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Hermione Granger and the Charge of Sexism

A LOOK, NOT ONLY AT HERMIONE, BUT AT THE BROAD SPECTRUM OF THE PORTRAYAL OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE HARRY POTTER UNIVERSE. A BONA FIDE FEMINIST LOOKS THE BÊTE NOIRE IN THE EYES AND DARES IT TO DO ITS WORST, AND DISCOVERS THAT, AS IS THE CASE WITH MOST BÊTES NOIRES, IT IS SMOKE AND SHADOW.

FIRST, A CONFESSION. I did not want to write this essay. I really didn't. I am a feminist, and the daughter of two feminists, and proud to be so. But writing this essay means making my best effort at intellectual honesty. I would have to go back and read all the Harry Potter books specifically looking for examples of sexism. If I found them, my ability to enjoy the series would be seriously curtailed, and I love the series, deeply and passionately. I love that so many kids love the series. Think about it: Millions of kids out there staying up 'til dawn, not because of a movie or a game, but because of a book.

Wow.

But the charge has been made, and it should be answered. So. Here we go. Question: Is the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling sexist?

No. Next question?

Okay, perhaps I should elaborate.

First, let me say, I do not consider Harry Potter a feminist series by any stretch of the imagination. The three most powerful figures in the book—one for evil and two for good—are male. As a result,

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An Unauthorized Exploration of the Harry Potter
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Dallas: Benbella Books, 2005

he point of view with which we spend the most time is male. To be a feminist work, a story has to be specifically about issues unique to girls and women and usually has a female protagonist as the main point of view. The Harry Potter books are not intended to be descriptions of the lives of women nor are they prescriptions for how those lives should be lived. Books are necessarily of a finite length and complexity, and an author, even of a fantasy, must choose which ethical questions to present in detail. Rowling chose to make racism the major ethical theme of the Harry Potter books.

However, whenever male and female characters interact within a story the question of gender relations arises, and it has certainly arisen in regards to this series. Since no one should have to stand trial without facing their accusers, for the purpose of this rebuttal I am going to reference three articles that accuse the series of sexism:

"Harry Potter's Girl Trouble: The world of everyone's favorite kid wizard is a place where boys come first," by Christine Schoefer, found at www.salon.com

"Me! Books! And Cleverness!:" Stereotypical Portrayals in the Harry Potter Series," by Natasha Whitton, found at www.womenwriters.net/summer04/reviews/HarryPotter.htm

"Stepping on the Harry Potter Buzz," by Jane Elliott, found at www.bitchmagazine.com/archives/3_01potter/potter.shtml

All three essays charge that the books are sexist, and they do so in remarkably similar ways. They all charge that the females use their power in ways that make them less appealing than the males, that the females are overall less likeable than the males, that Hermione Granger specifically is less powerful, less self-possessed and less adventurous than the boys.

All three essays also share a primary weakness: They make their charges with no consideration to larger context. The books are dismantled and incidents that fit the argument are rounded up and isolated. Adjectives and quotes are pulled out of the narrative without

reference to prevailing sentiments.

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reference to point of view, placement within the series or countervailing sentiment on the part of the character or author.

For instance, Whitton's essay only covers the first book, although it was written when four of the books were available. Consequently, it does not take into account the growth and maturation undergone by all the main characters, both female and male. All the juvenile characters have their own individual weaknesses related to background as well as age. To have them see and understand the complexities of the world perfectly from the get-go would not only be unrealistic, it would be astoundingly bad storytelling. In a good modern novel no character, male or female, is perfect. In fact, Rowling is taking a serious risk by playing up many of her characters' flaws as they age, and in making them in some ways less likeable and charming than they were in the beginning.

Much is made, in all the articles, of the adjectives used to describe the women in the books. Of particular concern is the paragraph describing the guests at the Leaky Cauldron in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. The phrase Whitton takes for examination is "funny little witches." In her article, however, the sentence goes unfinished. The whole phrase is "funny little witches from the country up for a bit of shopping," which, if taken in its complete form, says less that they are funny and little because they're witches than because they're bumpkins.

It is Schoefer, however, who makes the clearest misinterpretation by removing quotes from context. In her essay, she makes great objection to the assessment of Ginny in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Schoefer writes:

Ron's younger sister, Ginny, another girl student at Hogwarts... fares even worse than Hermione. "Stupid little Ginny" unwittingly becomes the tool of evil when she takes to writing in a magical diary. For months and months, "the foolish little brat" confides "all her pitiful worries and woes" ("How she didn't think famous good great Harry Potter would 'ever' like her") to these pages. We are told how boring it is to listen to "the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl."



If one of the protagonists, or the omniscient narrator, had uttered the quotes Schoefer pulls out in that paragraph, I would be standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her regarding sexism in the books. However, Schoefer fails to mention the most vital fact about this spate of derision: It is the villain, Lord Voldemort, who is speaking here. The adult "authority" in the book who finds Ginny ridiculous is a mass murderer known for his cold, calculated seduction and manipulation of anybody who might help him get his way. Of course Voldemort finds Ginny pathetic! He finds anybody who exhibits human emotion pathetic.

Context is vital in literary analysis, and nowhere more than here. We are not asked or expected to admire Lord Voldemort. While in later books, such as *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, we are given background that makes him more fully fleshed as a character, Voldemort is never presented as in any way fair or admirable. So, when he sneers at a character, we as readers are not being told to take his statements as an accurate assessment of that character's worth. We are being shown that such an attitude is at the least seriously flawed.

To put Ginny even more firmly in her own context, she, like the other characters, grows up during the course of the books. By *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, she proves to be highly intelligent, not to mention adept at athletics, academics and magic. She is so good at magic, in fact, that in *Half-Blood Prince*, Professor Slughorn includes her in his parties even though she has no powerful connections. Unlike Harry, but much like Hermione, she gets into "the Slug Club" on raw magical talent.

She actively battles evil and is not afraid of taking risks or following them through. Ultimately, she also finds success in love by accepting the advice of her good friend Hermione and taking the time to just be herself.

Come to that, while we're talking about the Weasleys, you'll notice something else about them. As the stories progress, it's not Ginny who's the weak link in the family. It's authority-loving Percy, her older brother. Male Percy's the true sycophant, up to the point where he is willing to desert his family out of blind adherence to authority.

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What seems to be the major argument of sexism in the books for both Elliott and Schoefer is that the authority of the women and girls is not "appealing." Elliott's main objection seems to be the series' tone when showing its female characters. She writes: "It's this negative cast that Hermione's defenders keep missing. . . . Hermione, Professor McGonagall and even Ron's mother, Mrs. Weasley, are indisputably powerful, but their power is also associated with a shrill recital of rules and codes of behavior." Later, she says, "But for female characters, even 'good' authority appears only in the shrill, limiting rule-bound variety. Men make people free and safe in these books, while women merely tell them what to do." Elliott also says, "My complaint is not that the books are about a boy. . . . but that the female characters are so stereotypically negative: the bossy, goody-goody girl; the stern spinster teacher; the mother whose only skill is self-sacrifice. . . ."

According to Elliott and Schoefer, the problem (to borrow from a very different American writer, namely Arthur Miller) is that the females are not well liked. They are certainly not well liked by the boys who cannot, or will not, see the consequences of their own actions.

Here again, if that was all we were being shown, I would be in complete agreement. But it isn't. I'm going to save the analysis of Hermione for the end, but let's look at the other specific charges now:

"The stern spinster teacher." I'm assuming we're talking about Minerva McGonagall here. Okay, stern's a fair charge: McGonagall is strict, and is consistently portrayed as so. She runs a tough class and she does not favor the students of her own house. This might make her hard to like in a friendly way, but she's also fair, as opposed to the increasingly evil and hated Snape, who blatantly favors students from his own house.

Whether or not the boys (with their flawed vision) like McGonagall, the author shows that she is a better teacher than a number of her male counterparts, and expert at a more complex magic in addition to being the head of a house esteemed for its courage and boldness. Transfiguration, her class, is shown to be a difficult and dangerous subject. Without discipline and concentration it could seriously harm the students. Everyone is anxious to pass Professor Mc-

Gonagall's Transfiguration class because it is a vital subject for them, while none of them want to continue with friendly, loveable Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class. As an aside, you'll note that during these lessons they think wistfully of the female teacher Grubbly-Plank.

This is not to say that McGonagall is not flawed. Like many people at the school, she has a pronounced weakness for sports, and bends the rules to allow Harry to play Quidditch in his first year with his own broom. Come to that, she bends them again, more severely and on her own authority, to allow Hermione use of a restricted magical artifact so Hermione can fully pursue her academic ambitions. These facts are overlooked in the consistent charge that the female authority figures adhere mindlessly to the rules and are no fun at all.

Also to be considered: McGonagall is, at the beginning, trusted with the secret of Harry's whereabouts and protection. This means it is expected that if she were caught and tortured, she would be strong and brave enough to keep her silence. She is also second in command at Hogwarts. Taken in itself, this can be seen as a position of subjugation, but when looked at within the context of the narrative, this is not a comfortable or easy place to be. Dumbledore knows the dangers that face the school, and that he might fail, or be absent at a critical moment, so it is Minerva McGonagall he trusts to watch his back, and take care of the school and the students in the face of evil that might destroy them. This is not a portrayal of female weakness.

"Spinster" is a more complex charge. As near as I can tell, none of the Hogwarts teachers, male or female, are married, let alone have kids. The place is a positive academic monastery. For the life of me I don't know why Rowling chose to make it this way; perhaps it's that pesky finite length problem again. It is, however, even-handed. There are no professors' husbands, but there are no professors' wives either.

Elliott's charges continue with "The mother whose only skill is self-sacrifice." Here I assume she's talking about Lily Potter née Evans. Lily casts the most powerful spell in the series. It is her action that defeats the curse that no one can defeat, cast by the most evil wizard ever, and it costs her her life. While that's hardly weak, or

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foolish, I can see the charge of sexism really sticking here. Mother-sacrificing-all-for-child is a literary cliché that goes back a long, long way, and it annoyed me as a kid. I will freely admit that, from my personal point of view, it annoys me rather less since I've become a mother myself. Here once more, though, Schoefer ignores the narrative context in which Lily and all the other mothers are placed as the series unfolds.

As we go through the series, we learn more and more about Lily Evans. According to Slughorn, who is not an admirable character but has an eye for talent, she was a brilliant student. While they were at school, it was James who was a prat, and Lily who refused to be taken in by his looks or impressed by his athletic skills. After school, Lily was a member of the original Order of the Phoenix when Voldemort first came to power. This means after she had married James and while she was pregnant with Harry, she was still actively fighting a deadly enemy who had no compunction about killing women and children. She did not go into hiding because she had become a mother. Rather, by her activities in the resistance, she made herself a target. That's the point that raises Lily above a simple cliché. If she'd hidden "just" because she was going to have a child, I'd accept that she was a pure stereotypical mother figure, but she stayed in the fight, even while she had an infant. I'm not sure I'd have that kind of dedication or nerve.

Lily is, of course, not the only mother in the series. Another mother we get a good look at is Narcissa Malfoy. From what we've seen so far, she has chosen the side of evil just as freely and as actively as her husband. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that she married Lucius because he shared views she had before the marriage. I'd suggest she's the antithesis of Lily Potter, particularly when it comes to what happens when their children are in danger. Lily faced the danger on her own and paid the price herself.

Narcissa begs someone else, and a male at that, to sacrifice himself for her child while she stays relatively safe at home. By showing us Narcissa Rowling shows us, again, that what makes women and girls good or strong is not their association (or lack thereof) with men, but their own choices and actions.

In contrast to this active seeking of evil, we have Merope, Lord Voldemort's mother. What's interesting here is the part she and her relationships take in the continuing themes of race and class. Lily, the lower class, mixed-"race" woman, is an excellent student from a sound family, capable of great courage and great love. Merope, like Narcissa, is the pure-blood member of the hereditary nobility and, also like Narcissa, is broken by her family circumstances and probably beyond repair. But where Narcissa walks into deliberate evil, Merope is a victim of abuse who can only fall in love with someone who scorns her. Rowling's whole segment regarding Merope was, in fact, a shudderingly realistic portrayal of domestic abuse and its consequences.

I've got to pause here for a moment and cheer this attention to detail. It is unusual in a fantasy novel for mothers to each have their own unique story that makes them fully fledged people, not just mothers. We even get that a bit with Petunia Dursley. If there are blatant caricatures in the book, they are the Dursleys. But the only one of the Dursleys who's even vaguely nuanced is Aunt Petunia. She is the one who in the end understands that to throw Harry out of the house is to condemn him to death, and she is the one unwilling to do that. Even in the middle of the most absurd section of the series, it is the female in the scene who clearly sees the consequences and acts on that knowledge.

The mother with whom we spend the most time is, of course, Molly Weasley. She's a powerful witch in her own right. Even Dumbledore is impressed by her abilities. On top of this, she's successfully raising seven kids on a tight budget. Honestly, the woman should get a medal. And, like Lily, she was an active participant in the original Order of the Phoenix, while she had five young children to look out for. Charlie, Bill, Percy and the twins, because they are all older than Harry, must have been born while Voldemort still held power.

But she's still a stickler for discipline, and this negates her other qualities in Elliott's analysis. Here again, I have to disagree. Codes of behavior are most certainly not all Molly brings to the book. Harry not only needs a father figure, he needs a mother figure, and he's got one in Mrs. Weasley, who welcomes him into her home and family and offers him all the security, protection and guidance she's got

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to give. Yes, she's a big one for the rules and for not taking chances. Again, within context, this makes a great deal of sense. She lived through Voldemort's reign. She knows he will kill children, and she knows he's out there right now. Added to that, she's got to ride herd on seven magical kids. If she doesn't take a strict line, they're going to get themselves killed because they've turned each other into mosquitoes or blown each other up. Her adherence to caution and rules is not born of timidity, blindness or some uniquely female failing, but because she can see the consequences and they are dire. Do the boys like it? No. Teenage boys never like rules or, at least, constantly say they do not. But those same teenage boys cannot see those consequences. If they could, they would be in far fewer scrapes and might even live longer, a fact that the author makes plain during the course of the narrative.

Does Molly Weasley continue to fight Lord Voldemort and support the fight against him with seven kids and full knowledge of what it might mean? Yes. This is the strength shared by the adult women in the Harry Potter series. Clear-eyed and mindful of the consequences to themselves and others, they move forward.

Another possible charge for the appearance of sexism in the books might be that Molly, our most positive mother, is in a highly traditional relationship. Mr. Weasley goes out and works, and Mrs. Weasley stays home and looks after their seven children. This raises a problem any modern female author faces. How do you portray a traditionally structured family? You cannot pretend they don't exist. No one will believe you. Okay, this is a fantasy, so one could do a lot with magic as it impacts family structure, if one wanted to, but to erase the nuclear family structure and make it believable would take up a whole lot of wordage, something that is in short supply in a young adult novel. Alternately, you can choose not to focus on traditional families, but as we are dealing with children, families are very important and cannot be left out of the stories.

I'm going to go out on a limb here. I've thought a lot about this one, as a feminist, and as an author. How *should* traditional roles be portrayed? In fantasy literature there is a school of thought that holds that women must be treated precisely like men. Only the tra-

ditional male sphere of power and means of wielding power count. If a woman is shown in a traditionally female role, then she must be being shown as inferior.

After a lot of thought, and some real-life stabs at those traditional roles, I've come to firmly disagree with this idea. For an author to show that only traditional male power and place matter is to discount and belittle the hard and complex lives of our peers and our ancestors. The best way to do it is what Rowling does—to show the traditional role as one possibility among many, and to show it as both negative and positive according to the choices of the person playing the role. Beyond their roles as mothers and wives, women are active in government and law enforcement. Women own their own businesses. Women teach, and are and have been headmistresses of magical schools. Hermione's from a solid, supportive, two-income family. The girls at Hogwarts are educated in complete equality with the boys, and there is no bar to their joining in athletics, or even coaching and captaining the teams. The only difference between the treatment of the genders at the school is that the girl's dormitory is booby-trapped to prevent the boys from entering, but the girls can freely enter the boys'. You will notice, however, that Hermione's assessment of this single difference in treatment is that it is "old-fashioned."

Which brings us finally and firmly around to Hermione Granger.

The complaints made against Hermione's portrayal in these three articles, and in others, are wide-ranging and manifold. One such criticism is about how she gets her buck teeth fixed in time for the Yule ball. The complaint is that Hermione needs to be physically transformed when the boys don't. Yes, Hermione changes her looks both there and by the judicious application of magical hair gel later, but you'll notice something important: Hermione herself changes her looks. Nobody else changes her. She changes what she wants on her own, in her own way and of her own choosing. No boy or man tells her she needs to dress up, or fix her teeth. No one helps her. Turns out she knows full well how to make herself attractive, she just doesn't like to bother. This is not a Cinderella story where a higher power must make a girl worthy of her prince: This is deliberate choice and action.

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It should also be noted that almost the first thing Rowling says from Harry's point of view is that the only thing *he* likes about his appearance is his scar. Ron also is concerned about his appearance and ashamed of his old-fashioned dress robes.

Another complaint is that Hermione cries. You know what? So do I. I've cried when I've lost contracts. Once I even cried over a particularly bad critiquing session with my writer's group. God knows I cried in high school when picked on for my beliefs, looks or actions. I've cried in public, and I've cried in the ladies room. Damned embarrassing. Makes you cry harder.

Which leads us to the famous troll incident, where Hermione balks and needs rescuing. Leaving aside the fact that all three of the heroes at various times need rescuing, there's a piece of context for this incident that gets left out of many of the analyses of it: Hermione is in trouble not because she was reduced to tears, but because the males around her made a series of mistakes. The male Professor Quirrell released the troll because he was possessed by the male Lord Voldemort. Ron's insults broke down Hermione's self-confidence causing her to flee. Ron and Harry's ill-informed act of locking the bathroom door put Hermione in more jeopardy than the troll did. It was because of a group of males—including the hero—that Hermione was suddenly in a room with a dangerous monster, all alone, with no escape route.

She also balks, and badly, during the final adventure in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*; she forgets that as a witch she can conjure the fire needed to defeat the Devil's Snare and, later, makes a self-deprecatory speech to Harry about how he is the true hero and her ability is only books and cleverness.

Yes, Hermione's got a classic cliché embedded in her character there. She lacks self-esteem, and it gets in her way, especially in the early books. Again, if Hermione only existed to be rescued and show the boy's heroism, I would agree that she is a subjugated figure and an example of sexism. But that's not all she is. She is a friend and an advisor. She is able to protect and defend, and think ahead when the boys are going along blindly. For instance, it's Hermione who works out how to make sure nobody snitches on the Dumbledore's Army meetings. She is sensible when the boys are foolish.

This is a trait which more than any other brings her in for some heat, both inside the books, and outside.

Of Hermione's cautionary role, Elliott says, "We've all seen this kind of character before—the one who's always shrieking 'Be careful!' or 'This is insane!' at the hero while he's busy doing something admirable and risky."

I agree. The lone, smart, disagreeable girl in the crowd of boys is a cliché. She is all over children's stories these days, especially children's television. I know this firsthand; I am compelled to watch a lot of children's TV with my son. There is, however, a big difference between Hermione and most of these others. In most children's tales, that lone, smart girl has to be put in her place. She's rude, and must be taught politeness, or she acts like she's smarter than others when she really isn't and must be shown the error of her ways. Alternately, she must be taught to listen to other people's ideas. Now THAT'S real sexism. If one asked the writers of these little episodes, they'd surely say "Look, we're not sexist, because we're saying it's okay for a girl to be really smart." No, they're saying it's okay as long as the girl doesn't act TOO smart, or get uppity. It's as bad as the old Katharine Hepburn movies where Kate's smart, and successful, and always, always has to be shown that it means nothing if she so much as verbally wounds Spencer Tracy or, Heaven forbid, divorces Cary Grant because he's a drunk.

That is most definitely not, however, the portrait of a smart girl in Rowling's world. Hermione doesn't just think she's right most of the time; she is right most of the time. If the boys get grumpy about it, it's less because she's rude, or wrong, than because *they're* wrong, and it is in human nature not to like to be shown up as having made a mistake, especially an important one. This is even more in the nature of teenagers than adults. Hermione sometimes looks foolish to her friends and classmates, but she is seldom wrong, and the other kids, who accept the prevailing wisdom and status quo, don't like her for it.

It is important to see, however, that the disdain comes from the other characters, not from the author. If the author disdained and disrespected her character's vigilance and tactics, Hermione would

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fail. She would apologize and change her mind, not just her tactics. She would be untrustworthy and belittled. She's not. At the end of every adventure and encounter, Hermione is shown to have been in the right, and she stuck with it, whether the boys liked it or not. Let me say that again. *She stuck with it, whether the boys liked it or not.* The boys scold, quarrel and pick on her fairly constantly. Despite this, Hermione does nothing, ever, just because the boys would like her better for it. She does what she does because her own judgment tells her it is right. Hermione, and Ginny with her, are overlooked and misunderstood by the boys, but not by the author. This is the crucial point. Taken in context, Rowling shows boys' treatment of the girls to be, in turns, callous, foolish or, in the particular case of ignoring Hermione's advice, dangerous.

Schoefer's essay focuses on the fact that she believes Hermione to be fighting for the boy's good opinion. Schoefer writes: "She struggles so hard to get Harry and Ron's approval and respect, in spite of the boys' constant teasing and rejection."

I strongly disagree. It's not that Hermione doesn't care what Ron and Harry think of her, it's that she doesn't let their opinions get in the way of doing what she knows to be right. You see, aside from attention to context, here's what's really missing from all three of these essays:

Harry Potter may not be a feminist series, but Hermione Granger is a feminist.

Oh yes, she is.

Hermione publicly and unashamedly pursues the course she knows to be right, even when it costs her her friends or the regard of male authority figures. She is not deterred by the prevailing opinion of society. If she is not initially effective, she tries other methods to achieve her right ends. She is, in the main, highly confident in her own understanding, and that confidence frequently pays off. She forcefully argues her points and does not back down when ignored. She brings every weapon she's got to bear into her particular fight, and she succeeds, even if it takes a while. She is also conscious that the boys have some blinders when it comes to the abilities of girls, and she does not take this lightly. In *Half-Blood Prince*, it's Hermione,

true to form, who works out that "Prince" might be a woman's surname rather than a man's title. The boys sneer at the notion. Also as usual, Hermione ignores their derision and goes forward on her own path, because she's certain she might be right, and this is important, so she will pursue it. Hermione never rests on previous opinions and preconceptions. She analyzes her situation rigorously. She follows authority when she sees it being exerted fairly, not just forcefully, and never allows a simple order from an authority figure, male or female, to override her own good judgment. Hermione makes the first real, open challenge to Dolores Umbridge. Hermione is the one who refuses to cower and be silent when threatened by Rita Skeeter's pen.

Then there's the contrast to Ron. Ron is held up as the more easily likeable of the two. So I thought, until I went back and read the series again. If Hermione can be a bossy goody-two-shoes, Ron can be a positive git. Ron's insulting, quick to judge, quick to fight, skives off classwork constantly and needs Hermione to get him through. He's also jealous, possessive and ashamed of his relative poverty. In *Chamber of Secrets*, the only thing Ron does is break his own wand, creating the plot device that overcomes Professor Lockhart in the end. Hermione's annoying traits tend to rescue any given situation. Ron's tend to make them worse. Yes, Hermione needs to be rescued in the middle of *Sorcerer's Stone*, but at the climax of *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Ron is nowhere to be found and it is only with Hermione's help that Harry succeeds.

Hermione, with her superior judgment and clarity of perception, never ceases to be a gadfly. Hermione's predecessor is less those fantasy heroines Dorothy Gale and Lucy Pevensie, and more the cursed Greek prophetess Cassandra. Because of this, Rowling shows Hermione getting what prophets and gadflies get: disdain.

Is it a mistake on the part of the author to show Hermione being picked on for her adherence to her own interpretation of the rules and her insistence on seeing the consequences of action? I don't think so. These books are not science fiction set in an idealized future. They are also not set in a completely imagined world where the author is free to make up all the rules of social interaction. They are set, relatively speaking, in the here and now. Hermione is

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from the world of the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. She grew up under its social pressures, the good ones and the bad ones. The results of these social pressures include caring about one's looks, caring about achievement, self-esteem issues of all varieties and differences in communication styles.

No, Hermione is not portrayed exactly like the boys in the book, but the boys aren't portrayed as exactly like each other either. As another YA author Madeline L'Engle put it so eloquently so many years ago, "Alike and equal are not the same thing." It would be ludicrous for Rowling to write Hermione as if social and peer pressures neither existed nor mattered. They do exist. They do matter, and the girls who are growing up reading these books deal with them every day, as does Hermione.

So in fact, do Schoefer and Elliott.

Schoefer writes: "Bringing up my objections has earned me other parents' resentment—they regard me as a heavy-handed feminist with no sense of fun who is trying to spoil a bit of magic they had discovered."

Elliott writes: "... feminists and other critical thinkers often find ourselves cast in real-life versions of Hermione's killjoy role."

Come to that, I got a treatment similar to Hermione's and Schoefer and Elliott's. Back in my blue-collar suburb, I was the only outspoken feminist in my various schools. I was also considered ugly, unpopular and thought to have a problem keeping my mouth shut. There was, in fact, a gym teacher who went around telling his classes, "None of you girls grow up to be feminists, or you'll end up like Sarah Zettel."

Where was Hermione when I was growing up? I could have used her.

Another point about Hermione: Yes, she harps on rules and the possibility of expulsion more than the boys. She's also more concerned about her academics. This makes perfect sense in terms of character, not because she's a girl, but because she's from a non-magical family. Whitton actually brings up this question. Of Hermione, she says, "She has already informed Harry and Ron that she has read all of the books for the term and done extensive additional research

to prove herself worthy of a Hogwarts education, whether because she is a girl or part-Muggle is not entirely clear.”

If Hermione fails Hogwarts, she's sunk. She can't exactly go back home and become a dentist. Unlike Ron, she's got no family to help her. Unlike Harry, she has no fame. She is absolutely on her own, and it is by her own merits and actions she must make good. Her position, therefore, is more precarious than that of either of the boys, and she shows by her actions she is aware of this.

Yet, despite all that, she is still perfectly willing and able to set fire to a professor's robes if she thinks he's cheating during a Quidditch game, or openly confront the Ministry of Magic stooge who has the power to torture and expel her, in that order.

I do not say that all the portrayals of women in the Harry Potter series are nuanced or fair. Madam Pince the librarian goes irrational when she thinks a student has written in a book. But then, Filch the caretaker wants the students whipped and chained for littering. The Fat Lady has no name of her own, and drinks too much at Christmas. But then, Peeves, the most persistent and obnoxious spirit in the castle, is male.

So's the wizard who tried to teach trolls ballet, and the one who tried to invent the cheese cauldron. Trelawney is a fraud who drinks too much and doesn't recognize her own power when it comes on her. Dudley is a ludicrous bully. His father is a ludicrous bully. Draco Malfoy's a racist and an inch away from being a murderer. This balance matters with regards to the charge of sexism. If only the females were shown to be flawed, then the charge of sexism would be serious and real, but that would also be the case if only the males were shown to be flawed. The people in Rowling's books come in all shapes, sizes and modes of behavior, just like people in the real world. Critics deride the girls at Hogwarts because they are shown to giggle and shriek and generally make a lot of noise. Some real, live girls do giggle and shriek. Some are quiet and serious. Some like pink and ruffles. Some like athletics and blue jeans. We see them all at Hogwarts. I reject the notion that we must tell girls that the only way to be valid human beings is to turn themselves into boys. I also reject the notion that authors must portray them that way. There are

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girls at Hogwarts who are vain and ridiculous. There are girls who are bookish and studious, or shy and uncertain. There are girls who are geeks. In Rowling's world, they are all okay, no matter what their peers think of them. They all can, and do, choose to stand up for what's right and lay their own lives on the line if need be. What Rowling ultimately shows in these books is that no matter who you are, you can be yourself and still be a worthy person.

I cannot think of a better message for the girls and young women of the world.

SARAH ZETTEL was born in Sacramento, California. Since then she has lived in ten cities, four states, two countries and become an author of a dozen science fiction and fantasy books, a host of short stories and novellas, as well as a handful of essays about the pop culture in which she finds herself immersed. She lives in Michigan with her husband Tim, son Alexander and cat Buffy the Vermin Slayer. When not writing, she drinks tea, gardens, practices tai chi and plays the fiddle, but not all at once.