The Magical Matter of Books: Amazon.com and The Tales of Beedle the Bard

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Consider the following scenario: Three months or so before the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, a reader gets online, locates Amazon.com, and, typing in the title of the seventh novel, pulls up the exact timing of its release (July 21, 2007), the package deals featuring the first six Potter novels, as well as industry and customer buzz about the series' final installment. Having logged on seeking specific information about *Hallows*, our reader is pleasantly surprised to discover that Amazon has already done much of the looking for her and has placed its results at the Harry Potter Store, one of only two stores on the site devoted to a single series.1 There, just a click away from Amazon's home page, she finds that the novels reside alongside the site's own version of Pottermania—trivia quizzes, film updates and interviews, an ever-increasing stock of paraphernalia, testimonials, message board discussions, and blog accounts. There, too, she learns that the store acts as a kind of Potter impresario, sponsoring special features from Kid Correspondents, to the Owl Delivery Writing Adventure, to the Harry-est Town in America.2 Before she leaves the site, our reader bookmarks the Harry Potter Store. She plans on returning.

Amazon collects, organizes, and distributes Pottermania in a way that, while fostering that phenomenon, also embodies it. Its place in the world of Harry Potter is as secure as the Leaky Cauldron’s or Mugglenet’s, two of the more prominent websites associated with the series. At the Harry Potter Store the novels function as an anchor, as centrifugal origin and ground for the books, music and calendars, toys and games, costumes, accessories and jewelry. This is the work of branding, to be sure, but it’s also the case that the paraphernalia give concrete existence to objects more or less meaningful to the world the novels set out. To be able to wield the boy wizard’s wand, or to own the Sorting Hat, is to confirm materially that world. Pottermania thus participates in the long

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An assistant professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, **Yung-Hsing Wu**'s work has appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *NWSA*, *Profession*, and *PMLA*. “The Magical Matter of Books” is part of a larger project on contemporary reading formations in what Jay David Bolter has called this “late age of print.”

familiar notion that reading enables imaginative transport by supplementing it with the facticity of things. Thanks to the wand and the hat, the glasses, the broom, and golden Snitch, that transport comes with carry-ons.

I describe this dynamic not to finger it as another instance of an empty, postmodern accumulation of curios, trinkets, and fetishes. My point is not to bemoan the commercialization of Rowling’s work as yet another instance of global capitalism run amok or to worry, as both academic and public commentators have done, that its success ensures “the process by which we homogenize our children” (Zipes 188), and to claim that that fate is another symptom of the demise of literature in children’s culture. But nor do I seek to celebrate the phenomenon’s seemingly infinite capacity for self-generation, the likes of which has yielded spin-off products as well as tongue-in-cheek translations in Latin and ancient Greek and all manner of fan fiction. In short, this essay will not sit in judgment of the postmodernity of Pottermania and Amazon’s place in it. Rather, I emphasize Potter paraphernalia as an index of the materiality Amazon ascribes to books, a materiality that might appear counterintuitive given the virtual context in which Amazon operates. Books matter on Amazon, even if Amazon no longer sells only books, and they matter because they are physical objects. While this notion—that the significance of books derives in part from the fact that they can be handled, exchanged, owned, presented as gifts, displayed, and yes, read—is hardly new, I suggest that its presence online is meaningful because there it must be mediated and mediated again. In what follows, I attempt to sort out these mediations by constructing something of a biography for The Tales of Beedle the Bard: from the “seventh copy” Rowling donated for charity auction in late 2007, to the virtual object Amazon established after purchasing the copy in secret, and finally, to the collector’s and standard editions published with Rowling’s blessing and fêted online at Amazon at the end of 2008. This essay argues, then, that such an account of Rowling’s Tales offers a glimpse of what happens when the Potter canon meets Potter culture. This is not to suppose that the text and the phenomenon to which it gave rise are necessarily separate but to insist that their material conditions define their interrelation most visibly. In other words, the Tales occur in Deathly Hallows, but the pages of that novel do not bind its existence precisely because Rowling’s donation and Amazon’s canny stewardship shift the terms of its materiality. The transformations in the Tales’ material status—from a readable fictional text, to an untouchable virtual object to, finally, a purchasable textual artifact—are thus indicative of the voracity with which Potter culture consumes the literary object.

On November 1, 2007, author J. K. Rowling announced on her website that she had donated a copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard for auction at Sotheby’s in London. The first Potter writing to surface since Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, the Tales had at that moment already a place in Potter lore, having appeared in Hallows as a collection of Wizarding children’s fairy tales Albus Dumbledore bequeaths to Hermione Granger. That Granger reveres the
book, and that her fictional translation of its text eventually aids the young wizards in the battle with their nemesis, Lord Voldemort, only intensifies the pedagogy—indeed, the moral imperative—of Dumbledore’s gift. In announcing her donation Rowling confirmed and amplified the text’s significance by turning it into an object on which Potter fans might actually put their hands, rather than a text about which they could only read. “Hermione’s Book Lives!” enthused one article title. For her part, Rowling noted that the copy was the seventh of a set she had handwritten, hand illustrated, and had custom bound with the purpose of thanking those closest to her—those she called “the real insiders”—for their support during the Potter years. Her idea for the gifts, Rowling recalled, emerged out of the conviction that “nothing shop-bought seemed personal enough” for the thanks she intended: as many fans would insist across Potter forums, these insiders deserved nothing less than a book that Rowling’s hands had made. Meanwhile the author’s decision to auction the last copy, known familiarly as the Moonstone copy (for the stones affixed on its cover), coupled with her proviso that the eventual owner could neither sell nor reproduce it, prompted equally strong reactions. Fans and media wrestled with the economics and ethics of Rowling’s gesture, arguing that the author was either free to do what she wanted with the copy or obligated to share with her readers this latest in Potterdom, that the charity auction signified either the author’s ongoing commitment to children or a spectacle staged to maintain her celebrity through the persona of philanthropist and children’s advocate. On Mugglenet and the Leaky Cauldron the forums were abuzz with excitement—and a good bit of outrage—about the auction and its rendering of the Tales as a collectible, rather than a readerly text. The hue and cry converged, in other words, on whether Rowling’s actions reflected well on her status as an author whose gift, tied to her philanthropic interests in children, now stood in conflict with the desires of her readers.

Such readerly righteousness proved difficult to sustain, however, in the face of the real. Even as Potter fans grumbled about their lack of access to the Tales, so did they imagine and hash out with each other in what guise the Tales might reach them—including what they would do with the prized Moonstone copy were it somehow to fall into their hands. “Here’s a thought,” wrote one Mugglenet poster, “wouldn’t it be great, to walk into The British Museum, and see a copy of Beedle the Bard behind glass, with a page open . . . it would be our only way to see it!” Another, while echoing fan covetousness regarding the Moonstone copy, went on to consider its potential transformation into a virtual text, asking whether “perhaps the lucky person to buy the 7th will type up the stories [sic] or perhaps they’ll become available online or something?” Museum artifact or downloadable document: the point is some kind of access to a material or digital textuality mediated by either a glass case or downloadable document. At the same time, Potter fans were keenly aware of the implications that their desire for access could generate. In one of the more cynical scenarios involving the lengths to which fans would likely go, one poster imagined the
illicit behavior of “some jerk [who] will get a hold of one of the copies (or the master from her printers) and have the text plastered all over the internet before the gavel drops at Sotheby’s.” The Internet is the accessory in this narrative, one redeemable only when the same poster goes on to speculate that Rowling might “release a new one on her website each week” or that the Tales might “be her first venture into e-books.” Illegitimate as the instrument of “some jerk,” online access is meaningful precisely when the author sanctions it. These comments concede the rarity of the Moonstone copy, and if they acknowledge and lodge complaints about that fact, they also take the position that because the Moonstone’s rarity constitutes its distinction, is untouchability is thereby justified. The desire for access in no way wanes—the variety of scenarios Potter readers dream up is impressive—but it does not impinge on the insistence with which they maintain the Tales’ singularity.

Early preoccupation with the fate of the Moonstone copy derived, then, from its rarity, which was itself bound to the book’s nebulous materiality: it existed, but for millions of its fans who wanted to see, touch, and read it, it might as well not have. The specularity of that preoccupation took center stage when, just weeks before the Sotheby’s auction, Leaky Cauldron webmistress Melissa Anelli reported on her “private audience” with the book.10 Her narrative opens with the first glimpse of the copy, “wrapped in a soft purple cloth, nestled in a special box from its jeweler,” as it is transferred to the Sotheby’s viewing site. As coveted object, the Moonstone copy invites a devotion to particularity, and Anelli, who describes herself as a witness for her readers, spares no detail in featuring the copy’s dimensions, binding, cover embellishments, clasp, and paper in her description to fellow Potter fans. Her attention thus underscores the aura already surrounding the copy by insisting, paradoxically, on its physicality. In this context it is not surprising that Anelli should mention the illustrations—those appearing on the pages of individual tales as well as hand-drawn page borders and symbolic icons—since they too, emphasize the handmade nature of the Moonstone copy. The “rough-edged” paper and the embellishments that accompany Rowling’s “personal comments”: these manifest what Anelli calls Rowling’s “precise and playful style” in images. Or, to put it another way, they manifest visually the author in the act of creation. Yet even more provocative is her rather Derridean response to what she calls an occasional irregularity in Rowling’s handwriting. Those moments when “Jo capitalizes [sic] a word after first writing it lowercase” are priceless for Anelli, for if they do not quite bear Rowling’s signature, they at the same time exceed that signature. The work of Rowling’s hands, this “tick” also represents a vivid, indeed graphic, instance of her hands at work. The material instance of a mistake registers a sense of immediacy, and the book is paradoxically nowhere more forceful, and nowhere more valuable, than in these lapses. Standing in the Tales’ presence, it turns out, means confirming even the contingencies out of which it arose. For it is these moments that create most forcibly the feeling that Rowling—and by extension, her world—are near at hand.
The Moonstone copy sold on December 13, 2007, for a cool $3.98 million, a fact that Potter fans greeted with prideful glee, smugness, and perhaps most understandably, resignation. Days later, however, the revelation that the London art agency Hazlitt, Gooden, and Fox had represented Amazon.com in purchasing the Tales returned the question of the book’s fate to the forefront, revitalizing commentary about its whereabouts and the permanence of its untouchable status. Why had Amazon purchased the book? Given Rowling’s prohibition against its reproduction and sale, what was Amazon doing buying it? Indeed, what could Amazon do with the Moonstone copy? Would the company make it available to Potter devotees, and if so, how? Some fans expressed enthusiasm that Amazon—and not “some rich old collector [who] would buy it and hide it away”—had won the auction, looked forward to the book tour the company promised, and articulated the expectation that in Amazon’s hands, the Tales were sure to find their way into mass release. Not exactly arguing for Amazonian populism, many of these fans felt nonetheless sure that their “source for books movies music and more” would not disappoint them in satisfying their need. Others were more disdainful, insisting that “Amazon just wanted it for show” and loathed the idea that corporate ownership would make it impossible for fans, those who “truly” deserved the Tales, to have access to it. Indeed the purity of Potter fandom led some to examine how the Tales’ status as a unique book object complicated its literary existence, whether or not Amazon would be its eventual purveyor. “We CARE,” wrote one Mugglenet poster, “I don’t give a DAHM [sic] to have the book, but I would like to see the stories.” The critique is pointed. Real fans are defined here by their readerly desire “to enter [the world of Harry Potter] one last time,” not by consumer acquisitiveness, the likes of which constituted for many a betrayal of that world. Sounding a good deal like detractors of the commercialization of children’s culture, this poster in fact insists on the distinction between the world in the Tales and the phenomenon created by that world: a phenomenon in which Amazon had long been a participant. From this perspective, Amazon’s purchase furthers the corruption of the Potterverse and thus justifies fan resistance to it. The prospect of a reading tour led some, for instance, to hope that their fellow fans would outflank Amazon with secret recordings that would then make their way to the greater public via “Internet leaks.” Others, meanwhile, took a more defiant line against the company’s exclusive hold on the Tales and eschewed access altogether in the name of loyalty to the series. “I refuse to read [Amazon’s] review before I read the story,” declared one, “even if that means I never read it at all.”

This split in the response to Amazon’s purchase echoes the familiar concern that the consumer capitalism that produces millions of copies of the Potter novels for purchase also taints what it touches through that insatiable generativity. In this context, Amazon’s comments shortly after reports disclosed its identity as the book’s buyer are suggestive precisely for their insistence on philanthropy:
Even before establishing her charity, J. K. Rowling had done the world a rare and immeasurably valuable service, enlarging forever our concept of the way books can touch people—and in particular children—in modern times.

The company bought the book as a thank you for everything J.K. Rowling has done for literature, and for encouraging children to read and for parents to read with their children. We wanted to celebrate that.18

Reminding readers of Rowling’s history of charity work (her foundation for children, Children’s Voice, as well as the Comic Relief project that included the sales of two Potter reference books, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *Quidditch Through the Ages*), Amazon here names Rowling’s very *authorship* as philanthropy.19 The logic goes like this: in writing the Potter series, Rowling has served both the world and literature, and in both cases, the well-being of children is at stake. That well-being, it is worth noting, is figured as transcendent: “immeasurably valuable,” no price can touch it. In making such claims, Amazon renders its purchase as a consequent act of gratitude and positions itself in the middle between Rowling and her readers, but not, significantly, in its familiar bookseller guise. Instead, CEO Jeff Bezos speaks from the perspective of a cultural commentator—or a parent?—invested in the moral force of literature, while Damien Peachy, the Amazon UK spokesman, describes the purchase in terms of a tribute the company hopes to make in Rowling’s honor.20 The effect of these statements is to render the company as a *fellow philanthropist* who responds to Rowling’s authorship, as the phrase goes, in kind: by purchasing the Moonstone copy, by promising that fans would have access to it via a traveling tour to schools, libraries, and bookstores. It is also to shift Amazon’s self-construction toward the ethical by invoking children and the literary. To put it another way, while the purchase of the Moonstone copy did not effect any great change in Amazon’s retail identity, it did yield an affiliation that no Potter board game or item of Potter clothing, both staples at the Harry Potter Store and the “Toys, Kids, and Baby” department, could.21 The double association with children—with children who read and children in need—confers onto Amazon an additional legitimacy as a virtuous agent of book culture.

Self-fashioning is serious business. The purchase of the unsellable book may have provided Amazon with no immediate material gain, but so did it vault the company to a new status as a steward of the materially inaccessible.

Materially inaccessible, the *Tales* acquired a virtual presence within days of its purchase when Amazon established a permanent link to the book at <http://www.amazon.com/beedlebard>. There, the company framed the link with thanks to Rowling, a quick recap of the *Tales*’ philanthropic origins, and a reminder that the 157-page book “is extensively illustrated and handwritten by the bard herself” before introducing the content of the link: a gallery of the photos of the Moonstone copy and an editorial review of the tales in it. While this framing suggests an intent to make the book knowable, the tack Amazon editor Daphne Durham takes when introducing her review turns that gesture on its head: “there is no easy way,” she writes, “to define the experience of seeing,
holding, or reading J. K. Rowling’s *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.* “Seeing, holding, reading: from the start Durham invokes the phenomenal nature of the act of reading and suggests that the difficulty of reviewing the Moonstone copy stems from its phenomenal presence. As a result, she places as much emphasis on the book’s materiality as she does on the five tales. The sheer facticity of the book commands attention, therefore, because it heightens the rarity of the “never-before-told” tales. Meanwhile, Rowling’s handwriting calls attention to the act of reading because it compels Durham to “follow” the author down “every dip and curve.” In both cases, Durham describes a knowing overdetermination in which her happy subjection derives from the physical awareness of the book before her. If to read the *Tales* is to be “swept away,” then that familiar trope for readerly transcendence has a very material ground.

Durham’s account of immersion is hardly surprising, of course: fandom presupposes it. More surprising is her repeated turn to locate that immersion in Rowling’s handwriting, which constitutes for her the tales’ “real magic” since it indexes and bring readers closer to the author’s feelings as she wrote as well as the moral sensibility that underlies the tales. If Durham admires the whimsical fable of a pot chasing down “a selfish young wizard,” she finds the shift in Rowling’s inscription the source of real enchantment, because “the way she underlines the ‘clang, clang, clang’ of the pot for emphasis” performs the tale’s belief in duty to others. That “her handwriting gets messier when the story picks up speed” is only further endearing, since it suggests that the author, like her reader, is “hurrying along” to discover, and ultimately, approve of, the wizard’s change of heart. Two reviews later, a darkening of ink in “The Warlock’s Hairy Heart” leads Durham to imagine Rowling so caught up in her story that her emotions again get the better of her handwriting. In this tableau the author’s frustration with her unredeemable protagonist leads her to press down with her pen; that frustration, Durham suggests, will surely impress itself on readers. In an echo of Anelli, Durham renders Rowling a less distant figure by equating the marks on the page with her person. That this textual materiality should generate intimacy, and that Durham should associate this intimacy with the tales’ implicit morality, heightens the aura of singularity surrounding the Moonstone copy. It is not just that the *Tales* were meant to teach young wizards a sense of right and wrong or that they provide Harry, Hermione, and Ron a much-needed ethical boost in *Deathly Hallows* that makes this instantiation special. The difference, rather, lies in the sense that the Moonstone copy has Rowling’s blessing, a touch at once physical and ethical.

If Durham in her review invokes a sense of the authorial touch, the gallery of photos that follow pursue a similar logic of intimacy. Shot from a variety of angles, these “first images” feature the book box’s leather binding, the silver chasing and jewelwork embossing the front cover, the removable clasp, as well as interestingly furtive peeks at pages covered in Rowling’s handwriting. From above, from alongside, and even in close-ups, the images lavish attention from the outside in. They interpellate the Potter fan as a viewer, as book
lover and book voyeur, moving him/her increasingly closer to the copy for a glimpse that is always just shy of complete. The partial shots—those in which one can just see an illustration, or get a peek at a few lines—receive particular emphasis here (there’s even an action shot in which a Sotheby’s staff member flips through the pages). These tantalize the most precisely because they are the most indistinct, the most blurred. The link’s first picture features, for instance, the title page in such a way that obscures the title while allowing a clear view of the illustrated border and Rowling’s signature. And in another the book appears at an angle—a reading angle—tilted just enough to reveal the underside of one page and the tops of several of those that follow, and just enough to make a few phrases readable. The point of this visual progression is to invoke the act of reading, of course, but also to promise the interior, to sidle up to Rowling’s handwriting, to the inside that signifies immediacy even as it remains illegible. Meanwhile, other images show the book secure in a glass Sotheby’s case, propped up on a bookstand, or, in one, in the gloved hands of a Sotheby’s staff member preparing to move it from one institution to another. Thus rendered as an artifact, the Tales confer onto the Amazon website the status of an exhibit—complete with an accompanying title, “Handwritten and Beautiful: Images of the Original Handcrafted Edition”—not unlike the one staged at Sotheby’s. In these ways Amazon honors Rowling’s condition not to reproduce the text. There can be no doubt, however, that Amazon has reproduced something else: its bookish aura. And in so doing, Amazon makes the rather circular, but fascinating, claim that a book is only as material as the aura of books it can generate.

For Potter fans, that Amazon represents the Tales’ material inaccessibility means that the latter acquires a forceful presence. The care Amazon took in crafting its position as the Tales’ steward was geared, in other words, to the Potter fan base the company had helped to create. Thus, if fans flocked to the permanent link when Amazon announced its purchase of the Moonstone copy, they all but stampeded when reports surfaced on July 31, 2008, that Amazon, along with Bloomsbury and Scholastic, would with Rowling’s blessing release standard and collector’s editions (in time for Christmas pre-ordering). Their response was no less emphatic than the announcement on the link, which figured both editions as another instance of Rowling’s philanthropy: “now J. K. Rowling is giving millions of Harry Potter fans worldwide cause for celebration.” At a retail price of $7.59, the standard edition would feature the five tales, a new introduction, reproductions of Rowling’s illustrations in the Moonstone copy, and commentary on each of the tales from Professor Albus Dumbledore. Meanwhile, the collector’s edition would include the tales alongside an “exclusive” reproduction of Rowling’s handwritten introduction in the original, ten new illustrations by Rowling not included in the standard or original, a velvet bag embroidered with Rowling’s signature, an outer case disguised as a wizarding textbook from the Hogwarts library, and metalwork, clasp, and replica gemstones on the binding and cover of the book. Significantly, Amazon
alone would sell and distribute the collector’s edition—which, the company was quick to point out, was “designed to evoke the spirit of the handcrafted original.” This evocation, coupled with a limited run of 100,000 copies (for $100.00 each), prompted a proliferation of new threads on the various Tales forums that in turn shifted readers’ discourse about the Tales, Amazon, and their relation to it as an originating body. The urgency over Amazon’s stewardship of the idealized Moonstone copy was now a thing of the past. The prospect of ownership, and the materiality implied by that relation, transformed that urgency into realizable desire.

Indeed, euphoria dominated fan response to the news that ownership, rather than fantasy, could now define one’s relation to the Tales. The header on the Amazon Beedle forum notes simply, “OMG!” while the discourse on Leaky Cauldron and Mugglenet registers shock, joy, speechlessness, tears, gratitude, and anticipation. This range of response, as many fans noted, had everything to do with the opportunity to return to a world that Deathly Hallows had seemingly closed off. While not part of the series, the Tales would make that return possible with “bits and pieces of the wizarding world” Potter readers craved; “another book to add to my Harry Potter Bookshelf” meant, in other words, the continuation of that world.25 “I remember how that [Amazon’s] purchase shattered all previous records for the auction of a manuscript,” remarked one poster on the Amazon Beedle forums, “and I also remember drooling over the images, and wishing that I could hold that little book in my hands. Well—now I can.”26 Having known the Tales primarily through virtual images and fantasy, Potter fans now shifted the terms of their desire to ownership, a relation they defined as a material presence in one’s hands. And in defining the material significance of that relation, many turned their attention back to Rowling, leaving Amazon’s role in the arrangement, interestingly, secondary. The Mugglenet story of the release thus made no mention of the company, focusing instead on the fact that “even though it’s her and Harry’s birthdays, JK [sic] Rowling is giving us and charity yet another gift.”27 As an authorial gift, the release of the Tales confirmed for readers their bond with Rowling, whom fans thanked for having “consider[ed] the thoughts of Harry Potter fans around the world!”28 This sense of connection, as one remarked, validated her prior refusal to read Amazon’s reviews of the Tales: “I am now glad that I didn’t read the full reviews that Amazon published, so that I can be surprised when I read the book!”29 This reader is just as sure she will purchase an edition of the Tales from Amazon as she was about her refusal to read the reviews. For her the difference lies in the degree of mediation she will accept. The release thus heightened the conviction that the Tales needed to be had (and read) in their immediacy.

That materiality signifies this immediacy is especially pointed, of course, in the case of the collector’s edition. If for many proof of fandom rested on a refusal of the mediations of the virtual, then readers on the Amazon Beedle forums were quick to turn the material into the most pressing articulation of that edition’s value.30 Just how limited would the print run be? Would the
outside case—a faux textbook from the Hogwarts library—add value to the edition, and would the velvet bag in which the book would arrive be of archival quality? How would the book be bound, what sorts of stones would be used on the cover, and what kind of metal would appear on the chase work? Would the book be printed in a typeface font, or would it feature a facsimile of Rowling’s handwriting on the original? Would each collector’s edition bear a number confirming its status? What relation would these editions have, finally, to the Moonstone copy? “I would like to know,” wondered one poster, “if the book is leather bound and also what print or edition this would be considered? If the first, would it be marked as such?” Tying its physical being to the book’s value, this reader posed perhaps the most urgent question for her fellow Potter fans: what is the particular value of its recreated authenticity, and what will its signifying marks be? While it was a given in this context that no one who purchased a copy of the Tales could claim to own the real thing, the force of the real still obtained. Despite—or perhaps because—authenticity could not be had completely, its approximations had to be meted out. A thread discussing the precise number of collector’s editions thus prompted some posters to track sales figures, while others expressed worries that Amazon might print more copies or reduce the $100 price tag in the future; later, with the discovery that the collector’s editions were numbered, posters on this thread checked and reported to one another the numbers on their respective copies as if in an attempt to verify the truth of the stated print run. In another string of threads posters converged on the edition’s material features to assess its value, beginning with questions about the binding, stitching, and decorative work on the cover before moving on to wonder if the pages were “all rough and beveled and old-looking like in Rowling’s handcrafted original?” and if the text of the tales would, like the introduction, feature a facsimile of the author’s handwriting. Two observations are worth making here. First, the judgment of the edition’s value not only occurred on these Amazon forums but was virtually enabled by the company: by its ownership of the Moonstone copy, by the link, by the photos. In this way the Tales’ material existence—at least at this moment—was defined by Amazon. Second, even as posters acknowledged the limitations mass production placed on quality, their comments revealed an almost Benjaminian investment in its auratic authenticity. Embodied in the look, dimensions, and details, authenticity remained a touchstone of value. As one poster later observed after having received his copy, “the Collector’s Edition is the only way to read [the Tales] because of the feel of it and the place that it puts you when you have it in your hands.”

“[T]he feel of it and the place that it puts you when you have it in your hands”: the material resemblance the collector’s edition bears to the original yields, in fact, two senses of authenticity. On the one hand, authenticity means physical verisimilitude, or at least its approximation. The exactness with which the collector’s edition mimics the Moonstone copy is its measure. On the other hand, authenticity also refers to the work—both symbolic and affective—the
edition performs for those who hold it. For it is the sense of touch, which subsequently turns into sensibility and feeling, that was said to enable a much yearned-for return to Harry’s world. This is the view that underlies discussions about desire and use, and, interestingly, about the function Potter fandom attributes to reading. One poster thus noted that the collector’s edition allows him to “feel, touch, and read what Harry, Hermione, and Ron read during the last days of the war against Voldemort.”

Reading the *Tales* enables the imaginative transformation of *Deathly Hallows*, the novel in which the *Tales* are embedded, into lived experience. Meanwhile another observed of the collector’s edition that it returns one to the experience of reading: “if you want to hold something in your hands that will take you right back to reading those last few chapters of the *Deathly Hallows*, this is for you.”

Nostalgic for Harry’s world, this poster is nonetheless after the feeling of reading the last novel in the series. Fans less sanguine about the collector’s edition also turned to reading to make their case. In assertions like “it is the content of the book that’s important,” some disdained the material excess of the collector’s edition, arguing not only that reading was better suited to the standard edition but that materiality should bear little relation to the act of reading. Others, if less righteous, were no less concerned about this relation, noting that the collector’s edition should for the most part remain a cherished artifact in one’s Potter collection. For these fans the collector’s edition belonged most properly in a library, in “a place of honor in our formal bookshelves,” or imagined “in Albus’ collection.” At least one poster went so far as to displace reading from the scene altogether, remarking that “mine was placed not on the bookshelf, but in a place of honor.” And even those who insisted on their plans to read the collector’s edition did so with the notion that the edition would have a privileged place, and, equally important, that reading would either be a one-time or occasional affair. “I’m gonna open it with cotton gloves read it once and put it away and just read the standard edition,” wrote one, “But I’ve GOT to read it once.”

The ritualization of reading emerges out of a concern for the edition’s material well-being. And readerly well-being, it turns out, lies at the heart of what fans claim for the *Tales*. In account after account, Potter readers turn to the *Tales*’ distinctive morality, doing so by foregrounding the presence of children. With few exceptions, most fans agreed that the *Tales* represented an extension of the lessons about friendship, self-reliance, and perseverance the novels teach and, therefore, offered another opportunity to foster that moral education through reading. And those who wrote about their purchases more often than not reported ordering the *Tales* for their children, whether or not they were already Potter fans, as the exemplary bedtime read. The *Tales*’ “authenticity” as wizarding fairy tales, meanwhile, enhanced for others their moral force because of the parallels they suggested between wizard and human children. If the tales were so convincing that they prompted visions of “Ron and his siblings hearing ‘Babbity Rabbity’ before bed at the Burrow,” then they would carry as much weight, so these posters ventured, with their human readers, who would take such imagined
The extent to which these discussions focused on the collector’s edition, with its neo-medieval look and heft, suggests that belief in the Tales’ moral weight was not unaffected by its material presence. “Would you read these wizard tales to your kids,” asked one poster, “from a nice little book that looks like it came from somewhere and means something, or a regular ol’ hardback?” The evocation of “somewhere” turns the act of reading the collector’s edition to one’s children into something extraordinary—something, in short, of Harry’s world. Moreover, unlike the standard edition, whose “regular” nature makes it practically a cipher, the collector’s edition “means something” precisely because it has a foot in that world. Its moral import has everything to do with its materiality: “it looks like it came from somewhere” (emphasis added). Another poster puts things even more bluntly when he admits that “I haven’t even read the book yet but that doesn’t matter”:

I’m not expecting it to be Harry Potter. I’m expecting it to be a children’s book of parables based in the Harry Potter world . . . The most important thing to me is the grandeur of the packaging of the collector’s edition. I’m already imagining taking the whole thing out to read to my children . . . the grandeur of the collectors [sic] edition will go a long way in adding to the ambiance of the age-old bedtime story. Can you imagine if your parents read you a book with so many trappings when you were a child.45

Substance is a familiar metaphor for morality; a weighty issue possesses gravitas. In claiming “grandeur” and “ambiance” for the collector’s edition, fans described their sense of the edition’s material significance and lent it an ethical resonance, associating its “many trappings” with parables, that children’s genre of moral exemplarity.

The argument for the collector’s edition turns in these instances on its conjunction of materiality with morality. If the Tales promote ethics, so the argument goes, that promotion is enhanced by its sheer presence as an object. That this presence resonates as authenticity is part of the broader complex that lived online on Amazon in particular, thanks to its purchase, virtual replication, and reproduction of the Moonstone copy. I have been suggesting that the online discourse about this complex has focused primarily, indeed compulsively, on how authenticity was to be gauged. Indeed, this discourse has focused as much on the criteria by which sets of fans, each with its own notion of value, judged the editions as it did on whether authenticity could be realized. By way of a conclusion, let me try to suggest what it means that authenticity should be so meted out. First, it seems to me significant that the materiality of a book should be so prominent a force in generating these concerns. I have not seen any commentary, for instance, that challenges Rowling’s authorship of the collection, and the complaints about the individual tales have not so much challenged their place in the Potterverse as they have expressed disappointment that they do not feature in their plots the characters from the septilogy. Instead, readers have been preoccupied by the artifactual nature of the collector’s edition, obsess-
ing over the physical details that mark it as a facsimile, worrying that forgeries might be on the horizon—since those would undermine its significance as a “relic pulled from a novel”—and battling with one another over the readerly merit of owning the edition. Second, that a Harry Potter book should generate these concerns demonstrates that the dilution of authenticity so regularly associated with mass reproduction is not so simple an affair. Until the advent of the “seventh copy,” the Potter phenomenon had embraced the mass reproduction of items of a singular, because fictional, nature. To be sure, detractors had all along lamented the rate at which Warner Brothers produced Potter item after Potter item; Potter devotees waving the flag of fandom purity constituted a vocal set in this population. The emergence of the “seventh copy,” and the release of the standard and collector’s editions, however, made Potter fans feel strongly, righteously, even—as they had not when purchasing the spectacles or the broom at Toys “R” Us—about authenticity: about the facsimile and its ability to evoke the original, and about the ways in which the material presence of a book could register that authenticity. Their status as books turned the fact of mass reproduction into an ethical affair, in short, because reading was on the line—and in this way they complicate any claim that conflates Pottermania with commodity culture. That these discussions marked young children in particular as Potter subjects (whether or not children constituted the majority of Potter readers) turned the debate over authenticity into one that the act of reading could index.

To put it another way, the affective and symbolic work the Tales (in all its guises) was said to perform marked for fans its distinctiveness. This is not to say that fans did not long to read the tales themselves, or that the tales somehow mattered less than the books in which readers encountered them. Rather, it is to call attention to the fact that fan discourse about the Tales yoked feeling and significance to materiality. That yoking produced a brush with authenticity, a glimpse of a Potter imaginary as well as a sense that a more intimate relation to the fullness of that realm was possible. At the same time, if Potter fans valued the collector’s edition for its material approximation of the Moonstone copy—which always remained the untouchable, and therefore hyperauthentic, ideal—they also claimed for the collector’s edition a singularity of its own. The passion with which readers wrote about their desires, the urgency with which many debated whether they would read (or use) the collector’s edition: in these responses the mimetic relation between copy and original has not remained invulnerable, and Potter fans have been the ones to undo it. With the news that the Tales would see publication still fresh, one fan wrote in to suggest that the collector’s edition should, in the interest of fictional authenticity, feature fonts that replicated Hermione’s handwriting. In this vision the collector’s edition is not a copy of the Moonstone—that original text features Rowling’s handwriting—but indeed something of a precursor, since, as the poster recalls, Hermione, and not Rowling, did the initial translating. Several months later, as the date of the release approached, fellow readers cheered a regular for her
remark that Amazon should issue certificates of authenticity with each collector’s edition and argued that such certificates would best document the collector’s edition unique status. Amazon, according to this logic, “should at least do something to protect authenticity of the book” because its value is tied to its rarity. Even the two dissenters on the thread had this concern in mind when, on the one hand, they argued that “the amount of detail Amazon has put into this book is better than any COA or number,” and, on the other hand, chided fellow posters for having forgotten that the value of the Tales lies properly in fans’ love, and not in some certifying authority. In these instances, Potter fans continued to regard the Moonstone copy as the measure of the collector’s edition but also insisted on positing the collector’s edition in its own terms. And those terms, interestingly enough, come with their own aura. “I just think there ‘is something’ about having a numbered COA of an item,” one poster remarks. What is “this something,” and what does it mean that it eludes specification, and that it sounds so oddly mystical? One answer, one made possible by readerly response, is that the Tales has generated—as if with a wand—its own real.

Notes

Thanks to Kate Capshaw Smith for bearing with me as I sorted out the narrative and citational threads of this essay. I would also especially like to thank John Laudun and Katie Levin for their willingness to listen and read.


2. In the days before the release of Deathly Hallows, the store announced that Falls Church, Virginia, had earned the title for having ordered the most copies of the novel per capita.

3. The proceeds of the auction were to go Children’s Voice, a charity Rowling cofounded to improve the lives of institutionalized European children.


11. What Derrida would have to say about Anelli’s response here would be summed up by “Signature Event Context” and *Paper Machine*.

12. In its announcement of the auction details of *Tales*, Sotheby’s site notes that “there is no buyer’s premium on the sale of this lot. Not sold with copyright. The buyer may not publish or reproduce this work or any extract from it.” <http://www.sothebys.com/app/paddleReg/paddlereg.do?dispatch=eventDetails&event_id=28411>. Retrieved 22 July 2008.

13. The_kai writes on 14 December 2007: “Wow. And here I was assuming some rich old collector would buy it and hide it away somewhere. What a turn of luck that someone like Amazon would buy it instead.” In a similar vein, member_of_SPEW writes that “this is exactly what I was hoping for! Now we WILL get to read it!” Posted on 13 December 2007. Both comments were in response to Andrew’s 13 December 2007 story announcing Amazon’s purchase of the Moonstone copy. <http://www.mugglenet.com/app/news/show/1384>. Retrieved 29 July 2009.


19. *Fantastic Beasts* and *Quidditch* were published in 2001 by Scholastic. Both are described as Hogwarts textbooks; *Beasts* is said to be printed from Harry’s own copy, “complete with claw marks on the cover and notes written by Harry, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger in the margins.” <http://www.rambles.net/rowling_quidditch.html>. Retrieved 7 March 2010.

20. In this context, it might be useful to note how Amazon constructs children’s books, itself a subset of the larger “Books” department. Going to “Children’s Books” yields categories including Age, Subject, or Area, as well as categories by Authors & Illustrators, Basic Concepts, Popular Characters, Series, Obsessions, and Issues. The category of Authors & Illustrators concedes how children’s books are bought (there isn’t, for example,
an “author” category for nonchildren books); the Basic Concept category reflects the pedagogic nature attributed to children’s books; the Popular Characters category reflects the marketing of children’s culture; and the Series and Obsessions categories reflects the intensification of that marketing.

21. “Toys, Kids, and Baby” constitutes one of Amazon’s major departments. Meanwhile “Children’s Books” appears on the site as a category in “Books”; within the former, “Children’s Literature” is its own subcategory.

22. Here I take Jerome McGann’s notion that the materiality of a text—its physique as well as the material conditions that produce it—and bring it to bear on the virtual context represented by Durham’s Amazon review of the Tales. For the review and images discussed below, see <http://www.amazon.com/beekelebard>.

23. These images were the first of Amazon’s copy. Arthur A. Levine, Scholastic co-editor for the Potter septilogy, lent his personal copy of the Tales to the New York Public Library for an exhibit between December 2008 and 4 January 2009. See Micah’s 3 December posting, which includes pictures of the copy before and after the unveiling, of the full display, of the Beedle boxes, of the copy close-up, and of the first page. <http://mugglenet.com/app/news/full_story/2015>. Retrieved 20 May 2009.

24. July 31 is, of course, both J. K. Rowling and Harry Potter’s birthday.


30. August M. LeBlanc writes, “I mean if having the nicer looking book means nothing to you then buy the SE version. The contents of the CE will be online once people get it and you can read it there. If you are concerned about paying too much then don’t even bother. We live in an internet age, just wait for it all to be online and download it for free. This is not an issue about money, it is an issue of how much of a HP fan you are.” Posted 19 August 2008, “Canceling order” thread. <http://www.amazon.com/beedlebard/>. Retrieved 4 August 2009.


34. In one instance, readers of the Beedle forum on Amazon discussed with one another the metal markers on the Moonstone copy. More than one noted that (s)he had used the zoom-in feature to get a better look.


42. See “So since a lot of us ordered the CE” thread. <http://www.amazon.com/beedlebard/>. A number of posters described having ordered the collector’s edition for their children’s collection of books. Zipes cites a USA Today graph “showing that 43 percent of the Harry Potter books were bought for people over age fourteen, while 57 percent were bought for people under age fourteen” (186).


44. Customer review posted by C. Perez, 4 December 2008.


49. Posted by E. Baker, 7 August 2008. “For something so beautiful and close to all our hearts,” Crystal M. Nichols asks, “is authenticity really your concern? . . . these are


Works Cited


