

News Article: JAH266

THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY: AUTHORS WEIGH IN ON THE POTTER DEBATE AND ALTERNATIVE STORIES

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J. K. Rowling's phenomenally popular Harry Potter series launched only a decade ago, and while millions of children happily immersed themselves in its fantasy world, many adults argued about the worldview behind the series. The argument has been perhaps most obvious among Christians. The bookend positions are that the Potter books spread interest in the occult (expressed in the film *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged*) or, in contrast, that it is rich with Christian symbolism (expressed in a series of books by Eastern Orthodox layman John Granger). Many Christians find themselves somewhere in between those two interpretations.

Beyond churches and their theological critiques of the Potter series, mainstream journalists also disagreed. Just before the release of the series' final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Lev Grossman of *Time* magazine argued that the series marked the death of God. He wrote, "In *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien fused his ardent Catholicism with a deep, nostalgic love for the unspoiled English landscape. C. S. Lewis was a devout Anglican whose *Chronicles of Narnia* forms an extended argument for Christian faith. Now look at Rowling's books. What's missing? If you want to know who dies in Harry Potter, the answer is easy: God." Grossman added, "Harry Potter lives in a world free of any religion or spirituality of any kind. He lives surrounded by ghosts but has no one to pray to, even if he were so inclined, which he isn't. Rowling has more in common with celebrity atheists like Christopher Hitchens than she has with Tolkien and Lewis."

Like Grossman, Jeffrey Weiss of *The Dallas Morning News* noted the absence of "God, gods, heaven or hell" in Rowling's books, but he also saw *Deathly Hallows* as Rowling's having "the last laugh on the dwindling number of conservative Christians who have attacked her Harry Potter saga over the past decade."

"Most of the themes in Harry's saga are common to many faiths: loyalty, love, friendship, courage, maturity, sacrifice, moral judgment," Weiss wrote. "But in 'Deathly Hallows,' the religious identity of Harry's family is made stunningly and suddenly explicit. He visits the grave of his parents, on Christmas Eve in a church-side graveyard, and reads the inscription on the headstone: 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.'"

Rowling is a member of the Scottish Episcopal Church. She has objected to arguments that the Potter series promotes interest in witchcraft, but she has not discussed her faith in any great detail during the past decade. Within the evangelical subculture, her series had the salutary effect of creating a new market—speculative fiction, or fantasy—that involves no magic charms or curses.

A Litmus Test. As Christians continue their decade-long debate about the Potter series, some authors in this genre offer alternative stories. During the summer of 2007, four of those authors—Wayne Thomas Batson, Bryan Davis, Sharon Hinck, and Christopher Hopper—made a whirlwind Fantasy Fiction Tour through twelve cities to meet their fans, find new readers, and help promote each other's work.

Hinck had dabbled in speculative fiction before, but her novel *The Restorer* gave her the chance to immerse herself more fully in a genre she loves. *The Restorer* retells the story of the Old Testament prophet Deborah, setting it in a fallen and pre-Messianic world. The novel's protagonist, a mother of four named Susan Mitchell, enters this world after discovering a box labeled "Dress Up" in her attic.

Like Hinck's other books, *The Restorer* is aimed at a readership that's mostly made up of Christian mothers. Hinck does not aspire for a wide readership beyond evangelical circles, simply because she's found that's not the kind of work she does best as a writer. "It's the hope for a lot of Christian writers that their books will get beyond singing to the choir," she said. "My core audience is the Christian who is weary and disillusioned, and finding the whole Christian journey more challenging than expected." During the Fantasy Fiction Tour, "I think our largest order for the book was at Borders, but it's often a Christian browsing Borders who finds it," she said.

Hinck's previous series consisted of "humorous books with a tiny bit of speculative fiction snuck in," she said. "That was my sneaky way of getting to write what I love in a form that was sellable." Hinck had been told for several years that the core demographic served by bookstores for evangelicals was not interested enough in speculative fiction. From talking with her friends, Hinck found that evangelicals had many misgivings about the genre. Such books had overly elaborate backstories, geopolitical harangues—and, in the Potter series, the added complication of the debate about magic. Hinck set out to write speculative fiction that defied those expectations, and the fan mail she's been receiving encourages her to believe she has succeeded.

"Some people in the Christian community are still nervous," she said. "They see speculative fiction as having something to do with the occult and with evil. Their hesitation is not coming from a place of ignorant hysteria."

Hinck is reticent to take sides in church conflicts about the Potter series. "In the Christian community, Harry Potter has become something of a litmus test," she said about both sides. "One of the things I love about the whole Harry Potter phenomenon is that families are getting excited about reading books together."

She's also troubled by the concept of "reaction art," in which Christians create knockoff versions of successful books or music. "We can be free to write our stories without doing them as a reaction to other things that are being done," she said. She sees her novels, and those of her Fantasy Fiction Tour colleagues, not as offering alternatives to an evil Harry Potter but simply offering additional stories in which people make heroic choices.

Not a Good Kid. Bryan Davis is less reticent than Hinck about weighing in on the Harry Potter phenomenon. He's troubled by it, but not so much because of the usual debate about magic. "I'm not a Harry Potter fan, even though I do understand fantasy and how magic can work," he told the JOURNAL. "He is not a good kid. He lies, he cheats, he steals, and he's never punished for it. In fact he gets worse as the series goes on."

Davis feels additional concerns about how authority figures are treated in the Potter series. "Every rule-keeper is portrayed in a bad light. Every authority figure is portrayed as a buffoon," he said. "It's a worldview that is not Christian."

Davis said these themes became especially clear to him with *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. "The one trend that was clear right at the get-go was that it's cool to break the rules," he said. "We need to write stories where good behavior is uplifted and bad behavior is punished."

Davis was, by his own description, an unlikely author of fantasy novels. He was working as a computer technician and helping his wife homeschool their children. "I didn't set out to write a novel or to become a writer, but to teach my children how to write and to show them how much fun writing can be," he said. He began writing a story and asking his children to give him more ideas to keep the story moving. Davis said he ended up having such a good time himself that a new career was born.

Davis saw the Fantasy Fiction Tour as a time to spread the love of such storytelling among his fellow Christians. "Let's take fantasy back into the light, where it belongs," Davis said. "Fantasy is a story of things that cannot happen without a spiritual cause. Jesus used it with his story about a camel going through the eye of a needle."

He also cites the moment in Old Testament history when Elisha's eyes are opened and he sees chariots of fire. "That's exactly what fantasy literature does," Davis said. "It opens our eyes to see another realm that

people cannot see with their eyes.” Davis points out that the fantasy genre had been fairly dormant among evangelicals since John White’s acclaimed Archives of Anthropos series in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “I wrote the first book [*Raising Dragons*] before Harry Potter appeared,” he said. “It just took me eight years to get it published.”

Despite his efforts to bring the fantasy genre back into the light, Davis says, he has encountered occasional resistance—one time simply because a person thought that dragons were symbols of Satan. Davis said that when he is in bookstores, “people will come up and say, ‘Your books are of the Devil.’” When they sit with him and hear him out, however, they change their view. “I’ve yet to leave someone unconvinced” about the worthiness of fantasy literature, he said.

Davis does not concentrate his critique of the Harry Potter series on its use of magic, but he respects parents who feel misgivings about it—and about other stories that could influence their children. “Parents who are concerned and cautious, I think they’re awesome,” he said. “I have your kids’ interests in mind and their spirits in mind, and I will not dishonor that.”

Not a Bad Series. One Christian who’s troubled by the Harry Potter debate is Mark Shea, an evangelical who became a Roman Catholic about twenty years ago. Shea recently published an essay, “Harry Potter and the Christian Critics,” on the weblog for *First Things* magazine. In this brisk essay, Shea confronts every major criticism aimed at the Potter series, including occultism, Gnosticism, irreligion and the death of God, and moral problems (such as Harry’s lying). Shea told the Journal he wrote the essay because “I’ve gotten tired of people talking as though your views on Harry Potter are an article of faith.”

Shea is especially pithy on charges of occultism. He writes,

The simple fact is this: The books are not occultic. Magic is not real, as Rowling repeatedly has had to state to interviewers who ask her if she “believes” in it. The magic of Harry is, as John Granger points out, “incantational,” not “invocational,” exactly like the magic of Gandalf. Born with the talent for magic, Gandalf says the magic words and fire leaps forth from his staff, just as from Harry’s wand. No principalities or powers are invoked in HP. Indeed, if any words are “invocational” they are the prayer to Elbereth and Gilthoniel uttered in Middle Earth. Yet nobody accuses Tolkien of promoting the worship of false gods. That’s because we understand Tolkien’s fictional sub-creation and its rootedness in Christian thought. I suggest Christian critics try to extend Rowling the same charity.

Shea’s essay makes clear that criticism of the Potter series is not limited to evangelical Protestants. Catholic novelist Michael O’Brien is a proponent of the view that the Potter series actually is an elaborate Gnostic myth. Shea counters: “Dumbledore’s consolation to Harry is that ‘it is our choices’—far more than our abilities—that really matter. And Harry’s choices concern, not ‘secret knowledge,’ but deeply human things such as love, mercy, forgiveness, courage, loyalty, and fidelity. None of this is gnostic.”

“It’s very disturbing to me, as a Catholic, to see Catholics not getting it,” Shea told the JOURNAL. Shea believes nevertheless that evangelicals bear some of the responsibility for anti-Potter arguments. “I think there’s a fear of the Incarnation out there,” he said. “If you let characters be what they are, rather than pitchmen for the Four Spiritual Laws, you’re getting off the program.”

What’s the Trouble With Harry? Shea said he too felt some caution when he first heard about the Potter series. “I was a typical parent when the books first came out,” he said, recalling his initial response as, “Another book about witches—*great*. But I read the first book, and at about three chapters into it I decided that this was nothing to worry about.”

Ten years after Rowling’s first novel appeared, with her last Potter novel completed and the film series trotting along at an efficient pace, Shea said he hopes believers will not only show Christian charity toward the author, but toward one another. He shudders at the thought of how many anti-Potter books have been written by Christians. “People are going to be reading the Potter books in a hundred years,” he said, and when they see anti-Potter books, they’re most likely to ask, “What was *that* all about?”

— Douglas LeBlanc