


Wizards & Wonder

—for children and
all non-Muggles

by Antoinette Botsford



At the stroke of midnight on July 8, 2000 C.E., in countless corners of the world, Harry Potter parties popped the cork on sales of the fourth book in J.K. Rowling's phenomenally popular series. In the U.S. alone, an unprecedented first hardcover printing of 3.8 million copies stood ready for purchase (minus those copies stuck in the pipeline somewhere, and the many thousands pre-shipped by Amazon and others). In our small hamlet of Eastsound, Washington, a patient queue of people filled the sidewalk outside Darvill's Bookstore. Many were clad in outfits inspired by the books; all were eager to put their hands on the next installment of Harry's life at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Only minutes after the witching-hour, the tiny store was bulging at the seams, and just about everybody there had purchased a book!

Is it an exaggeration to suggest that here before us a new market is being born? Kids who have never read a whole book before are poring over this 734-page volume, for which their parents are happily paying as much as \$25.95 at independent bookstores. Yes, Rowling has had quite a lot to do with it—but might there be more to the phenomenon than the advent of a great story?

Books and series featuring children as heroes in magical situations abound. Recently the ABA surveyed 400 independent booksellers in search of a reading list for the "Harry Potter Deprivation Club." The responses recognized both classic series (Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander) and newer arrivals.

Two of the very best "Tween and Young Adult authors to hit the stands recently are T.A. Barron and Philip Pullman. According to Patricia Gauch, Philomel vice president and publisher, Barron's beautifully conceived quintet about Merlin's childhood, *The Lost*

Years of Merlin, is finding a growing audience. She reports, "The Barron books are moving into the bestselling range, sharing the honors with Philip Pullman's trilogy [*His Dark Materials*, Knopf]."

A beguiling mixture of humor, compassion, magic, and surprise defines Barron's insightful work; his characters—whether animal, vegetable, mineral, or human—are utterly believable, presented as they are in carefully detailed realities. We live vicariously through Merlin's dreams and vision, and accept his worldview unquestioningly: We are all magic; nature is filled with wondrous, conscious beings; all existence is intricately connected.

Pullman's trilogy pulled down the most votes from booksellers in the ABA's search for a Potter substitute. Starting with the highly praised **The Golden Compass**, it follows two intrepid young contemporaries, Lyra and Will, who in the second volume, **The Subtle Knife**, join forces in an effort to find their missing fathers. They become embroiled in an adventure of mythical proportions that cuts through a complex web of interconnected universes. Well-developed and varied characterizations include warrior bears that talk and wear armor, a gregarious Texan zeppelin pilot, and an aging witch who once loved a human and is now totally devoted to serving others.

Both Barron and Pullman grapple with life's larger issues through stories, like Rowling's, in which magic and wizardry play a central role.

Is something brewing in the cauldron of collective consciousness?

Magic for Better or Worse?

What is implied by the current fascination with magic? Does it signal positive growth, or, as some groups have suggested, is it yet another indication of an unhealthy disaffection with what contemporary religion and culture are offering our young? (Attempts to ban Rowling's books have been well-publicized, as well as strongly opposed.) How does this trend affect us in our role as resource people for communities actively interested in higher consciousness?

Whether you call it fantasy or visionary fiction, this genre—perhaps more than any other—suggests an alternative way of looking at the world and reflects a commitment to positive social change, through the symbolic power of magic.

Fantastical powers are a doorway to a world where good and evil are bigger than life and the struggle between them is all-important. In these books it's pretty clear who the good guys and bad guys are, though a certain amount of ambiguity keeps things interesting (as well as realistic). The books we are looking at here assert the highest moral principles; their child heroes are always on the side of the good, in company with certain wise elders to whom they sometimes—but not always—turn.

That's why the censorship of the Harry Potter books (or other books having to do with wizards and magic) seems somewhat misplaced. Harry is right-thinking despite his emotionally impoverished childhood (his parents were killed when he was a baby, and he was raised by crass relatives who distrust psychic

abilities or anything in the magical realm). True, there are no specifically religious notes, as there are in C.S. Lewis or in the Arthurian literature, but principled action is upheld and personal responsibility is emphasized. At the end of Book II, **Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets**, the fatherly Dumbledore tells Harry, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." And as portrayed by the choices he makes, Harry is a moral, compassionate, and respectful young wizard, indeed.

It's appreciated by booksellers that in comparison to some other popular young adult series (Fear Street and Goosebumps come to mind), Harry Potter is positively uplifting. Rob Mulhauser of **New World Bookshop** in Cincinnati, Ohio, admits to happily riding on the end of Harry Potter's broomstick. "It's easier now [than it has been] to sell children's and young adult titles. I see it as a continuing trend, and it's most gratifying not to have requests for dark, negative books. I appreciate good writing and want everyone to enjoy it."

Subversion, Risk, and Possibility

Alison Lurie, author of **Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature** (1990, Little, Brown) might say that Harry Potter is subversive. He thinks for himself, for a start, and he and his sort value imagination and art and mystery far more than money, shopping malls, and social position (at least in Muggle terms). Engaging with mystery, after all, has a way of leading us away from hard-core materialism into other ways of seeing and being.

Angyl Ibrahim, assistant to the publisher of Jane and Jerry Bartholow's **Peace Soup**, (PSI Publishing, 2000), agrees. "People are hungry to identify with heroes who have values and who are not completely stuck in acquisitive commercialism—that is, people who can see a non-material side to life as an interest that should be followed."

Of course, "subversive" in this context doesn't imply a lack of morality. The Potter books do affirm a positive overall view of the world—but they also go further than that. As Madeleine L'Engle says, "Stories show children that they can do the impossible, sometimes." The much-awarded author of numerous children's classics, including **A Wrinkle in Time**, **A Wind in the Door**, and **The Arm of the Starfish**, reportedly saves her most difficult ideas for children. Why? "They are willing to accept them.... They are freer to take risks."

I am left to ponder what she means by risk. Does she mean the "risk" of accepting a reality that is different from the one conventionally presented? In fantasy fiction, the "laws of nature" as usually understood are much more flexible—it is possible for Merlin to become a deer or to be absorbed by a stone which later releases him, or for Pullman's characters to each have daemon-spirits that manifest as shapeshifting animals.

Another risk is to completely trust in the power of self-transcendence. Quite simply, one is to understand that love and hope, generosity, and loyalty carry more weight than mean-spiritedness and despair, greed, and betrayal. Perhaps children (even when overtaken with self-serving impulses) implicitly understand that the power of thought is the greatest power of all.



Art by Emma Shaw-Smith, courtesy of Harcourt Books

In any case, it seems to me that most children, even the very muddled-up ones, sense that there is much more to existence than meets the eye. This recognition—by children and the many adults enthusiastically embracing this genre of fiction—may well signal an upsurge in the appreciation of the possible.

It is precisely this paradoxical link between the possible and the impossible that gives magic its...well, magic. Harry Potter, Lyra and Will, and even the young Merlin are all ordinary people at the heart of their extraordinary-ness. "In these [fantasies]," asserts L'Engle, "you learn how complex being human is. And you can see—if that character can do this, so can I. It opens you up to accepting that we are quite often able to do the impossible."

"You know my view," adds T.A. Barron. "I believe that at heart we are all magical. There's a rising awareness that we do have the power collectively to remake the universe—and in books it's perfectly appropriate that it takes the form of wizardry and magic."


The Price of Wisdom

The young heroes of these books are clearly seeking wisdom, whether they say so directly or not. Wisdom has its price, of course. As Barron remarks, "Great wisdom comes only partly from what we gain in experience and understanding; it is also found in what we lose.... By losing his sight, young Merlin gains the ability to see beneath the surface, and over time he gains something more precious." The story of the sacrifices necessary to make a great wizard out of an ordinary boy is part of what makes *The Lost Years of Merlin* so com-

elling. Loss and sacrifice are themes in Rowling's and Pullman's work as well, though perhaps in smaller measure. Lyra loses her best friend in *The Golden Compass*, and well before the release of Book IV, word was out that Harry Potter would be dealing with a close-to-home death, too.

There has probably never been a better moment for cultivating the next generation of readers—they are the ones who will come into your store seeking ways to apply the mystical and spiritual principles that were introduced in children's fiction into their everyday lives. Now is the time to welcome the new customers, young and old, who are eager to visit your store to browse the variety of books that connect to interests stimulated by the Potter phenomenon. Now is the perfect time to organize discussion groups around some of the themes or some of the books, to have reading lists handy for those whose appetites are whetted by Harry Potter and who are ready for more magic.

The enduring quest for higher consciousness, empowerment, understanding, and liberation is an implicit theme of many of these novels, and there can be no question that the writers of these books have the courage and imagination to create fascinating stories that allude to a deeper reality. Such authors invite thoughtful discussions about the differences between appearance and reality, and contribute a lot of juice to considerations of the nature of evil and its relationship to power and true spirituality. Since good writers take their readers with them, their stories and characters can change us forever. Books that leave us with an expanded sense of our own ability to triumph ethically, no matter what we must overcome to do so, have the potential to transform society.



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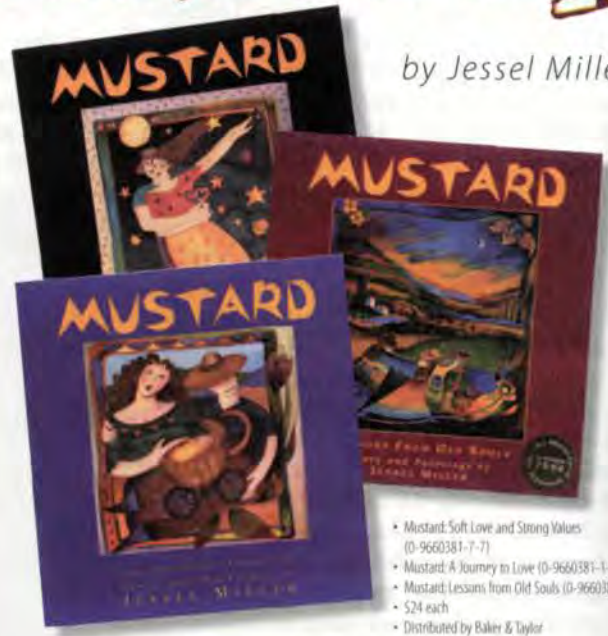
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