

From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the aesthetic trouble with Harry Potter.

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The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 26, Number 1, January 2002

pp. 78-97

10.1353/uni.2002.0008

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Lion and the Unicorn 26.1 (2002) 78-97

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"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" (277). So explains Professor Trelawney in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the third book in the projected seven-part Harry Potter series. And readers and critics have certainly looked past the mundane: Harry Potter is, quite simply, a crosscultural phenomenon with critical kudos to boot. Janet Maslin, in a review for *The New York Times*, writes of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: "This time Ms. Rowling offers her clearest proof yet of what should have been wonderfully obvious: what makes the Potter books so popular is the radically simple fact that they're so good" (B1). *The New Yorker* is equally enthusiastic. In her review, Joan Acocella contends that "the great beauty of the Potter books is their wealth of imagination, their sheer shining fullness" (76). With the impending publication of book five in the series and now the release of *The Sorcerer's Stone* film, we can imagine that Harry Potter will remain in the forefront of popular cultural taste, defining the parameters for successful children's literature, particularly fantasy literature.¹ With continued projected sales, the Harry Potter books may in all likelihood sell more overall volumes than those touchstones of modern fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

But do the Harry Potter books "broaden" our minds and allow us to "see past the mundane"? Or are they simply mundane entertainment? Jack Zipes identifies the Harry Potter phenomenon as a complex cultural intersection of competing impulses: "Phenomena such as the Harry Potter books are driven by commodity consumption that at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste" (172). This taste, argues Zipes, is quite ironic, for the Harry Potter phenomenon is a return to the strictly conventional: "What appears as something phenomenal [End Page 78] turns or is turned into its opposite through a process of homogenization: the phenomenal thing or occurrence must become a conventional commodity that can be grasped or consumed to fit our cultural expectations" (174). Thus some questions: Is Harry Potter a phenomenon because it is great, or even good, literature? Or is it a phenomenon because it provides readers with simple escape, a conventional quick-read? Is this conventionality, then, merely mundane? Or does Harry Potter tap into the societal need for magic? Acocella contends that "part of the secret of Rowling's success is her utter traditionalism. The Potter story is a fairy tale, plus a bildungsroman, plus a murder mystery, plus a cosmic war of good and evil, and there's almost no classic in any of those genres that doesn't reverberate between the lines of Harry's saga" (74). But is this utter traditionalism merely, as Zipes posits, a homogenization of the fantasy tradition that Rowling has seemingly reinvigorated?

My trepidation over the Harry Potter series is founded on the disconnect between *what* the books attempt to say--those significant archetypal themes Acocella elucidates--and *how* Rowling says them, a disconnect between form and content. No matter how popular Harry Potter remains, I argue that on aesthetic grounds the series is fundamentally failed fantasy. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Barty Crouch reminds us that "we must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament" (277). But the tournament's rules have been violated, we find out; in fact, Mad-Eye Moody tells Harry that "cheating's a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been" (343). The rule-bending /breaking in the Triwizard Tournament is a metaphor for Rowling's basic violation of fantasy literature ground rules--she violates the integral rules of the fantasy game, never capturing the integrity of..



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