

## Exploring the "Magic" of Harry Potter

July is shaping up to be an exciting but sad month for Harry Potter fans. Exciting because we look forward to the next film "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" but much more keenly we anticipate the release of the last book in the series "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows". It's sad because we are warned that at least two main characters will die. So anticipation is mixed with foreboding. There may be another book. J K Rowling has flagged the idea of an encyclopaedia about Hogwarts, but has ruled out a prequel or another book about her famous school boy.

### Harry Potter as Literature

I thoroughly enjoy the Harry Potter books. I think they are a good series: fun, exciting, magical! But beyond all that they are well written. [Future generations will decide if they are great.] J K Rowling with degrees in Classics and Modern Languages uses a wide vocabulary, good sentence construction and imaginative similes. Scratch below the surface of her novels and we are introduced to a vast array of classical literature, mythology and imagery.

The way she develops the characters in her stories is clever and authentic. Her young people grow up in a realistic way. She portrayed Harry's anger in "Order of the Phoenix" really well and it will be interesting to see how she handles sexual relationships in "deathly Hallows". Those of us brought up on Enid Blyton or even Arthur Ransome know that there is no character development in these books. J K Rowling is different. How she tells the story is fascinating as well. It's like a camcorder has been placed on Harry's shoulder. We see everything from his point of view; what he experiences and what he thinks - right or wrong. Only rarely does Rowling give us information that Harry would not know. It's a great skill to keep a plot moving and a character developing in this way.

Good stories challenge us! Stories can get behind our defences and take us into a different space and challenge us in ways that we would naturally avoid. No wonder Jesus often told stories! That's precisely what J K Rowling does in the Harry Potter books. She transports us from the self-indulgence and consumerism of our Muggle existence to a world where people are fallible but real. She cleverly shows the emptiness of western society when it lacks a spiritual (magical) dimension.

In her worlds it is wizards and witches, those with magic, who are "spiritual" people. They are the only ones who are really alive! The Muggle world is our modern world of consumerism and indifference; populated by people whose

only interest is in eating, sleeping and owning. It is a world dominated by greed and over-consumption. This is not how people should live.

It is in the world of magic where life is real. In this world people are complex and are drawn into the conflict between good and evil. Here people grow, develop, change and die. Yet, even in the Muggle world there are "god-fearers". Will Aunt Petunia change? We know she has been made aware of her connection with the world of magic.

One lack in her books is a clear indication of how people become wizards and witches. It seems people are born into that community - a matter of their genes - and after that they simply need training and moral guidance in the use of their magic. However, witches and wizards do not need two "magical" parents.

Through the outstanding variety of characters in her stories, she invites us to explore issues we readily avoid in particular the issues of death and life. Rowling deliberately explores death in these books. Harry is fascinated with the thin veil in the Department of Mysteries and the Thestrals that only those who have witnessed death can see. Rowling also focus on the power of choice in shaping character - rather than gifts or skills; the protection and redemption of sacrificial love, the confusion of adolescence, abuses of people with power, and a dozen other complex issues. She invites us to recognise the complexity of bad and good in us all and the way our choices can draw us towards the good or repel us from it.

### **Harry Potter and the reaction of Christians**

Why does she write like this? And are her books suitable for Christians? Indeed are they Christian? Some Christians have been adamant that she is against the Christian faith, I think they are wrong. Rowling herself is somewhat elusive when answering questions about faith. Yes, she does believe in God. When asked if she is a Christian she gives an emphatic "Yes" in reply. And she does go to church - and by that she means more than to weddings or funerals. But then she stops talking about the subject lest she gives too much away.<sup>1</sup>

So mountains of literature and hundreds of internet sites speculate about Rowling's intention in her books. Some Christians say the books are a danger to children and a pernicious introduction to the occult. Harry Potter books have been burnt by Christians or repudiated for being evil. In May 2003 Cardinal Ratzinger [now Pope Benedict XVI] criticised the "subtle seductions" of Harry Potter which "deeply distort Christianity in the soul"? It must be noted that Rowling rejects any intention to seduce children into magic or the occult.

In fact I agree with John Granger that "The Chamber of Secrets" appears to carry a not so subtle response to criticism of her books. Granger argues that Rowling uses the second book in the series to introduce ideas about values in books for children. There are three books in "The Chamber of Secrets". The first is Tom Riddle's [Lord Voldemort's] Diary, the second the books of Gilderoy Lockhart and the third "The Chamber of Secrets" itself.

Tom Riddle's Diary is a dangerous book full of hidden dark magic. Lucius Malfoy hides it in a Transfiguration book and drops it into the bag of the unwitting Ginny [read Virginia or virgin i.e. innocent] Weasley. She is transformed by the dark magic of the book and loses her mind and opens the Chamber of Secrets releasing evil into Hogwarts. Only later when Harry drives the Basilisk's tooth into the diary is the dark magic undone and Ginny restored. Is this a careful comment that Rowling is very aware of the dangers hiding in children's books?

The second book or rather set of books are those of Gilderoy Lockhart. These have been written to gain wealth and fame for the author. They are all about himself and the stories turn out to be fakes - just as he is. The only good trick that Gilderoy can do is a Memory Charm. His books purporting to be memories are tales from other people, his achievements are hollow, his bravery is shown to be cowardice and in a delightful twist when he tries the Memory Charm on Ron it backfires and he loses his memory! Rowling has admitted that Lockhart has a real world model and Granger guesses that this is Philip Pullman author of "His Dark Materials" trilogy. Pullman is a public atheist and uses his books to advance his worldview to children.<sup>2</sup>

The third book is "The Chamber of Secrets" itself and Rowling takes great care to show that this is a wholesome and good children's book. Harry is clearly the brave, thoughtful young man who stands against great wrong and even though weak himself he triumphs. His model here seems to be Mediaeval Mystery plays which always convey a moral theme.

In other words what Rowling is saying in these books is "Beware"! Books which purport to be good but are in fact evil can damage children. These books are often hidden. She is also saying that careless and self-opinionated writers can do great damage when they do not tell the truth. Then she is stating her own case - that her writing conveys all the good qualities that will guide young people to be more noble and brave and honest.

### **Harry Potter and the Christian Story**

I wonder if a key reason [apart from excellent marketing] why these books are so popular is because deep down readers realise that they communicate spiritual truth through the lived experience of love, loyalty, life and death.<sup>3</sup>

Some people believe that through story these books engage us with the challenging complexity of Christian truth and living in a way that our culture has neglected and the church has made boring. John Granger writes, "That the Harry Potter stories "sing along" with the great story of Christ is a significant key to understanding their compelling richness."<sup>4</sup>

I think these books introduce us to the great Christian story in a tantalising and refreshing way. I think J K Rowling does this partly deliberately, and partly because the Christian story is THE story with which we all intuitively identify. It is not simply the story of good versus evil: for that is to trivialise it. It is the story of the ambiguity of human nature; the power of sacrificial love, the paradox of trust and betrayal; of dying and rising from the ashes of failure or defeat. Fawkes the phoenix is a central symbol in the books who, amongst other things, rescues and heals Harry and laments the death of Dumbledore. In the Middle Ages, the phoenix, because it was believed to die by self-ignition and then rise from the ashes, has been a symbol of Christ. Fawkes seems to be the symbol that invites us to think carefully about the role of Albus Dumbledore. However it is important to note here that Rowling's characters are certainly not allegorical. Dumbledore is not like Aslan [from Narnia]. Rather, I think, she allows her characters to give us glimpses of something special that is beyond them. This is not dissimilar to the way Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is like a man who ... a woman who ... a sower who..."

John Granger argues that the final battle scene in "The Chamber of Secrets" is "the most transparent Christian allegory of salvation history since Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*."

Harry [Everyman] enters the Chamber of Secrets to rescue Ginny [innocent] whom he finds unconscious and almost dead. He asks Tom Riddle for help but Riddle turns out to be the evil Lord Voldemort. Harry challenges Riddle and voices his support for Albus Dumbledore [faith in God]. This heralds Fawkes the phoenix [often a symbol of Christ - the resurrection bird] who brings Harry the Sorting Hat of Godric Gryffindor. This provokes Riddle to challenge Harry and he releases the giant basilisk [a symbol of sin]. To look on the Basilisk is death so Harry runs away but the phoenix attacks the basilisk gouging out its eyes. Harry cries out for help and the Sorting Hat comes into his grasp and from it the sword of Gryffindor. When the basilisk lunges at Harry he drives the sword into the roof of the snake's mouth, but as the basilisk falls to his death a poisonous fang enters Harry's arm and mortally wounds him. Riddle laughs at Harry's death but the phoenix weeps into his wounds. Too late Riddle remembers the healing powers of the phoenix. He chases the phoenix away and rises to murder Harry. But the

phoenix gives to Harry the diary of Tom Riddle and Harry drives the basilisk's fang into it. Riddle dies and disappears and red ink pours from the diary. Ginny revives and they escape by holding onto the tail feathers of the phoenix.

Interpreting this saga we see humanity has lost its innocence through the effects of evil. When Man comes to the rescue he is powerless until he calls out to God and Christ comes to his rescue. It is Christ who fights for Man and breaks the power of sin when Man is unable to help himself. However God sends to Man the sword of the Spirit with which to slay his Christ-weakened enemy. But even in its death, sin overwhelms Man and leaves him for dead. But the voluntary suffering of Christ heals the man [redemptive love is a great theme of the Harry Potter books]. Man rises from death caused by sin and with Christ's help destroys Satan. Man's innocence is restored and he with all humanity is no longer condemned to live in the underworld but instead in the presence of God.

This description of the work of Christ is very different to the "Christus Victor" theme of Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but it does pick up major points about how our salvation was obtained as acted out in the Christian Mystery plays.

### **Harry Potter and Magic**

So we can see that these books are not superficial! If we are hung-up about spells and witchcraft then we've missed the point. I understand that JK Rowling has said that she rejects witchcraft and would not want to entice people into the occult.<sup>5</sup> However, she has studied alchemy in detail - and that is quite another subject. The magic is not there to lead us into the occult but to do three other things.

Firstly, the magic in these books is not occult magic, but fantasy magic. The magic of Harry Potter is incantational magic - it sings along in harmony with the universe. Occult magic implies calling upon higher powers to operate. In the Harry Potter books, no higher source is ever called upon or used - not the Force [as in Star Wars] and certainly nothing demonic. Words of command are spoken not to a higher power but into the air! Even if the spells are [as some claim] drawn from ancient spells there is no "motor" to make them "work". They do not invoke spirits to enter the spells and give them power. Indeed Rowling "laughs" at the whole idea of "divination". She rather scoffs at people who profess to predict the future through reading tea-leaves! It's far more fun to magically dive into "the penseive" than for Dumbledore to sit back in his armchair and recall an incident.

Secondly the magic leads us into a different world that is parallel to and intersects with our world - a very post-modern concept! From this vantage point Rowling is able to show both the poverty and richness of our world. It is poor because the world of 4 Privet Drive is bounded by consumerism, selfishness, and greed. On the other hand it is rich because we have such marvellous technology. Mr Weasley, who lives in a world of magic, is amazed by the automatic ticket machines on the London Underground! Her magical world invites us to look again at the values of our world. Her magic invites us to look again at the wonder of the age in which we live. We listen into conversations with bugging devices, but how much more fun to have magical extendable ears! We clean the carpet with a vacuum cleaner and put the dishes in a dish-washer. How much more fun to have wands that will do the job for us! But isn't our technology amazing. Do we appreciate it?

At the same time magic is used to lead us to a deeper truth. Remember the Boggarts - shape-shifters they "take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most"? How do you treat a frightening Boggart? You laugh at it and shout *Riddikulus!* What a great way to teach kids to deal with their irrational fears!

### **Harry Potter and Alchemy**

It is only recently that literature has come to be regarded as entertainment. Classical drama and literature was written in order to improve the reader. Aristotle wrote about the purifying purpose of tragedy. To achieve this, the writer uses the alchemical process to produce a strong identification in the reader with the tragic hero so that the reader experiences a cathartic [or cleansing] affect and as a result becomes a more noble person. These books stand in the tradition of great classical literature - the tradition alchemy.

Alchemy is far more than a primitive form of chemistry. As the alchemist endeavoured to find a catalyst that would turn base metals into gold so he also imagined a personal, spiritual journey that would take his sinful human soul on the path to salvation and in so doing to discover the way to immortality - the elixir of life.

In fact the process of alchemy is used in much great literature. In the *nigredo* - or black stage we see the hero go through a process where they are emotionally and sometimes physically stripped naked; shredded in the darkness - reaching the blackness of despair. Then they enter the *albedo* or white stage, where from that darkness they are further refined - a cleansing refinement - like gold being refined in a fire. The final stage is the *rubedo* or red stage where their shadow or dark side and their refined qualities are drawn together of into a wholesome [though not perfect] state.

Shakespeare's "Anthony and Cleopatra" and "King Lear" or Jane Austin's "Pride and Prejudice" are classic examples of this process in literature.

To travel along this road is not far removed from the desolation/consolation pathway of Ignatian spirituality. Indeed it resonates with us because we experience it as describing our own spiritual journey.

Rowling flagged this alchemic journey in the title of her first book "The Philosopher's Stone". She continues it through the series.

Think of "The Order of the Phoenix" where Harry is stripped of everything, Quidditch, respect, self-esteem, friends and much more. Anger and pain are etched [literally] into him. This is the dark period. Sirius Black is the key figure here and the book ends with his death and in a symbolic sense Harry is cut-off from his past.

In "The Half-blood Prince" Harry is further refined but this time as "the chosen one". Though he is now respected and trusted there is more work to do. Albus [White] Dumbledore takes Harry into his confidence and refines his character further by opening his mind to the complexity of who he is and the task that lies before him. Dumbledore prepares Harry for the work of life, even though he sacrifices his life to save Harry. [By immobilising Harry, Dumbledore stops Harry fighting or being seen but in so doing seals his own fate.]

I look forward to "Deathly Hallows" where I think we will discover that as he pursues his calling in life Harry becomes emotionally integrated and wise - the "red" period in alchemic language. Perhaps Rubeus [red] Hagrid will be prominent [and die?] in this book.

Alchemy [the quest for the philosopher's stone] has been used in Christian symbolism to describe the work of the vision of God in the life of the believer. Most famously it comes in the poem/hymn of George Herbert "Teach me my God and King in all things Thee to see." [As a poem called "The Elixir".] In the last verse he writes, "This [seeing God in everything] is the famous stone that turneth all to gold, for that which God doth touch and own cannot for less be told."

With this in mind we can see that Rowling is deliberately walking in the footsteps of the giants of classical literature and Christian theology. We should not therefore be surprised if we can argue for further Christian symbolism in her portrait of the world of Harry Potter.

The over-arching theme of the books is the Christian narrative: that the world is saved through redemptive love. Harry owes his life to his mother who out of love for her son sacrificed her life for him. In turn he keeps faith with

this calling as he grows in his awareness of the magnitude of this sacrificial love. Dumbledore tells Harry the fundamental truth: love - not power - conquers evil. *"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing that Voldemort cannot understand, it is love ... to have been loved so deeply ... will give us some protection for ever."*<sup>6</sup> And again he explains to Harry, *"There is a room in the Department of Mysteries that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more powerful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature... That power saved you ..."*<sup>7</sup>

In the Christian story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the saving power of sacrificial love is fully revealed. But sadly in our Muggle existence even those who are heirs of God's Kingdom put their faith in the efficacy of human power.

Rowling has created a wonderful fantasy world. In a remarkable feat she imagines a world that, unlike Middle Earth and different from Narnia, is parallel to and yet intersects with our world. In this way it captures the scientific theory that there are worlds interacting with ours of which we are unaware. It's also a fascinating source of reflection about how we as Christians might live "in the world" but not be "of the world". And of how the story of death and life, dying and rising, failure and triumph - in other worlds the Christian story - might become attractive in a post-modern world.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Wyman, "You Can Lead a Fool to a Book but You Can't Make Them Think: Author Has Frank Words for the Religious Right," *Vancouver Sun* (October 26, 2000). Quoted in Carrie Birmingham "Harry Potter and the Baptism of the Imagination" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8 (2), pp. 199-214. (2005)

<sup>2</sup> John Granger "Looking for God in Harry Potter" p133 see also note on p201.

<sup>3</sup> Carrie Birmingham "Harry Potter and the Baptism of the Imagination" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8 (2), pp. 199-214. (2005)

<sup>4</sup> John Granger "Looking for God in Harry Potter" Tyndale, 2004 page 2. This is a very helpful book by a teacher of English Literature.

<sup>5</sup> "I've never wanted to be a witch, but an alchemist, now that's a different matter. To invent this wizard world, I've learned a ridiculous amount about alchemy. Simpson, Anne. "Face to Face with J K Rowling: Casting a spell over young minds," *The Herald*, 7 December 1998

<sup>6</sup> "The Philosopher's Stone" p216

<sup>7</sup> "The Order of the Phoenix" p743