

Wizards and Muggles: Uses of fantasy

From the Editors in the [December 1, 1999](#) issue

Scottish author J. K. Rowling has written a wildly popular series of children's books about Harry Potter. Harry discovers on his 11th birthday that he is the son of two legendary wizards murdered by an evil magician named Voldemort. Harry has been living with his loathsome aunt and uncle (who make him sleep in a cupboard) and their mean son, Dudley. Apprised of his real identity, Harry eventually makes his way to Hogwarts, a boarding school for wizard children, and starts learning the family trade.

Kids of elementary-school age can't get enough of Harry Potter. The arrival of a new Potter title (so far there are three in the series) has caused frenzy at bookstores. When teachers read portions of the books aloud in class, the students clamor for more.

But some Christian parents are suspicious of works so full of sorcery and witchcraft. The *New York Times* reports that some evangelical ministers have begun to preach against Harry, and that the use of the books in schools has been challenged in eight states. Some parents argue that, given the books' embrace of magic, their use by schools amounts to an unconstitutional endorsement of religion.

Rowling is not the first fantasy writer to be attacked by conservative Christians. Even the explicitly Christian writer Madeleine L'Engle has taken heat for the "magic" elements in *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Such critics are right in thinking that fantasy writing is powerful and needs to be taken seriously. But we strongly doubt that it fosters an attachment to evil powers. Harry Potter's world, in any case, is a moral one: there are clear differences between good wizards and evil ones, and the virtues of courage and generosity are pitted against the vices of pride and spitefulness. Though Rowling's world lacks the theological weight of C. S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles* or the solemnity of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, it is a marvelous and witty invention.

Especially delightful is the way the world of the wizards and their apprentices exists alongside and penetrates the everyday world of "Muggles," or nonwizards. Muggles are largely blind to the magical signs about them. When they do perceive something out of the ordinary, they tend to regard it indignantly as so much nonsense.

It's difficult to know exactly the effect books have on us, but one of the salutary effects of fantasy writing is to remove us from the everyday world and prompt us to look at the ordinary in fresh ways. In a chapter in *Orthodoxy* called "The Ethics of Elfland," G. K. Chesterton claimed that his own journey to Christian faith began with his childhood absorption in fairy tales. From fairy tales he learned that the world is precious but puzzling, coherent but mysterious, full of unseen connections and decisive truths. The fantasy tales taught him that the world is "a wild and startling place, which might have been quite different, but which is quite delightful." In their own way, the Harry Potter books are teaching that lesson too.