

Book Review

John Granger, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter: Understanding the Meaning, Genius, and Popularity of Joanne Rowling's Harry Potter Novels* (Hadlock, WA: Zossima Press, 2002), 364 pages.

Harry Potter is a phenomenon unlike any in recent history. One may have to go as far back as the time of Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo to find authors whose books have been as eagerly anticipated as those of J. K. Rowling. Millions of children (and adults) eagerly anticipated the release of the fifth book, *The Order of the Phoenix*, in June, and quite a few had read all 875 pages by Monday morning. It is fascinating that so many people, including me, actually care about Harry and his friends Hermione and Ron are moved by the challenges they face and the choices they make.

John Granger offers an intriguing explanation for the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series. “Joanne Rowling is a Christian novelist of the Inklings School writing to ‘baptize the imagination’ and prepare our hearts and minds for the conscious pursuit of the greater life in Jesus Christ. Harry Potter is a Christian hero” (p. 140). Such a claim may come as a shock in light of the fierce opposition of some conservative groups against *Harry Potter* on the grounds that Rowling is seducing children into witchcraft and other evils, but Granger makes a very strong argument for seeing Hogwarts as a modern version of C. S. Lewis’ Narnia or Tolkien’s Middle Earth.

I, like Granger, read all of the *Harry Potter* books aloud to my daughter (and wife), and have always felt that there was more to these books than just a good adventure tale. I have found it hard to express my thoughts on this, but the books always felt deeply Christian to me. To be honest, I have been surprised by how many Christians have raised doubts about the morality or spirituality of the books because I feel that Rowling has done a marvelous job of depicting the difference between good and evil. Harry and company are not perfect, but they are good at such a deep foundational level that they are able to see through the deceptions of evil and conquer it while still enjoying Everyflavor Beans and a game of Quidditch.

What John Granger has done is give support for this sense that the *Harry Potter* books are fundamentally and intentionally Christian. Contrary to the popular press’ depiction of the Rowling as a welfare-mom who struck it rich as much by luck as by pluck, Granger points out that she was an honor student in French, German, English, and Classical Languages. Her favorite authors are Lewis, Jane Austin, and Dickens, and the Christian sensibility (and sense) of those authors are evident in *Harry Potter*. The books are filled with images and motifs from ancient and medieval Christian symbolism that touches the reader at a deep, unconscious level.

It is not accidental that the symbol of Harry’s “house” at Hogwarts is a lion, a symbol of Christ or that Harry’s “Patronus” is a stag which in medieval art was also a representation of Christ. It is not accidental

some of the key characters teach (or taught) Transfiguration Class because one of the key themes of the books is transformation in a spiritual sense. It is intentionally that Harry's mother, who gave her life to save Harry, is named Lily, which is the flower of the resurrection.

Many of Rowling's characters have meaningful names if you seek the meaning. Albus Dumbledore means "white bumblebee," which is not illuminating unless you know that in Christian tradition the bee was a symbol for the soul. Dumbledore, then, is the white soul. Malfoy, on the other hand, means "bad faith" and Lucius recalls Lucifer. Hermione, the most brilliant mind at Hogwarts, is named for Hermes, or quicksilver in alchemy. Peter Pettigrew, the rat who betrayed Harry's parents, has a name that implies a certain lack of manliness while Sirius Black means "black dog" which is a symbol of faithfulness. Salazar Slytherin recalls the snake of the Garden of Eden. Granger demonstrates that this attention to symbolic detail runs throughout the books but is done so subtly that it does not turn the books into a dry allegory.

One of the strongest sections of Granger's book concerns the theme of death in *Harry Potter*. Some people have been concerned that there is so much about in these "children's books" (forgetting Grimm's Fairy Tales apparently), but Rowling herself has pointed to death as the most important theme. The basic evil impulse in Lord Voldemort (wings of death) is his quest for immortality at any price. He fears nothing more than death, and he is willing to cause death to keep himself alive.

With the help of Dumbledore, Harry discovers that one of the things worse than death is to live like Voldemort. Consistently, when Harry has to choose between the right thing and the easy thing, he chooses the right thing even though it could lead to his death. He also learns from Dumbledore that "to a well-ordered mind" death is not to be feared. True to Christian teaching, the soul that is prepared for death is prepared for true life now and beyond.

Granger may push his analysis too far in places, and I imagine that even Rowling will be surprised at some of the Christian symbolism he pulls out, but all in all he makes a very strong case that Rowling, who worships regularly in the Church of Scotland, is writing a self-consciously Christian series that is not overtly Christian. Had it been overtly Christian, *Harry Potter* would have been relegated to the Christian bookstores instead of touching the lives of millions of people.

Magic in *Harry Potter* is not about performing spells or conjuring; it is a way of seeing the deeper spiritual significance in life itself, just as it was for Lewis and Tolkien. It is the magic of art, of the Eucharist, of baptism, and of sacrificial love in a selfish world. Still, the books are not for everyone, and many who enjoy them will miss some of the point. Just as the Muggles (non-magical humans) cannot actually see the magical world even though it is all around them, Muggles who read *Harry Potter* have trouble seeing the symbolic and spiritual message in the series.

Harry Potter, though, learns that there is bad magic in the world, too. Religion and spirituality can be twisted to perverse and destructive ends. As Granger points out, one of the central themes of the books is that prejudice, especially racism, is evil. There are evil wizards who want to destroy those who

are not of “pure blood.” Voldemort clearly is modeled on Hitler and the Death Eaters bear a striking resemblance to the Klu Klux Klan. But the concern about the evil of prejudice goes beyond overt racism and anti-Semitism to all forms of social cruelty and oppression, including child abuse. *Harry Potter* is ultimately about liberation personally and socially. The many symbols of Christ all point to this freedom from fear and the transforming power of love.

With this in mind, we may be able to see why certain Christian groups instinctively reject *Harry Potter* despite its positive message. Some Christians may simply be “Muggles” and are blind to the symbolist perspective of *Harry Potter*. It is hard to look at the world “diagonally” to see what is really there. Some Christians have difficulty discriminating between symbolism and idolatry or between imagination and Satanism. Others Christian leaders, though, may be guilty of using bad magic and they are rejecting *Harry Potter* because of its Christian message that perfect love casts out fear. *Harry Potter* is a direct challenge to those who would use the resources of Christianity to encourage prejudice, oppression, and cruelty instead of embracing a suffering world with love and the hope of transformation.

— *Craig D. Atwood*