

Harry Potter and the Unwritten Epic of Tomorrow

Act I: Obvious-in-hindsight foreshadowing that we somehow never notice

Okay, this post does some significant wandering around in the Forest of Dean before it circles back to Hogwarts. I absolutely promise there's a thesis here, but before we get to it, we've got to get past the premise it follows from, and that premise is one that *might* require you to have your torches and pitchforks close at hand.

... ready?

Newer books tend to be better than older ones.

WAIT, WAIT! LET ME EQUIVOC—I MEAN, EXPLAIN!

First of all, “tend to” means just that—they *tend* to. I’m not by any means dissing any of the classics, nor do I think that every modern book is worth reading. It’s just that—well, there are more people writing than ever before, and at the same time our filters are getting finer and more efficient (thanks, internet), so what floats to the level of general cultural attention has the benefit of being a higher percentile in a larger pool. Add in the fact that modern writers get to learn from (read: stand on the shoulders of) past giants, and the not-insignificant factors of relevance, accessibility, and the rolling zeitgeist, and it’s no surprise that I think I can get away with saying something like “Harry Potter is a quantitatively better series than the Chronicles of Narnia.”

(Ow! Okay, whose tomato was that?)

It’s the nature of iteration, the evolution of memes. Where our parents had Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, we’ve got Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw. Two epic anthologies filling the same niche for different generations, just as tales of Arthur and Merlin filled it before them. (I’m showing my youthful ignorance by implying that no children’s fantasy of note was written between Tennyson and Lewis, but you’re probably better at Googling than I am, so this exercise left up to the reader).

The interesting question is, what'll fill that niche for our children and grandchildren? Because if Narnia is any kind of model, Harry Potter will still be widely read 50 years from now, but it won't be *defining* anything anymore.



"Is this a 90's book?"

Act II: Boy, this spell sure would've come in handy last year, huh?

There's a thing that kittens do when they dream (actually, I think it's true of most mammals, but this is the internet, so ... kittens). Scientists in the late 50's showed that a certain kind of brain damage would turn off the safety-valve paralysis of normal sleep, and hey, presto—sleeping kittens would sniff, stalk, pounce, and play, all with eyes closed.

This type of dreaming gradually tapered off as the cats grew older. The presumed reason? Dreaming was *practice*, and adult cats don't need as much of it. Those kittens were learning in their sleep, building up valuable experience in the consequence-free realm of imagination. They were *rehearsing*.

Humans do this, too, of course, but we have the peculiar superpower of doing it *all the time* (if you've got a minute, read up on the French phrase *l'esprit de l'escalier*). In a very real sense, this is what fiction *is*—a way for us to play out various scenarios, to impose narratives on the random and the inscrutable, to learn valuable life lessons without having to take commensurate risks. And in the increasingly bland-and-safe bubble of

first world suburbia, it's an important source of perspective and a way to broaden horizons.

But there's a very particular function that fantasy performs that most other fiction does not. At its best, fantasy—particularly *children's* fantasy—is all about teaching us what it is to be human. Not what it is to be *a* human, dealing with all the quirks and foibles of our fellow folk, but what it means to be Human with a capital H—about how we fit into a world that is marvelous and frightening and baffling in turn, a world in which we are not necessarily the biggest fish nor always on the right side of history. It's in children's fantasy that we see the human at its most archetypal—it's no accident that the lines between Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw are so starkly and inevitably drawn.

And *this* is why Harry Potter has meant so much to so many of us—because the human beings that it taught us to be are something to be proud of, something worth *truly* aspiring to. (I know I'm picking on Narnia a bit here—I swear, I love the Narnia books to death—but there's not much growth to be had in “Aslan raises your army for you and kills the witch himself, and everybody's just been waiting for you to show up and rule them, so ... hooray I guess.”)



Art by Perseus McBrennan

To be clear, I'm *not* talking about those particular teachable moments for which the Harry Potter series receives (much deserved) praise. Neville Longbottom getting points for standing up to his friends at the end of book one is a scene that brings tears to my eyes every time I read it, but it's not the sort of thing that could *only* happen in a fantasy world. That's more of a humans-bumping-into-other-humans thing.

No, what I'm talking about is *magic*. A sense of meaning and mystery, an unshakeable belief in the power of determination, a recognition of the pivotal importance of very small actions, an awareness of the vastness of time and space, a respect for the dignity inherent in all manner of creatures and objects and traditions. Harry Potter and its universe holds an allure very much like that of religion, only without all the baggage of institutionalized faith—since we know it isn't real, we're free to absorb the lessons on a spiritual level and avoid the need for doublethink and elitism and peculiar party lines.

This is what Harry Potter did for me and my generation, better than any set of tales written before it. The difference between a kid who grew up on a diet of Harry Potter (or similar) and a kid who grew up without is like the difference between color film and black-and-white:

Year One: Harry Potter and *there is so much more to this world than I ever suspected, and I have the potential to learn great power and fulfill a meaningful destiny.*

Year Two: Harry Potter and *sometimes you need talent AND research AND bravery AND luck and you really can't fake it forever, Professor Lockhart.*

Year Three: Harry Potter and *once in a while, once in a very great while, the stars align and the impossible becomes possible and you really truly can save everybody. Oh, and it's better to be merciful and to believe in second chances than to be cold and cruel, even if that belief sometimes comes at great personal cost.*

Year Four: Harry Potter and *the choice between what is right and what is easy, and you-didn't-really-think-evil-was-a-thing-of-the-past, did you?*

Year Five: Harry Potter and *no matter how dark and confusing and difficult life gets, there really are answers out there. There's always an explanation, a way to make sense out of the madness, if you can just track it down, and having that knowledge is FAR better than acting in ignorance.*

Year Six: Harry Potter and *the chain of causality, stretching back and back and back, such that no one decision is responsible for anything, but rather a long pattern of making the same kinds of choices over and over again until you discover you're someplace you never would have predicted when you were ten.*

Year Seven: Harry Potter and *in the end, the struggle between good and evil is often decided by which side has more people who simply refuse to give up, ever.*

... it's not much of a stretch, I think, to say that kids who take Harry Potter into their hearts have a harder-than-average time growing up to be nihilists, or terrorists, or workaday drones. There's just something about Harry's story (and Hermione's, and Neville's, and Narcissa friggin' Malfoy's) that makes you *really, really want* to be the kind of person Dumbledore would be proud of, and honestly, it doesn't seem to matter much that Dumbledore doesn't exist, because he *should*.

Act III: We should probably fire the Defense professor on general principle. I'm tangentially associated with a community of rationalists out here in the Bay Area, by which I mean a group of people who are actively interested in applied psychology and game theory and heuristics-and-biases research and, generally speaking, figuring out ways to be [less wrong](#). There are a lot of debates that take place in such a community, and one that caught my eye last year centered around whether or not well-meaning and rationally-minded atheist parents ought to raise their children with a belief in Santa Claus.

The arguments were pretty straightforward, boiling down to something like this:

- No, because lies are bad
- Yes, because instilling a sense-of-wonder is good
- No, because we can instill that sense-of-wonder in other ways, *without lies*
- Yes, because there's a valuable meta-lesson in *uncovering the lie*

It was a strangely compelling glimpse into the souls of the debaters—you could tell that these were people who had *real opinions* on how their own experience with Santa Claus had resonated meaningfully throughout the rest of their lives. And it got me thinking about children, and fantasy, and the future, and where we as a society and as a species can go from here. Because for all that Harry Potter is a keystone of my childhood, I fully expect it to be dethroned one day, and as it turns out, I have a very

particular set of requirements for considering that dethroning to be an actual improvement.

One of the members of that rationalist community has written a ~700,000 word Harry Potter fanfiction. It's called [Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality](#), and it takes place in an alternate universe in which Petunia extorts a beauty potion from her sister Lily, dodges the bullet that is Vernon Dursley, and ends up happily married to an Oxford professor, such that Harry (now abominably Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres) is raised in a loving adoptive home with lots and lots of science books.

It so happens that if you turn Harry into a significantly more skeptical and deliberate character and follow that change to its logical conclusion, the events of the story veer pretty sharply on Day 1, and never really come back. (*"So, [Professor Snape], how exactly does one go about filing a formal complaint against an abusive professor? Does one talk to the Deputy Headmistress, write a letter to the Board of Governors ... would you care to explain how it works?"*) It's not without its flaws, to be sure—the alternate Harry can be a bit of a hard-to-swallow pill, there are jarring lectures that break flow and can ring condescending, and there are times when I prefer the veil on my epistemic propaganda to be slightly less thin—but overall, it's a noble and monumental work, with a genuinely important message that few other stories are trying to impart. Because, you see, there is one thing that Harry Potter (the original) did not do, which HJPEV (the rationalist update) does, and that is *put his sense-of-wonder to good use in a way that someone without a wand could imitate*.

The new Harry is every bit as flabbergasted and amazed to discover a whole wide world of unimagined potential, but he *doesn't stop there*. Instead, he immediately launches into a series of investigations into what sorts of rules this magic stuff might have (...*because, come on, 'Wingardium Leviosa'? The universe was going to check that you said 'Wingardium Leviosa' in exactly the right way and otherwise it wouldn't make the quill float?*), and once he starts getting a handle on them, he starts using that knowledge practically, looking for better ways to achieve wealth and happiness and longevity and all of the Generally Good Things that have descended from the Enlightenment.

I'll admit—even as I write that, it's hard to suppress the urge to cringe and flinch. It's like I'm taking that sense-of-wonder and kicking it in its private parts, and I can feel myself wanting to hold up my hands and say, "No, really, it's not as terrible as it

sounds!" Can you even *sustain* an appreciation for the mystical and magical, if you're simultaneously taking it apart to see how it works?

But on reflection, the answer is, obviously, yes. The knee-jerk discomfort comes from the fact that we simply don't have a *pattern* for that kind of behavior—it's not a story we've *rehearsed*.

There's a line in the Prisoner of Azkaban that always rubbed me the wrong way—it comes in the aftermath of the disastrous final act, when Dumbledore is explaining the magical bond that Harry's clemency forged between him and Peter Pettigrew. "This is magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable, Harry," Dumbledore says, and I always wanted to shout *why?* Why can't this mystery be penetrated? If there's a magical principle here, wouldn't it be good for Harry to *understand* it? Indeed, by the time Ron hauls him out of the pool in the Forest of Dean, it seems that Harry's developed an *intuitive* understanding:

When Ron offered the sword, however, Harry shook his head.

"No, you should do it."

"Me?" said Ron, looking shocked. "Why?"

"Because you got the sword out of the pool. I think it's supposed to be you."

He was not being kind or generous. As certainly as he had known that the doe was benign, he knew that Ron had to be the one to wield the sword. Dumbledore had at least taught Harry something about certain kinds of magic, of the incalculable power of certain acts.

We're all familiar with the joy of stumbling upon a mystery, the thrill of learning that our picture of the world was incomplete, and the majesty of seeing something truly *new* for the first time. It's the reason we were so excited, in the Goblet of Fire, to see all of the powerful spells that Fleur and Cedric and Viktor Krum are capable of casting—even after three books, there were still aspects to Rowling's magic that we hadn't anticipated and were dazzled to behold.

But what a disappointment, in the Half-Blood Prince, to see how little progress Harry and Ron and Hermione had made toward being able to cast those same spells themselves (remember in Chamber of Secrets, when Hermione declared that they would start practicing human transfiguration in their fourth year?). How tragic to see

that, far from actually *learning* the underlying principles behind the workings of potions, the best Harry could do was faithfully copy instructions from an alternate source—to cheat, in Hermione's justified view. The trio never failed me harder than when, upon looking up the recipe for Felix Felicis, they saw that it would take three months and *didn't* say, “Well, we'd better start right away!”

This link between wonder and incuriosity—this unconscious assertion that to understand or engineer is to fail to appreciate—is, in my mind, the largest remaining flaw in the genre of children's fantasy. It's something that's subconsciously ingrained in us from our very first fables—*there are questions you do not ask, child*. And this, in my mind, is exactly the opposite of the lesson we should be learning from our consequence-free how-to-be-human rehearsals in the realm of unfettered imagination. Knowing that the Grand Canyon was produced by erosion does not in any way reduce the awe that you feel when you stand upon its edge. Harry Potter filled me to the *brim* with epic sensibility, with appreciation for the romantic and the dramatic. But that's only half of the distance a childhood-defining story *ought* to cover. People who love Harry Potter (and similar stuff) seem, to me, awake and alive in a way that people who don't will never achieve—but we can go still further! We can turn that awake-aliveness into *drive*, convert the willingness-to-be-amazed into an eagerness-to-achieve. The proponents of the no-Santa-Claus platform argued that you can get a lot more mileage out of the awesome spectacle of a space shuttle launch (R.I.P.) than out of an impossibly mythical figure who will turn out to have never been real in the first place, and it's hard to disagree, because once the illusion is shattered, what's left to support your belief in magic? Take a look at [this little girl](#), who's got a Christmas-miracle look on her face if ever there was one—but what she's seeing is a *train*, the kind of magic she could one day fully comprehend, and whose design she might personally revolutionize.



I can't help but think that this is the sort of expression Hermione Granger might have had at age three.

Act IV: You're seriously sending me back to the Dursleys?

If I had to limit myself to a single sentence, I'd sum up the value of Harry Potter by saying that it taught an entire generation to *believe in heroes*. It certainly wasn't the first series to do this, and it won't be the last; if it had never been written, most of us would've found adequate inspiration in movies, video games, and other (lesser) books. But as things stand right now, it's the unrivaled champion—no other children's epic is so magnificently thorough in painting the picture of human vice and virtue. I cannot help but compare the people I meet to Hermione and Neville, to Dumbledore and McGonagall and Lupin, to the madcap Weasley twins and the tragic Creevey brothers, and because I have these categories primed and ready in my head, I am aware of a nobility of spirit that might otherwise fail to reach the level of conscious attention.

As a human being, though (and hopefully someday a father), I want more. Because as often as I see those virtues reflected in the people around me, I don't see them often enough. The density of valor at Hogwarts is far, far higher than the density in the world around me, and so too is the frequency of actions of true weight and consequence. Many of us are lucky enough to live in the warmth and comfort of first world suburbia, and so we find it easy to forget about war and poverty, to ignore the fact that we really ought to have a colony on the Moon by now, to shrug at the idea of

cryonics or longevity research and to feel slightly defensive when it's implied that we might try doing something a little less trivial with our afternoons and weekends.

But honestly, there are still plenty of battles left to fight. And as strong as my generation is, I'd like to see the next one be stronger. Part of the path that gets us there is a new kind of story, one which teaches us not only to *believe* in heroes, but to try to *be* them—and not in an impossible-to-attain kind of way which lets us off the hook when the letter from Hogwarts never arrives. We have access to more power than any human beings who have ever lived—the term “first world problems” ought to refer to those problems that are so complex and ambitious that only the first world has the resources to tackle them. Compared to our kinfolk from a hundred years ago, we *are* wizards. But as a culture, as a species, we have yet to fulfill the potential of even our current power, let alone the power we might unlock over the next hundred years. The story that knocks Harry Potter off its throne will be the one that teaches *that* lesson to our kids, and as much as I've enjoyed living in the time of a giant, I can't wait to see how high we'll reach once somebody comes along and climbs up onto its shoulders.

