harry potter and the question of merit

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Many qualities combine to make the Harry Potter books so popular. Rowling's writing is excellent; the fictional landscape and its population extraordinary; the stories enthralling; the action engrossing; the interdependent storylines captivating; and the characters compelling. None of this, however, can explain the intensity of the public response. Other great writers have shown these qualities without the overwhelming sales, the level of "pre-sold" copies prior to distribution for each novel, and the celebratory "event" atmosphere at each novel's publication, not to mention the movie and merchandising.

What sets Harry Potter apart? In my opinion, it is the nature of the protagonist and the "just world" philosophy the books espouse.

Rowling has created a rich and complex dual world in which the "muggles" (non-magical folks) and the magical folks exist together without the muggles' knowledge. The magical world is depicted in great detail with elaborate social and political institutions, political conflicts, and multiple races of magical folks embedded in a semi-caste system administered by witches and wizards, the elite. At least one race of magical folk are born into a closed system with no option for other roles (house elves who serve the wizards), whereas the wizards and witches inhabit a variety of jobs and economic classes in a relatively open system and run the government in the magical world. The characters are interesting, complex, and evolve as the characters age. The "fools" or "bad guys" are two-dimensional in the early books but are given a great deal more depth in the later books.

In an informal survey of Los Angeles high school and middle school students, the top reasons for enjoying the Harry Potter books were: "the characters are really good" and "great action scenes." Action scenes primarily appear in the latter portions of quite long books; the primacy of the characters seems evident. Readers relive pre-teen and adolescent sensibilities as they "grow" and identify with the different age-graded perceptions of the characters. As the series unfolds, this binds the reader to the characters with a sense of sharing in the character's history.

The primary characters Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter organize the perceptions of the reader and experience the main events. Harry's primacy is established early, as his is the only "back-story" initially provided to the reader. Ron and Hermione are introduced on their first journey to attend Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, where students remain in residence throughout the academic year. As readers approach the magical world, they are socialized along with the newcomers. Each book depicts one year in the life of this triad, with Harry as focal point (he is the one the reader spends the summer break with). This strengthens the bond between reader and character. Identification with the characters is further enhanced by the fact that the three are all, in some way, marginalized. This enables readers to enter their magical world, learning as they do, and yet identifying with their somewhat "outsider status" because the readers, as muggles, are outsiders as well.

Ron is marginalized because his family, although wizards and witches, is in the lower economic strata of the magic world. Hermione is marginal because of her non-magical parentage as well as her academic excellence (which, as she bemoans in the first book, is not the earmark of a great wizard or, one assumes, witch). Harry is marginalized by having been raised in a muggle family that kept the truth of his history a secret and by the fact that he begins both Hogwarts and his awareness of the magical world with an established reputation as "other." This reputation is based on a fame he was unaware of having.

Despite the triad's friendship and shared adventures, Harry's sensibilities, perceptions, and character carry the primary voice in the social narrative constructed through the series. It is Harry who enters the world with an established reputation and celebrity, credited, as an infant, with doing what no adult could do—defeating the most powerful of the dark wizards, Voldemort. In a later book, the reader learns (but the magical world does not) that the Dark Lord's temporary disappearance resulted not from any innate talent or special quality of Harry's, but from the power of the love emanating from the self-sacrifice of his parents who died to protect him. Yet, his celebrity and reputation, and the scar he carries from the infamous encounter, lend him a credibility that readers, particularly older ones, might not otherwise credit to an eleven year old.

By contrast, Ron is unremarkable except as a model of loyalty and friendship. He is otherwise dismissed as a leading voice soon after he is introduced. He is shown disrespect on the first day due to his class status, and although this is a means of showing the unpleasant character of Draco Malfoy and his clique, it is part of what keeps Ron marginalized. Ron has substandard robes, wand, and messenger animal, and his grades, accomplishments, and athletic ability are unremarkable.

Hermione is the intellect, the voice of reason, who applies
her appearance (the film version makes her attractive but diminishes her role). Hermione is initially presented as bossy, priggish, and overly prepared for school. After she tries to teach Ron to pronounce a spell properly, he snidely tells Harry: “It’s no wonder no one can stand her.” Later they become friends, but this attitude shadows her status. Hermione’s tertiary status is underscored in the movies, particularly in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. In the book, each member of this triad is of critical importance in breaking through the series of protections to reach the sorcerer’s stone, yet in the movie Hermione’s role is significantly downplayed and her task involving the use of logic is omitted. Even in the book, after first saving both boys’ lives from a magical plant and, moments later, succeeding in solving the intellectual clue required to achieve their goal, Hermione dismisses her own talents as only books and cleverness.

Even the flaws that give depth and fullness to the characters are treated differently. Hermione’s faults put her at risk of being ostracized, and Ron’s make him a “sidekick.” Harry’s flaws, even those that put others at risk, are instead presented with sympathy. His rashness is presented as the consequence of passion, loyalty, and bravery. His friends are loyal. Harry remains central to the narrative.

Harry’s popularity also rests on the fact that he is, primarily, an ordinary person. He is an uninspired student with an anti-intellectual streak who looks for “shortcuts” and under-
against Mrs. Weasleys wishes, Harry invests a significant amount of money to help wizard-school dropouts George and Fred Weasley establish their magical novelties business (they have proven themselves very talented in this regard). Their successful business grudgingly wins over their parents. The message is that those with resources needn’t be generous with friends or reciprocate for the material comfort provided by those who have less; the distribution of wealth need not be addressed as an issue, and capitalist investment supports a meritocracy.

The characters’ conflicting values show a complex picture of the social institutions and systems of the magical world—both through readers’ shared “socialization” with the characters, and through Harry’s voice that ultimately provides the “correct” viewpoint. The house elves are a case in point. House elves have a caste-like status, are wholly owned by wizard families, and may even be bequeathed as property. They can be set free by a wizard but are unable to choose to leave even the most abusive wizard. One elf, Dobby, is liberated when Harry tricks the owner (Lucius Malfoy) into freeing him. Harry is motivated partly by an urge to spite the Malfoys, and partly by the impulse to protect Dobby from the dangerous reprisal he faces for warning Harry of Malfoy’s ill intent. Interestingly, Harry never sees this as an issue of class, status, or power, but as a unique event. The only other freed house elf is Winky, set free by her master and yet filled with despair and shame at the loss of her house-elf identity. Harry and Ron roll their eyes at Hermione’s attempt to begin a grassroots social movement to free the elves. This stance is underscored by the literary device of providing a name for her organization that reflects a judgment about her social voice, SPEW (“Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare”). The house elves themselves show no interest in SPEW and actively avoid being “set free” by Hermione. Thus, the author both raises and resolves the problematic issue of social inequality and the status of the house elves with a type of “just world” approach in which Harry represents a comforting view—the elves know their place and support the status quo. This vision, which justifies a world of entrenched inequality, seems one possible reason for the popularity of these books.

Perhaps one of Rowling’s greatest magical feats in Harry Potter is the sight of hand that allows her to build a convincing and enchanting world in which the opposed concepts of meritocracy and unearned celebrity co-exist and work together to provide a comforting fantasy in which the ordinary person is elevated without having to “share the wealth” or work for civic improvement.

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