

Crafting a Masterpiece: The Genre Mosaic of *Harry Potter* by Emily Keller

“Harry—yer a wizard.” Rubeus Hagrid’s revelation early in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (50) sparks a whirlwind of adventures for the then eleven-year-old protagonist, Harry Potter, resulting in brushes with supernatural creatures, evil wizards, and the Dark Lord, Voldemort. I vividly remember curling up next to my mother as we read about the escapades of Harry, Hermione Granger, and Ron Weasley at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Back then, long before the extreme popularity of J. K. Rowling’s megahit series propelled *Harry Potter* to its present worldwide acclaim, I was entranced by the fantastical characters, the innovative sports, and the heroic quest of an ordinary boy I could relate to. Harry’s story is a global phenomenon, with the seven books in the series selling 400 million copies in sixty-seven languages and leading to the production of eight blockbuster movies (“Rowling ‘Makes £5”). In a time when newspapers and other forms of print media are losing their readership, *Harry Potter*’s enduring popularity would seem surprising if not for the array of genres that appeal to the series’ diverse audience. In “Generic Fusion and the Mosaic of Harry Potter,” Anne Alton notes that *Harry Potter* is at once a prime example of pulp fiction, horror books, mystery novels, sports books, and fantasy novels, among others. For Alton, the combination of genres results in a superior mosaic instead of potentially unrecognizable chaos, connecting readers’ basic genre expectations with the incredible success and appeal of the series (49). As such, the *Harry Potter* series is an example for future creative writers, including myself, to emulate, a goal which can only be achieved by examining the effects these distinct genres have on readers.

Like most young readers of nine or ten, I was attracted to *Harry Potter* by an often overlooked but key element of the pulp fiction genre: the cover. While browsing the shelves of the local library, the broomstick, unicorn, castle, and three-headed dog accompanying Harry on the cover provoked my healthy childhood imagination. Intrigued by the promise of fantastical adventure, I took the book from its not-so-dusty shelf to read the title. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, “suggests fantasy, magic, and myth” (Alton 142), an almost irresistible combination that finds its origins in the pulp fiction of tabloid magazines. In order to appeal to mass groups of readers, typical pulp fiction writers utilize such enticements as attractive covers and stirring plots that often include action, sex, and protagonists with whom readers can identify. The *Harry Potter* series succeeds by offering sexual and romantic situations that are appropriate for its target audience while delivering enticing plot details such as the presence of conspiracy in the form of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, the appearance of luxury with the ease of magical spells, and the inclusion of lawlessness that is rampant in wizard prison breaks and the murders of central characters. The absence of adult situations and explicit sex draws in younger readers who would otherwise find themselves banned by their parents from reading such sensational material. As my mother read to me, and later when I dabbled in the books myself, I developed an appreciation for the way readers of all ages, races, genders, and ethnicities can identify with Harry, an affinity that is a definite mark of popular pulp fiction (Alton 143). Further, as Harry rises from ordinary to extraordinary overnight, readers find an embodiment of their own need to be special, noticed, and great (Alton 143). When viewed as pulp fiction novels, the *Harry Potter* series capitalizes on the most useful and attractive aspects of the genre without including more scandalous details which would limit young readership and thus curtail the popularity of the series.

The lure of the horror genre further heightens this popularity. From the typical grisly murder story with its vast stretches of nail-biting suspense to more mythical terrors that really do go bump in the night, horror, when well-written, can keep even the most terrified reader frantically turning pages. There are a variety of typical elements to these fearsome novels, but the most distinguishing one is violence. Murder, kidnappings, and amputations provide the basis for significant events within the series and are extremely characteristic examples of the necessary brutality of the genre. Another

distinguishing element employed by horror writers is the supernatural, a component *Harry Potter* features in the form of vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and other unusual creatures. Furthermore, the gothic castle evokes a realistic atmosphere where paranormal terrors are not only plausible but probable. Hogwarts contains dungeons, secret entrances, subterranean passages, hidden rooms, and moving staircases that make navigation of the various corridors not only difficult, but at times, hazardous. All of these horror aspects add an incentive to readers who may not be interested in the more generic appeal of straight pulp fiction. Each of the seven books is written with the same mounting tension. Within each book, readers advance feverishly toward the end, unable to set the novel aside due to the heightening danger faced by beloved characters, yet terrified of a climax that might result in their deaths. Looking at the series as a whole, it becomes clear that Rowling expertly builds the threats Harry and company must overcome, a skill that capable horror writers classically employ. She produces a wealth of hazards in the final novel that would have seemed overwhelming in the first book but appear fitting at the very end of the series. The shocking conclusion of *Harry Potter* features attacks from a combination of magical spells and fantastical creatures, thrillingly employed as a distinct and effective escalation of the horror genre.

These dangers tend to provoke scrutiny and inquiry by the ever-adventurous protagonists of *Harry Potter*, yielding a further classification of the books: mystery fiction. According to Alton, a significant facet of the mystery genre involves employing detective work to unravel issues and reveal secrets related to a crime (144). Harry's adventures contain a wealth of mysteries both big and small, mysteries that drive either the entire series or a singular novel. For example, the larger mystery of the books revolves around the central antagonist, Lord Voldemort. Why does Voldemort want to kill Harry so badly? Why does he fail each time? Will Harry die in the end? Furthermore, specific mysteries propel each book from beginning to end: *Sorcerer's Stone* revolves around the location and attributes of the stone; *Chamber of Secrets* creates a detective story whereby Harry and his friends work to discover the identity of the Heir of Slytherin and the hidden entry to the Chamber; *Prisoner of Azkaban* focuses on the character of Sirius Black and his relation to the killings of James and Lily Potter; *Goblet of Fire* constructs a combination of mysteries, including the identity of the person who put Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire and the history of the Crouch family; *Order of the Phoenix* deals with the mystery behind Voldemort's fixation on an object contained within the Ministry of Magic; *Half-Blood Prince* presents a variety of mysteries, including the nature of Draco Malfoy's (Harry's archrival) assignment from Lord Voldemort, the sites of the Horcruxes (pieces of Voldemort's soul), and the history of Tom Riddle (Voldemort's real name); and finally, *Deathly Hallows* solves everything, while centering upon the powers and locations of the Hallows and the remaining Horcruxes. Not only does Rowling build suspense and resolution within each of these mysteries, but she varies the nature of the events Harry investigates in order to keep her readers guessing, a staple of successful mystery writing. For readers of the genre, this staple creates an almost irresistible lure, especially when the puzzle is well-constructed. Besides sustaining interest, thoughtfully designed mystery novels encourage readers to formulate their own personal theories as the book progresses. With the *Harry Potter* series, readers explore alongside Harry, Hermione, and Ron, making guesses as to the identity of a killer or the significance of an object, criticizing the false conclusions, or celebrating the trio's triumphs. The inclusion of mystery further expands the appeal and popularity of the *Harry Potter* series in that it allows readers to feel that they have a stake in the journey and outcomes of the events.

Readers also feel connected to Rowling's conception of the wizard game, Quidditch, which illustrates the broad identity of the series as a sports story. Explained in detail during *Sorcerer's Stone*, Quidditch, which is played on flying broomsticks, appears to be at least as popular as football in America. Sports writers typically attract readers through plot formation, especially when their characters must overcome great odds, and through knowledge along with passion about the game itself. Rowling not only invents a playable and completely believable sport, but she involves her readers in Quidditch

players' struggles. These players are devoted to winning, even fanatical at times. Their ardor attracts the dedication not only of the fictional audience, but of the reading audience as well. Sports writers have to interest bookworms in the story, even if these readers care little about sports. At the same time, these writers must appeal to sports enthusiasts. Rowling's Quidditch manages to lure readers across the board.

However, at its basest level, *Harry Potter* is a fantasy novel that skillfully combines reality with mythical concepts like Quidditch. Rowling's ability to provoke readers into suspending disbelief and becoming immersed in her fantastical world serves as the basis for every other genre subset within her series and functions to provide the broadest scope of appeal among her readership. Without acceptance of Harry's world, readers would not trust in the thrills of Quidditch or the horror of dark wizards or the fabled creatures on the covers of the novels. The instant belief in a modern England where wizards live among Muggles (non-wizards) in secret seems to be due, in part, to this placement of wizardry alongside the real world. Familiar locations, like train stations and middle-class neighborhoods, serve as settings for the beginnings of Harry's adventures in *Sorcerer's Stone*, so readers can slowly become accustomed to layer upon layer of magical abnormality. The train station reveals itself as the site of the Hogwarts train. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's middle-class house provides the introduction into the world of wizard mail in the form of carrier owls. *Harry Potter* is further steeped in reality with such ordinary requirements as homework and classes that drive the lives of students at Hogwarts and those of any contemporary school.

This inclusion of reality as a backdrop to fantasy is supported by the detail through which Rowling fashions her invented world. For example, photographs and portraits are extraordinary in that the objects and people within them move and even speak. Additionally, important elements of modern culture are prominent within wizardry society, although sometimes they are accompanied by certain twists. Wizards have their own separate financial, political, transportation, and educational systems, and even unique brands of candy (Alton 155). Magic plays an integral role in the lives of all wizards by assisting with chores and moving objects. Elements from fairy tales appear continuously in the form of such fabled creatures as unicorns and trolls.

The fantasy world of *Harry Potter*, filled with dangers from fairy tales at every turn, satisfies the thirst for quests that typically epitomize the genre. Harry, as the hero of the story, finds himself ordained with an ultimate quest: to kill Voldemort. In the meantime, he must survive repeated threats from the Dark Lord and his representatives. And throughout the novels, as Alton observes, "Ron and Hermione fill the roles of faithful companions, while Dumbledore and Hagrid appear to be the primary helper figures" (156). With their help, Harry eventually succeeds in defeating Voldemort and saving the wizard and Muggle worlds.

As Harry pursues this quest, certain themes, characters, and objects arise that also appear in earlier works of literature within the fantasy genre. In *What Writing Does and How It Does It*, Charles Bazerman refers to this "relation each text has to the texts surrounding it" as intertextuality (84). Bazerman contends that there are six techniques of representation, one of which, "using recognizable phrasing, terminology associated with specific people or groups of people or particular documents" (88), seems to materialize most frequently in Rowling's series. James E. Porter offers an even broader division of intertextuality, separating it into just two types, with "iterability," or "the 'repeatability' of certain textual fragments," including "unannounced sources and influences" (35) characterizing the *Harry Potter* books. Although Rowling never even indirectly quotes works by earlier fantasy authors, popular and successful ideas often employed by fantasy writers appear with her own twists. For instance, as Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara point out in *From Homer to Harry Potter*, various supernatural elements in esteemed works like J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, and C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, such as wizards and talking animals, make appearances in some form in Rowling's series (54). One such element, Tolkien's wizard, Gandalf, serves as a mentor, much like the

wizard Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter* (Dickerson and O'Hara 240). And according to Dickerson and O'Hara, "both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are quests [...] involving arduous and fantastic journeys" (100), much like Harry's lengthy mission to defeat Voldemort. These similarities like these not only highlight parallels between Rowling's *Harry Potter* and the works of creative writers within the fantasy genre, but increase interest in her novels for readers hungry to sample writing that draws from these beloved authors of the past.

Taken as a whole, the grounded reality coupled with the detailed fantasy of Rowling's series create a welcoming setting that is inviting to a vast variety of readers, including fans of past fantastical works. Young adults especially seem to enjoy Harry's journey. According to Cathi MacRae in *Presenting Young Adult Fantasy Fiction*, these younger readers typically appreciate "long, fat series books because they do not want the fantasy world to end" (xv). Fantasy, with its penchant for stretching the imagination, also tends to appeal to this faction of the audience. As a well written, carefully constructed mythical series, *Harry Potter* attracts fantasy fans of all ages and interests, ranging from children to mature audiences interested in literary works from the likes of Tolkien and Lewis.

Popular authors like Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling serve as models to aspiring fantasy writers, such as myself. A main factor in Rowling's success has been her inclusion of a rich landscape of genres that intrigue a vast, diverse array of readers. Her readership consists of dynamic individuals, hungry for originality. As time passes, interests change. No longer can any book that capitalizes on only one genre, such as straight fantasy, generate the type of fan-frenzy that Rowling has prompted in modern readers. Writers hoping to achieve the same result must learn to adjust their writing techniques without giving up their own identities as creative composers. Clever innovation and dedication combined with mass appeal in readership can only yield victory for us struggling Muggle writers.

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