, even to legitimate authorities. The intention of the character seems to be the only consideration that defines the virtue.

The worst flaw with Rowling's work, however, is that it simply has nothing important to say. The tales are amusing, but Rowling is merely playing with the form. She offers

amusement for amusement's sake, without any serious reflection upon the larger issues of the real world. She is skillful in what she does, but she does not turn her skills to good use. In this respect she is poles away from Bunyan, Tolkien, or Lewis.

Does this mean that Christians must not read *Harry Potter*? The answer will vary with the situation. These stories are not good fare for young children whose moral base is still being formed. Even the earlier books are mildly subversive, and as the series progresses the attitudes become uglier and the actions become more violent.

Whether adolescents should read the series is a decision that parents need to make child by child. Much in these books provides a poor model for young people. Still, the series may even provide fruitful material for the discussion of moral complexities. Even bad examples can be turned to good uses (witness any of the historical books of the Bible).

In short, I do not recommend the reading of *Harry Potter* by or for children. I also do not recommend that parents permit younger teens to read any of these books unless the parents have read them first and are willing to discuss their contents. On the other hand, I do not believe that mature readers will be harmed by these volumes. Even should they fall into the hands of our offspring, the damage will probably be minimal. *Harry Potter* is not spiritually healthy fare for the immature, but it is more like junk food than it is like poison. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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