THE ALAN REVIEW

Critically Thinking about Harry Potter: A Framework for Discussing Controversial Works in the English Classroom

Joanne M. Marshall

Harry Potter as Test Case

Since J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series was first published in 1997, parents, teachers, and readers of all ages have been fans of the boy wizard, enthusiastically standing in bookstore lines at midnight to purchase the next installment, or flocking to the movies, or rushing to buy the DVD. Previously reluctant readers, including young adult readers (MacRae), are suddenly enthralled with a book, and the adults who care for those readers are equally enthralled with its results. Magic, indeed.

However, not everyone has been under Harry's spell. The American Library Association reported in January that the Harry Potter books are the most-challenged books for the third year in a row, and there have even been reports of its public burning (Goldberg, "Harry") and, when burning wasn't possible because of fire codes, cutting (Goldberg, "Pastor"). These rejections of Harry have been largely from a few conservative Christian groups who feel that the Bible's many admonitions against the practice of witchcraft and sorcery (see Deuteronomy 18:9-14, for example) are to be taken seriously (Abanes). Other critics feel that the books are sometimes violent and scary, and note that sometimes its characters disobey or disregard authority. These parents, therefore, both religious and non-religious, are concerned about the negative influence such a story, especially such an extremely popular story, could have on their children. It is important to note, therefore, both that Harry Potter's critics are not limited to conservative Christians and that not all conservative Christians condemn the books. Some authors in Christian publications view the books as morally positive and uplifting (see, for example, Jacobs; Maudlin), while others have written thoughtful, if not completely accepting, analyses (see, for example, Faries; Neal).

Regardless of the source of people's discontent with Harry and his friends, the popularity of the books, when combined with the vociferous objections to their use in English classrooms, serves to make Harry Potter an ideal test case for how teachers and media specialists can handle controversial works.

A Framework for Discussing Controversial Works

The most important step in bridging ideological gaps is to open discussion. As Alex Molnar wrote in 1994 about public school conflict with conservative Christians, "Educators too often do a poor job of reaching out to diverse groups of parents and community members and drawing them into the life of their schools" (p.5). At the school level and in the classroom, English educators can lead the way in open discussion, particularly discussion about books such as the Harry Potter series. I offer the following seven-step framework as a way to begin that discussion, having tested it in three young adult literature college classrooms and one adult education church classroom. While my experience has been with college-age or older adults, I am confident that young adults would also benefit from this exercise, which is at its heart an exercise in critical thinking. Although the Harry Potter books are of immediate interest because of their current buzz, the framework could be adapted to any other work of media.

The most important step in bridging ideological gaps is to open discussion.

First, I ask people (a) if they have read any of the Harry Potter books, or (b) if they have seen the movie. Count the people so you get an idea of your audience. Ask people to keep their hands up for a moment so that those who haven't read the books or seen the movie can find the Harry Potter readers and/or movie-watchers later when answering group questions that require some in-depth knowledge of the stories.

Second, I summarize the story very briefly. My summary, which I put on a slide, is this:

> Harry, an orphan living with his mean aunt and uncle, discovers at age 11, when summoned to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, that he has magical powers and is famous in the magical world—a sort of parallel England—for surviving evil Lord Voldemort's attack on his parents. Adventures at school ensue as Harry learns more.

I ask the group if there are any questions or if anyone would like to add any other key details.

Third, I draw "for Harry" and "against Harry" columns on a chalkboard and ask the class to quickly fill in the arguments for reading the Harry Potter books and against reading them. As a group, people have been quite good at filling in both sides, even when it is obvious that they wholeheartedly agree with only one side.

Fourth, I introduce the concept of finding common ground by thinking critically about the book, calling the group to a

democratic ideal of open discussion and asking them to try to see the other side's point of view, complimenting them on a good beginning by their success in fulfilling step three. I also introduce the concepts of ascertainment and discernment, modified from Ted Baehr's work. Ascertainment is simply the idea of figuring out what happens, as in ascertaining the facts about something, in this case, what happens in the Harry Potter story. Discernment is the personal application of that ascertainment, or how what happens affects you as a reader, if at all. For most readers, the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of discernment as "the act of discerning or perceiving by the intellect; intellectual perception or apprehension" suffices. In other words, discernment is about thinking critically. In conservative Christian theology, discernment is also a spiritual gift, the ability to tell good from evil, or to "discern between the spirits" (I Corinthians 12:10; Thomson and Elwell). So in Christian theology, discernment is also about thinking, or perhaps feeling, critically. There is therefore some common ground available around these ideas of ascertainment and discernment. While everyone might agree on what happens in the book, there is room to disagree about how what happens might affect the reader. Regardless of the opinions, however, the application of ascertainment and discernment require readers to discuss the book critically. I emphasize that the point of this exercise is not to tell people *what* to think about reading the Harry Potter series, but to provide an opportunity for people – whether adults, young adults, or younger students – to practice *how* to think about books or other media.

First, I ask people (a) if they have read any of the Harry Potter books, or (b) if they have seen the movie.

Fifth, I provide a handout (see Table 1) based on the work of Baehr and media professor William Romanowski. There are three columns. The first column provides two sets of questions in eight categories for readers to answer about the Harry Potter series, providing evidence for their responses in the second column. One set of questions is intended to help the reader ascertain the facts of what's going on in the Harry Potter books; the other set is intended to help the reader discern the impact of those facts. Readers use the third column to indicate whether they think, given their answers to the questions and evidence from the books or movie, Harry Potter is a positive, negative, or neutral influence. I break the audience into small groups, asking them to make sure they have at least one Harry Potter reader or viewer in the group, and then I assign each group one of the eight categories to discuss. Categories include questions about how the hero, the villain, violence, sex, Christianity/religion, worldview/culture, moral lessons, and authority are addressed in the book. Category number four, sex, is not really relevant to the Harry Potter series – yet – but it is included here so that the framework might be applied to other media.

Sixth, I compile column three responses from each group, writing each positive, negative, or neutral evaluation on the board. When finished, I ask the group if they are surprised by any of the ratings, if they have questions for any group, and if there are any group's ratings they would like to discuss. These questions lead to some lively discussion, as groups ask questions of others, defend their answers, and provide textual evidence for their responses.

Finally, I ask the audience to make an overall statement about whether they think these particular books are worth reading, and if there are any limits that they would place on their being read. These questions provoke interesting discussion about the value of the books as well as about age-appropriateness. If I were using this framework in a high school or middle school classroom, I would ask students to write a short persuasive essay outlining their position about the appropriateness of Harry Potter, in keeping with research on the positive effects that inquiry-based activities such as this one have on student writing (Hillocks; Johannessen). Or I might ask them to apply the framework to another work of literature. The framework is intentionally broad enough to be used for any work of literature or movie and with any group of people, from young adults to concerned parents.

Working with Controversy

As readers and educators, we tacitly acknowledge the power that books have on us. We fall in love with stories, can't stop talking about books, and hope that we share some of that love with younger readers as we teach and model reading. We teach books by diverse authors so that our students can learn about others' experiences and points of view, perhaps even feeling something in response, and our literary theory acknowledges the power of experience and reader response (Rosenblatt, Probst, Scholes). So it should not be completely surprising to us that conservative Christians and other parents are concerned about their own children's affective response to a particular set of stories. Rather than dismissing those concerns as ridiculous or crying "censorship!" we should work instead to try to understand those concerns. The advantage of the framework provided here is that it acknowledges those concerns and provides a voice for them while also demanding that readers think critically about what they are reading. In that sense, then, we can use controversy to make our classrooms places devoted to diverse and well-reasoned voices.

Works Cited

Abanes, Richard. *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick*. Camp Hill, PA: Horizon, 2001.

American Library Association. "Harry Potter Series Tops List of Most Challenged Books for Third Year in a Row." 2002. <http://www.ala.org/news/v8n2/harrypotter.html>

Baehr, Ted. *The Media-Wise Family*. Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor/Cook, 1998.

Faries, Krista. "Why Harry Potter Is Not the Chronicles of Narnia." *Radix* 2000: 18-21. <http://www.radixmagazine.com/page1HarryPotter.html>

Goldberg, Beverly. "Harry Potter Bewitches Fans, Foes @ the Library, Movies." *American Libraries* 33.1 (2002): 27.

Goldberg, Beverly. "Pastor's Potter Book Fire Inflames New Mexican Town." *American Libraries* 33.2 (2002): 19.

Hillocks, George Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. New York, N.Y.: National Conference on Research in English, 1986.

Jacobs, Alan. "Harry Potter's Magic." *First Things* 99. January (2000): 35-38.

Johannessen, Larry R. "Teaching Thinking and Writing for a New Century." *English Journal* 90.6 (2001): 38-46.

Table 1: Questioning Framework: Ascertainment and Discernment*

Ascertaining/ Discerning Questions	Answers/ Evidence from *Harry Potter*	*How does Harry rate? (positive, negative, or neutral)*
1. The Hero Ascertain: Who is the hero? Why does he or she succeed? Discern: Who is the hero? Heroes fight Man, Nature, Self, Supernatural What kind of role model is that hero?		
2. The Villain Ascertain: Who is the villain? Villains fight Man, Nature, Self, Supernatural Discern: What is the message behind the villain's role? Is the villain sympathetic? What's the source of evil?		
3. Violence Ascertain: How much violence is there? Discern: How is the violence portrayed? Necessary? Fun? Normal? Shock factor?		
4. Sex Ascertain: How much sex is there? Discern: How is the sex portrayed? Loving and glorious in marriage or a committed relationship? Fun and frequent goal outside marriage or a committed relationship?		
5. Christianity / Religion Ascertain: What's the role of religion, the church, God, Christians, or other religions in this story? Discern: How is religion, etc. portrayed? Foolish, weak? Admirable?		
6. The Worldview / Culture Ascertain: What is the worldview or the culture like in the book/movie? Discern: How is the worldview or culture portrayed? Gloomy, hopeless, violent, exotic, everyday? What's the value of life? Worth living?		
7. Moral Lessons Ascertain: What are the moral lessons of the piece? Discern: How do those lessons compare with typical moral or religious lessons?		
8. Authority Ascertain: Who or what are authorities? (adults, government, tradition, God, etc.) Discern: Are the authorities worth respect? Do they make good decisions? How do they compare with real-life authorities?		

*Adapted from: Baehr, Ted. *The Media-Wise Family*. Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor/Cook, 1998 and Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos/Baker, 2001.

MacRae, Cathi Dunn. "Harry Potter Update: Is it for YAs?" *English Journal* 89.4 (2000): 137-138.
Maudlin, Michael G. "Virtue on a Broomstick." *Christianity Today* September 4 2000: 117.
Molnar, Alex. "Fundamental Differences?" *Educational Leadership* 51.4 (1994), 4-5.
Neal, Connie. *What's a Christian to Do with Harry Potter?* Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2001.
Probst, Robert E. "Reader-Response Theory and the English Curriculum." *English Journal* 83.3 (1994): 37-44.
Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos/Baker, 2001.
Rosenblatt, Louise M. "Literary Theory." *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*. Ed. James Flood, et al. New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1991.
Scholes, Robert. *Protocols of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
Thomson, J. G. S. S., and Walter A. Elwell. "Spiritual Gifts." *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996. 1042-46.

Resources

For more resources on the Harry Potter debate, see <http://www.luc.edu/faculty/jmarsh8/harry.html>.

Joanne M. Marshall is a Curriculum Specialist and Visiting Assistant Professor at Loyola University Chicago.

ALAN Announcements

A Change in Rates

Beginning with the new year, the ALAN Membership rates will increase slightly. Student memberships will be $10, regular memberships will be $20, and institutional memberships will be $30. Those who join ALAN using the current membership form (see the back cover of this issue of *The ALAN Review*) can still take advantage of the former rates.

ALAN Speakers Bureau

In our continuing quest to serve schools, libraries, and other groups interested in young adult literature, ALAN is initiating a speakers bureau, which can be visited at the ALAN Web site, *www.alan-ya.org*. This speakers bureau will contain the names and contact information for speakers who are available for school, in-service, library, and other programs involving young adult literature.

If you are interested in including your name in the ALAN Speakers Bureau, please contact Bill Mollineaux, 2003 ALAN President, at *Bnose3@aol.com* for further information.

Congratulations to the Newly Elected ALAN Officers for 2003:

Michael Cart, President-Elect

These three will be joining the Board of Directors:
Carolyn Lott
Jean E. Brown
James Cook

New *ALAN Review* Co-Editors Have Been Selected!

From January 2003, please send your manuscripts to Dr. James Blasingame, Co-Editor, *The ALAN Review*, Department of English/English Education, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, P.O. Box 870302, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287-0302. Jim and Co-Editor Lori A. Goodson will be assuming responsibility for the journal editorship in the summer, 2003; they will share responsibility with current editor Sissi Carroll during a spring transition period.