

Harry Potter and His Critics

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The Harry Potter books are an extraordinary success story in the publishing world. Over the past few years they have aroused much interest and excitement not only in the original English language editions, but also around the world as they have been translated into many other languages. Their translation into Chinese was reported to be the biggest publishing event in China's history. The Harry Potter books strike a chord with both children and adults, and the Harry Potter movie has recently been released to packed theaters. The fourth book in the series had an initial print run in the U.S. of 3.8 million copies, 40 times as many as an average best-seller. The fifth book is scheduled to be released in 2002.

As well as being extraordinarily popular, the books have encouraged millions of children to start reading for the first time. Many parents are delighted to see their children eagerly reading these stories, and then moving on to read other books as well.

I have entitled this presentation "Harry Potter and His Critics." As I address the critics' estimation of these books, I desire to challenge their assumptions and encourage recognition of the value of the Harry Potter books. There have been passionate attacks on the Harry Potter series by many people and in particular by Christians. This has occurred especially in the United States — much more than in Britain or other places. In the U.S., Christians on the radio, in magazine articles, on television, on web sites, and in a growing number of books, have attacked this series very strongly. There are Christian schools where the books have been banned. I have had several telephone calls from confused parents saying, "My children love these books, I love these books — what is going on?"

The first of the books introduces a little boy who discovers that he was born with magical powers. He subsequently goes off to a school for wizards called Hogwarts, where he learns to develop his gifts. Simply because the books bring readers into an imaginary world of magic and wizards, many Christians say they teach occult practice. This is the primary reason Christians attack these books.

The second criticism leveled is that the books teach a rebellious attitude against authority. Critics cite the way Harry sometimes responds to his uncle and aunt who are raising him as proof of this — though it has to be said that the uncle and aunt treat him very poorly (to say the least, for they are abominably cruel guardians).

Thirdly, there are many Christians who simply say that fantasy is dangerous, and that to present this kind of fantasy world to children is automatically hazardous to them.

Rather than simply accepting such criticisms, as Christians who are called to be salt and light in our society

we have a responsibility to encourage discernment with regard to these popular books. If we have children who are eager to read the books or if as adults we are interested, we must sift through the above criticisms and be prepared to think about J.K. Rowling's stories using the wisdom that God has given us — attempting to avoid suspicion against something merely because it is popular. Then, with a sensitive issue such as this, we each ought humbly to exercise discernment in deciding what is best for our families and for ourselves.

Before I respond to the criticisms, I am going to tell you why I like the books so well. First, they are great fun (just consider a game like Quidditch!)

Second, J.K. Rowling has created a delightful world of the imagination. She has constructed a kind of alternative universe, another dimension (rather like C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* or J. R. R. Tolkien's *Middle Earth*), which fits right alongside our world. In the case of the Harry Potter books it is right within our world, yet ordinary people are not aware of it. For those who have a problem with the idea of fantasy and alternative universes alongside ours, we need to recognize that almost all children play imaginative games in their minds starting at a very young age and have no difficulty whatsoever in distinguishing between fantasy and reality. J.K. Rowling simply has a fantastic and elaborate world in her imagination that she is skillfully communicating to ours.

The third reason I like the books is that they are well written. One of the simplest tests of the quality of writing is whether you can read a book aloud easily, and whether it communicates well while you do. If you have read these books to your kids, you know they are a delight to listen to and a pleasure to read aloud.

Fourth, I like them because of the characters in the books. J.K. Rowling has brought into being an entire portrait gallery of people, adults and also children who are growing up book by book. Each book is set one year later than the previous one, so you see the children growing gradually into maturity. There is wonderful character development and this brings these people to life.

Additionally, the Harry Potter books send a strong message about moral order. There are beautiful and enjoyable human relationships among the characters, and there is a depth of commitment and service among them. The characteristics celebrated in the relationships are friendship, loyalty, integrity, kindness, and self-sacrifice. Harry Potter himself is prepared to set aside his own success, in order to serve his friends. These are qualities in which we can all delight.

There is also a very clear portrayal of the distinction between good and evil — both the appalling destructiveness of evil to human life and the beneficial fruit of treating people with justice, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, and integrity. It is particularly significant that the books recognize that goodness and faithfulness in relationships have a cost. This is not a world where everything is like a box of chocolates and always works out nicely. Good virtues have to be worked at and are hard won. Virtue is rewarded primarily in terms of character development and the increasing depths of relationships among the characters, rather than through the attainment of popularity or success.

J.K. Rowling also has a very deep understanding of the folly of those who turn their eyes blindly towards evil and of evil's destructive consequences. There is a depth in the development of moral order, both in terms of relationships and the understanding of good and evil.

Finally, I see the books as valuable because they consistently include the three fundamental themes that can be found as a subtext in almost all good literature: the beauty of creation, the appalling reality of evil, and the universal human longing for redemption — for a better world. These themes touch the way the world

truly is, the way God has made it. J.K. Rowling does not profess to be a Christian, as far as I am aware, but she has insight into the themes that are at the very heart of what Christians understand to be true about the nature of the universe in which we live.

As a Christian, I am fascinated by the fact that the stories show how a better life comes primarily through self-sacrifice. This is brought out unmistakably in the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. In this book Harry is prepared to sacrifice himself on behalf of his friends whom he loves and to whom he has a deep loyalty. And at the heart of all four of the books is a reference back to Harry Potter's mother, who died when he was a baby in order to save his life from a great force of evil. Rowling says the mother's death on Harry's behalf is an example of the most powerful act imaginable. The author sees that act of love and self-sacrifice (analogous to the work of Christ), as the one means which can bring protection and transformation to human life and the defeat of evil.

Self-sacrifice in these books is the primary means by which evil is defeated. Now that of course is the very heart of what Christianity says about the nature of the world. We come from God's hand as those who have been made glorious. Life is beautiful as God has given it to us, yet it is appallingly twisted and broken by the reality of evil in our lives, and God Himself has made the ultimate self-sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ to bring about the destruction of evil in the supreme act of love. He gave Himself to death to save the lives of others — to bring protection, renewal, transformation, strengthening, and redemption to us. Recognizing that this theme of self-sacrifice is running all through the series, it is extraordinary to me that there has been such a violent and negative response by Christians. One has to hope that it is the minority response rather than the response of large numbers of believers. I think this negative response is a tragedy for all sorts of reasons.

It is a tragedy in that there are many people who have failed to read the books with an open mind. The Word of God challenges us to be prepared to celebrate anything that is good and true, wherever it is found. Sadly, I think there are many people who are unable to see the good qualities that are there, either in the *Harry Potter* books or in much else in popular culture. Many of those who have criticized the books to me personally have not even read them.

Second, there is a deep misunderstanding and inappropriate suspicion of fantasy present in the negative accusations. One can sometimes write far more truth in presenting a fantasy world than in describing the real world. There are many books, both by Christians and non-Christians, which attempt to describe the real world directly and do a very much poorer job than J.K. Rowling does in her world of fantasy. All truth is God's truth, and non-Christians recognize that truth to one degree or another. Even if an author's worldview is not completely in accordance with Scriptural truth, there will be elements of beauty and truth still to be found there, simply by virtue of the fact that he or she lives in God's world under His common grace.

Third, there is a misunderstanding in the response to the magic in the books. As many are aware the same criticisms have been made of C.S. Lewis's and Tolkien's books, even though both of these authors were committed Christians. It is said that because magic is a part of the *Narnia* books, they may have the effect of interesting children in the reality of the occult. The same charge is brought against Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. However none of these books are encouraging occult practice. The magic is simply a part of the imaginative worlds that Lewis, Tolkien, and Rowling have created. In such an imaginary world, people can become invisible; animals talk; mythical creatures like unicorns and centaurs exist; and rings and spells work wonders. Watch a little child playing, and you will observe many such magical things. But this does not equal an interest in the occult.

Some people have gone on record as stating that they believe that J.K. Rowling is purposely and explicitly teaching occult and even Satanic practice. The first time that J.K. Rowling was asked publicly about whether she was teaching the occult, she was astonished by the question. Her response was, "I think you need to see a doctor." She was bewildered that anyone would accuse her of teaching the occult. And as the criticisms have grown, she has been personally and deeply hurt. As a Christian, I have to say I am profoundly ashamed of those who have responded with this kind of malicious gossip. We must recognize that whenever she talks about evil magic she presents it as evil, as thoroughly destructive of human persons. It consumes them as individuals. It destroys and completely ruins their relationships with other people. It reduces relationships to power and ugliness. Rowling has stated that she does not believe in the occult, and she certainly does not promote it.

Additionally, when these sorts of criticisms are made about books without a proper basis it causes an appalled and dismissive reaction to Christians in general and the Christian faith itself. That is a tragedy. Often Christians are indeed guilty of responding in fear to our culture — criticizing, condemning, and cutting themselves off from it as much as possible.

Anything that is popular becomes suspicious. And this is a very serious problem in the life of the Church. It is not that we should accept everything our culture presents. But Christians should be prepared to celebrate what is good and cultivate Biblical discernment in the midst of our culture. This is what any Christian should do in regard to the Harry Potter books or anything else. You will have to decide for yourself if the Harry Potter books are good for you or your children, but please do so in a way that is thoughtful and discerning according to the Biblical picture of truth, beauty, and goodness, not in a way that is suspicious of anything popular in our culture, or that is untruthful and unkind.

Some 450 years ago John Calvin encouraged people to read books by the great writers from Greece and Rome. He wrote instructions for the teachers in the school system he designed in Geneva, Switzerland, asking that they have the students read the great classics of Greece and Rome that were pagan and non-Christian. And he asked that they not criticize them, but rather encourage the students to celebrate what is good in them, and to learn from the truth that they could find in them. Calvin said on another occasion that it is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to deny that pagan writers like Plato wrote many things that are true and helpful. We must be prepared to act similarly in our day when it comes to the Harry Potter series or any other product of our culture.■

Francis Schaeffer, for whom the Institute is named, led a ministry that was marked by a willingness to give honest answers to honest questions. As a Christian, he sought to create an environment with those to whom he ministered where no question was "off-limits." Question-and-answer-time is an irreplaceable part of the ministry of FN@TI. The following is a sampling of the Q and A that followed Prof. Barrs' presentation on "Harry Potter and His Critics."

Can we give critics the benefit of the doubt that there might be some inability on the part of young people to distinguish between fantasy and reality? We have seen people violently acting out fantasies in our culture today, such as the students involved in high school shootings. Could these books lead to such destructive fantasies and behavior?

These are good questions, but I do not agree that they are valid criticisms. Of course we recognize that in our culture there are young people acting out all sorts of awful fantasies. But we are using a different meaning of the term fantasy here. The problem is not fantasy, the problem is a deeply flawed understanding of who we are as human persons, of what life is about, and the awful reality of evil. There are young people who have lost any sense that life ultimately has any meaning at all. That is the tragedy of teenage shootings such as Columbine. The problem is not that they have been reading fantasy, as if there is something somehow wrong with fantasy, or watching movies that create alternative worlds. It is that they have been convinced by the whole radically secular direction of our culture that life ultimately has no meaning at all — that there is nothing worth staying alive for. They think that the only things that make life bearable are things that give you instant thrills.

Of course there have been books and movies that present such a view of the world. They present such an absurd view of the human condition and such total alienation of people that they encourage a destructive reaction. We can indeed criticize some movies and books for that. But the problem is not one of fantasy itself but a deeper emptiness in our culture. We live in a culture which is losing its sense that there is any ultimate meaning to the human condition and that there is any value to human life at all. We are raising a generation of young people who are hopeless. J.K. Rowling, however, is not communicating a universe which is hopeless. Her books are filled with hope and constructive relationships and with many delightful games and amusing things which encourage you to take enjoyment in life and in human relationships. They are very different from some of the deeply destructive books and movies available.

Even if J.K. Rowling is not intending to bring in the occult, could something like this act as a sort of introduction to the world of the occult and evil magic for people?

Rowling does everything she can to present evil as thoroughly destructive and to be avoided. There is no question about that. There is a very clear moral universe which comes across in the books. If you ask, well is it still possible for people to use this and say this is really real and I can start trying to get such powers for myself — then certainly that is possible. But people can misuse anything. That does not make the thing itself illegitimate — or something to be “careful” about. The Old Testament book *Song of Songs* does not come with a warning. But, it would be perfectly possible to take the *Song of Songs* and use it to create sexual fantasies in one’s own mind and use it in all sorts of illegitimate ways. That does not mean there is something wrong with the book itself or that it needs to come with a warning.

Can you comment on C.S. Lewis’s use and view of fantasy?

Lewis himself regarded pagan myths as one of the primary means that God used to bring him to an understanding of Christianity because they present echoes of a “lost world,” as he expressed it, or a longing for a better world. This longing is present in other religions, too — in religions that are not true. Likewise it is there in fantasy worlds created by writers who are not Christian believers. Lewis regarded these echoes of a lost world as positive because they create this longing for something better. There are very powerful echoes of truth in the Harry Potter series. I am not saying that J.K. Rowling herself is necessarily moving toward a truly Christian understanding of reality, though that is my prayer for her. But, from where she is now, she reflects the glory and brokenness of our humanity and a longing for a better world. She communicates a deep sense that the best way to bring this better world about is by the supreme self-sacrifice of an individual who

loves another more than they love themselves. That is an extraordinarily powerful message. Such an understanding is found in all sorts of literature which is not explicitly Christian. And Christians must be prepared to look and see those deep elements of truth that are being communicated, even in the context of something they might at first sight not like, such as magic or fantasy.

Are there any cautions you would give in regard to the books?

What I would say is, of course these books are not perfect and they are not for every age child. Parents always must be aware of where their children are developmentally and what they are able to handle. There are some small children who would not be able to cope with the intensity of the drama and the consequences of the evil that are in these books. The same is true of *The Lord of the Rings*, both the book and the film. Many years ago my family was visiting friends in Oregon and a friend showed our kids a video of Rudyard Kipling's story, *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*, about the mongoose and the cobra and the little boy. One of my sons, who was about five at the time, had nightmares for months afterwards. He could not cope with that story at that point in his life. When he was a little older I read those books to him and his brothers and later they read them themselves and they loved them. But any parent has got to be aware of whether a child is at an age where he or she can cope with the particular reality which any book is dealing with. So I would not say that you should read *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* to a five-year-old for example.

Once again, parents have to make up their own minds. I am not going to set rules. I do not believe in setting rules for other people when it comes to issues where we must exercise Biblical discernment (Scripture forbids such rule setting!). But parents need to be aware of what is appropriate for their children and where they are developmentally.

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