

## Harry Potter Book Review

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*John W. Fawcett*

The recent craze over the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling has not only been omnipresent in the popular media, but has also captured the attention of the evangelical world as well. Wheaton College professor Alan Jacobs, along with others, has written in *First Things* and *Books & Culture* praising Rowling's engaging writing and has tended to underplay concerns about the books' influence on the moral imagination of children. Having read all four of the Harry Potter books to date, I believe that ultimate judgment on the outcome of the series must obviously await its completion. Already, however, one can discern the broad outlines of Rowling's worldview, and it is definitely a mixed one. Though she intends to set up a conflict between good and evil, her outlook is gnostic, and therefore any positive principles one may derive from her narrative are always mingled with confusing and misleading ones.

In the first place, Rowling's books serve as a virtual catalogue raisonné of the language and practices of the occult--spell-casting, potions, necromancy, conjuring, etc. The world of Harry Potter is not the closed system of the scientist, but the permeable universe of the pagan. And since Rowling's stories are seductively appealing, they invite the transgression of holy boundaries against the occult by humanizing it, taming it, perhaps even civilizing it.

A child who follows Harry Potter's curriculum at Hogwarts will find it a short step from there to the metaphysics bookshelf at the local Borders. And what sort of metaphysic will he find there? A supernatural one, certainly, but by no means a Judeo-Christian one. In Potter's world magical forces compete against one another as equally matched sides of the same coin. Good and evil sit poised on opposing ends of the plank, balanced on the fulcrum of the human will.

Insofar as Rowling acknowledges good and evil and the importance of choice, she shares a common set of values with believers who reject the materialism of modernity. But her dualism has more in common with the "dark side of the force" of Star Wars than it does with the cosmic conflicts of the Book of Revelation. Hers is a form of gnosticism, and like all gnosticisms, it is eclectic and slippery. So while her characters celebrate Christmas and learn some valuable lessons in courage, they also enjoy extended conversations with the ghosts of the departed and learn to conjure spirits. It is not because these practices are purely imaginary that they are dangerous (as the modern critic might assume), but because they are so real. Rowling's domesticated paganism may appear harmless in itself, but she creates imaginative inroads whereby the more serious article may be encountered.

What then, one might ask, differentiates Rowling's use of magic from that in works by Lewis, Tolkien, and MacDonald? Chiefly, I would suggest, the fact that the latter employ magic within the context of an ordered universe in which evil is bounded by the structural limits of natural law and the goodness of creation. Think, for example, of Lewis's "magic from before the dawn of time" that thwarts the White Witch's attempt to destroy Aslan, or

Tolkien's Valar who intervene to limit the power of the decadent Numenoreans. By contrast, Rowling's world lacks moral consistency, since even the magic that she does employ fails to conform to a rationally ordered cosmology. For example, if her characters' bevy of magical powers were to be unleashed simultaneously, sheer chaos would result.

Perhaps more seriously, Rowling's characters often play roles that contrast sharply with their appearances, i.e., what looks like evil is not always so; nor is what appears good always trustworthy. Granted, there is frequently enough data to identify "the good and bad guys," but at key points Rowling's lesson seems to be that some pretty shocking creatures can turn out to be not so bad. This, one might argue, could encourage sophisticated moral reasoning on the part of children, as we all must indeed learn to set aside first impressions and allow reality to unfold in all of its ambiguity.

But there may be a less benign message at work. Are Rowling's readers not actually being encouraged to accept the contemporary divorce between appearance and reality, and thereby to devalue the importance of external actions? Isn't there a theological mixture lurking somewhere here, where the lines between good and evil actually intertwine at some higher plane? There is at least something profoundly unsettling about Rowling's appropriation of the terminology of witchcraft that renders it unsuitable for incorporation into a Christian moral framework. (Recall the burning of the sorcerers' scrolls in Ephesus recounted in the Book of Acts.)

Alan Jacobs has pointed out that some Christian reactions to Harry Potter tend to ignore the parallel dangers to a Christian worldview that exist within a purely scientific and technological approach to nature. In this he is undoubtedly correct. However, one must not ignore the dangers of gnosticism in one's haste to deplore scientism. In reality, the evangelical fascination with Harry Potter reveals the failure of the evangelical imagination to distinguish between the moral universes that underlie the works of truly Christian authors such as Lewis, Tolkien, and MacDonald from those of authors such as Rowling and Ursula LeGuin. Could it be that in reaction to having inherited an intellectually arid and sacramentally barren form of the Christian tradition, evangelicals are now vulnerable to embracing anything that assuages their thirst for symbolic realities more profound than those given them through Enlightenment modernism?