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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

Magic within the Mayhem: the Multi-genre Success of *Harry Potter*

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Citation:

Kelly O'Brien: Magic within the Mayhem:the Multi-genre Success of Harry Potter. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2009. Volume 5 Number 1.

The success of the *Harry Potter* novels relies heavily on its “box of chocolates” kind of charm—author J.K. Rowling's genius of giving the reader a taste of everything literary, from fantasy to myth and even the classic school story to mention a few of the numerous genres she draws from. Many wonder if Rowling possesses the same sort of magic as her leading wizard character due to her mysterious abilities of pulling children away from video games and television sets and introducing them not only to the *Harry Potter* series, but other great works of fantasy from writers like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis; this has become evident with the addition of a special children's section to the *New York Times* Bestseller List in relation to the direct, immediate, and overwhelming response of readers in terms of book sales (Byam 7). Speaking of which, children are not the only ones reading these magical fairy-tales—adults pore over them unabashedly and may even, perhaps, discuss the adventures of Harry, Ron, and Hermione at the proverbial water cooler. J.K. Rowling's talent as a writer of children's fiction is not magic or luck but just...talent; she is precise and methodical in her way of weaving these stories together and delighting readers of any age or personality that comes her way. Rowling illustrates this point with her careful selection of characters; Declan Kiberd observes in “School Stories” that Rowling could foresee that a male leading character with a female sidekick would better suit all children than the other way around, “but [Rowling] was careful to show that Hermione is far more learned and clever than Harry, despite his bravery and imaginative

capacity” (68), which gives female readers reason to read it *and* something to cheer about. And as Anne Hiebert Alton is quick to point out in “Generic Fusion and the Mosaic of *Harry Potter*,” “...all three of the main protagonists appeal to readers: Everyone can either identify with or knows someone like brainy Hermione, faithful and funny Ron, and orphan Harry” (143). But superb characterization cannot be the only reason that keeps so many different kinds of people up at strange hours of the night trying to wrap up those last few hundred pages, wondering if Harry saves the day, and pleading for one more page at the completion of each book. As Professor Trelawney demands, “Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 105). Once past the mundane (whatever that may be), it is quite obvious that the secret to J.K. Rowling's success is almost as hard to pin down as a mountain troll or even a house elf, but most wands seem to point to the fusion of so many genres.

The very first trait one notices about the *Harry Potter* novels is the pure and simple fact that they are series books, which the cover sort of screams at the reader with titles such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. For those who are not quite destined to win a Nobel Prize, the idea that the stories will relate to one another in some fashion (with this Harry chap fitting in *somewhere*) is blissfully obvious: nothing pleases an audience, especially children, more than to know where a story will go and where it has been. As Alton notices, the popularity of series books “suggests a certain desire for predictability that series books provide with similar plot structures and style” (146), which is a very logical way of looking at it because as readers delight in recognizing something that feels familiar, they are then able to focus on the new ideas and stunning details that Rowling introduces. But Alton goes further saying, “This repeated structure reassures readers of a happy ending while allowing them to experience the vicarious enjoyment of adventure, drama, and danger” (146). The other major characteristic of series novels is the journey of the characters through their ups and downs, ordinary and extraordinary events, change—basically, growing up. In the first two books, the reader witnesses Harry, Ron, and Hermione begin school at Hogwarts as energetic pre-adolescents, who worry about friends, school, and Quidditch (except perhaps Harry, who worries more about being murdered); in *the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *the Goblet of Fire*, the trio focuses on the importance of family with the near loss of several of the Weasleys (Ron's family) and the actual loss of Harry's uncle and godfather, Sirius; *the Order of the Phoenix* and *the Half-Blood Prince* relate the excitement and heartbreak of young love, yet Harry, Ron, and Hermione realize that they will always be there for each other. As Alton reports, “Since the middle of the twentieth century, long after the glorification of innocent childhood by such poets as Wordsworth...the growth from childhood to adulthood has been regarded as a loss rather than

a happy progression” (148). But as the reader progresses through the series and grows along with Harry (or reminisces about such growth), he or she triumphs in his successes and empathizes with his hardships because Rowling enables the reader to see that the characters gain something by growing up, so nothing is lost. As C.S. Lewis wisely comments, “A tree grows because it adds rings: a train doesn't grow by leaving one station and puffing on to the next” (“Writing for Children” 3). It is true that writing a series for children is almost always problematic in this way; as Victor Watson suggests, “It is a bold series-writer who proceeds beyond this point, for to do so must challenge the great...assumption that the *potential* adulthood of the young is more charismatic than *achieved* adulthood” (qtd. in “Generic Fusion” 148). Luckily, J.K. Rowling knows what she is writing about.

Another rather significant genre J.K. Rowling tackles without breaking a sweat is fantasy. As Richard Barbieri comments, “If jazz is a uniquely American art form, fantasy is almost exclusively the property of the English” (“Wizardry at Work” 1). It is true that most of the great fantasy writers overflow with strong English heritage: C.S. Lewis, the Brontes, A.A. Milne, Kenneth Grahame, and C.L. Dodgson— the list goes on and on. Clearly, these artists have greatly influenced Rowling's work because *Harry Potter* is first and foremost a work of fantasy: not many people wander into wizards on a daily occurrence or travel through fireplaces by floo powder on their commute to the office. But Lev Grossman reports from an interview with the grandmaster of fantasy that she was completely ignorant to the fact that she had written a fantasy novel until after publishing *the Sorcerer's Stone*; Rowling comically admits, “You know, the unicorns were in there. There was the castle, God knows. But I really had not thought that that's what I was doing...[because] I'm not a huge fan of fantasy” (“Hogwarts and All” 1). E. Nesbit (who Rowling commonly cites as her biggest influence) is probably rolling in her grave at such news, but Rowling redeems herself somewhat by clarifying that it is the sentimentality about children in fantasy (especially C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* novels, which many compare to *Harry Potter*) that gets her wand in a knot (“Hogwarts and All” 2). It is almost too good to be true that Rowling did not recognize the fantasy in her own books because the best fantasy is that which sneaks by the reader's sensibilities and makes it all seem so real. Steven Barfield concurs in “Fantasy and the Interpretation of *Harry Potter*” saying, “The world of the fantastic...must be our familiar world; it is the events that occur in it that require the reader or character to hesitate between explanations as to their origins” (27). J.K. Rowling adheres to this principle with incredible fervor when focusing on the creation of the wizarding world: she covers school systems, social hierarchy, government in the form of the Ministry of Magic, magical technology, and even the invention of magical currency. Thanks to Rowling, most children understand the important knowledge that there are twenty-nine Knuts in a Sickle and seventeen Sickles in a Galleon...well, maybe not most children, but as Alton explains, “The fantasy appears in the

details..." (155) and "tells us things we never knew but...make perfect sense once we learn them" (Barbieri 3). Kerrie Le Lievre brings up an interesting idea that *Harry Potter* does not just belong in the fantasy genre, but the subgenre of wainscot fantasy, such as Mary Norton's *Borrowers* and Terry Pratchett's *The Carpet People* ("Wizards and Wainscots" 25). In wainscot fantasy, two cultures exist simultaneously: the dominant culture (the large, mundane world in which the reader belongs) and the wainscot culture (small, fantastic, and invisible to the dominant culture). This is phenomenal because it is essentially the entire structure of J.K. Rowling's books—Hogwarts, the Muggle world, and how the two interact with Harry in the middle. In the series, Rowling identifies the wizarding world as a wainscot culture as soon as Hagrid introduces it to Harry:

"But what does a Ministry of Magic *do*"

"Well, their main job is to keep it from the muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone." (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* 65)

Ann Swinfen comments on the formula for success in fantasy saying, "Writers have had to learn the lesson that in the creation of a secondary world it is no less necessary than in the description of the primary world to keep closely to the intrinsic reality of the created world, to observe a scrupulous inner consistency...to obtain utmost 'realism'" ("The Perilous Realm" 230). Rowling captures her audience with the drab, hopeless, all-too-real life with the Dursleys and contrasts it with Harry's entrance into the Technicolor, wonderland of the wizarding world, and by the end of each book, the audience finds themselves suddenly realizing, "Harry, I don't think we're in Surrey anymore." Alton agrees with this reasoning for J.K. Rowling's success saying, "The ability to combine fantasy and reality is one of Rowling's greatest strengths, and she makes it effortless for readers to invoke their willing suspension of disbelief" (155)—yet she also subverts the genre. Rowling explains bluntly, "Harry goes off into this magical world, and is it any better than the world he's left? Magic does not make his world better significantly. The relationships make his world better. Magic in many ways complicates his life" ("Hogwarts and All" 2). Rowling realizes that good fantasy "tends to question the prevailing world-picture by asking just now fantastic our notions of reality are and creating alternatives to what we think of as the real world" (Alton 156). Fantasy can be difficult to understand and almost impossible to produce in its truest form, but it is also one of the most enveloping forms of literature because, as Swinfen remarks, "Fantasy engenders an extraordinarily enhanced perception of the world, which is so often only imperfectly grasped until a shock is given to the

senses by the introduction of the marvelous” (234). Rowling is the master of the necessity of reality in fantasy because every child has that tiny spark of belief that some day they, too, will receive their letters to Hogwarts; unfortunately, the closest most will come is writing about it.

In *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Thomas Hughes proclaims “It is a toast which should bind us together and to those who've gone before, and who'll come after us here. It is the dear old school-house—the best house of the best school in England” (qtd. in “Safe as Houses” 125). Ah yes, no one could forget those blissful days of school...then again, maybe a few could fail to remember. Declan Kiberd presents his view of the school system declaring, “That prison-house is, of course, school itself...which, by calibrating progress from year to year, measures the degree of socialization, before marking the moment of final access to adult codes” (55). Many wonder which viewpoint an author should take on such a delicate matter of childhood, but J.K. Rowling finds a happy medium yet again by focusing more on the triumphant camaraderie and successes schools (especially boarding schools) provide with a sprinkling of empathy for its hardships as well. After all, everyone experiences the bullies, loathing of certain teachers, and the subjects that just cannot be mastered in school, but one lives for the moments when he or she gets picked first in kickball, receives a great score on a test, or laughs so hard that a liquid of some sort comes shooting out of one's nose. According to Maria Nikolajeva, “In boarding school novels...the plot revolves around ‘ordinary’ adventures: lessons, homework, sports, celebrating the first and last day of school, competition among dormitories, mischief, forbidden outings to off-bound places...” (“*Harry Potter— a Romantic Hero*” 131). Rowling really finds her niche in the depiction of this natural sequence of life; Karen Manners Smith concurs that *Harry Potter* is a “classic boarding school fantasy, complete with dodgy food, sadistic teachers, bullies, and unshakeable loyalties” (“*Harry Potter's Schooldays*” 70), and she explains, “It is so reassuringly familiar...fantastical on the one hand, but on the other, quite conventionally domestic in its depiction of childhood experience” (70). Steven Barfield points out that “Rowling's Hogwarts is much more like a modernized, mixed-sex version of traditional boarding school and learning magic is based on a recognizable version of the school curriculum” (“*Fantasy in Harry Potter*” 25); he comically adds, “Professor Snape's potions class...is the much feared chemistry lesson in disguise” (25). Alton contributes, “The depth of description devoted to the classes is a...tendency that traditional school stories have of ignoring the academic part of schooling, but [in *Harry Potter*] the details add to the enjoyment” (151). This is one of the simplest yet most important aspects of the school story, or any form of children's literature, because children need to be able to connect with the characters and the environment of a story in ways that relate to their lives in order to find any enjoyment in it whatsoever. Nikolajeva comments, “...these everyday elements dilute the heroic nature of our hero, making him more like us, the readers” (131). Harry is such a loveable character because

he is the underdog-hero, who still blunders through his mistakes just like everyone else. But Kiberd argues, "It is the fact that school stories deal with ideals which explains their perennial effect not just to the young, but also to the vast numbers of adult readers who saw in them a projection of their own ideal self-image" (58). In Harry's case, it is clear he possesses both qualities: he is easy to relate to, yet readers live vicariously through him as he catches each Golden Snitch, wins the Triwizard Tournament, and hexes the school bullies...on occasion. Kiberd also points out, "Part of the appeal [of the school story is] of a world that never changes... [because] children who, growing very fast, love things that remain the same..." (58). This theory is quite obvious in examination because in *the Sorcerer's Stone*, the reader learns that a witch or wizard must complete seven years of schooling at Hogwarts (hence seven books) as well as Harry's repetitious returns into the wizarding world with each school year, so the reader can find comfort in knowing the general structure of the novels. Another obvious trait the *Harry Potter* books possess is their placement in the subgenre known as the boarding school story. This adds an interesting twist to the common school story because the parents do not play a significant role (if any at all) in the children's lives, which is a familiar theme in many children's books. Smith recounts, "American middle school children...reported that, in addition to loving the magic and wizardry of the books, they were fascinated by the fact that Harry and his friends went to a boarding school" (69)—most likely because they would be free from parental authority. But as Kiberd indicates, "...unlike most boarding schoolers, Harry is not just temporarily deprived of his parents, but orphaned forever" (68), which seems to be J.K. Rowling's way of emphasizing the importance of family and never to take them for granted. Rowling explains the attraction for boarding schools saying, "No child wants to lose their parents, yet the idea of being removed from the expectations of parents is alluring. There is something liberating, too, about being transported into the kind of surrogate family which boarding school represents, where the relationships are less intense and the boundaries perhaps more clearly defined" (qtd. in "Harry Potter's Schooldays" 69). And perhaps, as Smith suggests, most children "realize that they have not the slightest chance of experiencing the reality [of boarding schools] and are thankful, with the more rational part of their minds, that they have not" (69) because even though the students at Hogwarts do not have to worry about cooking or laundry (thanks to magical house-elves), they do have to work through tough issues like loneliness, quarrels, responsibility—in essence, they have to grow up on their own and at a much faster rate than most children. Rowling's school stories contain other bits of guidance as well, which are cleverly hidden in the "natural" personalities of the characters. Nikolajeva comments that "adult co-readers may find Harry quite satisfactory as a model for children: he is humble, well-mannered, respectful...almost a perfect English gentleman" (130). Although Harry is more than just a good guy, this works perfectly with the common formula for the hero of a school story. Of course, many of Rowling's characters fulfill an "educational" purpose:

Hermione's love of academia, safety, and rules; loyal Ron's bravery and self-sacrificing ways for others; even the negative exemplar of Draco Malfoy as the bully with family problems. The most towering figure in this category, however, is Professor Dumbledore. Dumbledore is the perfect messenger for these morals and lessons because it is in his job description and his natural personality to teach these things to all of the children but especially to Harry because Dumbledore is the only one suitable enough to look after Harry. As Smith notes, "...Dumbledore's messages are about character and morality...a sage advisor for the child of any belief system" (79). Thankfully, not everything in *Harry Potter* is so serious; Rowling manages to parody certain elements of the school story, such as the stuffy, self-important prefects (Percy Weasley) and the overweight, snobbish, conceited antihero (Dudley Dursley), which questions what lessons are being taught at these prestigious academies (Smith 83). Rowling surprises many critics with her adherence to conformities of the school story in certain circumstances and her complete disregard for them in others. Smith informs, "Frequently found among the hero's friends in classic school stories is a pair of identical twins, often practical jokers whose activities provide both comic relief and confusion..." (77); if that does not describe the Weasley twins to perfection, nothing else will. Going back to the other side of the spectrum, Rowling breaks all the rules by adding a girl (Hermione) to the classic, boys' school series (Smith 75). But the most significant and traditional element to which Rowling pays homage is "the epic treatment of the war between good and evil, and the notion of a special child ear-marked... [for an] unknowable greatness" (Kiberd 69). This is what *Harry Potter* is about—"the Boy Who Lived" (*the Sorcerer's Stone* 17) and who has to save the world about seven times...

Many would normally be quite right in assuming that a story about a teenage English boy who vanquishes the same arch nemesis in each book is bound to be a huge "yawn fest," but J.K. Rowling creates such mind-boggling twists and turns along the way that one nearly forgets about Harry's "impending doom" with the evil forces of Lord Voldemort at the end of the novels, which places the series squarely in the adventure genre in this instance. Alton further explains, "Adventure plots tend to be fast-paced, heavy on dialogue and description, and maintain a buoyant and optimistic tone throughout, even though the hero at times may be tempted to give in to despair..." (156). The audience knows that Harry will save the day as usual, yet they are still creeping towards the edge of their seats as the book intensifies, praying that their favorite characters (not to mention Harry, *knock on wood*) do not die with the cautious completion of each page, and almost screaming for Harry to use the shield charm while Hermione and Ron countercurse the enemy, and for heaven's sake, would someone just shove Neville Longbottom out of the way?! (One can imagine how people can get carried away...) But the "typical adventure hero overcomes the odds and wins the battle against his adversaries" (Alton 156), and the reader can then give a small sigh of relief—Rowling does not

always return to blue skies, however.

As the books progress, Rowling makes each adventure a little more serious than the last and, especially in books four through six, tends to sacrifice an important character (schoolmate Cedric Diggory, Harry's godfather, Sirius, and Dumbledore) to bring the level of suspense and danger to even greater heights. Rowling does allow the reader to settle his or her nerves somewhat with the resolution of each school year—as soon as the evil forces have been temporarily conquered. Alton concurs, “The climax of the adventure story...generally arises from the theme of honor preserved against the dangers of intrigue, betrayal and the clash of loyalties” (157). Rowling also keeps the reader on his or her toes by infusing each adventure story with so much mystery. After all, how much fun can a person *really* have in defeating the enemy if the enemy's identity and location are already known? Nikolajeva observes, “In each novel, [Harry] must solve a mystery using his wits, courage, defiance, curiosity, deduction ability, and, not least, physical dexterity” (131), but it is important to note that Ron and, especially, Hermione are always by his side to help him solve each case, and the traditional element of children's mystery novels helps Harry out quite a bit as well. Nikolajeva explains that these mystery novels “empower the protagonists by letting them be smarter than the adults, to succeed where real detectives fail, and to happen to be at the right place at the right moment” (130). It is rather suspicious how Harry and Ron manage to find and open the Chamber of Secrets when Dumbledore, who is said to be the greatest wizard in the world, could not manage it; but then again, children want to read about someone like themselves outsmarting everyone instead of an incredibly old professor, who probably should have been able to do it in the first place. Unlike most children's mystery novels, Rowling blends these elements in almost seamlessly until the reader would be surprised if Hermione did not know the answer or if Ron did not happen to stumble upon the right secret door. Alton mentions that Rowling's elements of mystery also evoke “the audience's prejudices, which works quite well in relation to both Rowling's creation of the Dursleys and her assumption that most readers will be as offended by Draco Malfoy's anti-Muggle sentiments as Harry, Ron, and Hermione” (145); these prejudices ultimately lead to the audience's misguided accusations as to who the *real* culprit is in each book (until Rowling proves everyone right with the revelation of Snape's true character in *the Half-Blood Prince*), which is a supremely ingenious ingredient for success because it gets the reader involved in the story. Just as there would be no sport in defeating an easy target, even less would exist when reading about it.

As Harry embarks on these “quests” to find and defeat the enemy, the intelligent reader becomes aware of certain patterns (like Harry's unbelievable talent for getting out of scrapes), which are explainable only through the fairy-tale motif. Nikolajeva comments, “Indeed, Harry's triumphant ascent from his oppressed position in the Dursleys' home to fame, perpetual

riches, and his privileged existence at Hogwarts is an easily recognizable fairy-tale pattern” (128), which is appropriate for children because it reflects a child's growth from underdog to independent and strong (Nikolajeva 128). But Elaine Ostry notes that Harry, “would never have been able to [succeed] without helpers and luck, which generally attend the fairy-tale hero” (“Accepting Mudbloods” 97). Where would Snow White be without the Seven Dwarfs? Cinderella would probably still be taking orders from her wicked step-sisters (and in such a horrible dress, no doubt) without the help of her fairy godmother and the luck of misplacing a silly shoe. The same is true for Harry: Ron and Hermione lift him up in such a way that no one could doubt that he is the hero, whose purpose is far greater than their own. When Harry tries to convince Hermione that she is a much more talented witch than he is a wizard at the end of *the Sorcerer's Stone*, Hermione scoffs, “Books! And cleverness! There are more important things...” (287). Nikolajeva supports Ostry's statement saying, “...fairy-tale heroes normally have helpers possessing stronger powers than they do, without whom they would not be able to achieve their goals” (127). Again, Hermione's intelligence plays an enormous role in the triumph and safety of the trio; without Hermione, Harry and Ron would not have made it past their first year at Hogwarts. Ron provides ample amounts of street smarts, like an unbelievable talent for chess (which does, oddly enough, propel them onward to save the Sorcerer's Stone); he also boasts gargantuan amounts of loyalty: when all else fails, and even Hermione is temporarily “unavailable” due to some catastrophe, Ron is still standing strong next to Harry and ready for the next blow. Harry's role, on the other hand, becomes a bit muddled due to J.K. Rowling's complex characterization. As a fairy-tale hero, Harry is destined for better things (Ostry 98), but Ostry also states that Harry “is essentially a static character...” (97). Harry tells Ron and Hermione that he will never join the dark side, and readers believe him, so “the books rest on [this] image of Harry as inherently virtuous” (Ostry, 97). Ostry delves deeper saying, “There is no real doubt about his character; while his friends develop, he is stuck in the role of the fairy-tale hero. No wonder Ron is jealous” (98). Yet the reader is not quite so jealous...maybe Harry's family tragedies play a role in the reader's sympathy for him, or perhaps the audience loves his rather unassuming ways, but Ostry believes, “Despite his heritage, Harry is strongly characterized as an ordinary boy...” (97), which may attest to the true reason children look up to Harry and do not have the strong sensation to shove him into something hard. But as Ostling mentions, “...Rowling's books describe, not the extraordinariness of the ordinary, but rather the ordinariness of the extraordinary” (3). Rowling twists the common fairy-tale by adding elements of disenchantment to its world. Ostling observes, “Magic [in *Harry Potter*] is a skill which may be learned—not through ritual, initiation, or the transmission of charismatic power, but rather through book-learning, homework, practice, and regular tests” (4). Instead of magic that relies entirely on special powers of the person, Rowling favors the type that can be attained through practical and rational mastery (Ostling 4). This is an

invaluable lesson for children because it subtly shows them that they can achieve almost anything with hard work and determination. As Ostry notes, “Children's literature in general and the fairy tale in particular reflect this double agenda to amuse and instruct” (89). Yet children still find joy in reading these tiny lessons because “the familiar fairy-tale motifs add to this cozy feeling [of domestic writing], and the delight in seeing them is compounded by the adult reader recognizing the [fairy-tale stories] of youth” (Ostry 98). It appears that even adults need to re-learn a few lessons from fairy-tales now and again.

It is without doubt that readers of any age or sex look to Harry more than any other character in the series as a model for life lessons; it is with a rather large commonality that readers feel a very strong connection with Harry in terms of personality, personal struggles, and emotional responses—but why? Yes, Harry is the hero, and J.K. Rowling creates him to be the central character for such purposes, but it is the romanticism of Harry's role that grabs the reader. Harry fits the mold in many ways, and as Alton suggests, “...Harry is approaching the romantic hero's characteristic of being analogous to the deliverer or mythical Messiah, just as Voldemort is akin to the Satanic destroyer” (158). Nikolajeva supports this statement saying that Harry “bears the mark of the chosen on his forehead, and he is—although unaware of this himself—worshipped in the wizard community as the future savior” (137). Perhaps Rowling's audience is drawn to such a god-like figure who will always give them a happy ending. “The premise for the romantic child hero...is based on the belief in the child as innocent and, therefore, capable of conquering evil” (Nikolajeva 128). Nikolajeva shifts focus saying, “...the appeal of Harry is exactly that he is not a hero of the Superman caliber, but an ordinary clumsy and bespectacled boy” (139). Harry is curious, disobedient, and not the most outstanding student—he is extremely average in these regards (Nikolajeva 139). Apparently, *Harry Potter* fans love this aspect of Harry, too: Harry is like them in many ways, yet he can also do extraordinary things, which gives readers hope that great things will happen for them. Rowling recognizes the need for an ordinary aspect in Harry, and as Nikolajeva explains, “...the child hero is brought back to the ordinary, sometimes being explicitly stripped of the attributes of previous power...” (128), so it is no coincidence that Harry has to return to the Dursleys (a place totally void of magic and the people he loves most) each year. It is also no accident that Harry is an orphan. Paige Byam explains, “The orphan has audience appeal because he or she is alone in the world and has often suffered great trauma; the reader thus usually sympathizes with the character and roots for him or her” (“Children's literature” 9). Nikolajeva comments, “A child deprived of his or her birthright is one of the most common mythical and folktale motifs...the romantic convention will, however, suggest to the reader that the weak and the oppressed will be empowered and returned to their proper position...” (137). Harry's return to the wizard community conforms to this mythology, including his gradual empowerment into his parents'

positions of saving the world. "In a way, Harry is a hero...we would like to be, but know we can never be—not because we are not born into a rich family or do not have Einstein's IQ or Cindy Crawford's looks but simply because we recognize the conventions of the genre" (Nikolajeva 139). In even simpler words, Harry Potter is just a really great character.

It is clear that the *Harry Potter* series is relatable to almost every literary genre under the sun: series novel, fantasy, (boarding) school story, adventure, mystery, fairy-tale, and the romantic hero—not to mention the plethora of others that have yet to be dreamt up. Alton claims:

By fusing the genres in this way, Rowling has created something new: a generic mosaic made up of numerous individual pieces combined in a way that allows them to keep their original shape while constantly changing their significance...and [interpretation] at any given time by any given reader. (159)

Kiberd agrees, "...it is really in [Rowling's] imaginative combination of so many disparate elements of previous children's literature that the brilliance of the Harry Potter conception may be found..." (67-68). Rowling not only hits each literary genre on the mark but also manages to delight adult readers as well. Lisa Damour observes, "Grown-ups can enjoy Harry Potter because they *do* remember what it was like to be eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen and take pleasure in recognizing and reliving a time when they were preparing to leave childhood behind" ("Magical Looking Glass" 16). Rowling also provides escape for adolescents and role models for young children with such superb characterization and attention to detail that one feels as if Hogwarts is a real place and Harry, Ron, and Hermione are good friends one can visit on occasion. The *Harry Potter* books make people feel special, and as Alton asks, "...how much more 'special' can one be than to be admitted into a world filled with like-minded people who have talents above and beyond the real world?" (143). But Alton stumbles upon one of the truest reasons for the success of *Harry Potter*, which is the "sense of wonder that results from [the reader's] repeated experience of 'knowing the place for the first time'" (159). And with so many genres to discover, readers will find millions of "first times" within the pages of *Harry Potter*.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my freshman Honors Children's Literature professor, Dr. Germaine Murray, for encouraging me through the difficult writing process of this paper and to both Dr. Murray and my Honors advisor, Dr. Linda Pitelka, for helping me throughout the publication process.

About the Author

I am currently a junior Physical Therapy student at Maryville University. Despite my major, I thoroughly enjoy reading and writing about literature, especially the *Harry Potter* novels, one of my absolute favorite series of books.

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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482