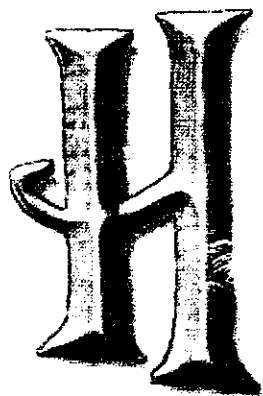


SHOULD

Harry Potter

COME TO ADVENTIST SCHOOLS?



arry Potter came to visit my home as a charming, nerdy kid desperately in need of a friend. His mean-spirited Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, and Cousin Dudley have belittled and severely mistreated him throughout his

childhood years. These three Muggles, or regular non-witch people, raised Harry after his parents were mysteriously killed. Harry has no friends and no family support except for a little food and a horrid place to sleep.

While living with his relatives, Harry receives a message that he is to attend the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The first four books in the Harry Potter series¹ describe Harry's adventures at Hogwarts School. He meets charming friends and dreadful bullies; strange half-dead, half-alive beings; good wizards; and evil wizards. Harry and his friends, Hermione and Ron, are portrayed as three ordinary kids with special powers who get themselves into many scrapes.

Through the power of witchcraft and wizardry, as well as their own scheming, they are able—with the help of powerful wizards—to extract themselves from their difficulties.

Millions of children identify with this orphaned boy—partly because he is

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so engaging and partly because he has such a tough time in life. So shouldn't parents and teachers welcome their children's interest in this series? After all, *at least now, kids are reading!* Reluctant readers and children who don't read well are picking up Harry Potter books instead of watching TV or playing Nintendo. Furthermore, the books are well written and fun to read, with engaging characters. To many people, this is reason enough to warmly welcome each new Harry Potter book.

Since Harry Potter is so engaging, and children enjoy him so much, why not encourage students to read these books? For Christian educators, the issue goes beyond readability and attractive heroes. We have a responsibility to help students decide upon appropriate guidelines for selecting any reading material. We cannot possibly acquaint ourselves with every children's book, so we cannot tell students or parents which books they should or should not read. Nor should we. It is more important to teach students the principles for choosing good literature. Because Harry Potter books are so popular, with 76 million copies in print (in 42 languages), and a movie soon to be released, we have an excellent opportunity to discuss with students and parents the influence of different kinds of reading materials.

Use of Power

The Harry Potter books contain much of the author's philosophy about life, spoken through the words of the characters. For example, the head of Hogwarts School, Professor Dumbledore, says: "There are all

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kinds of courage. . . . It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.”²

This brings up a major theme in *Harry Potter*, which is power. What are the proper uses of power? How does a Christian stand up to enemies and friends? In *Harry Potter*, we see a power struggle between Harry and his friends, between Harry and bullies, between evil wizards, and between good wizards and bad wizards. Whether we are talking about “good” wizards like Harry or bad wizards like the evil Lord Voldemort, all either already possess various powers or acquire them in order to control others.

There are two major power holders in *Harry Potter*—Harry and Voldemort, who killed Harry’s parents and tried to kill Harry when he was very young. (That was when Harry acquired the identifying lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.) These two characters, Harry and Voldemort, share several characteristics. Both have Muggle (ordinary human) blood, are orphans, and have magic wands with a feather from the same phoenix. Harry is a

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current Hogwarts student, while Voldemort studied there in the past. As the books progress, the interactions between these two characters get increasingly violent. The most recent book opens with several violent murders by Voldemort and his helpers.

In speaking of the evil Lord Voldemort, Quirrell, a character in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*,

says, “He is with me wherever I go . . . I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it. . . . Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me.’ Quirrell shivered suddenly. ‘He does not forgive mistakes easily.’”³

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For Christians, the dual issues of power and the use of witchcraft or wizardry to control other people, as used in the Harry Potter books, are problematic. The power to control other people removes their free will and their ability to make choices for themselves. The underlying argument in many instances is this: If you have the power to force someone else to do your will and you are on the “good” side, then it is OK to use this power. This brings us to the next issue, revenge.

Revenge Principle

Harry Potter often finds himself in difficult situations. Sometimes, he gets out of trouble without using his powers, but at other times, he cannot. In one instance, Harry and two friends are accosted by some school bullies who have immersed themselves in the dark arts. They make cruel remarks to Harry and his friends. In response, Harry and friends simultaneously cast hexes on the bullies, rendering them unconscious. “Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle—each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit—out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.”²³ Then Harry and his friends sit down and play games.

This spirit of revenge, which runs through the Harry Potter books, is diametrically opposed to Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek. Do we want children to learn to solve problems by forcing others to do their will? Should they take revenge on others because they have the power to do so? Harry Potter casts spells to hurt his enemies and gain power over them. The Bible teaches us

to deal with evil by putting our trust in God and letting Him punish evildoers. Harry Potter learns how to disarm and conquer the dark arts through wizardry. Christianity focuses on God’s power, while Harry Potter learns at Hogwarts to focus on himself and to develop his own strong powers.

Struggle Between Good and Evil

Some have argued Harry Potter stories are just a metaphor for the struggle between good and evil. Let’s examine that assertion for a moment. Harry Potter is a wizard enrolled in a school for witchcraft and wizardry. He learns how to overcome his enemies through wizardry, not through the principles of good. In a sense, this is evil battling evil. Harry is portrayed as a victim, but in fact, he is a victim with unusual powers that he uses on behalf of himself and his friends.

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The argument that one is justified in using violence to overcome evil is not new. Many wars have been defended by this philosophy. However, in the story of the Great Controversy, Jesus, the central character, was a meek man who prayed for His enemies, forgave those who put Him to death, and shunned violent conflict. Although Jesus had the power to blot out His enemies in an instant, He refused to do so because the principle of His kingdom is love.

Imagination

Harry Potter is a fictionalized, imaginary character. However, the books about him are so compelling and well written that he seems almost real in people’s minds. Since the books are only imaginary and we assume that kids

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come informed enough about witchcraft to see its subtle dangers?

Responding to alarm about children's dramatically increased interest in paganism, Mr. Norfolk, a spokesman for the pagan federation, said that: "Parents should not be alarmed by their children's sudden interest in magic. 'Paganism is recognized as a valid religion,' he said. 'In no way is it a cult and certainly it offers nothing untoward.'"⁶

Witches celebrate the positive portrayal of their craft in the Harry Potter stories: "For once, the witches aren't ugly old hags," says Michael Darnell, a 39-year-old computer programmer from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, who has been practicing witchcraft for 25 years. "For once, they're the protagonists rather than the villains."⁷

These comments should alarm Christians. We need to ask ourselves some critical questions: Is there a war between good and evil, and if so, what does it look like? Is the occult real or only imaginary, as some argue? Does Satan attack us only in the garb of ugliness, or does he come with charm and enticements as well? Our students need to be able to answer these questions for themselves.

A related concern is how the Harry Potter books deal with life after death. In *The Goblet of Fire*, the evil Lord Voldemort's magic wand is able to bring Harry's dead parents, as well as others of his victims, to talk to Harry.⁸ The Bible and Ellen G. White teach that the dead "do not know anything" and "the dead do not hold communication with the living."⁹

Choices

As an education professor, I have had teachers ask me for a list of acceptable books. My response is that each of us must learn the principles of choice for ourselves and teach them to children so they can make informed decisions about what they read. No one can or should read all children's books

begging to be let into Hogwarts, and some of them are really sad. Because they want it to be true so badly, they've convinced themselves it's true."⁵

It is possible that the huge number of hours children spend watching the media confuses their notion of imagination and reality. Movies, books, video games, and other forms of media seem so real that their assault on our senses tends to blur the distinction between the imaginary and the actual. (See the article on page 10.)

The Occult

Some Christians dismiss the objection that Harry Potter uses witchcraft, saying that the books are only a creative use of the imagination; therefore, we shouldn't worry too much about children reading them. However, since children have been reading the story of Harry Potter, they have become more interested in paganism and the occult than ever before. Have we helped our students to be-

know the difference between what is real and what is fictional, does this justify children's reading them? From colleagues who study the human brain, I have learned that physically, the brain can't tell the difference between fiction and fact. Only a careful evaluation of the information helps us make that distinction. What goes into the brain stays there. What is reinforced is recalled longer and better. So for Christians, the question is, What do we want to be stored in our children's brains?

Indeed, there is some question about how well children, particularly younger ones, can distinguish between the real and the imaginary. In an interview with *Newsweek*, J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, said, "I get letters from children addressed to Professor Dumbledore (headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the books' setting), and it's not a joke,

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and then tell parents or students what to read. We make people weak when we make all their choices for them. This making of decisions by authorities is more an issue of control than freedom. The gospel gives us the freedom to make our own choices. It is time for us to teach students how to make informed decisions for themselves. They will be stronger for it.

Therefore, I am not going to tell you whether to read Harry Potter, or which other books you and your students should or should not read. There are, however, some important principles that we can use in making these decisions, which I will discuss at the end of this article.

What Are the Options?

Two years ago, I attended an Adventist teachers' convention when the speaker gave the participants a sheet with many names listed on it, asking us if we recognized any of them. There were words like *Dumbledore*, *Harry Potter*, *Pokemon*, *Hogwarts*, and others. Almost none of us did. We were then told that our students would know these words. I immediately became concerned. How could I possibly be so out of touch with current popular culture that an 8-year-old would recognize and use 50 words I'd never heard? So I decided to get the first Harry Potter book, a small pack of Pokemon cards, a Pokemon book, and a book on Animagi. I read the Pokemon book and was not charmed for several reasons: First, I did not think it was particularly well written; and second, the use of

violence to gain power over someone else—even a bad person—was antithetical to my view of Christlike behavior. I haven't had the courage to read the Animagi book yet—the cover is too graphic. But Harry Potter is a charmer. I decided to prepare a presentation for the North American Division teachers at their Dallas, Texas, convention this past summer. It didn't seem reasonable to speak about something I knew nothing about except from reading hysterical Internet challenges to the books. I, therefore, have read all four of them.

Along with Harry Potter, near the end of the fourth book,¹⁰ I was so horrified at the gratuitous violence and murder that I wanted to put my hands over my eyes and shout "No!" How could a children's book end like this?

My reading of the books has caused me to contemplate several issues. First, the principles teachers need to think through before trying to help students decide what to read and what not to read. Some of these questions are:

- If a story is imaginary, does this mean it's OK to read?
- Does the fact that a book includes a few good philosophical statements justify reading it?
- Will knowing the difference between

right and wrong enable us to ignore the "bad parts" of a book?

- Is reading Harry Potter or similar books a matter of right and wrong or is it just good fun?

We must answer these questions for ourselves and help students answer them for themselves. As we read, we must keep in mind that humor disarms our sensitivities. The repetition of violence or the occult desensitizes us to evil and human suffering. Everything we read, watch, hear, or do influences us. For me, one of the biggest issues in Harry Potter or Pokemon is that of influence. We need to ask, "What is the overall influence of what we read and see?"

The author of Harry Potter says that the books will get increasingly dark. This is evident as the plot develops throughout the first

four books. A graphic illustration of this progression occurs near the end of the fourth book. I, along with Harry Potter, closed my eyes to avoid seeing a horrifying mutilation, combined with gratuitous violence and murder. How could a children's book end like this?

Battle for the Mind

Remembering that the conflict between good and evil is largely a battle for the mind, we must consider how media influences our thinking. Do violence and wizardry desensitize the mind? Is Satan real or imaginary? If a book is fun, is it OK? Is there an evil side of good? Is there a good side of evil? The Harry Potter books seem to indicate that there is a good side of wizardry.

I have very good friends on both sides of the Harry Potter issue. I hope that they have made their decisions thoughtfully, not because someone else told them what to think. Often, people who find fault with the popular media are marginalized and ridiculed before they even have time to think through or defend their positions. Since this is the case, we need to take great care in what we say about Harry Potter. If we criticize these books or their author, J. K. Rowling, based on quotes from the books or the author, we must be careful that our arguments are sound and that the quotes are factual.

I recently received a widely circulated E-mail. It contained vulgar words supposedly written by the author of the Harry Potter books. The source was said to be a World Wide Web site that claims to be America's news site. However, this Web site includes a satirical journal with made-up articles. As a slam at Christians, it made up a satirical fictional story about Harry Potter. The E-mail used this story to condemn the Harry Potter books. This sort of attack does a great deal of harm to thoughtful Christians and others who want to know the truth and to make principled choices. Sincere people who repeat such wild allegations may be dismissed as crackpots, which does nothing to help people learn the real facts.

Rather than stating all principles in the form of questions, I would like to list some principles for your consideration when deciding about Harry Potter and other reading ma-

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terials.

The first issue is *use of time*. Ellen

White says:

"Our time belongs to God. Every moment is His, and we are under the most solemn obligation to improve it to His glory. Of no talent He has given will He require a more strict account than our time."¹¹ This, of course, embraces much more than reading mate-

rials. It covers all our activities.

Second is *whether the reading material fits the principles Paul enumerated in Philippians 4:8*: "And now, dear brothers and sisters, let me say one more thing as I close this letter. Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."¹²

Third, *whether as Christians we should choose revenge or offer grace*. Jesus said, "But I say, don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too" (Matthew 5:39).

Fourth, *how we relate to our enemies and even our friends*. Do we try to gain power over them, or do we treat them with respect and love? "Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!" (Matthew 5:44).

Fifth, *whether imaginary witchcraft/wizardry and other types of behavior by literary characters influence the reader's mind*. "It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell."¹³

As I see it, there are two fundamental issues at stake for Adventist teachers: (1) Is it our role to control other people's choices, or should we help them figure out what to do for themselves? (2) What responsibility do we as educators have to protect students in Adventist schools?

I would like to suggest that the answer to the first question is this: *We must teach students how to make principled decisions*.

Is reading Harry Potter or similar books a matter of right and wrong or is it just good fun?

The answer to the second question is: *We need to learn to make principle-based decisions ourselves so that we can help students learn to think for themselves*.

Should Harry Potter come to your Adventist school? I leave that decision to you. This article has discussed the principles you can use for making that decision and for helping your students choose good reading materials throughout their entire lives. ☞

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