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Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary

Roni Natov

I like the Harry Potter books because they are like real life but more interesting.

—Melissa Stevens, 14

Harry is like a real boy—except that he’s a wizard!

—Sarah McKenna, 10¹

Harry begins his journey at eleven years old, an age associated with coming into consciousness, particularly for boys, and particularly in England, when children begin their “serious” study to prepare them for adult life. What Harry discovers on his eleventh birthday is that he is a wizard, that he has powers he intuitively but, as is true of most childhood knowledge, does not consciously recognize. He had noticed that strange things happened to him: his hair grew back overnight after his aunt sheared it off; the sweater she tried to force him to wear kept getting smaller when she tried to pull it over his head. A most hilarious scene occurs at the zoo where the caged boa winks at him, after sleeping through his cousin Dudley’s command to “‘Make it move,’” and, as it makes its escape amid “howls of horror,” Harry “could have sworn a low hissing voice said, ‘Brazil, here I come. . . . Thanksss, amigo’” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 28). He does not connect these events with his own power. Like most orphans, Harry has little sense of having any power at all.

Like most orphan heroes, he will need to be unusually sensitive, almost vigilant, particularly since he has been raised by hostile relatives

against whom his sensibility absolutely grates. He has to make his own choices, as Rowling pointed out in a National Public Radio (NPR) interview, without the benefit of “access to adults,” the “safety net of many children who have loving parents or guardians.”

However extreme this situation, it only epitomizes what I believe at one time every child feels—that she is on her own, unacknowledged, unappreciated, unseen, and unheard, up against an unfair parent, and by extension, an unfair world. Justice and the lack of it reign supreme in the literature of childhood, where our first sense of the world is often so astutely recorded. “But it’s not fair” is a phrase that stands out from my childhood and continues to resonate for me even now. I am reminded of E. B. White’s opening to the beloved classic, *Charlotte’s Web*: “‘Where’s Poppa going with that axe?’” White’s hero, Fern, protests against the adults’ Darwinian treatment of animals, those creatures closest to her child-sensibility: “‘But it’s unfair! . . . The pig couldn’t help being born small. . . . If I had been very small at birth,’” she accuses, “‘would you have killed *me*?’” (3).

And what could be more unfair than losing your parents as a baby? The orphan archetype embodies the childhood task of learning to deal with an unfair world. I am also reminded of Jane Eyre at ten years old, thrashing around in her awareness of her unjust treatment at the hands of her aunt and cousins. Harry, like his great Victorian predecessors, is a kind of Everychild, vulnerable in his powerlessness, but as he discovers his strengths, he releases a new source of vitality into the world. He becomes the child-hero of his own story, like Dickens’s “favorite child,” the orphan hero of *David Copperfield*, whose story begins, “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show” (1). The *Harry Potter* stories chronicle the process of the child’s movement from the initial consciousness of himself as the central character in his story, a singular preoccupation with self, to a sense of his own power and responsibility to a larger community.

Harry Potter has been raised by the Dursleys, who pride themselves on being “perfectly normal” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 1)—a sign that this story will assert the unconventional, even the eccentric. Harry will provide a resistance to normality that, Rowling suggests, is necessary for inclusiveness, for the individual and the community to prosper. Mr. Dursley, director of Grunnings, which makes drills, is a brutal, “beefy man with hardly any neck” (1). His equally nasty opposite, Mrs. Dursley, is “thin . . . [with] nearly twice the usual amount of neck . . . [good for] spying on the neighbors” (1). These are the caretakers of “the boy who lived” through

the murder of both his parents and the attempt on his own life. Many are the injustices heaped upon him: he is kept under the stairs, half-starved and half-clothed, is “small and skinny for his age . . . [his] “glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose” (20). The Dursleys are also psychologically abusive and provide, conversely, a model of how not to treat children. They treat Harry “as though he wasn’t there . . . as though he was something very nasty that couldn’t understand them, like a slug” (22). They withhold the truth of Harry’s birth, in violation of a basic tenet of children’s rights—one of the many indications that Rowling sees children as people with rights. What they hate in Harry’s behavior, “even more than his asking questions [is] his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn’t, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon” (26). Here Rowling emphasizes the preeminence of the imagination of childhood and the need for children to question and dream. So when Harry dreams of a flying motorcycle, it foreshadows his success at Quidditch, a kind of soccer in the sky, and his imminent rise above the chains of conventionality. Normal, Muggle (non-magical) school is a system that teaches children to use “knobbly sticks for hitting each other . . . [as if it were] good training for later life” (32). There Harry is persecuted by Dudley’s “normal” friends, like Piers, “a scrawny boy with a face like a rat . . . who held people’s arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them” (23)—because he is different, because he is an orphan, because he is dressed in Dudley’s old, shrunken uniforms, “looking like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin . . .” (35). Aside from his dark cupboard under the stairs, nowhere is Harry safe. And nowhere is he loved, which only provides the urgency for a compensatory endowment of magical powers.

Belying Harry’s puny appearance and weak position in the Muggle world is his bolt-of-lightning scar, which marks him, like Cain, for difference and protection against antagonism to that uniqueness. When Harry is most vulnerable, his scar burns painfully, which serves to warn him against proximity of danger. A particularly touching image of Harry’s vulnerability occurs at the end of the first chapter, where he is curled fetus-like in sleep, “not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous . . . that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: ‘To Harry Potter—the boy who lived!’” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 17).

Harry embodies this state of injustice frequently experienced by children, often as inchoate fear and anger—and its other side, desire to possess extraordinary powers that will overcome such early and deep

exile from the child's birthright of love and protection. That every child experiences himself as special is obvious, if for no other reason than that everything that happens to him is inherently significant. The world revolves around him; each moment resonates with the potential vitality of the first time, of unexplored territory. As the child grows into consciousness, an inner world serves to witness the extraordinary quality of experience recorded, sorted through, and reflected upon. Along with this consciousness comes the recognition that others may share that experience, in part at least, and that ultimately each child is just another human being on this large, multitudinous planet. I remember looking up at the stars one night in the country and coming to a sudden understanding that contained both terror and relief. My epiphany turned on how small and insignificant I was, coupled with the insight that I was not responsible for the world. I had only a small part to play; the world was long in the making before I entered it and would go on long after I was gone. I remember that my ordinariness, then, offered a perspective and put into sharp relief my need to be special.

The Harry Potter series opens with the infiltration of the ordinary world by the luminous and magical as "a large, tawny owl flutters past the window" unobserved by the blunted Dursleys. Mr. Dursley "noticed the first sign of something peculiar—a cat reading a map," but assumed that "[i]t must have been a trick of the light . . . and put the cat out of his mind" (*Sorter's Stone* 2–3). He was aware of "a lot of strangely dressed people . . . in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn't bear people who dressed in funny clothes . . . [and] was enraged to see that a couple of them weren't young at all," dismissed them as "people [who] *were* obviously collecting for something [and put] his mind back on drills" (3). He was oblivious to "the owls swooping past in broad daylight, though people down in the street . . . pointed and gazed open-mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead" (4). With this startling image of the nocturnal in bright light, Rowling establishes three groups defined by their response to the magic of the world. The Dursleys represent those who are hostile to anything imaginative, new, unpredictable. The Muggles, who notice the owls but are remote from their magical aura, represent a kind of conventional center. Professor Dumbledore, Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, an old man, whose silver hair and beard "were both long enough to tuck into his belt . . . [who wore] long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots" (8), and Professor McGonagall, who has shape-shifted from cat to woman, indicated by her glasses with "exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes" (9), embody the childhood world of magic and awe.

In most popular children's fantasies, the magical world is entirely separate from daily life. In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, for example, entry into the supernatural takes place through a wardrobe at the back of a strange house during the bombings of World War II and represents the child-heroes' escape into a reimagined and revitalized Christian realm. In Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and its successors, *A Wind in the Door* and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, the magical world is celestial, in keeping with science fiction and L'Engle's strong religious allegorical allusions. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy take place entirely in a magical world and represent a refuge, an alternative to the real world.²

Rowling noted the genius of Lewis and Tolkien, those predecessors with whom she has been frequently compared, but she claimed in the NPR radio interview that she was "doing something slightly different."³ Though her stories contain the usual global battle between the forces of good and evil, Rowling, I believe, is essentially a novelist, strongest when writing about the real world. Harry has a psychology; his problems need resolution in the real world. Insofar as he is a real child, with little relief at home, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where the supernatural reigns, he is freer to discover his own powers. In Rowling's stories, the interpenetration of the two worlds suggests the way in which we live, not only in childhood, though especially so—on more than one plane, with the life of the imagination and daily life moving in and out of our consciousness. The two realms, characterized in literature as the genres of romance and realism, are located in the imagination, which is, always, created by and rooted in the details of everyday life. In fantasy, always we are grounded; the unconscious invents nothing, or as Freud put it, "In the psychic life, there is nothing arbitrary, nothing undetermined" (qtd. in Todorov 161). The realm of the fantastic, based on the unconscious, is firmly and inevitably a reconfiguration of everyday reality, transformed and disguised though it may be.

The need for both realms and their interdependence was recognized by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their plan for the *Lyrical Ballads*. As Coleridge noted:

my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic—yet so as to transfer, from our inward nature, a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. . . . [Wordsworth was] to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of

custom, and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us—an inexhaustible treasure but for which . . . we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (*Biographia Literaria* 531)

In the *Harry Potter* books, magic calls attention to the awe and wonder of ordinary life. Rowling ingeniously enhances and amplifies the vitality of ordinary objects. For example, at Hogwarts, the walls are “covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames” (*Chamber* 203). Books bite and argue, “locked together in furious wrestling matches and snapping aggressively” (*Prisoner* 52)—a literary joke about the Battle of the Books or other debate literature, reminiscent of Carroll’s *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* landscapes. Along with magical wands, cloaks of invisibility, maps that reproduce and mirror actual journeys as they are taking place (like the virtual reality of technology), the things of children’s culture—treats such as candy, and kids’ own particular kind of humor, such as jokes about bodily fluids—are featured. Some of children readers’ favorite aspects of life at Hogwarts include Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, consisting of such flavors as spinach, liver, tripe, grass, sardine, vomit, ear wax, and “even a booger-flavored one” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 104). Words themselves suggest the magical power of language to mean, as well as to evoke and connote. Such passwords as “pig snout,” “scurvy cur,” “oddsbodkin,” suggest treasure and mystery. The characters’ names are appropriately allusive and inviting. As Moore points out:

There are sneaky-sounding s’s: Slytherins, Snape, Severus, Sirius and Scabbers. The h’s are kind of heroic: Hogwarts, Hedwig, Hermione and Hagrid. The f’s are often unpleasant types: Filch and Flitwick. . . . The names that sound French are usually difficult people: Madam Pince, Madam Pomfrey, and Malfoy. (2)

Alison Lurie noted,

As in many folk tales, you can often tell a character’s character from his or her name, and “Voldemort” neatly combines the ideas of theft, mold, and death. Harry Potter, on the other hand, has a name that suggests not only craftsmanship but both English literature and English history: Shakespeare’s Prince Hal and Harry Hotspur, the brave, charming, impulsive heroes of *Henry IV*, and Beatrix Potter, who created that other charming and impulsive classic hero, Peter Rabbit.

As Harry embodies both the ordinary and the extraordinary, his narratives contain realistic and romantic elements. Like other questing heroes, Harry must prove himself through a series of tests, each increasingly more difficult. Joseph Campbell noted how the hero’s cycle

corresponded to the dynamic movement through life stages, particularly the development of consciousness and the discovery of identity. Even the simplest of hero stories, the fairy tales, dramatize the complexity of the life struggles of Everyman/woman/child. For example, both Perrault's and the Grimms's most virtuous, Christianized, and domesticated girl-hero, Cinderella, must revolt against the wishes of the good fairy godmother (without the consciousness that she is doing so, of course). She must forget to leave the ball by midnight, in order that the prince find her and that her rightful place be restored. This tale acknowledges the hero's paradoxical struggle to maintain tradition and to subvert it for evolution to occur. Some taboo must be broken, some boundary crossed—this is at the heart of the hero's quest. Harry, who is, as Alison Lurie points out, a kind of Cinderlad himself, must break the very rules at Hogwarts needed to maintain order and its basic values.

The fairy tales of childhood illustrate a most significant aspect of that earliest stage, the centrality of play and the imagination, which, though it receives prominence in childhood, often gets lost along the way to adulthood. Consider "Jack and the Beanstalk," in which the lazy child, Jack, refuses to do his mother's bidding and "forgets" to sell the cow for money but rather is enchanted by the magic beans. The tale asserts his right to journey into the sky (the world above the world) and solve the earth-bound adult problem of money by stealing the golden harp, hen, eggs—the means to achieving ever-regenerating money and power—precisely what he never could have gotten by selling the cow. Once having used up the modest sum he would have gotten from the cow, he would have had, inevitably, to go out again to market with whatever was left to sell, only to return home again with fewer resources, thus moving into the cycle of poverty—from which the poor often do not have the power to emerge, any more than children have the power to overcome the authority of adults. The magic beans in this story represent relief from the real problems that are quite beyond the child to solve but can be, as the story suggests, imagined. Magic embodies the imagination, stands in for what is beyond the power of children, perhaps anyone, to actualize. Often we can envision long before we can create the means to flee or resolve what feels overwhelming. This is particularly true for children.

Harry's supernatural powers invite children to imagine beyond the boundaries of their limitations: what if I could see and hear without being seen or heard; what if I could fly; what if I could read another's mind. With his magic cloak, Harry is invisible; with his Nimbus 2000 racing broomstick, he can fly; he can even, in the fourth book, project himself into Dumbledore's siphoned-off thoughts. Also, like every child, Harry is

one among many, represented here by the fact that his classmates are also wizards. While he is good at playing Quidditch, he is just an ordinary player at his school work; nor is he particularly insightful in the way he relates to or understands others. His classmate Hermione Granger, the girl with whom Rowling most closely identifies,⁴ is smarter and more sensitive. Hermione has the most highly developed sense of justice; even though Harry has freed Dobby, the house-elf, Hermione alone understands the oppression of the house-elves, as they serve their masters without pay, “beaming, bowing, and curtsying” (*Goblet* 379). Part of Rowling’s genius is the creation of stories about the development of the ordinary boy, as he grows from the start of the series at ten years old to the age of seventeen. There will be one book for each year, Rowling announced in December 1998, with the “hormones kicking in.” Gender informs Rowling’s vision in that she blends the male questor with the feminized hero of tales of school and home; these stories are relational, psychologically nuanced, and in that sense realistic.

During the NPR radio interview, a child called in to ask if Rowling could please bring back Harry’s parents. Respectfully and sorrowfully, she said she regretted that she couldn’t do that. “You can’t bring dead people back,” she said. She had to set limits on what magic could and couldn’t do since it was important to her to keep these characters real. Even the magical ones are defined by their human as well as magical traits. The real world, then, becomes somewhat illuminated by these characters who can span both worlds. For example, teachers at Hogwarts can be imaginative and compassionate; they are also flighty, vindictive, dim-witted, indulgent, lazy, frightened and frightening. Students are clever, kind, weak, cruel, snobbish. Lessons are inspiring and tedious—as in the best and worst of real schools.

Harry’s guide into the magical world of Hogwarts is Hagrid, a larger-than-life figure, the giant from the fairy tales of childhood, deliverer of the annunciation: “‘Yeh don’ know what yeh *are* . . . Harry—yer a wizard” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 50). He is “almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide . . . simply too big to be allowed, and so *wild*—long tangles of bushy, black hair and beard hid most of his face . . . [with] hands the size of trash can lids, and . . . feet . . . like baby dolphins” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 14). He is also careless, drinks too much, humanized by his sentimental and indulgent love for bizarre and grotesque creatures, such as the dragons and Blast-Ended Skrewts, who threaten the safety of Hogwarts. Even these creatures suggest the two sides of imaginative writing: dragons are recognizable as mythical fire-breathing creatures, although here Rowling makes them distinct, almost realistic:

The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes. . . . (*Sorcerer's Stone* 235)

The Skrewts, slug-like and slimy, are also described in vivid detail, while their size mythicizes them. The movement here between these two poles suggests the force of the imagination of childhood to illuminate reality.

Most of the adventures take place at school, seen here as the transitional world situated between childhood and adulthood. It is a liminal space that tests the mettle of the child here and, like all liminal landscapes, it represents "the not-as-yet-conscious,"⁵ what is yet-to-be, possibility itself, and chance. A burning question for Harry, who has never fit in, not at home, not at Muggle school, who has never had the chance to experience friendship and all that goes along with it—loyalty, competition, finding a place among peers—is how will he succeed in this home away from home? Particularly when he has never been at home at home?

Situating the train that takes people to Hogwarts at 9-3/4, between tracks 9 and 10, reinforces the central location of these stories between the earth-bound and magical worlds. As Harry transports himself beyond the boundaries of the real world, between tracks 9 and 10, one can viscerally feel his body brace against the shock, his mind unbelieving, as he breaks through what appears to be a solid barrier, as the imagination may seem to do with real life problems. The school and its various accoutrements epitomize the imagination of childhood and the real concerns of children. In the wizard world, everything is adorned with the magic so that, for example, the point of entry into the bank, a warning against greed and snobbishness—a worldly concern—is heightened by the poetic language on the sign: *Enter, stranger, but take heed / Of what awaits the sin of greed . . .* (*Sorcerer's Stone* 72). There are many such indications of Rowling's abhorrence of the class system, its divisiveness, the negative potential of specialness. Malfoy, the pale boy with the pointed face, whose sense of self is based on embracing his father's money and social position, is early established as Harry's enemy, just as Ron Weasley, who has to share the little his family has with his six siblings, and Hermione, the racially mixed daughter of a Muggle and a wizard, are his best friends.

While Hogwarts contains all the offensive and irritating aspects of real life—it in fact mirrors its elitism and petty power struggles—it is also a wondrous and humorous world. Required reading, for example, abounds

with hilarious matches, such as: *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander. The magical Sorting Hat matches each child with her proper house (Harry and his friends are assigned to Gryffindor for their courage) and wands intricately fit their owners. The phoenix that provided the feathers for Harry's wand did the same for Voldemort, the "brother [who] gave you that scar" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 85), Harry is told, linking him, as Lucifer was God's fallen angel, to his dark enemy. And there is much darkness in these books. However, it is always rooted in the psychological darkness associated with childhood and with human development: with anger, loss, death, grief, fear, and with desire. Although initially Harry is elated when he hears the news of his powers, he is also alarmed and bewildered. Hagrid notes that it's hard to be singled out, and Harry protests, "Everyone thinks I'm special . . . but I don't know anything about magic at all. . . . I can't even remember what I'm famous for" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 86). Fear of his power, unsure of how to control desire, or how to recognize and use his gifts wisely—Harry, as Everychild, needs guidance.

Rowling is adept at providing paradigms for thoughtful, courageous, and moral behavior for children, with clear explanations of the states of feeling that accompany the process. These deeper moments of reflection serve as pauses in the rapid pace of these page-turners. It seems to me that the best mysteries, adventure stories, and romances represent a negotiation between the reckless pace of the narrative breathlessly moving forward and the meditative pockets that provide the space and time to turn inward—to affirm our sense that something memorable is happening to us, something we can retrieve for later, after the book is ended. As is true of our best writers, Rowling draws these opposing realms so seamlessly that they appear to have always been there, side by side, the event and its meaning exquisitely illuminated.

In the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the scene in which Harry comes upon the Mirror of Erised (thinly disguised so children will discover that it represents desire) and sees, for the first time in his life, his family, "he had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness" (209). How fascinating that his friend Ron sees only himself decked out as Head Boy, his own "deepest, most desperate desire" (213). Ron, whose strongest wish is to stand out from his five brothers and from Harry as well, assumes he is seeing the future, just as Harry believed he was looking into his past. However, this mirror, says Dumbledore, "will give us neither knowledge or truth" (213). It can drive us mad, "not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible." He

warns against “dwell[ing] in dreams” as one could “forget to live.” However, he offers, “If you ever *do* run across it, you will now be prepared” (214). Rowling has, essentially, taken the great test of Odysseus, who must hear the song of the sirens but not act on that calling, and reimagined it for children. At its core, Rowling suggests, desire can be both alluring and dangerous. Children need to understand, on whatever level, its complexity. Rowling does not minimize childhood longing. She offers this small allegory with the understanding that the search for identity is reflected in that mirror—as Harry sees his family behind him and desires only to return again and again to that vision of himself, supported by those who resemble him, smiling at and waving to him. This scene prepares for the ones that follow, in which Harry comes into deeper and darker knowledge, though always returning to this central issue of identity and the protection it promises.

If the Mirror reflects what we most long for, it also evokes the fear that accompanies such desire and the loss that engendered it. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Rowling focuses on this fear, beginning with the boggarts who take the shape of “whatever each of us most fears” (*Prisoner* 133). For Harry, as his Dark Arts teacher tells him, it is fear itself, embodied in the dementors, the prison guards of Azkaban. What tortures Harry is his overwhelming guilt and sorrow at his mother’s death. At the sight of these grey-hooded figures, Harry hears his mother’s desperate cries: “No, take me, kill me instead.” Haunted by her pain and guilty that she died to save him, Harry is drawn into intense ambivalence, which Rowling explains:

Terrible though it was to hear his parents’ last moments replayed inside his head, these were the only times Harry had heard their voices since he was a very small child. . . . “They’re dead,” he told himself sternly . . . “and listening to echoes of them won’t bring them back. You’d better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup.” (*Prisoner* 243)

The desire to be reunited with his parents, though natural and inevitable, serves as a warning, as with the Mirror, against remaining in the past, lost in memory or desire. Of course, in addition to exploring Harry’s inner demons, here Rowling connects despair with madness and suggests that it is the loss of hope that makes us demented, that promotes criminality and destroys the heart. The dementors, those who are supposed to guard prisoners,

drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. . . . [S]oul-less and evil . . . you’ll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. . . . [S]et on a tiny island, way out to sea . . .

they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they're all trapped inside their heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Most of them go mad within weeks. (*Prisoner* 188)

The antidote for such haunting is happy memories, those that make children feel safe, loved, confident, good about themselves. More than anything, a sense of self is exactly what Hagrid was denied in prison, as he tells Harry: “‘Yeh can’ really remember who yeh are after a while” (*Prisoner* 221). Knowing who you are is at the heart here, the development of the child’s consciousness, the narrative of Everychild—the right to knowledge and expression of self. Rowling has spoken about depression as the loss of hope, how it has been her enemy, and how it has informed her depiction of the dementors here.⁶ I remember fits of depression as a child, though without any name for that state of mind, it went unrecognized and was buried, along with the shame that accompanied all my unacknowledged feelings. As Sendak claimed, when he was called upon to defend his depictions of frightening monster-like figures in *Where the Wild Things Are*, most frightening to children is to dream their own figures of fear and find no analogue in anything they hear about or read. Children need to see their feelings, particularly the darkest ones, reflected in their stories. Mitigating the darkness of the fairy tales takes away their power to reassure children that they are not alone in their fearful imaginings, that they are shared and can be addressed.⁷

As Harry gets older in the books, the emotional challenges become more complex, which Rowling attempts to help children understand. She has captured the familiar sense of childhood shame with the Howlers—loud, public scoldings sent by parents to humiliate and ultimately to control children. For example, Neville receives a letter in the audible form of his “grandmother’s voice, magically magnified to a hundred times its usual volume, shrieking about how he had brought shame on the whole family” (*Prisoner* 272). Such exposure is handled with a kind of empathic humor, reminiscent of Woody Allen’s adult projection of his mother’s face in the sky, publicly denouncing him, a metaphor of adult shame and its roots in childhood. This externalized projection mirrors Harry’s private, internal moments following his collapse at the sight of the dementors, when he “felt the beginnings of shame. Why had he gone to pieces like that, when no one else had?” (*Prisoner* 36). Shame separates us, makes us feel less than, different from others. This aspect of difference, Rowling demonstrates, is deadly. At times she handles it with the acceptance that comes from humor; at times, with a kind of respect that accompanies our most difficult emotional trials.

Children are also led beyond the simple concept of evil as purely bad guys whose struggles abound in the earlier books. With the third volume, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, what appears evil turns out to be a paradoxical figure, Lupin, who is a werewolf, a force of good that can be dangerous as well. Rowling's use of the werewolf as metaphor for the split self here is astute and in keeping with the earliest known Red Riding Hood variant in which rather than the wolf, the werewolf—a fusion of animal and human—tries to seduce the young girl (Zipes 2). What is most interesting here is that the potentially destructive part of the werewolf is humanized and offered with understanding. Rowling establishes his innocence and evokes compassion for him, as he tells his story.⁸ Lupin says, “I was a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. . . . My transformations . . . were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead” (*Prisoner* 352–53). As Lupin becomes a werewolf when he doesn't take his potion, madness and self-destructive impulses are depicted with a kind of psychological truth. Rowling attempts to humanize the demonic, rather than demonize the human.

The servants of evil are recognizable as frail humans who have grown large because they are adults who are out of control—what is often most terrifying to children. Peter Pettigrew, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, is “horrible to watch, like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor” (374), and Voldemort, who represents the generating power of evil, the force of discord and enmity, bears “the shape of a crouched human child, except Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking. . . . Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face—no child alive ever had a face like that. . . . The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it” (640–41). The infantile adult, a kind of perverted innocence, childish without anything childlike, is most horrifying when, as a child, it is the controlling force of your life.

How children take control of their lives—most crucial and central here—is metaphorically represented in several ways. Harry and Hermione watch themselves in “a Time-Turner,” able to replay an event, to be in more than one place at a time, to go back in time while remaining in the present, to redo their mistakes and save the lovely hippogriff, Buckbeak. Harry tells Hermione, “I knew I could do it this time . . . because I'd already done it. . . . Does that make sense?” (*Prisoner* 412)—expressing the paradoxical sense of knowing what we didn't know we knew. Even

more psychologically profound is the way in which Rowling demonstrates what can be retrieved, even in the final loss of the death of a parent. To protect himself from fear, Harry conjures up a “Patronus,” an image of his father. As an orphan, Harry will have to provide for himself the father he has never known. Here is a kind of child vision of father atonement. Dumbledore, in such a vision as a father figure, tells Harry: “You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don’t recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry . . . you did see [him] last night. . . . You found him inside yourself” (*Prisoner* 427–28).

This scene represents the only real consolation as well as a possible direction for healing such an early fracture. There are many father/son atonement scenes. Most awful is Mr. Crouch’s son, rejected by his father, even as he stands before him, pleading in his innocence, “Father! Father, I wasn’t involved! . . . I’m your son! . . . I’m your son!” (*Goblet* 596). We are not surprised that, in his confusion and despair, he becomes a servant of evil. Rowling also helps children to understand how Neville’s parents, who have been “tortured for information about Voldemort’s whereabouts” (*Goblet* 602), go insane, and so, though they are alive, when Neville visits them with his grandmother, they do not recognize him. Harry is more fortunate than the others in that he has been able to retrieve something, a touchstone for protection he can carry with him, although he has never had access to his parents. But it is not enough in his state of privilege to be isolated from the misfortune of others. Harry feels for Crouch’s son, as images of the pale-faced boy swim up to him from his imagination. His compassion extends to Neville too, as he imagines how it must feel “to have parents still living but unable to recognize you” (*Goblet* 607).

The *Harry Potter* stories center on what children need to find internally—the strength to do the right thing, to establish a moral code. As hero, Harry must go beyond the apparent truth of things and, ultimately, learn to trust what he sees and act on what is right. The tournament of the fourth volume, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, departs from the rather simple victory of Quidditch tournaments, where one house at Hogwarts beats the others, Harry serving as Seeker, the primary position, for Gryffindor. In this book, as Hermione points out, “This whole tournament’s supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them.” Although Ron with partial truth responds, “No it isn’t. It’s about winning” (423), more is at stake here. The community is larger, more global. What it means to “win” is interrogated. In an expansive leap of feeling, Harry saves his rivals,

along with his friends. Voices tell him: “Your task is to retrieve your own friend . . . leave the others. . . .” (499). He wonders, “Why hadn’t he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first back. . . . Cedric and Krum hadn’t wasted time worrying about anyone else . . .” (505). In response, he resists such individualism with “an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all,” Dumbledore tells him, “if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.” (723). Harry and his closest rival, Cedric (who took Cho Chang, the object of Harry’s desire, to the ball) help and support each other, and finally decide to reach the Cup at the same time, thus producing two winners. While Cedric dies, and thus Harry alone bears the reward, the boys’ rejection of the school’s either/or policy establishes a new paradigm of sharing, building community, and inclusiveness.

Sharing thoughts and passing on experience is brilliantly depicted in the Pensieve, a basin that holds thoughts. “I sometimes find,” Dumbledore tells Harry, “that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind. . . . At these times, I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links . . . when they are in this form” (*Goblet* 597). Harry is literally drawn through a substance that was either “liquid or gas . . . a bright, whitish silver . . . moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid—or like wind made solid . . .” (*Goblet* 583). To understand another’s history, one must enter into a liminal state; one must move beyond the established boundaries of self and other, represented by the indistinguishable states of matter. In book two, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry had fallen “through a page in an enchanted diary, right into someone else’s memory” (*Chamber* 586). But here in *The Goblet of Fire*, the idea is more developed. Thought is depicted as tangible, progressive, dynamic—a series of landscapes to be visited, returned to, and discovered as patterns of meaning. Harry falls through Dumbledore’s thoughts about his past, the subjectivity of memory extended to history. When he lands in the courtroom of Dumbledore’s memory, “not one of [the adults] noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling . . .” (*Goblet* 585), reminiscent of Auden’s Icarus, who falls unnoticed out of the sky. But unlike Icarus, who, in his youthful optimism, flew too high so his wings melted from the heat of the sun, Harry’s fall is a descent into consciousness, and rather than cautionary, it is visionary. It suggests connection, that we can participate in another’s experience, explore another’s past, albeit only through the subjectivity of our own vision.

Even the child, without the experience of the adult, without perspective afforded by hindsight, can glean something valuable from the lessons of the past—not those set in stone to be received unquestioningly but to make meaning of, the way Harry must make sense of the events he witnesses. In this scene of Dumbledore's younger days, Harry first notices how Dumbledore has aged, a perspective that reveals Harry's developing consciousness of time. Each person carries a unique history, some of which can be shared, as when Dumbledore joins Harry in reviewing his thoughts.

Even the idea of reviewing thoughts supports the value of interrogation and reflection. Surely this runs counter to what we are currently being told by television, video games, fast-paced cutting images of MTV, and the superficial content of pulp fiction. The *Harry Potter* books satirize for children the superficiality of this world, its pretenses and human failures, the narcissism of popular culture, the stupidity and cruelty of the press, the rigidity and fraudulence embedded in our institutions, particularly the schools, framed by the unrelenting snobbery and elitism of our social world. The unprecedented popularity of the *Harry Potter* stories, not only with sophisticated readers of a wide range of ages, but with new readers, those who previously resisted reading, suggests that rather than flat, knee-jerk responses, children are capable of and drawn to complexity and reflection—accompanied by the spectacular—integrated, always, in the real and recognizable world it is the child's mission to negotiate and struggle through.

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Notes

¹ Quoted in *We Love Harry Potter!*, ed. Sharon Moore, 17.

² Suzanne Rahn speaks about E. Nesbit as the first children's book author to bring magic into our contemporary world, in which "the protagonists [are] ordinary children," *Rediscoveries in Children's Literature*, 145.

³ Rowling herself mentions E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* as particularly influential in her conception of the Harry Potter series.

⁴ The debate over Rowling's choice and use of a boy hero has been extensive. Christine Schoefer, for example, writes about "Harry Potter's girl trouble," where she claims that "[n]o girl is brilliantly heroic the way Harry is, no woman is experienced and wise like Professor Dumbledore . . . [that] the range of female personalities is so limited that neither women nor girls play on the side of evil [and that Rowling depicts Hermione as] working hard to be accepted by Harry and his sidekick Ron, who treat her like a tag-along until Volume 3" ("Harry Potter's Girl Trouble"). Along with her many supporters, Rowling complains, "What irritates me is that I am constantly, increasingly, being asked 'Can we have a strong female character, please?' Like they are ordering a side order of chips. I am thinking 'Isn't Hermione strong enough for you?' She is the most brilliant of the three and they need her. . . . But my hero is a boy and at the age [11] he has been girls simply do not figure that much. . . . I think it would be extremely contrived to throw in a couple of feisty, gorgeous, brilliant-at-math and great-at-fixing-cars girls" ("Harry and Me").

⁵ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, 103–11.

⁶ "Harry and Me," where Rowling described the dementors as "a description of depression . . . entirely from my own experience. Depression is the most unpleasant thing I have ever experienced. . . . It is that absence of being able to envisage that you will ever be cheerful again. The absence of hope. That very deadened feeling, which is so very different from feeling sad. Sad hurts but it's a healthy feeling. It is a necessary thing to feel. Depression is very different."

⁷ From an unpublished interview with Maurice Sendak conducted by Geraldine DeLuca and me in 1977.

⁸ I recently talked to an eight-year-old who told me that her favorite character was Lupin, and when I asked her why, she said she felt sorry for him, because he was really good but couldn't help being bad sometimes.

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