

FEATURE

Harry Potter series continues to captivate kids

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, by J.K. Rowling. Scholastic Press/Arthur A. Levine. 734 pp., \$25.95

Reviewed by Julianne Palma
Guest contributor

In the late 1960s, young adolescents fell in love with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. The next generation seemed to prefer C. S. Lewis. Now the rage is for J.K. Rowling, her initials not used to mimic her famous predecessors, but out of fear that boys wouldn't read such a book by a woman.

She needn't have worried.

Her four novels detailing the adventures of Harry Potter offer the same charms (no pun intended) and imagination as the two classic fantasy writers. The difference is that her works have been so immediately and astoundingly popular that *The New York Times* was forced to create a new Best Seller list specifically for children's books so that other books might again have a chance at the top three spots.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire continues the Rowling formula setting of a year in the life of Harry at Hogwarts School. In his fourth year of study, the 14-year-old faces issues that every young reader will recognize: the loyalty of friends, the lure of the forbidden, competitions that turn nasty, a first crush and mountains of schoolwork.

But because the author believes, as Rowling stated in a recent "60 Minutes" interview, that "Children are grossly underestimated," other themes in the novel include prejudice, slavery and the dysfunctional family. Dominating all, however, is the struggle between good and evil.

The main plot concerns the Tri-Wizards Tournaments at Hogwarts. This "friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry" is renewed after several centuries, pitting a champion from each school against the others in contests of skill, intelligence and courage.

The more significant struggle, however, occurs between Harry and his archenemy. The evil Lord Voldemort was responsible for the deaths of Harry's parents and was prevented from killing the infant Harry by some mysterious power, as yet unexplained. In this most recent adventure, Harry (and the reader) receives some oblique hints about the powers on which he can call in his ongoing battle.

In this slow uncovering of the truth about Harry's identity and abilities, the series is clearly the latest in the line of epic portrayals of the heroic journey. From Homer's



Photo illustration by Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

The fourth book in the Harry Potter series intrigues Courtney Badger, 10, and her brother Taylor, 4, of East Rochester.

Odyssey to Star Wars, our imaginations have been captured by the young and naive hero's search for his or her identity. The Harry Potter series began with the hero's sudden discovery of his wizarding skills, first kept hidden, then denigrated by his very unpleasant adoptive family.

His character demonstrates many of the traditional heroic qualities, especially in his refusal to misuse his abilities. (In Volume 2, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry

is reminded: "It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.") When invisible, Harry accidentally gains information that gives him an advantage over the competition, but his sense of fair play drives him to share the information with the others.

This device of overhearing is one of the plots' few weaknesses. Rowling makes convenient use of Harry's listening to others' talk at a number of crucial moments. Similarly, the lengthy revelation by the villain under the influence of Veritaserum is a rather clumsy denouement. The observant reader has deduced much of the information anyway.

The most serious error that Rowling perpetuates in this volume is the characterization of Harry's friend Hermione Granger. The depiction of this obsessive student is not likely to improve the self-image of young, smart female readers. A great deal of attention has been paid lately to the stigma borne by smart girls, and Hermione merely reinforces the stereotype. She's very smart and sometimes obnoxious. The problem is that she is judged to be obnoxious because she's so smart. She is also unattractive physically.

Although she admits that the novel is driven by its plot, Rowling achieves a good deal of fun through wordplay. Her evocative use of the sounds of our language gives the reader an immediate touchstone to the nature of many of her characters and locales.

Before even meeting them on paper, one knows that Draco Malfoy can't be trusted and that Neville Longbottom can. Lord Voldemort is obviously a bad guy, and Albus Dumbledore is clearly good. In competitions, the team from Slytherin will certainly cheat, but the Hufflepuffs will play fairly (if somewhat ineptly).

Those readers familiar with Latin will be delighted by little gems such as the motto of the school, which translates: Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon. Observant readers will already have noted the reference above to Veritaserum.

The delightfully wacky world created by J.K. Rowling is as full of linguistic jokes as it is of fantastic creatures. But it is a world peopled by characters of nobility and courage who long to be accepted and admired by peers and by adults. It is a literary creation of rare imagination, which has reminded children that there is an engrossing alternative to TV and computers.

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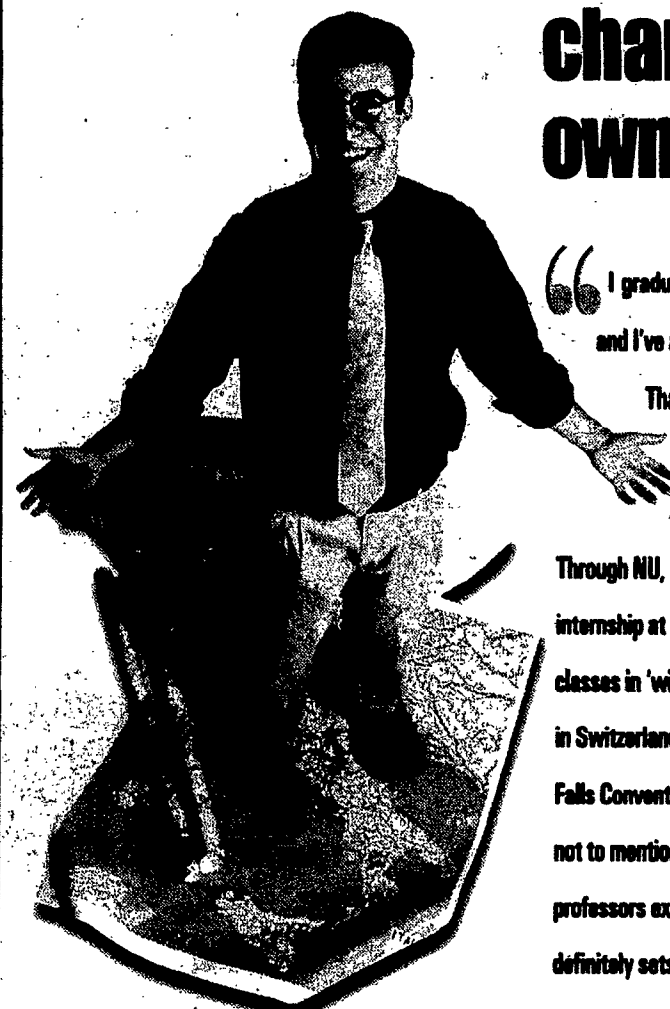
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