



J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter

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A. Introduction

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 movies have 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 bestseller.

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.

B. Attacks on Harry Potter

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?"

§ Because the books bring readers into an imaginary world of magic and wizards, many Christians say they teach occult practice.

§ 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.

C. Positive Remarks Regarding Harry Potter

§ These books are great fun (just consider a game like Quidditch!)

§ J.K. Rowling has created a delightful world of the imagination. She has constructed an alternative universe, another dimension (rather like C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* or J. R. R. Tolkien's *Middle Earth*), but, right within our world.

For those who have a problem with the idea of fantasy and alternative universes - 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.

§ The books are well written. Try reading them aloud — this is the simplest test of good writing.

§ The multitude of 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.

§ Additionally, the Harry Potter books send a strong message about moral behavior.

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.

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.

§ 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
- 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

D. Themes from Harry Potter

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.

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.

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. I think this negative response is a tragedy for all sorts of reasons.

§ The Word of God challenges us to be prepared to celebrate anything that is good and true, wherever it is found.

§ There is a deep misunderstanding and inappropriate suspicion of fantasy present in the negative accusations.

§ There is a misunderstanding in the response to the magic in the books. 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.

As a Christian, I have to say I am profoundly ashamed of those who have responded with this kind of malicious gossip. Rowling has stated that she does not believe in the occult, and she certainly does not wish to promote it.

E. How are we to react to our culture?

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.