

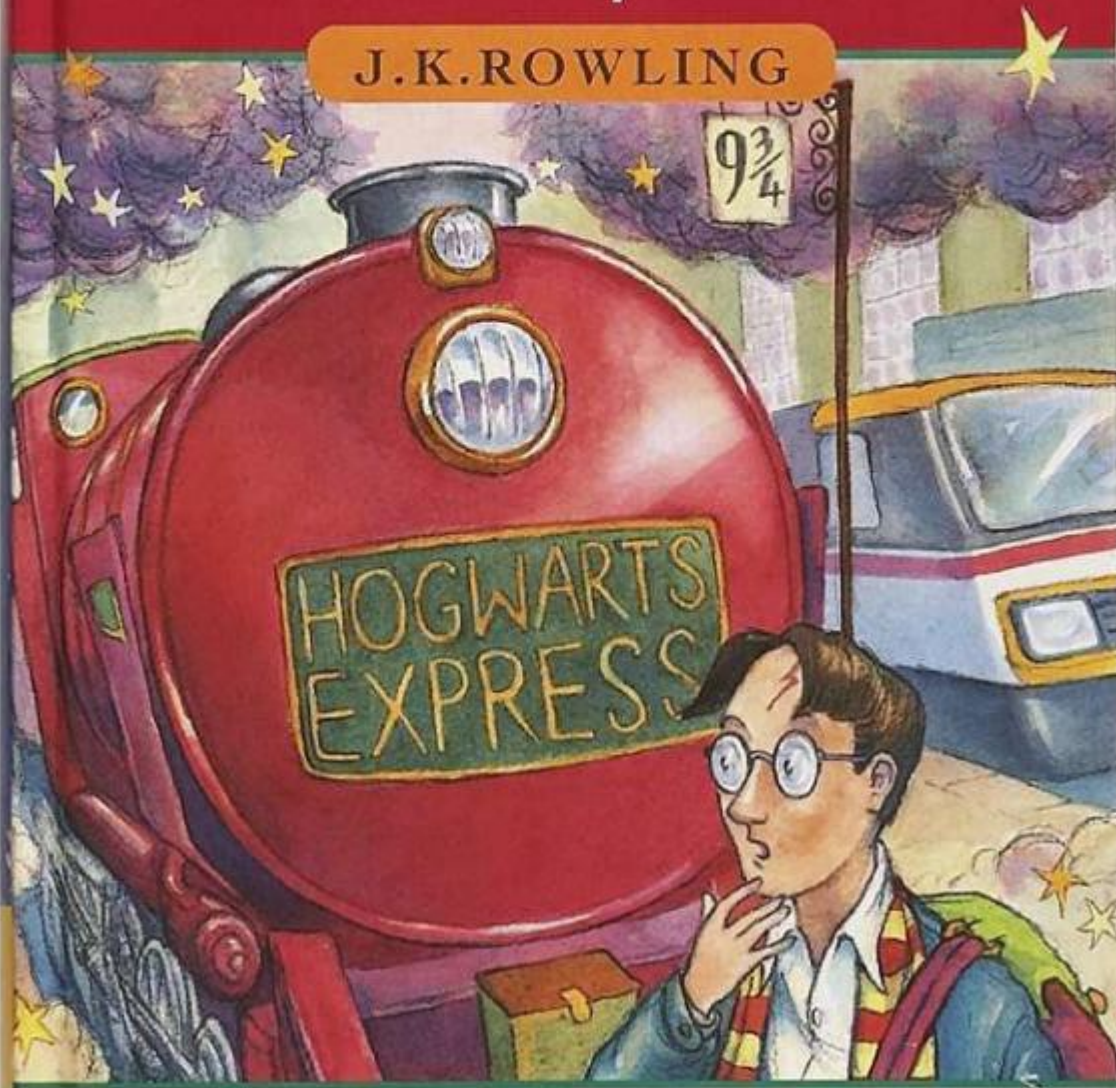
Taking the Measure of Harry Potter, Some Twenty Years On

His unoriginality, his popularity, and his Britishness

HARRY POTTER

and the Philosopher's Stone

J.K. ROWLING



"A terrific read and a stunning first novel" Wendy Cooling

The popularity of the Harry Potter books (and movies) are baffling to me. Here is one of the oldest stories in the world (some would say the oldest); and those familiar with variants of this tale would have to admit that others have told it better. Indeed,

maybe the series only seems fresh to those who are not widely read and don't recognize it as an avatar. In any event, J. K. Rowling is ultimately telling the story Joseph Campbell called the "Hero with a Thousand Faces." Harry Potter is No. 1001.

In the first book (originally titled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and published in the U.K. on June 30, 1997) we learn that Harry, true to form, was the offspring of distinguished parents--the notable wizards, Lily and James Potter. Not swaddled and laid in a **manger in Palestine** or even sent (like **Superman**) from Krypton to earth in a rocket ship, baby Harry is swaddled in blankets and arrives by aerial motorcycle at the doorstep of middle-class relatives living in contemporary England. Like the royal **Oedipus** who was raised by shepherds and had a distinguishing scar where his ankles were pierced and tied when he was abandoned, Harry has a conspicuous lightning-bolt-like scar on his forehead that marks his own separation from his late parents.

Harry is raised by his relatives, the Dursleys, who are "Muggles"--that is, ordinary people and the kind **Holden Caulfield** would call "phonies." Not the kindly type of guardians that **Superboy** finds in Mr. and Mrs. Kent when his own ark of bulrushes arrives in Smallville (U.S.A.), Mr. and Mrs. Dursley belong to the more familiar tribe of surrogate parents who mistreat their adopted child or step-child. So, akin to **Cinderella**, Harry is made to live in a cupboard under the stairs, wear hand-me-down clothes, and eat the crumbs that are left over.

Moreover, and again true to form, Rowling's hero has his dark twin and sibling rival, his greasy cousin Dudley who is a bully and makes life even more miserable for Harry. Throughout this time, Rowling writes, "Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away." Eventually, something like that happens and Harry is summoned to school at Hogwart's.

Then begins the second phase of the hero's life when he is acknowledged as special: strangers on the street doff their hats to Harry and ask to shake his hand, schoolmates and teachers recognize that he is the famous boy they have heard of, awe and respect follow in his wake since the pauper is actually a prince and the **bespectacled Clark Kent** is actually Superman.

If this was a dream, if the book itself was actually a patient's dream journal, a therapist would quickly recognize this as an example of what Freud called the Family Romance—a familiar fantasy that most children have had, a dreamy conviction that they were adopted and that the adults they live with are not their real parents, that their real parents are somehow more important and more attractive and will some day come to retrieve them. Along with the delusions of grandeur that accompany it, the Family Romance is a compensatory fantasy for the child who feels special but unrecognized.

Here, then, lies one explanation for the popularity of Rowling's story: it's appeal to every science nerd and bookish girl, to every kid who wears glasses, and (in fact) to Everychild since every child feels aggrieved and under-appreciated and special. Worldwide, "Cinderella" is the most popular fairy tale.

But if the Family Romance – a child born of distinguished parents languishes unrecognized in an adoptive family only to receive a summons which brings acknowledgment of their importance – is not regarded as a dream and compensatory fantasy but is written out as a fact, then what we get (as Otto Rank has observed) is the Myth of the Hero. Such is the case with Harry Potter. But such is also the case with **Moses, Oedipus, Cyrus, Tristan, Jesus, Cinderella, the Prince and the Pauper, Superman, and legions of others.**

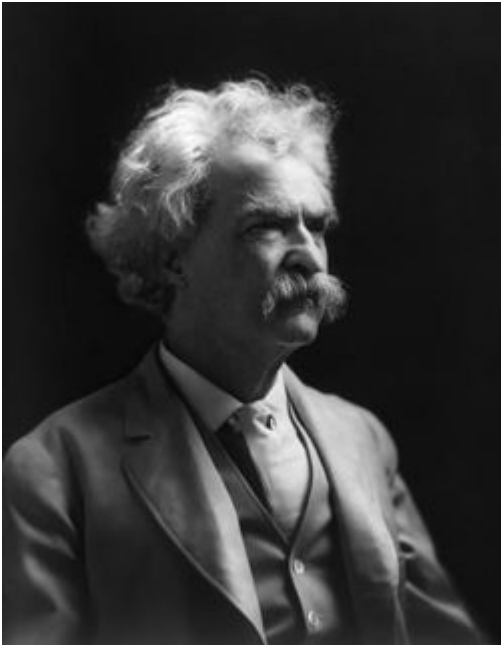
Where Rowling's variant differs, however, is in placing this

ur-story in a milieu of magic and wizards. Here is *Tom Brown's Schooldays* recast as a game of **Dungeons and Dragons**. Then there is also the influence of "**Star Wars**"; at one point, in the face of the Darth-Vader-like character Voldemort, Harry declares, "I'm never going over to the Dark Side."

And certainly another appeal of the Harry Potter books is that they are a series. Longinus said that the pleasure of literature lies in *exstasis*, its ability to "take us away" and--like books about the Hardy Boys or Sweet Valley High or Oz or the Lord of the Rings--a series book allows us to go away for a long time. One happy result, we're told, is that "children are excited about reading again." And who can find fault in that?

But my more cynical friends find in the Harry Potter "phenomenon" evidence of the machinations of marketing and believe that, every so often, a product is arbitrarily chosen and sent down the well traveled road of media publicity and product tie-ins. To them, Harry Potter is only the marketers' most recent darling. In response, I observe that the machinery can't work unless there is something there to work with. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. And there is plenty of worth in these books. Rowling is no slouch.

In truth, my own objection to the Harry Potter books is a niggling one, and that is that they are so British. When the first book was made available in the U.S., it suffered a title change and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* became *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. That translation was not enough. All the talk about school scarves and "winning points for your house" strikes me as foreign, as does the underlying and British preoccupation with class.




But more than that, Rowling's tone seems distant from our native tradition.

Mark Twain grew tired of reading stories where good boys are rewarded and bad boys receive their just desserts. So, he wrote a story about a Good Boy who helps an old lady across the street (against her wishes) and is soundly beaten by this senior citizen, and he wrote another about a Bad Boy who doesn't suffer for his crimes but gets elected to the state legislature. In

other words, compared to Twain's prankster Tom Sawyer, Rowling's Harry Potter (while not quite a prig) does seem a bit solemn and stiff in the British manner.

So, I await the inevitable American rejoinder, the parody that someone must even now be writing of the Harry Potter books. It might begin in a more typical American high school, with football games and dating, cars and music videos. And then, say, Bart Simpson travels as an exchange student to Hogwarts and there is hell to pay. I'd welcome a book like that: an American Harry Potter that was funny and subversive.

This essay was originally prepared for the Los Angeles Times Book Review in the Fall of 2001. Rowling's sequels and immense popularity, however, soon overtook my first impressions and the piece was never published.

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