**book review**

**Muggles, Broomsticks, Quidditch, and Owls That Deliver Mail**
*A Cast of Characters to Breathe Life—and the Magic of Good Writing*—into Children’s Literature

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

*By J. K. Rowling*


*As reviewed by Diane Ravitch*

Not long after the release of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the sixth Harry Potter book, worldwide sales for the series topped 270 million copies. Not only has the Harry Potter series broken all sales records for books, but also it has shattered a host of preconceptions about the kinds of materials children are willing to read. Conventional wisdom has long held that new technologies render books obsolete. Publishers of educational materials long ago concluded that today’s media-saturated children do not like to read and that they require a dizzying array of graphics on each page to hold their attention. Experts in children’s literature have been saying for many years that children want to read only about children who look like themselves and about situations that reflect their own lives. In the young-adult literature market, the watchword for book marketing and for authors has been “relevance.” Young adults, it was widely believed, want to read about contemporaries who are struggling with contemporary problems in contemporary settings. A quarter of a billion books by J. K. Rowling say that they are all wrong.

*Can So Many Kids Be Wrong?*

Who is this Harry Potter, and why do so many millions of children (and adults) stand in line to buy the latest installment of his adventures? I have my own views about this, which I will expound upon in a minute, but I thought I would first report what my grandson Aidan said. Aidan, 11, has read all of the Potter books and knows every detail about every character. He likes the books, he said, “because they have action, surprise, suspense, and magic spells.”

By now, the whole literate world knows the basic storyline of the Harry Potter epic. Harry is an orphan; his parents were killed by the evil Lord Voldemort when Harry was a year old (the jagged scar on his forehead is a memento of this fearsome event). He lives unhappily with his mean relatives, the Dursleys. At the invitation of a great wizard, Harry has been enrolled in Hogwarts, a boarding school for wizards, where he develops intense friendships and learns to use his magical powers. Voldemort, who represents the dark side of the magic world, wants to kill Harry and assert his evil dominion (the other wizards are so frightened of Voldemort that they call him “he-who-must-not-be-named”). Because of his special powers and his goodness, Harry is the only one who can defeat Voldemort. In the first book, Harry is 11; each book covers another year of adventures and explores the pedagogy of wizardry at Hogwarts. The series is supposed to conclude with the next book, which will describe Harry’s seventh and last year, at which time all of the puzzles associated with the evil Lord Voldemort will be resolved.

What are the attractions of these books for their readers? They have a lot of action. They are extremely well plotted. The plot line involves numerous subplots, each of which touches on the fate of Harry and his friends. Some of the characters are highly sympathetic, others are villainous. Harry and his friends are realistic, seeming like any children of their age. The whole story is situated in a particular place (England), with its particular language and idioms. Yet once the characters board the train for Hogwarts at King’s Cross Station in London, they enter an alternative universe, one that is magical, fantastical, and utterly different from reality.

At Hogwarts, there are games that are found nowhere else (“quidditch” is the school-wide field competition, played in the air on broomsticks). There is a special vocabulary used only by wizards (nonwizards are known as “muggles”). Fantastic things happen: there are portraits that move and talk, ghosts that are friendly, and owls that deliver the mail. At Hogwarts, students of wizardry learn such subjects as potions, spells, defense against the dark arts, and other subjects necessary for students of wizardry. The line between fantasy and reality is constantly crossed; students worry about exams, and their teachers are as warm or caustic as teachers in an ordinary school. But unlike a regular school, the teachers might turn out to be deadly enemies, secret disciples of the evil Voldemort. The devotees of the Harry Potter novels quickly master the special language of Hogwarts, of course, and there are many web sites on which readers discuss their theories about what might happen next.

Although the Harry Potter novels are written for preadolescents and adolescents, they apparently have a substantial adult following. Now that the books are treated as a cultural and commercial phenomenon, each new one receives respectful reviews by major critics. What matters most about the Harry Potter books, I think, is that they demonstrate the power of literature to captivate the age group that is
considered least likely to read: adolescents. J. K. Rowling does not condescend to her readers with a dumbed-down vocabulary or a simple plot. She does not rely on glitzy visuals to grab their attention. Her books have few graphics: a simple black-and-white line drawing introduces each chapter, and everything else is text. Rowling expects her readers to read: the latest book has 652 pages. Rowling has a faith in the power of language that our own National Council of Teachers of English seems to have lost.

Somehow millions of Harry Potter fans manage to complete every book without benefit of leading questions, a teacher’s guide, previewing, or any of the other junk pedagogical strategies that burden American schoolchildren in their English classes. They respond to and appreciate an author who is a powerful storyteller with a terrific imagination.

It is sad that many schools avoid the Harry Potter books in order to placate certain religious sects that oppose any reference to magic and witchcraft. Under such pressures, the publishers of reading books for our schools exclude any stories that involve fantasy and illusion. The Harry Potter books have often appeared on the American Library Association’s list of the most-banned books. This is enough to keep them out of public schools, but not out of the hearts of the millions of young people who love Harry Potter and despise the small-minded Dursleys, who ride with Harry on the train to Hogwarts, cheer for him as he leads his quidditch team to victory, stand alongside him as he challenges the forces of evil, and pray that he survives the violent confrontation with Lord Voldemort that inevitably lies ahead.

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