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The Harry Hype

Children should be brought up in such a way that they will fall in love with virtue and hate vice.

Plato

In 1997 J. K. Rowling introduced us to Harry Potter with her brainstorm *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (called *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in the United Kingdom). Since then, educators and parents alike have struggled with what to do with Harry Potter. Does he have a place in your home? in your classroom? How about the Christian classroom? Get to know Harry, and you will find the answer is yes!

Children love Harry because he conquers struggles they face daily, and he does so in a world of fantasy that appeals to their already active imagination. Harry is picked on by bullies, is treated unfairly at home, struggles with homework, forms friendships, makes mistakes and chooses between right and wrong. But more important, he shows how a weak child becomes strong and respected. His is the classic tale of how the weak become strong.

Harry enters a magical school where he gains fame, becomes the team hero in Quidditch matches, and wins battles with a troll, Pro-

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fessor Quirrell and Lord Voldemort. Children can't get enough. We are suddenly facing the problem of getting children's noses out of books rather than into them. "Since the Potter novels have been on the market, paperback sales of children's books increased by 24 percent totaling $660 million, and hardcover sales expanded by 11 percent totaling $1.6 billion. Books whose sales have significantly increased include C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* series and Lloyd Alexander's 'The Black Cauldron Series.'"[1] Harry has convinced children to read. So why isn't he being showered with praise and awards?

Harry's creator, Rowling, *is* winning wide acclaim for Harry Potter. In fact, she has obtained a long list of awards since Harry was introduced in 1997: British Book Awards Children's Book of the Year, the Smarties Prize, *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 1998, *School Library Journal* Best Book of 1998 and the Parenting Book of the Year Award that same year. Also, the Harry Potter books were the first children's books to claim spots on the *New York Times* bestseller lists since E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* in the 1950s. And the books remained on the bestseller lists longer than many adult novels—creating another controversy.[2]

Worried About Harry

Despite these impressive achievements, some adults are concerned that the Harry Potter books will have negative effects on our children. The worst-case scenario in circulation is that the Harry Potter series is a ploy of Satan to destroy our children. Proponents of this theory are appalled by the use of witchcraft to fight evil in the books. "The Truth About Harry Potter" on Freedomvillageusa.com states:

> Harry is a bonafide wizard and is being taught divination (crystal ball, and tealeaf reading) and other occult practices. He is

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> the hero and uses his powers of darkness to fight a greater power in the dark world (the evil Lord Voldemort) who murdered his mother (a witch) and his father (a wizard). This is saying that it's OK to use evil to fight evil if your intent is for self-gain. That is a cardinal doctrine of Satanism and will lead you to believe that you can control the use of evil.[3]

Some proponents of this position even believe the Harry Potter series is a recruitment tool for Wicca, witchcraft and the occult. They believe parents' and teachers' acceptance of these books leads children to believe that the occult and witchcraft are acceptable, legitimate arenas. Some anti-Harry folks say that the lightning bolt on Harry's forehead is a satanic symbol.

Proponents of these views feel so strongly that they have pushed to ban Harry Potter from school classrooms and libraries. The American Library Association has recorded another first for Harry Potter: there were more demands for these books' removal from classrooms, school libraries and reading lists than any other book in 1999. They cite a total of thirteen states challenging the Harry Potter books.[4] This has necessitated careful reviews of the First Amendment. In Wichita Falls, Texas, a federal judge ruled against a local law allowing controversial books to be pulled from library shelves. The law was found to be unconstitutional, as it violated the First Amendment.[5]

What to Do with Harry

So what do we do about Harry? He has captured children's hearts, and the First Amendment protects him. He is here to stay. Yes, as some of the opponents have pointed out, there are areas of concern in the books—in particular Rowling's use of witchcraft and violence. But banning the books will only push children to read them in pri-

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vate without us, and the taboo areas will become the most attractive features of the books.

The best solution is to continue to be good educators and parents. We need to read the books with children—savor the stories, help them sort out the fantasy and reality, and discuss the serious issues that are presented.

When enjoyed in the classroom and at home, as well as used to discuss moral issues in the real world, the Harry Potter books can become powerful resources for training our children in critical thinking. They provide opportunities for parents and educators to take up real-life issues with children: child abuse, lying, friendship, dealing with bullies, death, and good and evil, to name a few. Reading not only becomes fun, but it connects children with adults and helps form powerful and meaningful relationships. Children and adults can use the Harry Potter books as springboards for discussion that allows them to understand each other and bond.

Nationally known storyteller, lecturer, author and language arts consultant Carol Hurst reinforces this point. Hurst explains that to fully acquire literacy, children need to engage in a dialogue with adults when they read. She says, "Books can no longer be taken in isolation. Bridges can and should be made by books. At first those bridges must be built by adults, but increasingly such bridges come from the children."[6]

Making Connections

Harry Potter provides an excellent opportunity to build those bridges. But don't forget, these books should first and foremost be enjoyed. Rowling draws us into the classic battle of good versus evil in an imaginative and fun fantasy world. We make friends with Harry, Hermione and Ron. We take potions class from Snape and sneak

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through the woods to visit Hagrid in his Hut. We are tempted to join forces with Voldemort to gain fame and glory. With Harry, we choose good over evil and win!

All of these exciting adventures provide fertile ground for moral discussion. The theme of the Harry Potter books helps us to connect with C. S. Lewis's classic *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* which Rowling has noted was one of her favorite childhood stories.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, four children—Peter, Susan, Lucy and Edmund—enter the magical land of Narnia, where numerous battles and adventures lead the children to a deeper understanding of themselves and the moral world. We especially see this through the character of Edmund, who betrays his siblings out of greed and a desire for power but later repents and fights beside them to destroy the White Witch. But the real Christian allegory occurs with Aslan the Lion. He is killed by the evil White Witch yet rises from death and thus becomes a Christ figure in the story.

Aslan parallels Christ, who was crucified and then resurrected to conquer death. After Aslan's resurrection, he explains to Susan and Lucy that

> though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read that when a willing victim who committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.[7]

We find a similar Christian parallel in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Though Harry's parents were killed in their battle with Lord Voldemort, Harry was saved by the love of his parents, particu-

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larly of his mother. This reminds us of Christ's loving sacrifice: he died on the cross so that humanity might live. In a heart-to-heart conversation with Harry, Professor Dumbledore explains:

> Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good.[8]

The fantasy world of magic has been used for many years to teach children about the nature of good and evil. Other well-known stories such as *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle and the Star Wars films by George Lucas also use fantasy to present themes of good versus evil. There are differences, of course, in the characters and settings. In *A Wrinkle in Time,* children travel through time and space to battle the Black Thing. In Star *Wars* Luke Skywalker and Obi Wan Kenobi use the force to battle Darth Vader.

Our imaginative minds are attracted to moral issues when they are given shape in a world of fantasy and magic. Creative authors take advantage of this and lure our minds into mystical realms of good and evil. Returning to reality, the reader is better equipped to recognize themes of good and evil in the real world.

Talking about these books in various settings allows us to make our jump back to reality with others. We share the fun of the story with others; we also clarify our thoughts and internalize the story's lessons. Just as Harry relies on Dumbledore at the end of each adven-

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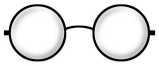
ture to make sense of what has transpired, we can rely on each other to make sense of the stories and talk about the lessons we learned. As parents and educators, we often need to be Dumbledore for children. And as Harry teaches Dumbledore at times, children will also teach us.



QUESTIONS TO BRIDGE THE GAP

- **What do you like best about Hogwarts? What do you like least? Why?**
- **Why do you think Dudley and Malfoy are so mean? How do you deal with people who act like Malfoy and Dudley?**

Fantasy creators like Lucas, Lewis and Rowling get children excited about reading. We need to channel that excitement with discussions that bring us together and help us unravel what is really going on in Narnia, at Hogwarts and in the universe. Most important, we need to return to reality and apply the lessons of Hogwarts and Narnia to the real world. These are fictional places with fictional characters, but the issues they address are real. We need to bridge the gap. And as we do so, we have the chance to find our own imagination.

Spiritual Connections

Finding our imagination helps us grow spiritually. Many biblical teachings involve the battle of good versus evil. And some of them require us to stretch beyond what can be verified and proved with facts and evidence.

Children readily cross the boundaries of the ordinary in their thinking. Their attraction to the extraordinary helps them quickly bypass what can sometimes be an obstacle to faith for adults. Children move beyond the how and allow themselves to become enthralled and excited by the story.

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We can catch their energy and help them to decipher the morals and lessons presented in the Bible. For example, in the Genesis account of creation, Adam and Eve battle Satan in the form of a snake while they live a garden life that involves no pain, no toil and no clothes. Satan is evil, and God is good. Adam and Eve lost the battle because they didn't obey God. They were overcome by greed and lust for power. They wanted to be more powerful than God.

Most children love this story. They rarely question how Satan can become a snake or doubt that a place such as the Garden of Eden existed. They dream of such a place. They believe God's Word and extract God's lessons with our help.

These lessons, often echoed in fantasy stories, are easy for many children to connect and relate to. The battle of good and evil is everywhere; it is part of life. Every new tale gives us a chance to take children back to the Bible, where it all began and is true.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,* Voldemort takes the shape of a snake, and Harry must do battle with him. Harry is tempted with power by Voldemort, as Eve was tempted by Satan. If Harry gives Voldemort the stone, Voldemort promises to share his power and eternal life with him. But unlike Adam and Eve, Harry doesn't yield to the temptation. Harry fights the snake and wins. Of course, Harry must battle Voldemort many more times. New struggles and temptations continue to arise for Harry, just as they do for us.

Relating our spiritual battles to Harry Potter empowers our children. As Jesus overcame Satan's temptations, we can say no to temptation. Children *can* overcome evil. Children *can* defeat Satan.