

# What's Harry Potter Doing in the Library?

## Depictions of Young Adult Information Seeking Behaviour in Contemporary Fantasy Fiction

Jennifer Burek Pierce

Assistant Professor

Indiana University School of Library & Information Science  
Indianapolis, U.S.A.

*This paper uses qualitative, textual analysis of selected prominent contemporary young adult fantasy stories. These books – Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Artemis Fowl, and Garth Nix's Lirael – in addition to creating captivating magical worlds, also depict a part of our every day world in their use of libraries as settings (in the case of Harry Potter and Lirael) and the use of computers for information seeking (as seen in Artemis Fowl). These images are examined for their portrayal of library use and other information seeking behaviours.*

*'I don't know about no book. . . . You want book, go to library.'*

– *Artemis Fowl* (Colfer, 2001)

### Introduction

What do adolescents do with information? How do they obtain facts and ideas needed to make decisions? Where do they go to find information? What sorts of problems lead young people seek information? These questions form the substance of a developing field of scholarly research in information seeking. Simultaneously, though drawing less attention from researchers, these matters are depicted in fictional narratives of young adult life.

Fiction for young adults has experienced a sort of renaissance in recent years, with librarians, editors, and booksellers alike concurring on the vitality of contemporary youth literature. The attention garnered by this literature includes kudos for a number of prominent works of fantasy fiction. These stories, represented in part by the works of Garth Nix, Eoin Colfer, and J. K. Rowling, have won both critical and popular acclaim. Honours for Nix's *Abhorsen* trilogy include the Aurealis Award for Excellence in Australian Science Fiction for *Sabriel* (Scholastic Profile), for which *Abhorsen* is currently shortlisted as a 2003 contender as well (Aurealis Awards). Not only are Rowling's Harry Potter books amassing incredible sales figures, they routinely appear on prominent lists of recommended titles for young readers, as is the case currently with *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* making the ALA/ALSC list of 2004 Notable Children's Books (ALA/ALSC). Similarly, while the *Artemis Fowl* series sees impressive sales figures, its books also make awards lists such as the 2001 British Book Awards Children's Book of the Year, among others (Eoin Colfer's Web Page; *Artemis Fowl*). These commercial and critical distinctions signal the merits of this young adult fiction and encourage scholarly attention to their content.

Further, there is the conventional fantasy fiction plot that sees the young magician working toward mastery of magic. This learning process may involve a range of approaches to achieving competence as a mage, including use of spell books and of libraries which archive magical lore. Libraries and the information sources they provide, then, are integral to this genre.

Thus these books, in addition to creating captivating magical worlds, also depict a part of our every day world in their use of libraries and computers for information seeking. Information-seeking behaviour, both in and outside of the library, is integral to the of the plots of these significant works of contemporary young adult fantasy fiction. In addition to Harry's night-time visit to the restricted section of the library, he and others are shown studying in the Hogwarts library. The trio of Harry, Ron and Hermione make efforts to locate information on topics ranging from alchemist Nicholas Flamel, plants with magical properties, and spells to allow them to assume others' identities in the many pages of this series. Garth Nix's critically acclaimed and best-selling Abhorsen trilogy comes to centre on Lirael, the second-assistant librarian who prowls the depths of the Clayr's library in search of adventure and identity. In a much more contemporary vein, the award-winning *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer features a Net-surfing, computer-savvy teen whose ability to manipulate information exceeds that of every other magical or non-magical being in the story.

Many critics agree that fantasy fiction is not without connection to the real. For our purposes, this tendency may be best demonstrated by scholarly responses to Rowling's work, which are accumulating, though not at the same rate as her sales figures, at a somewhat breathless pace with at least one full-length monograph dedicated entirely to studies of her writings. It has been observed that fantasy literature, such as the Harry Potter books, operates in a sort of liminal space (Turner, 1974) somewhere between pure invention and the world inhabited by its readers. As Cockerell writes, "Rowling suggests the existence of witches and wizards in the world we inhabit here and now" and "She has abandoned the realm of high fantasy and laid her story in contemporary England" (2002, p. 15). Similarly, in writing about the series, Natov states that "The two realms, characterised in literature as the genres of romance and realism, are located in the imagination, which is, always, created by and rooted in the details of everyday life" (2002, p. 129). The facets of everyday life captured in Rowling's narratives range, according to scholars, from race and class issues (Westman, 2002) to public education (Booth & Booth, 2003). A number of similar themes occur in the novels by Colfer and Nix. In each story, the central characters respond to the pressures and the uncertainties of their adolescence through a range of information-seeking activities.

The images created by these three authors are examined for their portrayal of library use and other information-seeking behaviours, in order to assess relationships among these depictions and existing scholarly literature on images of libraries and young adult information seeking behaviours, arriving at conclusions about the nature of these portrayals. The question, then, is what are these fictional young adults doing in their respective libraries? And what is the relationship between those information-seeking behaviours and the ones taking place in the real world? Three key areas of the research on adolescent information-seeking – the imposed query, the pursuit of life-related information queries, and the processual nature of inquiry – offer perspectives from which to consider the information-seeking activities of selected fictional youth. Because of the conditions of information seeking and the places where information resides, the nature of the information-seeking behaviours engaged in these depictions in turn holds implications for identity and selfhood.

### Information seeking: Imposed queries, self-imposed queries and the self

One significant condition under which adolescents seek information is what has come to be known as the imposed query (Gross, 1995; Gross, 2000). This type of inquiry is differentiated from a self-generated query in that the user is thought to possess less understanding and ownership of the information need. According to Gross, "When a user presents a self-generated question, even if it is not perfectly articulated, the user will know many things about the context from which it sprung" (2000, p. 10). The imposed query, however, results both from and in different information-seeking conditions. On the one hand, the imposed query is defined simply as a condition in which "People . . . seek information on behalf of others" (Gross, 2000, p. 10). More complexly, though, the question type referred to as the imposed query includes school work assigned to youth (Gross, 2000). Gross, then, represents the imposed query at least in part as an information-seeking condition in which youth subordinate their own interests to demands created by those in positions of authority or responsibility for the youths' learning. In this framework for inquiry, youth neither originate the inquiry nor possess full interest in solving the problem that they represent in their information-seeking activities. In this case, the imposed query represents a condition of inquiry in which the seeker is envisioned as self-effacing and even somewhat disengaged. There is potential in the descriptions in the literature on the imposed query to see the seeker as a sort of pawn in a negotiation between other parties (namely, the assigning instructor and the librarian or information intermediary), someone whose sense of self is not invested in the learning process.

A further point of the literature on adolescent information seeking involves youth interests in information that addresses the concerns of their lives, which range from careers to contraception and controlled substances. This attention to what young people do in order to obtain answers not only to school questions, but also to extracurricular ones, results in a literature which is mixed in multiple senses. There are, variously, indications that materials with the potential to meet adolescent information needs are available (e.g., Gross, 1997), that information seekers often do not perceive libraries and related information intermediaries as connected with those needs (Julien, 1999; Poston-Anderson and Edwards, 1993), and that there is nonetheless some usage of collection material on these concerns (Pierce, 2003).

The motivation for research is a significant point of comparison between empirical and fictional information-seeking activities. The three protagonists of these fantasy stories are distinguished in part by their self-determined pursuit of information. These youth do complete homework assignments and use libraries as study centres – for example, Harry and his comrades are repeatedly shown completing their lessons in the Hogwarts library – but the questions which drive them, serving to advance the plots of these stories, are the ones which they come up with themselves. While external forces figure in generating the conditions which require these protagonists to acknowledge and articulate their information needs, the protagonists determine whether, and often how, to pursue the facts and concepts to resolve their dilemmas.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, any number of significant characters independently seek to satisfy their information needs. Hermione Granger demonstrates a precocious pursuit of information that extends beyond any academic demands. In the earliest instances in which her character features in the story, Hermione indicates a strong motivation to acquire information. When she meets Harry for the first time on the Hogwarts Express, she informs him, "I know all about you, of course -- I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and

*Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*” (Rowling, 1997, p.132). This display of knowledge is followed by her critique of Harry for not being aware of these same resources and their biographical treatments of him: “‘Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me,’ Hermione said” (Rowling, 1997, p.132). In conversation, Ron demonstrates knowledge of current events through newspaper reading (Rowling, 1997, p.133), and when the trio studies in the library at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry they encounter Hagrid “‘jus' lookin’” around the stacks as well (Rowling, 1997, p.229). In other words, it is not atypical for characters in this novel to obtain information for their own purposes.

Despite Hermione's chiding of Harry as uncurious, he likewise possesses an interest in information resources. Before leaving the Dursleys, he has begun to explore his textbooks which, because they are "very interesting," leave Harry "reading late into the night" (Rowling, 1997, p.110). Once he arrives at Hogwarts, it is not long before he runs into trouble with Professor Snape due to his extracurricular reading of *Quidditch Through the Ages* (Rowling, 1997, p.181-82). There is also his determined pursuit of information on the mysterious Nicholas Flamel, whom Harry and his friends regard as the key to the cryptic goings-on at Hogwarts. Once Harry possesses the invisibility cloak, his choice of destinations is the library and his goal is information:

*Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library. He'd be able to read as long as he liked, as long as it took to find out who Flamel was (Rowling, 1997, p.205).*

While Harry is also depicted in the library to do homework or feeling resistant to the demands of his studies, the significant features of these episodes is their self-determined nature. He reads and researches not only because homework is assigned, but also because he wants answers to questions he is developing about the circumstances in which he finds himself.

Nix's Lirael is another character motivated by curiosity to independent exploration for information. Lirael, who chooses to become a lowly assistant librarian in the Great Library of the Clayr, finds not only refuge from her troubles, but also great pleasure in exploration of the library. Even before Lirael is appointed to work in the library, she exhibits a sense of its information resources. Looking for a way out of the misery of what she perceives as an inability to fulfil her destiny, Lirael wants a particular kind of magic spell, which forces her to reflect:

*But she wouldn't find that in the school texts, her workbook of Charter Magic, or the Index of Charter Marks, both which lay on a desk a few paces away. She'd have to search the Great Library for such a spell, and that sort of magic would be locked away by charm and key (Nix, 2001, p.32).*

Once Lirael is assigned to work in the library, these advanced spells are in places far beyond the range permitted by the limited magical access she is provided with in order to do her job. She turns her attention to figuring out the magic which restricts and permits access to the library's many venues, not because the task is assigned to her, but because of "curiosity" and the inherent interest of the "intellectual exercise" (Nix, 2001, p.88). Once she learns to command the access spells, though, Lirael abandons the notion of a limited task of learning unauthorised spells in favour of exploration of the depths of the library: “But there were so many interesting doors, hatches, gates, grilles, and locks that she couldn't help but wonder

what was behind them" (Nix, 2001, p.88). In this observation of the library's features, one hears Lirael's rationalisation of her efforts: it is not, after all, the doors and locks that are curious, it is that the character who spies them is strongly inquisitive in her own right.

As one might expect, the explorations of the library go awry, leaving Lirael with a new problem to resolve, which we will discuss rather obscurely to save as much of the story as possible for those who have not read this far with us. That said, rather than reveal her skills by asking for aid, Lirael pursues research that will allow her to confront the threat on her own. This is no simple pursuit; instead, it involves seventy-three days of reading, consulting a minimum of eleven reference works. Serendipitously, as Lirael is temporarily focused on another information problem, she finds the vital information she needs: "Flicking through the pages without expectation, her eye was caught by an engraving that showed exactly what she was looking for" (Nix, 2001, p. 131). Thus, this character is one with a range of information interests, whose ultimately interconnected pursuits provide answers to her questions. While there are external motivators in this story, such as the particular danger in the recesses of the library, Lirael opts to seek information to address challenges, rather than turning the problems over to someone who might readily possess the information and the resources involved in finding solutions. As such, she exhibits the characteristics of a self-determined inquisitor.

Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* is likewise a rather self-possessed adolescent, perhaps a necessary condition for a character described as a criminal mastermind. While he, unlike Harry and Lirael, is a fully human child, he is a rather atypical youth. Colfer describes Artemis as "a child prodigy" who speaks "with the authority and vocabulary of a powerful adult" (Colfer, 2001, pp.1, 5). Artemis further differentiates himself from other fantasy characters in his use of computers, rather than libraries, as tools of inquiry. This character is "a pale adolescent" because "Long hours in front of a computer screen had bleached the glow from his skin" (Colfer, 2001, p.5, 2). Even these physical descriptors, relaying his advanced vocabulary and interest in computers, suggest something of Artemis's self-determined pursuit of information.

The story offers other indicators of Artemis's efforts in pursuit of the information. He wants a fairy text, and he has pursued this search steadfastly. Readers are told that "Artemis's search had begun two years previously when he first became interested in surfing the Internet" (Colfer, 2001, p.18). When faced with a translation problem in the guise of a text which "seemed almost to be actively resisting him," Artemis's determination is unflagging, resorting to analysis using multiple programmes and even examination of hard copy – "Sometimes it helped to have things on paper," we are told (Colfer, 2001, p.23). Artemis's pursuits have resulted, as one character informs another, in a "ten-gigabyte file" with Interpol (which translates "in paper terms" to "half a library") (Colfer, 2001, p.123). Artemis, then, reflects another character driven to significant risks in pursuit of information goals that he has set for himself. His efforts to obtain an understanding of fairy culture confirm Artemis's sense of his ability to master information. He notes to himself when ideas align, when the "few consistent facts [of] his research" (Colfer, 2001, p. 6) work in conjunction with observed features of those phenomena; for Artemis, though, information discoveries are not simply pleasing, as he pursues knowledge in the aim of seeing that "the Fowls would be great again" and a "new empire would rise, with Artemis Fowl the Second at its head" (Colfer, 2001, p.14). Admittedly, then, this character is acutely sensitive to the idea that knowledge, as the saying goes, is power, and he is interested in the ways in which the resulting power of information will help re-define him.

Adaptive use of technology to address information needs shows in other aspects of Artemis's interactions as well. Artemis monitors the news for word of his father's return via a CNN Web site projected onto a wall in his workroom (Colfer, 2001, p.30). When words fail him during a confrontation with elf captain Holly Short, Artemis reflects on how information technology could prevent any such future lapses: "It was a woefully inadequate response, and Artemis was instantly appalled with himself. . . . He really would have to put together a database of witty responses for occasions such as this" (Colfer, 2001, p.216). These even more personal dimensions of Artemis's information needs illustrate the way he endeavours to use information resources to meet the uncertainties of his young life.

The ordinary concerns of these fictional characters deviate somewhat from those expressed by the youth who visit our libraries. Yet, their investigative patterns offer some parallels to research findings on adolescent information-seeking behaviour. What is distinctive about the fictional representations of information seeking is that interpretation of these texts suggests the primary motives for these characters' investment in information seeking: in each story, the character's quest for information is intrinsic to issues of being and identity. The imposed query, on the other hand, figures less prominently. In seeking information, then, these characters learn about themselves.

### **More than magic: Discovery processes for self and information, too**

Self-discovery is normally regarded as a process, and a significant model for information seeking emphasises aspects of the process. Kuhlthau (1993) articulates a model of the processual nature of information seeking as enacted by adolescents. Adolescents' work to uncover information occurs as "a series of thoughts, feelings, and actions" characterised by "patterns" of behaviour and reflection (Kuhlthau, 1993, p.170). Some features of this process include uncertainty and abstract conceptions of the information that can clarify the problem under investigation. Again, the actions and the reflections of characters in these stories reveal both significant departures as well as similarities in process models for adolescent information-seeking behaviours. Each character pursues a particular information objective, but there is variance in the degree and the nature of uncertainty regarding the process by which the needed information can be obtained.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry could be understood as pursuing multiple information needs. Because he was raised among Muggles only to be revealed as an important figure in wizard history, Harry begins his life at Hogwarts with three readily identifiable major questions. He needs to know how to function in the world of wizardry and magic which he has learned is his birthright. Additionally, having learned that his parents did not die as he had been led to believe, Harry wants to know more about them; it could be argued that he pursues this need through his visits to the Mirror of Erised. This approach to searching, however, is corrected by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore who warns that the mirror "will give us neither truth nor knowledge" and that it is likewise impossible to ascertain whether "what it shows is real or even possible" (Rowling, 1997, p.265). It is difficult to tell whether Harry pursues these questions in any systematic way, beyond his recurrent visits to the mirror. He is shown at his relatives' house, perusing his school books as he waits for the term to begin. He observes others' behaviour at the rail road station to determine who knows how to find the mysteriously numbered platform. In short, he investigates, but his investigations are impaired, not only by his lack of resources, but also by his lack of knowledge about how to find and use relevant information tools. There is also the larger question, or related questions, concerning Nicholas Flamel, Fluffy the guard dog's

charge, and whether evil is afoot. Harry ultimately connects these questions with his efforts to understand the circumstances of his life and his parents' deaths. With these matters Harry engages more systematically, using library resources, for example, with his friends to uncover the identity of Flamel.

Lirael, disturbed by her apparent failure to develop the magical power of foresight which constitutes both identity and vocation the rest of her community, looks to the library as a place where she can develop her own interests and assuage her feelings of failure. As a repository for both magic and magical lore, the library provides chosen and unwanted learning opportunities for Lirael. While she is preoccupied by feelings of disconnection and inferiority, she develops and pursues intellectual interests, such as creating a companion in the Disreputable Dog and defeating powerful monsters. She works through the puzzles of magical charms, and she reads the library's holdings in pursuit of particular facts. Yet the arrival of the Disreputable Dog leads Lirael on a series of less structured explorations which ultimately provide her with the information she needs to understand her identity and to assume her role in society.

Artemis seeks not his place in society, but the ability to manipulate social information for his own ends. In this he makes sustained efforts over the course of a two-year period to locate and interpret information artefacts, using computers and even travelling to sites that promise to offer the information sought. His searches that uncover the fairy text and its secrets, in conjunction with his ability to apply its concepts in combat with fairy militia reveal an eerily logical and structured approach to resolving an information problem, makes his searches atypical, even when compared to those of other fantasy narratives.

For the most part, these characters develop strategic approaches to some information problems. Despite their reluctance to consult librarians or other information intermediaries, they achieve at least partial success through their own efforts to understand the problems that confront them. As these characters internalise ideas and approaches to locating information, they demonstrate increasing sophistication in applying what they have learned to new queries and searches.

### **Who's afraid of snapping books? Information resources and intermediation**

While these protagonists search for information using at least some of the resources and tools with which librarians are associated, the resources and the strategies that they use to meet their information needs are not always traditional ones. The matter of why these adolescent characters choose, at critical moments, avoid either libraries, librarians, or both is another dimension in understanding these representations of information-seeking behaviours. While images of the librarian and of the library have been analysed in any number of contexts, libraries as depicted in popular culture receive critical attention as sites of fear, as places where stereotypes are enacted – generally, as repositories for a host of negative perceptions (Radford & Radford, 2003; Radford & Radford, 2001; Radford & Radford, 1997). Further, Radford & Radford present the idea that the library “guards and controls discourse” (1997, p.260) and librarians serve as “gatekeepers” (1997, p.261).

It is certainly true that libraries are not always presented as kindly places in the Harry Potter stories. The first reference to libraries in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* occurs in a description of Harry's solitary state among the Dursleys: “He had no friends, no other relatives – he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books

back" (Rowling, 1997, p.34). This only reference to a library's basic regulatory function of ensuring the return of borrowed materials is characterised as being conducted in a demanding and unpleasant manner. Later, when Harry purchases his supplies for Hogwarts, the image of the library is invoked again as he enters Ollivanders' wand shop: "Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of questions that had just occurred to him . . . For some reason, the back of his neck prickled" (Rowling, 1997, p.102). That Harry feels unable to ask questions in a place which reminds him of a library and which also is regarded as offering clues to his destiny – "The wand chooses the wizard, remember. . . . I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter," the shop's proprietor tells him – signal that there are barriers to this fictional adolescent's use of the library as an information resource.

These are among a number of descriptions in the Harry Potter stories that characterise libraries and their contents in ways that are other than welcoming. Sometimes violently animated books "quiver," "snap," and "scuttle" in (Rowling, 1999, p.12-13). A bookstore scene reveals the trouble with books in Harry's world – not only do they bite, they disappear, and some have contents which are "enough to frighten anyone to death" (Rowling, 1999, p.52). It perhaps should not surprise us then that Harry discovers his crucial clue not in an aggressive book or the Hogwarts library, but on the back of a trading card (Rowling, 1997). Often the library and book-related incidents in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* align with Radford & Radford (1997) in the presentation of libraries as negative and rule-bound institutions, but interestingly, it is seldom the librarian who perpetuates such negative perceptions.

Although Lirael willingly adopts librarianship as a profession, there are indications that it is not an uncomplicated choice. Lirael asks to be assigned to the library because it is to her "the logical place where she could avoid people the most" (Nix, 2001, p. 73). Her request is one to be evaluated carefully, because, as she is told, "The library . . . can be dangerous to a girl of fourteen" (Nix, 2001, p.73). When Lirael reports for work, she learns something of the reason for this statement. Not only is the head librarian an intimidating presence, the library is an unpredictable, even hostile place:

*According to her superiors and co-workers, it was not uncommon for librarians to lay down their lives for the benefit of the Clayr as a whole, either in dangerous research, simple overwork, or action against previously unknown dangers discovered in the Library's collection (Nix, 2001, p.101).*

Even for someone who sees the library as a refuge and later reminisces about its "strict discipline and chain of command" (Nix, 2001, p.587), then, it is not a risk-free environment.

In keeping with his status as an evil genius, Artemis seems to recognise that extant resources may not meet his needs but ably adapts resources to his purposes. While the fairy, whose text he borrows tries to divert him with the disclaimer, "I don't know about no book. I am a healer. You want book, go to library," Artemis relies most often on his own information technology rather than on someone else's (Colfer, 2001, p.11). Descriptions of Artemis's technology-savvy manipulations reveal his ability to use digital technology to capture, manipulate and store information. The depictions of his interactions with information include making back-up files and storing them in different locations. As the narrator observes, "Artemis preferred not to take chances with information" (Colfer, 2001, p.14). For Artemis, this avoidance of chances seems to involve reliance on multiple technologies and trusted associates over others whose trustworthiness he has not verified.

In each story, then, traditional sites and resources for information seeking are somewhat alien places, associated with danger, unpleasantness or both. At the same time, these novels depict adolescent information seeking as related to issues of identity development, with characters involved in one or more efforts to find knowledge and ideas that will enable them to understand issues of self-determined importance. In these activities, the protagonists of these fantasy works also establish their relationships to the larger communities in which they participate: Harry wants to understand his past and his relationship to the world of wizardry, Lirael wants to become a true daughter of the Clayr, and Artemis hopes his acquisition of fairy lore will help him achieve world domination and maybe the return of his parents.

For characters who actively strive to forge relationships with their societies as they develop their mature identities, the library and its anti-social associations sometimes seem ill-suited to the information endeavours at hand. Just as fantasy fiction represents a sort of liminal space, the library in these works fills a similar function, storing the knowledge of the community but not truly operating as a place where community members are welcomed. As such, it is not always a receptive place for the fictional adolescents on the pages of these books. While the characters might need information resources, when the place that houses those tools and represents its intermediaries is cast in not only in negative terms, but ones which distance it from the rest of the community, it is inevitable that even fictional adolescents will find themselves, with Ron and Harry, "looking longingly out of the library window" (Rowling, 1997, p.229).

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### *Author note*

Jennifer Burek Pierce is assistant professor of library and information science at Indiana University's Indianapolis campus. She is the editor of *Indiana Libraries* and the Grassroots Reports columnist for *American Libraries*. She wishes to thank colleagues who read early versions of this paper, particularly Herb Snyder, for their insightful comments.