

POPULAR CULTURE

The World of Harry Potter

A Magical Mystery Ride for Kids & Adults

BY DUNCAN H. BROWN



Eleven-year-old newcomer Daniel Radcliffe (left) stars as Harry Potter (with Rupert Grint and Emma Watson) in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, opening November 16.

ORIGINAL CREATIONS are self-consistent, fresh, and enthralling. Such is J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Rowling, an unemployed single mom, wrote the first *Potter* book in a coffee shop, stretching cups of coffee or tea quite a long way indeed. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* rocketed to best-seller status not just in her native England, but in the U.S. and worldwide. Since then, Rowling has written three additional best-selling books: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

Harry Potter's world is a divided one, co-inhabited by witches and wizards on one side, and by Muggles, non-magical folk, on the other. In the hands of Stephen King, this would be a prescription for terror and apocalyptic warfare. Rowling aims, though, for children, and hits the mark wonderfully. The enthusiasm her books have created has introduced a generation of youngsters to the joy of reading. I've had few pleasures quite as great recently as reading *Harry Potter* out loud to a niece and nephew.

Part of the fun of *Harry Potter's* world is that the magical folk are in a sometimes-comical conspiracy to keep Muggles from ever seeing or believing in magic. To do this, Rowling creates a petty bureaucracy of magicians whose sole job is to keep magic from disturbing Muggle lives.

Also, common things we do are transformed into magical equivalents: mailing a letter at the post office is transformed into "owl-post," wherein owls fly from magician to magician bearing letters, packages, etc. (If it's a heavy package, the owl can arrive exhausted and hungry.)

Harry Potter was orphaned when only a baby. His parents, first-class magicians, were killed by the evil wizard Voldemort (or, in the vernacular of the good magicians, "You-Know-Who.") So Harry is raised by his Aunt and Uncle, the Dursleys. The problem, though, is that they are Muggles. They deny Harry's magical heritage, and act very nasty whenever they see any sign of it in the boy. They are, in

fact, very unpleasant people, in the best tradition of fairy tales like Cinderella. They make Harry's life very disagreeable and difficult. Rowling's sympathetic descriptions of his travails really touch the heart.

It's therefore with enormous pleasure that Harry gets an owl-post inviting him to attend a magical school, Hogwarts, where magical children go to learn their craft and become responsible witches and wizards.

To get to Hogwarts, students board an invisible (to Muggles) train at London's Kings Cross Station that arrives on track 9-3/4. The track appears between tracks 9 and 10 only when the train arrives at the station to discharge and pick up its magical passengers.

Hogwarts is the centerpiece of the *Harry Potter* series, and Rowling's imagination is so fertile that she invests it with all manner of customs, traditions, fasci-

nating rooms, magical devices, creatures, spirits, and people. Hogwarts' Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, seems nice enough, but when evil threatens, we find he has hidden wisdom and power. Rowling staffs the school with a huge variety

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of magicians and witches (who are fully realized characters in and of themselves) as the Hogwarts teachers. She keeps us guessing about which of them are good, and which might be working secretly for

You-Know-Who.

Like many schools, Hogwarts has an outdoor sport the children play. But it's a magical game, called Quidditch, an amazing combination of soccer, handball, and rugby, though played on magical broomsticks flying through the air. All the kids want to play it, though first they have to get a good, fast broomstick like a Nimbus 2000 or a Comet 260. It's like the attention kids pay to bikes or other sporting equipment in our non-magical world.

But Voldemort is seeking revenge on Harry Potter (we find out why as the series progresses). The forces of good and evil clash, and sometimes just surviving the encounters is a victory for young Potter.

Rowling is writing for children, but she's so good with her descriptions, characters, and plotting that the books are enjoyable for adults as well. She'll have you guessing along with young readers right up to the last page as to who's who and what's what. You could think of the *Harry Potter* books as mystery stories, though set in a magical universe and impelled by light and dark forces as they battle for control and victory.

Parents should take care with very young readers—if they can't distinguish between make-believe and reality, they could be frightened by some of the material regarding Voldemort and his evil magical schemes. If you have any doubts, do some pre-reading yourself before reading *Harry Potter* to your kids or taking them to the movie.

Scanning the *Harry Potter* movie website (www.harrypotter.com) suggests Warner Brothers and director Chris Columbus have done a good job adapting *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to the silver screen. I hope the movie remains true to the witty, funny, occasionally scary tone of the books describing children growing up, forming friendships, dealing with good and evil, and awakening to their magical heritages. □

Duncan Brown will be a guest on Iowa Talks, broadcast live on WSUI AM 910, on Friday, November 30, for a program on fantasy literature. Reach him at dhbrown@iowatelecom.net.