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In Defense of Harry Potter: An Apologia

Nancy Flanagan Knapp

University of Georgia, USA

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books are arguably the most popular series ever in children's fiction, but also one of the most controversial. Repeated challenges have led some schools and libraries to remove or ban the books, with even more choosing to avoid problems by simply recommending or using other books. This article presents evidence that Rowling's books should be kept, used, and recommended in libraries and schools because they exemplify three essential qualities of great children's literature: they are intensely engaging; they have significant literary worth; and they raise questions of deep significance to children's social and ethical development.

As I wrote this article, the movie *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* had just finished an outstanding premier weekend, setting a new record by grossing £9.8 million in Britain and Ireland, scoring the third-best opening weekend ever in the United States by pulling in $87.6 million (topped only by *Spiderman* and the original *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), and taking in $54 million more in seven other key world film markets (Potter conjures, 2002). After book sales that captured the top three slots on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for a tediously long time in 2000 (the first time any author has ever accomplished this feat, and rumored to be the reason the *Times* finally split off a separate Children's List on which two of the Harry Potter books still hold places in the top five), it seems clear that millions of children and their parents are just as anxious to see the movies as they were to read the books. The series is arguably the most popular ever in children's fiction, yet it is also one of the most controversial.

One of the earliest conflicts arose in the US, in Zeeland, Michigan, where the superintendent of schools forbade teachers to read Harry Potter books aloud to their classes because of their positive references to witchcraft, and a self-named group of "Muggles[1] for Harry Potter" campaigned successfully to lift the ban (Censorship, 2001). By the middle of 2000, 25 school districts in 17 states had challenged the books, and they had been at least temporarily banned in schools in Kansas and Colorado (Jones, 2000). In 2001, 60 Seventh-Day Adventist schools in Australia had banned the books (Schools ban, 2001), and in December that year, the pastor of a New Mexico church ceremonially burned them, claiming they were "a masterpiece of Satanic deception" (Goldberg, 2002). In February 2002, the books were banned for school use in the United Arab Emirates (Emirates ban, 2002). Perhaps most tellingly, the series has led the American Library Association's "most challenged books" list for the last three years, 1999-2001.

There is evidence that because of these challenges, some teachers and librarians are now shying away from using or recommending the Harry Potter books (Censorship, 2001). Perhaps they sympathize with some parents' concerns about the "witchy" props in the stories: the spells, the potions, and the pointy black hats. Or in a form of self-censorship, they may be tempted to avoid problems by simply recommending less controversial materials. Yet I believe these books have too much to offer our children for us to set them aside or, worse, restrict children's access to them. In fact the Harry Potter books exemplify three qualities I see as essential to great children's literature: they are intensely engaging; they have significant literary worth; and they raise questions of deep significance to children's social and ethical development.

They are intensely engaging

Great children's books must first of all appeal to children. Children read most what they like best, and the more we can encourage children to read, the better readers they will become. Gamoran, in a 1986 study, found that the strongest predictor of elementary children's reading achievement was simply the number of words they had read over the year. This relationship also holds true for second-language learners (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). As Krashen and McQuillan (1997) said, "those who read more read better, write better, spell better, and develop better grammatical competence and larger vocabularies" (p. 410). Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) concluded that student engagement is the mediating factor through which classroom instruction must operate. Yet students often have trouble finding books they like in our classrooms and school libraries (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Kim and Krashen (2002) found that the most common reason sixth graders gave for not liking to read was that books were "boring." Low-income students in particular may have little access to engaging books (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Studies have consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between students' reading achievement and the availability of good, engaging books in the school library (Hopkins, 1999; Krashen, 1995; Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; McQuillan, 1996). Books that entice children to read are perhaps our best allies in the effort to help them become fluent, lifelong readers.

The Harry Potter books meet and exceed this first standard. Children are not just attracted to these books, they are fascinated by them. When the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Rowling, 2000), was finally released after an unanticipated delay, children lined up in thousands at bookstores all over the US waiting to get their copies at the stroke of midnight on the release date. A *New York Times* survey in April 2001, estimated that almost 60% of US children ages 6-17 had read at least one Harry Potter book (Race, 2001). A less formal survey of both children and adults found that over 50% of respondents had read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*,

including readers from age 7 to 62, and "everyone who read the book liked it" (Wood & Quackenbush, 2001). Nor is the books' popularity limited to the US. Comber and Nixon (2001) collected reviews from students in South Africa and India, which included comments like, "It is the best book I ever read, and I look forward to reading the rest of them," "I really enjoy Harry Potter. His popularity in South Africa is unbelievable. Most of my classmates have read all four [books]," "It's really interesting, and I never wanted to put it down," and "Kids from all over the world are reading Harry Potter because it is very imaginative and fun." In mid-2001, the series still dominated the fiction best-seller lists in Germany and several South American countries, and by spring 2002, they had sold more than 100 million copies in 44 languages worldwide (Opar, 2002).

Although readers young and old find them intensely absorbing, no one could accuse the Harry Potter books of being a "quick read." They range from 309 to 734 pages long;[2] a child who has read all four books even once (and many have read them repeatedly) has read a total of 1,819 pages. This sheer quantity of reading, more than four times the number of pages in most basal reading texts intended to be read across an entire school year, can contribute significantly to young readers' developing skill and fluency, as well as their motivation to read. Books like these that can attract even reluctant readers to read at such length and with such enthusiasm can greatly help us toward our goal of increased literacy for all children.

They have significant literary worth

But engagingness is only the first criterion we should consider in choosing books to recommend or teach to children. We need children's books that are not just interesting, but also well written; great children's books are also quality literature. Again, the Harry Potter books more than meet this criterion, whether judged by the numerous literary awards they have won or measured directly against the most accepted standards in the field of children's literature.

A plethora of awards

The first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*,[3] was the winner of a 1997 National Book Award in Britain. It also won the 1997 Gold Medal "Smarties" prize for ages 9-11, an award given by the Youth Libraries Group each year to the most outstanding children's book published for each age group in Britain. In the US, it was selected as an ALA Notable Book and a Publisher's Weekly Best book of 1998. *Parenting Magazine* gave it the Book of the Year Award for 1998, and the New York Public Library chose it as a 1998 Best Book of the Year. Later books in the series have done equally well, capturing the Gold Medal Smarties award again in 1999 and 2000, and making *Phi Delta Kappan*'s 2000 list of 10 must-read books for teachers' summer reading (Books for, 2000). In a crowning achievement, Rowling's fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, won the coveted Hugo award

for the best science fiction/fantasy novel of 2001 in competition with the best of both children's and adult fiction in the field that year.

Measuring up to the Newbery standards

The American Library Association awards the Newbery award each year to the author(s) of the single "most distinguished contribution to American Literature for children," based on adjudged excellence in "interpretation of theme or content, presentation of information.... development of plot, delineation of characters, delineation of setting, and appropriateness of style" (ALA). Because Rowling is not a citizen or resident of the US, the Harry Potter books have not been eligible for this most prestigious American award for children's literature. However, examining these books more closely in the light of the Newbery standards clearly demonstrates that their other awards are not the fruits of mere popularity. Because these books do not purport to present information, and theme is treated in detail in the next section of this article, here I discuss only criteria related to plot, setting, style, and characterization.

Plot. For those (few) who have not yet read the books or seen the movies, Harry Potter is a seemingly ordinary boy who lives a miserable life with the Dursleys, his cruel aunt and uncle and their obnoxious son Dudley. When Harry is 11 years old, he receives a magically delivered invitation to attend the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and thus discovers that he is himself a wizard. He learns that his parents, also wizards, were murdered by the evil Lord Voldemort when Harry was just a baby. Voldemort, whose very name most other wizards are still too terrified to speak, had also attempted to kill the infant Harry. However, his spell mysteriously backfired, and he vanished, leaving Harry with a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead and no relatives except the Dursleys, who ever since have resented his existence, lied to him about his parents' deaths, and unremittingly attempted to stamp out the "taint" of wizardry in him. Despite the Dursleys, Harry does go to Hogwarts, where he learns to use the talent born within him.

Following this pattern, each book in the series tells the story of one of the years Harry spends at Hogwarts, and in some ways they are classic English school stories. Each year, Harry struggles with the difficulties of lessons and the vagaries of teachers such as Professor Binns, a ghost who teaches the boring History of Magic, and Madame Trelawney, the Divinations teacher, who revels in disastrous foretellings and premonitions of doom. Harry makes friends, including Hermione Granger, the class brain, and Ron Weasley, youngest boy in the red-haired, impecunious Weasley family; copes with bullies, most notably the smooth but detestable Draco Malfoy; and enjoys athletic triumphs as Seeker on the school Quidditch team. In other ways, Harry's story is anything but ordinary, for in each book he must face and overcome Voldemort, who is determined to return to full life and once again dominate and terrorize the wizardly world. Each time, Harry barely defeats

him, not through any great brilliance or talent or even luck, but through a sort of dogged holding to what is right, a bravery that, as Dumbledore says at the end of the first book, "is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle ... again and again" (*Stone*, p. 298).

As might be guessed of books that so many people have found "impossible to put down," the plots are well-crafted and tightly knit, with few loose ends. Moreover, the series develops as a coherent whole, with minor events in early books foreshadowing elements central to the plots of later books, and a variety of ongoing and engaging subplots, including Hermione's struggle to grow up both as a woman and a "brain," the playing out of Mr. Weasley's hazardous fascination with Muggle "artifacts" like cars and electric plugs, and, more darkly, the gradual revelation that Draco Malfoy's father and other wizards who had publicly repented of their support of Voldemort many years ago may still secretly be working to bring him back to power. Perhaps the best testimony to Rowling's skill at plotting is the sustained and vocal impatience of her fans, who are on tenterhooks to find out "what happens" in the long-overdue fifth book, scheduled for release in the US on June 21, 2003.

Setting. Hogwarts' School, the nearby village of Hogsmeade, and the whole of the wizardly world, with Quidditch matches played on broomsticks and wand shops and travel by floo powder and the goblin-run Gringott's bank, which Rowling has imagined as existing unnoticed side-by-side with our own less magical world, forms a rich and believable background to her stories. She has described this world in lavish and loving detail to the delight of her readers and of those who have seen it faithfully reproduced in the two Harry Potter movies released so far. A good example of her creative skill is the following passage from *The Sorcerer's Stone* describing Harry's first glimpse of Diagon Alley, the wizards' main market street in London.

> Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles an ounce, they're mad."
>
> A low soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium—Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. "Look, " Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand—fastest ever—" There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments that Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon. (pp. 71-72).

And, of course, there are Rowling's mouthwatering (if slightly alarming, to grown-ups at least) descriptions of the wizardly candy available for purchase at the fabled Honeydukes in Hogsmeade:

> There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering pink squares of coconut ice, fat honey-colored toffees; hundreds of different kinds of chocolate in neat rows; there was a large barrel of Every Flavor Beans, and another of Fizzing Whizbees, the levitating sherbert balls Ron had mentioned; along yet another wall were "Special Effects" sweets: Droobles Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-colored bubbles that refused to pop for days), the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps ("breathe fire for your friends!"), Ice Mice ("hear your teeth chatter and squeak!"), peppermint creams shaped like toads ("hop realistically in the stomach!"), fragile sugar-spun quills and exploding bonbons. (*Azkaban*, p. 197).

Style. The facility and appeal of Rowling's writing style can be seen from the passages quoted above. In addition, her stories are classic examples of the fantasy genre, with all the characteristics that Bucher and Manning (2000) suggest teachers should look for in selecting fantasy books for their students. There is consistency in the fantasy world; it has its own rules or "laws of nature," which are not arbitrarily broken. There are also restraints, limits to what can be done even through magic; as Harry finds out to his grief, "No spell can reawaken the dead" (*Goblet*, p. 697). And the stories are in their way realistic, rooted in concerns common to our everyday world and the foibles, fallibility, selfishness, and incredible courage of our common human nature. Believability and originality of description are demonstrated above, and theme is discussed at length below.

Characterization. Rowling's characters are one of the strongest features of her books. A few, indeed, are flat, recognizable stereotypes. For example, the Dursleys are greedy, rude, and revolting, without redeeming qualities—close kin to the repellent family in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Draco Malfoy and his sycophants Crabbe and Goyle are likewise one-sided portraits of the bullies we all detested and suffered under in school. Even Headmaster Dumbledore, one of my personal favorites, is just a bit too good, wise, and foreseeing to be truly human. Rather, he embodies the same "old wise one" archetype as Tolkien's Gandalf and does so just as successfully.

But most of Rowling's characters are delightfully human and realistically complex. For example, Hagrid is first introduced to us as the huge, bumbling gamekeeper at Hogwarts, with "an unfortunate liking for large and monstrous creatures" (*Chamber*, p. 249), like the giant three-headed dog he fondly calls "Fluffy," the baby dragon he names Norbert, and the giant spider Aragog he raised in a dormitory cupboard, the cause of his expulsion from Hogwarts as a student many years ago. But Hagrid is also brave, protecting Harry and his friends when they enter the Forbidden Forest, and an unswervingly loyal friend to Harry. In the fourth book, *Goblet of Fire*, we

learn that Hagrid has struggled all his life against the stigma of being a half-giant, but at Dumbledore's behest, is now willing to contact the Giants openly and try to make common cause with them in opposing the newly resurrected Voldemort. Hagrid shows both wisdom and resolution in the final chapter when he says:

> Knew he was goin' ter come back.... Known it fer years, Harry. Knew he was out there, biding his time. It had ter happen. Well, now it has, and we'll jus' have ter get on with it. We'll fight. Migh' be able to stop him before he gets a good hold ... No good sittin' worryin' abou' it. What's comin' will come, an' we'll meet it when it does. (*Goblet*, p. 719)

Professor Snape, the sinister Potions master, is one of Rowling's most complex characters. Snape displays an unexplained hatred of Harry from the moment he sees him, and at first seems to be behind most of the problems Harry and others are having at Hogwarts. Then we discover that, far from trying to harm Harry, Snape is responsible for saving Harry's life when another professor, under Voldemort's direction, curses Harry's broomstick in an attempt to unseat him in midair during a Quidditch match. In the third book, Snape, whose animosity toward Harry seems if anything stronger, is revealed as a past follower of Voldemort. He also does his best to see that Sirius Black, Harry's godfather, is unjustly condemned to death, all because of an old schoolboy grudge against Black and Harry's father. Yet in the fourth book, we find out that Snape had in fact turned against his former master long ago, then worked undercover "at great personal risk" (*Goblet*, p. 722) to topple Voldemort and identify and convict his followers and is preparing to do so again. Though Snape remains hostile and threatening, Dumbledore seems inexplicably to trust him, and we are left at the end of book 4 wondering what has distorted Snape's personality so deeply and whose side he is really on.

But it is the two antagonists Voldemort and Harry who are the most fascinating characters in the series. As Rowling said in an interview for *School Library Journal*, Voldemort is no "pantomime villain, [with] a lot of sound and thunder and nobody really [getting] hurt" (Feldman, 1999, p. 2). In his overmastering desire for power, his delight in creating fear and torment, his ruthlessness in calmly sacrificing his own followers to achieve his ends, and his terrifying quest for immortality, Voldemort embodies a thoroughly adult conception of evil. Yet in book 2, *The Chamber of Secrets*, we meet Voldemort as the young Tom Riddle before his rise to power, an outcast and orphan with strange resemblances to Harry himself. In some ways, we come to understand and even feel sympathy for Riddle, while at the same time recognizing the ultimate wrongness and the terrible results of the choices he is already making.

Harry, with a similar potential for power and suffering equally from the loss of his parents and lack of love in his childhood, makes different choices and, as Dumbledore tells him, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we

truly are, far more than our abilities" (*Chamber*, p. 333). We meet Harry in the first book as a somewhat smallish 11-year-old boy with taped glasses and hair that won't lie flat no matter how often he combs it. Instead of a figure of power and terror, Harry is in a sense Everyman, or rather Everyboy. He struggles with his schoolwork, worries about letting his team down at Quidditch, and feels too embarrassed to ask a girl to a school dance. Children can see themselves in him; like them, he procrastinates about doing his homework, plays tricks on his bullying cousin, and sometimes trips himself up trying to fib his way out of trouble. Caught up unwillingly in Voldemort's plots, he jumps to wrong conclusions, takes foolish risks, and is often confused about exactly what is happening and why. But underneath it all, Harry is abidingly good. When it really counts he always, almost instinctively, makes the right choice, that is, the moral choice. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, although the situation looks hopeless, he refuses to give the Stone to Voldemort, even to save his own life. Again, in *Chamber of Secrets*, he risks death by going down to face the Basilisk and try to rescue Ron's sister Ginny, simply because "he couldn't not go ... not if there was even the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive" (*Chamber*, p. 301). In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry stops Professor Lupin and his godfather Sirius from killing Peter Pettigrew, who he has just discovered betrayed his parents to Voldemort and has been trying to betray him as well, because he believes his father wouldn't have "wanted them to become killers" just for the sake of vengeance (*Azkaban*, p. 376). Finally, in *The Goblet of Fire*, Harry repeatedly jeopardizes his chances to win the Triwizard Tournament in order to prevent other contestants or bystanders from being hurt. In the final contest, he twice sets aside his own pursuit of the prize to warn his strongest rival of unseen dangers, saving him once from the curse of a rogue wizard and again from a giant spider. Each of these choices—of other before self, of right over wrong, of good instead of evil—turns out to be, not coincidentally, a proximal cause of Harry's victory, or at least survival, in the face of Voldemort's repeated attempts to kill him.

They raise questions of deep significance to children's social and ethical development

Even beyond holding children's interest and whetting their appetite for good literature, I believe we want books that help children learn about life, that contribute to their social and ethical development by raising questions of deep moral significance. The best literature offers children a type of "virtual experience" through which they can investigate ethical issues and assess the impact of different moral choices before they face these choices in real life. Living through the eyes of the heroes they read about, children can develop the courage and convictions they will need to stand against the more prosaic evils they will inevitably face as they grow up (Rackman, 2001). This concept came home to me just the other day when I asked my 16-year-old son why he

had chosen a particular course of action, and he answered, "Of course I know what to do, Mom; I've read the right books."

It is, however, on these very grounds that the Harry Potter books are most criticized; not that they are boring—their worst critic cannot say that—nor even very often that they are bad literature. Rather, that they deal with concepts and themes that are somehow inappropriate or harmful for children. Some critics hold that the books are too dark, too frightening for the pre-adolescent children who are their most avid readers. In all of my conversations about Harry Potter with children in elementary and middle schools, I have yet to talk with any who said the books were too frightening or had given them nightmares. It is true that bad things happen to people in the books: Harry's godfather was unjustly imprisoned for years in the soul-destroying prison of Azkaban, and in the fourth book, an innocent Hogwarts student, Cedric Diggory, is killed during the battle between Harry and Voldemort. Some people in the books also do bad things, from Mr. Dursley, who forces Harry to sleep in a closet under the stairs, to Barty Crouch, a fanatical Voldemort follower who kills his own father. But many people in the books do good things, and many good things happen to them as a result. I agree with Peter Denton (2002), who recently wrote,

> I think it is a wiser course of action to let children see something of the world as it is, something of what evil lurks in the hearts of other people, to help them learn the nature of the choices they will have to make, in order that they have a better chance of fending for themselves when there is no longer an adult around to protect them (p. 30).

A more vocal group of critics come mainly from conservative Christian backgrounds. They claim that Rowling's books promote witchcraft and, wittingly or unwittingly, tempt children to dabble in the occult (see, e.g., Abanes, 2001; and the criticisms summarized in *Church & State*, Religious right groups, 2001). As a mother and a Christian myself, I can understand and sympathize with parents' concerns about any books that would promote the ideals of witchcraft. However, I think that if the critics read the books with an open mind, they would see that the magic in Rowling's books is not at all Satanic or occult in origin. Consider, for example, this passage describing Harry's first lesson in Potions, from the sinister Professor Snape:

> Snape put them all in pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes....

> "Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?" (*Stone*, pp. 138-139)

Rather than initiation into a mysterious and esoteric rite, this lesson seems more like a high school chemistry class than anything else, complete with the usual botched experiments. In the magic Harry learns at Hogwarts, there is no raising of demons, no calling on spirits. This magic is much more like the science of our own culture (Denton, 2002), a tool that can be used for either good or evil depending on the goals of the people using it. The Harry Potter books are, in fact, just the latest in a long tradition in children's literature of stories pitting "good magic" against "bad magic," from *Grimm's Fairy Tales* through *The Wizard of Oz* (in which Glynda the Good Witch of the North helps Dorothy defeat the Wicked Witch of the West) and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books and Diane Duane's more recent *So You Want to be a Wizard* series, both of which contain explicitly Christian symbolism.

Primarily, through Harry's choices and actions (although it is often left to Dumbledore to verbalize their significance), Rowling encourages her readers to consider age-old moral questions (Binnendyk & Schonert Riechel, 2002), such as the following.

What is of value?

In her books, Rowling draws sharp portraits of two families ruled by materialistic goals, the Dursleys and the Malfoys, contrasting them with the Weasley family who, as Draco Malfoy scornfully says, "have more children than they can afford" (*Stone*, p. 108). The Dursleys live at number four, Privet Drive and by their own account, are "perfectly normal, thank you very much" (*Stone*, p. 1). Mr. Dursley owns a company that sells drills and spends his time dreaming of buying an even bigger, newer car and a vacation home in Majorca. Mrs. Dursley spends her time spying on the neighbors; and Dudley, their only son, spends all his time eating, bullying smaller children, and throwing tantrums. The Malfoys live in an opulent manor house that has been in their family for generations, but they are equally unhappy. Mr. Malfoy dominates the household, ruthlessly putting down all pretensions to worth by either his wife or his son Draco, and brooding over the rising tide of "Mudbloods," wizards and witches who have some Muggle ancestry, and the decreasing respect for "pure-blooded" wizards of "good family" like himself.

The Weasleys, on the other hand, live in The Burrow, a house that "looked [to Harry] as though it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic" (*Chamber*, p. 32). Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of Magic's Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, and thus is able to indulge his intense curiosity about all things Muggle,

while Ms. Weasley raises her six sons and one daughter with a combination of firmness, love, and a talent for yelling very loudly when necessary. Harry finds the Weasleys and their house simply "wonderful," and Mrs. Weasley, especially, adopts him as one of her own, knitting him sweaters for Christmas, coming to see him compete in the Triwizard Tournament, and giving him his first taste of motherly love since his own mother was killed defending him against Voldemort when he was an infant. There is little doubt about the set of values that Rowling prefers, as she has Dumbledore comment at the end of the first book,

> You know, the Stone was not really such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most humans would choose above all—the trouble is, humans do have a knack for choosing precisely those things that are worst for them. (*Stone*, p. 297).

Who is our neighbor?

In *The Chamber of Secrets*, a house-elf named Dobby misguidedly attempts to stop Harry from returning to Hogwarts, thinking he is in danger there. Although Dobby's efforts result in Harry being locked in his room at the Dursleys and subsequently breaking an arm by falling from his broom during a Quidditch match, Harry's last action in the book is to free Dobby from slavery as the Malfoy's house-elf. In the same book, Harry misses the annual school Halloween feast to attend the Deathday party of one of the Hogwarts ghosts, Nearly Headless Nick, just because Harry can't bring himself to disappoint Nick by turning down his invitation. Through actions like these, and his diverse circle of friends which comes to include a werewolf and a hippogrif, as well as his best friend Ron, the half-giant Hagrid, and the brainy but Muggle-born Hermione, Harry demonstrates that what matters is what is inside a person, rather than the accidents of their birth or circumstances. Again, Dumbledore says it best at the end of *The Goblet of Fire* when he talks to the contestants and wizards from other schools and counties who have gathered at Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament, a tournament that has ended in the death of one contestant and the resurrection and loosing of Voldemort upon the world:

> Every guest in this Hall will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again—in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open. (p. 723).

What is true power?

In every contest between Voldemort and Harry, the power seems always to be on the side of Voldemort. In fact, through one of his tools, Professor

Quirrell, Voldemort tells Harry, "There is no good or evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it" (*Stone*, p. 291.). Yet every time, Voldemort fails in his ultimate goals, stopped not by Harry's magical power, but by his loyalty, his courage, and the love of his parents that reaches out to help him even from beyond the grave. As Dumbledore explains,

> Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love.... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever.... Quirrell, full of hatred, greed and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good. (*Stone*, p. 299)

How shall we choose our actions?

Harry is the hero of these books, not because he is big or strong or famous or smart or powerful, but because, as discussed above, in the end he always chooses the good and holds fast to it despite the probable consequences to himself. But there are other heroes in these books, perhaps even less likely heroes than Harry. There is Neville Longbottom, who has so little magical talent that he frequently falls victim to his own spells. But he ultimately finds the courage to stand up for what he believes in, and even though he is once again mistaken, he earns the praise of his Headmaster and the accolades of his fellow students. There is Ron, who conquers his fear of spiders to go into the Forbidden Forest with Harry, trying to find a way to save their friend Hermione. Finally, there is Cedric Diggory, Harry's fellow student and close rival in the Triwizard Tournament, who dies, all unprepared, at the hands of Voldemort's henchman. A person with no outstanding talents or fame, "he was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker; he valued fair play" (*Goblet*, p. 722). Again, Dumbledore has the final word:

> A week ago, a student was taken from our midst. Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory. (*Goblet*, p. 724).

Conclusion

In sum, I find much good and little harm in the Harry Potter books. Certainly parents and teachers will want to talk with children about the issues they raise regarding the wrongful uses of power, magical or otherwise; the books themselves invite discussion of this topic as well as many others. But books like these, which can engage young and reluctant readers, help them learn to recognize and appreciate good writing, and above all introduce them to some of the enduring moral questions we face in society today, must remain in our schools, in our libraries, and on our bookshelves. They are good reading, good literature, and good for our children.

Notes

[1]"Muggles" are what wizards call ordinary nonmagical people in Rowling's books.
[2]US hardback editions.
[3]Originally published in the UK as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

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Author Note

Nancy Flanagan Knapp is an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. She does research on how to help at-risk and reluctant readers and is herself an avid reader of fantasy, science fiction, mysteries, and Christian apologetics.