

Can 35 Million Book Buyers Be Wrong? Yes.

By Harold Bloom
Wall Street Journal, 7-11-2000

Taking arms against Harry Potter, at this moment, is to emulate Hamlet taking arms against a sea of troubles. By opposing the sea, you won't end it. The Harry Potter epiphenomenon will go on, doubtless for some time, as J. R. R. Tolkien did, and then wane.

The official newspaper of our dominant counter-culture, The New York Times, has been startled by the Potter books into establishing a new policy for its not very literate book review. Rather than crowd out the Grishams, Clancys, Crichtons, Kings, and other vastly popular prose fictions on its fiction bestseller list, the Potter volumes will now lead a separate children's list. J. K. Rowling, the chronicler of Harry Potter, thus has an unusual distinction: She has changed the policy of the policy-maker.

Imaginative Vision

I read new children's literature, when I can find some of any value, but had not tried Rowling until now. I have just concluded the 300 pages of the first book in the series, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," purportedly the best of the lot. Though the book is not well written, that is not in itself a crucial liability. It is much better to see the movie, "The Wizard of Oz," than to read the book upon which it was based, but even the book possessed an authentic imaginative vision. "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" does not, so that one needs to look elsewhere for the book's (and its sequels') remarkable success. Such speculation should follow an account of how and why Harry Potter asks to be read.

The ultimate model for Harry Potter is "Tom Brown's School Days" by Thomas Hughes, published in 1857. The book depicts the Rugby School presided over by the formidable Thomas Arnold, remembered now primarily as the father of Matthew Arnold, the Victorian critic-poet. But Hughes' book, still quite readable, was realism, not fantasy. Rowling has taken "Tom Brown's School Days" and re-seen it in the magical mirror of Tolkein. The resultant blend of a schoolboy ethos with a liberation from the constraints of reality-testing may read oddly to me, but is exactly what millions of children and their parents desire and welcome at this time.

In what follows, I may at times indicate some of the inadequacies of "Harry Potter." But I will keep in mind that a host are reading it who simply will not read superior fare, such as Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows" or the "Alice" books of Lewis Carroll. Is it better that they read Rowling than not read at all? Will they advance from Rowling to more difficult pleasures?

Rowling presents two Englands, mundane and magical, divided not by social classes, but by the distinction between the "perfectly normal" (mean and selfish) and the adherents of sorcery. The sorcerers indeed seem as middle-class as the Muggles, the name the witches and wizards give to the common sort, since those addicted to magic send their sons and daughters off to Hogwarts, a Rugby school where only witchcraft and wizardry are taught. Hogwarts is presided over by Albus Dumbeldore as Headmaster, he being Rowling's version of Tolkein's Gandalf. The young future sorcerers are just like any other budding Britons, only more so, sports and food being primary preoccupations. (Sex barely enters into Rowling's cosmos, at least in the first volume.)

Harry Potter, now the hero of so many millions of children and adults, is raised by dreadful Muggle relatives after his sorcerer parents are murdered by the wicked Voldemort, a wizard gone trollish and, finally, post-human. Precisely why poor Harry is handed over by the sorcerer elders to his priggish aunt and uncle is never clarified by Rowling, but it is a nice touch, suggesting again how conventional the alternative Britain truly is. They consign their potential hero-wizard to his nasty blood-kin, rather than let him be reared by amiable warlocks and witches, who would know him for one of their own.

The child Harry thus suffers the hateful ill treatment of the Dursleys, Muggles of the most Muggleworthy sort, and of their sadistic son, his cousin Dudley. For some early pages we might be in Ken Russell's film of "Tommy," the rock-opera by The Who, except that the prematurely wise Harry is much healthier than Tommy. A born survivor, Harry holds on until the sorcerers rescue him and send him off to Hogwarts, to enter upon the glory of his schooldays.

Hogwarts enchants many of Harry's fans, perhaps because it is much livelier than the schools they attend, but it seems to me an academy more tiresome than grotesque. When the future witches and wizards of Great Britain are not studying how to cast a spell, they preoccupy themselves with bizarre intramural sports. It is rather a relief when Harry heroically suffers the ordeal of a confrontation with Voldemort, which the youth handles admirably.

One can reasonably doubt that "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" is going to prove a classic of children's literature, but Rowling, whatever the aesthetic weaknesses of her work, is at least a millennial index to our popular culture. So huge an audience gives her importance akin to rock stars, movie idols, TV anchors, and successful politicians. Her prose style, heavy on cliché, makes no demands upon her readers. In an arbitrarily chosen single page--page 4--of the first Harry Potter book, I count seven clichés, all of the "stretch his legs" variety.

How to read "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone"? Why, very quickly, to begin with, perhaps also to make an end. Why read it? Presumably, if you cannot be persuaded to read anything better, Rowling will have to do. Is there any redeeming education use to Rowling? Is there any to Stephen King? Why read, if what you read will not enrich mind or spirit or personality? For all I know, the actual wizards and witches of Britain, or America, may provide an alternative culture for more people than is commonly realized.

Perhaps Rowling appeals to millions of reader non-readers because they sense her wistful sincerity, and want to join her world, imaginary or not. She feeds a vast hunger for unreality; can that be bad? At least her fans are momentarily emancipated from their screens, and so may not forget wholly the sensation of turning the pages of a book, any book.

Intelligent Children

And yet I feel a discomfort with the Harry Potter mania, and I hope that my discontent is not merely a highbrow snobbery, or a nostalgia for a more literate fantasy to beguile (shall we say) intelligent children of all ages. Can more than 35 million book buyers, and their offspring, be wrong? Yes, they have been, and will continue to be for as long as they persevere with Potter.

A vast concourse of inadequate works, for adults and for children, crams the dustbins of the ages. At a time when public judgment is no better and no worse than what is proclaimed by the ideological cheerleaders who have so destroyed humanistic study, anything goes. The cultural critics will, soon enough, introduce Harry Potter into their college curriculum, and The New York Times will go on celebrating another confirmation of the dumbing-down it leads and exemplifies.

"Besotted With Potter"

William Safire

New York Times 27 Jan 2000

The British have just upheld the side of adult culture in the English-speaking world. They resisted the pressure to award a top literary prize to J. K. Rowling for her superselling series of Harry Potter books. Instead, the top honor again went to the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, this time for his translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic "Beowulf."

That was a relief. With the orphan wizard dominating best-seller lists, the Harry Potter phenomenon needs a little perspective.

These are children's books. Their glory is that their hero's magical charm has captivated a world of kids, inculcating the reading habit in pre-teens who otherwise would be seduced into interactive games of mayhem. Getting children to read is no small blessing, and Rowling has provided them with a key to literacy.

These are not, however, books for adults. Unlike "Huckleberry Finn" or "Alice in Wonderland," the Potter series is not written on two levels, entertaining one generation while instructing another. Rather, it is in the category of Tom Swift and Dr. Dolittle; I was hooked on reading by them, but have laid aside my electric rifle and no longer talk to horses.

The trouble is not that children are being lured into belief in witchcraft, as some tut-tutting clerics complain; Western civilization has survived Merlin's magic in the tales of King Arthur. Nor will poor children be corrupted by tales of life in upper-middle-class English boarding schools.

The trouble is that grown-ups are buying these books ostensibly to read to kids, but actually to read for themselves. As Philip Hensher warns in the Independent newspaper, this leads to "the infantilization of adult culture, the loss of a sense of what a classic really is."

Scholarly tomes will be written about the underlying motifs of the Potter series, justifying its adult readership. Steven Spielberg will slip a little social significance into his movie treatment, further furrowing academic brows. But this is not just dumbing down; it is growing down. The purpose of reading, once you get the hang of it, is not merely to follow the action of a plot, but to learn about characters, explore different ideas and enter other minds.

"Huckleberry Finn" is a classic because it used the device of a boy's coming of age to illuminate a nation's painful transformation. When Lewis Carroll took us through the looking glass, he dealt with madness and injustice in this world by mocking a parallel world. Critics delight in annotating the allusions in such books.

Not in "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." That's the one I read, noting its nice deployment of the standard tricks. I also enjoy short films, featuring anthropomorphic porcine cartoon characters, that end with "Th-th-th-that's all, folks!" But prizeworthy culture it ain't; more than a little is a waste of adult time.

That's why my hat is off to Jerry Hall, the intelligent Texan and mother of four, divorced from Mick Jagger, who still sort of lives with her. She is reported to have cast the swing vote on the judging panel for Seamus Heaney. That Nobel laureate accepted the \$35,000 prize with a line from "Beowulf," "Fate go ever, as fate must" (a somewhat fatalistic response). The Guardian headline: "Heaney pips Harry Potter."

It's about time Potter was pipped (narrowly defeated). His creator, Ms. Rowling, deserved the lesser award she received for best children's book. But let us not exalt Potter, either, as a cultural icon. Adults make a part of their lives only the works that have meaning.

Remember Dorothy in her transforming ruby slippers in "The Wizard of Oz"? Frank Baum's book, cemented into our culture by the 1939 Victor Fleming movie starring Judy Garland, was a children's fantasy, complete with a Wicked Witch of the West, but dealt deftly with heartlessness, mindlessness and cowardice.

Its symbols became part of our culture. Munchkins presume to advise candidates following the yellow brick road to power, and behind the curtain we discover that the fearsome wizard of bombast is only a frightened Frank Morgan. For adults, Harry Potter may reign over the best-seller lists, but he has yet to heave his philosopher's stone over the rainbow.