A wizard's mission: Christian themes in Harry Potter

by Leonie Caldecott in the January 15, 2008 issue

“The excitement, anticipation and just plain hysteria that came over the entire country this weekend was a bit like the Beatles’ first visit to the U.S.” Lisa Holton, president of the children’s publishing house Scholastic, was referring not to the appearance of a rock band or blockbuster movie but to the release in July of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The seventh and final book in the wildly successful Harry Potter series sold 8.3 million copies in the U.S. alone during the first 24 hours after publication. Harry Potter has made the author of the books, J. K. Rowling, into a multimillionaire and has made his mark on an entire generation of children during the decade the books have been coming out.

Not everyone has shared the enthusiasm. A number of Christian commentators have condemned these stories about an orphaned boy who at the age of 11 discovers that he is destined to follow in the footsteps of his parents and study magic at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Soon Harry also discovers that he is in danger: an evil wizard, Lord Voldemort, who was responsible for the death of Harry’s parents when he was a baby—and who tried but failed to kill Harry at the same time—is pursuing the boy wizard.

Mysteriously, Voldemort was vanquished, though not outright killed, by the very act of trying to murder Harry. His killing spell rebounded from the child (after leaving a scar on Harry’s forehead) and hit its originator instead. Ever since, the dark wizard has been seeking to come back from his reduced life and reassume power.

The manner in which Voldemort has ensured his own survival is a central theme of the series’ last two books and is crucial to the plot resolution. Voldemort has employed a forbidden magical technique that allows him to divide his soul and invest each part in a specially chosen object, called a horcrux, which can then be kept safe from harm. A magician can create a horcrux only by murdering someone in cold blood: it is an act of self-preservation based on the deliberate performance of

a mortal sin. Voldemort has done this as many as seven times.

The darkness in the Harry Potter books has alarmed some Christians, and some schools in the U.S. have been pressured to ban them. Some critics worry that the books encourage an unhealthy and dangerous interest in the occult. The Catholic writer Michael O'Brien has complained that "Rowling's wizard world is gnostic in essence and practice, neutralizes the sacred and displaces it by normalizing what is profoundly abnormal and destructive in the real world."

On the other hand, John Granger, author of *Finding God in Harry Potter*, argues that the books speak to something deep in the human heart. "All humans naturally resonate with stories that reflect the greatest story ever told, the story of God who became man," he writes. He believes that the Harry Potter novels "touch our hearts because they contain themes, imagery and engaging stories that reflect the Great Story we are wired to receive and respond to." Granger maintains that Rowling is following in the footsteps of authors such as C. S. Lewis in using magical themes to point up archetypal human experiences that relate closely to salvation history as understood by Christians.

Indeed, Rowling, who describes herself as believing in God (though with a faith more akin to Graham Greene's than Lewis's), has stated on several occasions that Lewis's fantasy stories were a major influence in her life and that to this day she is incapable of being in a room with a Narnia book and not picking it up to read. Certainly her books can be seen as attempting to carry religious, and specifically Christian, ideas past the "watchful dragons" that Lewis wrote about in his own reflection on the role of magic and fairy tales.

In a seemingly post-Christian era, there is an urgent need to articulate the basic themes of the Christian mystery in ways that are fresh and original, yet faithful to the truth of the gospel. Since the publication of *Deathly Hallows* Rowling has actually spoken about the Christian theme of the books, saying that to her the religious parallels have "always been obvious. But I never wanted to talk too openly about it because I thought it might show people who just wanted the story where we were going."

G. K. Chesterton wrote about this issue in his essay "Magic and Fantasy in Fiction." He speaks of the net of St. Peter and the snare of Satan, each of which represents a different kind of magic in which one can become enmeshed. "I am convinced," he

wrote, “that every deep or delicate treatment of the magical theme, from the lightest jingle of Peacock Pie . . . to the most profound shaking of the phenomenal world . . . will always be found to imply an indirect relation to the ancient blessing and cursing; and it is almost as vital that it should be moral as that it should not be moralizing.”

This criterion provides a good tool for analyzing Harry Potter. In what ways do the books, to quote C. S. Lewis, “instruct whilst delighting”? (At this point, I have to enter a caveat: I am treating the books, not the films, which are variable in quality and faithfulness to the ethos of the books, and which put far more emphasis on occult attraction than the books ever do, in some cases actually distorting crucial pieces of plot or dialogue.)

If you are looking for a simplistic role model in Harry, you will be disappointed. Harry is flawed, you might even say damaged. He is disobedient, willful, at times deceitful (at least in front of figures of authority), and he carries a huge burden of anger in the face of the tragedy at the heart of his young life. In short, he is a sinner, perhaps a typical sinner for our time, in which social breakdown and dysfunctionality have become the defining note of many young people’s lives. Yet Rowling portrays Harry’s growth and maturation, through all the usual crises of adolescence, in such a way as to take readers with him through the fire and out the other side.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in *On Fairy-Stories*, coined a term for the way the redemptive mystery is explored in fiction: he called it the *eucatastrophe*. A story which requires hardship and sacrifice—and even the ultimate pouring out of self which appears at first glance to be a catastrophe—feeds the soul’s need for deeper meaning. There is a classic eucatastrophic pattern to the seven Harry Potter books, with the central books, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, taking the reader to the darkest, most desperate point in terms of both the plot and Harry’s own development.

Rowling dares to go very deep into what Pope John Paul II called the “culture of death.” The name of the evil antagonist, whose own development in the opposite direction to Harry’s is a central theme of the books, makes this very clear: *Vol-de-mort*. Rowling draws on ancient linguistic roots (in this case French) to define the hero’s adversary as the “will to death.”

While Harry is indeed haunted by the tragedy at the heart of his life, he does not succumb to the temptations that Voldemort has given free rein to. He doesn't pursue dark magic; he isn't contemptuous of authority figures, even if he feels misunderstood by or is impatient with them; he is not consumed with the lust for power, far less with the ultimate goal of that path—rendering oneself immortal without reference to God.

As is revealed in *Deathy Hallows*, far from trying to cheat death, Harry willingly embraces death when he comes to understand that this is necessary to save others, and not just those he particularly loves. A clear distinction is made in the books between the evil wizard's will to death for others and Harry's attempt to give life to others by accepting his own death.

While the books deal with difficult issues such as violence and death, and for this reason may not always be suitable for preteen children, certainly not without supervision and discussion, Rowling never loses sight of the ultimate goal, which is ultimately Christocentric if not overtly Christian. The power that originally saved Harry's life was simply his mother's love: this power, and not some spell, imbued him with protection against Voldemort. It is a protection that persists through the books, and eventually carries him through the most difficult task of all.

The headmaster of Hogwarts, Professor Dumbledore, tells Harry that this power has nothing to do with magic, and indeed goes way beyond it. Voldemort underestimates it for just this reason. He cannot understand the power of self-sacrifice, since it is rooted in the one thing that cannot bring us personal power.

Rowling becomes ever more daring in her eucatastrophic plotting as the novels unfold. One of the things that causes Harry much anxiety in the earlier novels, such as *Chamber of Secrets*, is that he turns out to have so much in common with his archenemy, from the ability to speak the serpentine "parseltongue" to a traumatic childhood background. Dumbledore is at pains to reassure Harry that it is not his abilities or even tendencies that count, but his own conscious choices.

In *Deathly Hallows* Rowling takes the theme of the will resisting temptation even further, showing not only that Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione are fallible creatures, but that the great mentor who has been so influential for them, Albus Dumbledore, also has feet of clay. Rowling deals with human sin in a realistic and very modern fashion: even figures of great authority commit sins and must learn

wisdom in the wake of youthful folly. This theme is not only compatible with Christianity, but lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of any earthly society.

In Dumbledore's case, his obsession with worldly power, allied with an overpowering attraction to a wizard classmate named Gelert Grindelwald, rendered him self-centered and actually caused the death of his young sister. His repentance is made manifest in the inscription he chose for his mother's and sister's tombstone: *Where your treasure is*, *there your heart will be also*.

Rowling caused a stir when, in speaking to schoolchildren in New York in October, she said that she had always thought of Dumbledore as gay. This was not a well-judged comment on her part, if only because a large section of her audience are younger children who already have to deal with enough prematurely sexualized material in the world that surrounds them. In any case, the point in Rowling's story is that Dumbledore's attachment to Grindelwald helped lead him into an immoral quest for power. Human concupiscence, along with every other kind of self-seeking attachment, brings death in its wake.

The words that Dumbledore chose for the tombstone are, of course, from chapter six of the Gospel of Matthew. The whole passage, should eager Harry Potter fans look it up, makes Dumbledore's turnaround—conversion, if you will—very clear. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Catherine and David Deavel have commented in the Catholic cultural review *Logos*: "Just as M. Night Shyamalan's movie *The Sixth Sense* was not really about ghosts, but instead about parenting, Harry Potter is not really about magic, but about character." It is impossible to deal with the formation of character without dealing with temptations that could steer it off course. The crucial temptation for Harry, as with Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, is the desire to possess that very occult power which Christians rightly warn against. It is a question of ends and means: will any means do to destroy Voldemort, even if they entail descending to his level? Or if the only righteous way to vanquish him is to sacrifice oneself, then does the hero have the strength of character to go through with this? It is on this basis that Dumbledore tells Harry, when they meet in the antechamber of the next world, aptly named

King’s Cross, that Harry is a “better man” than his onetime mentor.

A side plot opens up in *Deathly Hallows* as Harry discovers the existence of three magical objects that seemingly give power over death—objects that even Voldemort has not managed to discover, or at least not in their proper context. (The wand of power is the only one Voldemort pursues, and this only in order to defeat Harry’s wand, whose “twin core” with his own wand makes it impossible for Voldemort to assert his supremacy.) These objects are the “deathly hallows,” and for a period Harry allows himself to become obsessed with them to the neglect of the original mission given him by Dumbledore: to find and destroy the remaining horcruxes.

Harry makes a crucial decision to forego seeking these objects of power until he has dealt with the horcruxes. He makes his decision after witnessing the sacrificial death of an innocent house-elf whose freely given devotion has saved Harry and his friends from Voldemort’s “death eaters.” Refusing to use magic to dig Dobby’s grave, Harry buries him with his bare hands and goes through the cleansing process of mourning to reach a new clarity in his struggle. This is the kind of detail that exonerates Rowling from the accusations of her heavy-handed Christian critics. (Rowling’s name for the collaborationist minister for magic, “Pius Thicknesse,” may well indicate her impatience with this league of self-appointed inquisitors.)

This is not to say that the plotting and characterization of the Harry Potter books are beyond reproach. Having set her novels in a semirealistic universe (as opposed to a more complete subcreation like Narnia or Middle-earth), Rowling needed to make the transmutation of the hero credible psychologically as well as metaphysically, and I am not sure she entirely succeeded. Since the authorial voice keeps us firmly inside Harry’s own interior world, we need to undergo the process of purification more intimately than Rowling allows.

Also, the resolution of the plot in terms of true ownership of the ultimate wand is not quite as metaphysically satisfying as it should be or as theologically satisfying as Christians would want it to be. I was not alone in expecting that Harry’s previous act of mercy toward Peter Pettigrew, who betrayed Harry’s parents to Voldemort, would play a more central role in the resolution. Although this act is not ignored, its consequences are played out at the magical level rather than the more powerful personal one—an instance perhaps of Rowling giving in to the fascination of magic.

But if Rowling falls short, it is not because she is in the grip of some corrupting pagan influence but because her writing powers did not quite match up to the intuition around which she wove her tale. That intuition is a valid and fascinating one. It is perhaps best summed up by the epitaph (also chosen by Dumbledore) that Harry finds engraved on his parents' tombstone: "*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*" (1 Cor. 15:26).

The fact that Harry does not understand the meaning of the epitaph, not to mention its provenance, is an entirely legitimate fictional device on the part of an author who understands the need of young people not to be spoon-fed the truth, but rather to puzzle it out for themselves.

A story which revolves around the kind of choice that every individual must make to be on the side of life rather than death, and which understands that the seeming triumph of the evil one must in the end be endured in love and obedience, cannot be dismissed as a neopagan rave-up. No New Age proponent of the culture of death and instant gratification would risk a potentially cheesy postscript in which the ideal of happiness is not the celebration of occult power or the human ego, but ordinary family life.