

# Places of the Mind

## By Martin Richardson

That Sophia was nervous was both clear and understandable; she was only nine; the difference between being nine and eleven is vast. The Great Hall is also vast: built well over 700 years ago it is an imposing space. For a time Sophia had company, but as the names were called the company diminished. Finally there were only two left, and then her older sister was called forward. Sophia was alone. Everyone turned to face her and willed her to stand and move forward.

Twenty-one years ago I got a telephone call from Wolfgang. That's one of the things about phone calls, you're never quite sure where they will lead you. I had no idea that this phone call would lead me to be standing in my dress robes watching Sophia rise from her seat.

As a result of Wolfgang's phone call I became involved in a research project sponsored by the European Union which explored national identity and notions of citizenship through studying history and culture. Six months before our first meeting in Austria, J.K. Rowling published *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. When we met and introduced ourselves, I told my new colleagues about the university in Durham with its gowns, formal meals, colleges and Castle. I remember one of the group saying that it sounded, 'Just like Harry Potter'. On the other hand, everyone knows that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in the northwest of Scotland, a fact confirmed by J.K. Rowling's website, *Pottermore*. Be that as it may, my Hogwarts is in Durham and the seed had been planted.

Given the seemingly self-generating and self-perpetuating nature of the Harry Potter franchise (for so it has to be called) some explain its success by reference to the media hype - perhaps best exemplified by the midnight book launches and star-studded film premiers - but with this it is all too easy to lose sight of the inescapable fact that that it was and remains a literary phenomenon. These were first and foremost books, and books require commitment.

I suppose the most remarkable, maybe even magical, thing about Potter is that it worked. It shouldn't have - literature was old school. *Philosopher's Stone* was

published at the wrong time. This was a period when reading for pleasure was in decline, especially amongst the young, and boys in particular. The lure of the computer game was already proving irresistible, as too was home entertainment generally, with an ever increasing number of television channels. Then along came a series of books set in a boarding school. It still doesn't seem to make sense - how could books, of increasing length and complexity, compete with the instant gratification of the internet?

Ironically the internet, which had the potential to stifle the series at birth, served to act as midwife to the ever expanding Potterverse. The seven books written over a ten year period (1997-2007) were supplemented by eight films (2001-11); add to this the merchandising, theme parks, studio tour, fan conventions and fan fiction; also *The Cursed Child* play and the new *Fantastic Beasts* films. The Potter statistics are staggering - two will suffice. It is estimated that the number of stories written by fans inspired by the original series is well above 600,000. But that pales when compared to the book sales which will soon pass the half-a-billion mark! Potter has become part of the nation's cultural DNA - indeed the planet's for that matter.

For reasons that one can only guess, the truly magical ingredients of the Harry Potter series seemed to prove irresistible. Right from the start and before the media machine added its considerable weight, people - and not just young people - became engaged. For me, it was personal. Teachers in gowns, prefects, head boys, steam trains, traditional food, and the importance of sport - this was my childhood. Add to this high table, professors, the Great Hall and the view from my office window - I not only attended Hogwarts, I was now teaching there! This is clearly at best self-indulgent, at worst delusional - the confusion of fact and fantasy. Or is it?

As Sophia started to walk forward she was dressed in a real gown; she was in a real Great Hall; and she walked passed the House Cup and between tables bedecked in the four House colours. But surely this was just mere play acting? Quite possibly. On the other hand, at what age were you first sorted? Does it matter which family you were born into? How many brothers and sisters you have? The colour of your skin or the school you attended? So maybe this was play acting, but it was play acting with a purpose. For throughout our life we are sorted many times, and in our turn we are the sorters. We sort our friendship groups, the subjects we study, the careers we choose to follow; and we judge

other people too, often hastily and with scant information. In the first book of the Harry Potter series, Draco Malfoy offers Harry the hand of friendship saying, “You’ll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there.”<sup>1</sup>

Was our sorting ceremony real? Is Harry Potter real? These questions form the basis of my final lecture. I have to confess that I am no philosopher — well no more than the majority of people I know. I do, however, know a little bit about identity per se, and national identity in particular. How much of your identity is real, how much is made up? Students when they come up to Durham as freshers curate their past - I’m sure I did - though as it is nearly fifty years ago I can’t remember the details. Are we lying, or being ‘economical with the truth’, or merely conflating events and making connections much like film makers will do to make a story flow and appear more coherent? Probably all of these things and more.

For many years now I have referenced the works of James MacPherson in my lectures on Scottish identity. Ignoring the debate about authenticity, one cannot deny his significance and the links to the bard Ossian and with landscape, mysticism and myth. It has long been accepted that national identity, no less than personal, is highly selective and carefully sculpted. Does it matter that the exploits of our best loved heroes are often embellished and owe more to artistic freedom than verifiable fact? The cold-blooded historian in me will have to say yes. On the other hand it would be disingenuous to downplay the significance of such embellishments.

Sebastian Faulks reminds us of the importance of fictional characters “whose inner lives we get to know so well that they’re more familiar to us than our own families and friends, so much so that it’s in the power of their experiences that we see our own lives in a new light. The events that befall them shape them as people, but they affect us too. The lives of these characters help us to understand ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

It seemed that right from the start Potter mattered: readers identified with the characters and the settings. Of course it helped that it was set in a school, albeit a very different one than the majority of readers attended. Still we could relate to so much that happened to Harry and his chums. Bullying teachers, teachers who

were clearly fantasists, teachers you liked and trusted, and others whom you misunderstood; homeworks, friendships; sodium this or sodium that which seemed to make things fizz or change colour as if by magic; and everyone knows that all history teachers are dead, or else why would they spend so much time in the past? Add to this two other things: the idea that those chosen to receive their letter from Hogwarts when they turn eleven are special. And, as Faulks implies, by identifying with Ron, Harry, and Hermione, we are special too and so attend Hogwarts of the mind.<sup>3</sup> And, the really clever one - in accordance with the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy signed in 1689, the magical world is hidden from sight of Muggles!<sup>4</sup> Indeed, with a nod to Socrates and his Forms, there is a revelatory court scene in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* where Harry has been accused of breaking wizarding law by saving his cousin from attack by unpleasant magical creatures called Dementors: "He's been thinking it through and Dementors would make a very nice little cover story, very nice indeed. Muggles can't see Dementors, can they boy? Highly convenient, highly convenient [...] so it's just your word and no witnesses [...]"<sup>5</sup> This is a show trial reminiscent of those held in totalitarian regimes - indeed, much of the series mirrors real life events, which is part of its appeal and use as a teaching tool.

One of the most discussed episodes in the whole septology occurs when Harry is in conversation with his dead headmaster, the flawed but seemingly omnipotent, Albus Dumbledore:

*"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"*

*"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?"<sup>6</sup>*

Deep waters indeed. This conversation takes place at King's Cross station - a place of arrivals and departures. Journeys are important in Potter, just as they are in life. Potter is a fine example of the bildungsroman - a faltering journey towards enlightenment in which we learn through experience. Sophia is now about half-way towards me - all eyes are still on her and she has not yet faltered.

As I said, Potter should not have worked, and the internet in particular should have proved fatal. It did not. Potter is unfinished - it is a tale half told and there

are gaps. So emotionally engaged were the readers, and later film-goers, that they decided to take matters into their own hands, and the computer and internet gave them the means to do it. The outpouring of fan fiction beggars belief. Fan theories expounded on fan forums: alternate plotlines, many lying outside the accepted canon; alternate character pairings are particularly popular – such pairings are usually referred to as ships – short for relationships. When in 2014 Rowling suggested in a magazine interview that Hermione might very well have been romantically paired with Harry rather than Ron it led to fans excitedly expressing their view pro and con. It was clear that to the fans such things mattered, and it gave one gifted headline writer the opportunity to refer to ‘The Shipping Wars’!

The big question still, however, remains. Why did it work? Why did people engage and commit to reading the series? As with all such questions it is impossible to give a satisfactory answer; all one can do is mention contributing factors. Media hype? Yes undoubtedly, especially as the series progressed; and one cannot overestimate the impact of the films – wonderful that the same actors remained throughout (sadly with the exception of Richard Harris). It has often been said that the series attracted some of the very best acting talent – and the young actors grew up with the series, just like so many of their fans – the so called Harry Potter generation – though it was never restricted to children. The films are persuasive, instructive and entertaining. I have to confess, however, that I’m not a lover of the final dual between Harry and the villain of the piece, Lord Voldemort. In the final book Harry defeats Voldemort morally – he triumphs because he is a better person, not through clever wandwork.

The books certainly appealed to a society that was sated with commodification – everything had its price with few knowing its value. One of the greatest professional tragedies of my career is the number of times I have been asked, ‘Will this be on the exam paper?’ To quote the odious Professor Umbridge in the film *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, who believed that rote learning and memorisation was essential to pass your examination: “After all that’s what education is all about.”<sup>7</sup> We have to believe it is more than that.

In 2005 Philip Pullman gave a lecture at the University of East Anglia. In the lecture, entitled ‘Miss Goddard’s Grave’, he introduced his audience to the idea of the School of Morals. His thesis is that through reading, or going to the theatre

(Miss Goddard was an actress), or watching films, and so on, one is enrolled in the school. Pullman contends that:

*“[T]he relationship with books and plays and stories we develop in the school of morals is a profoundly, intensely, essentially democratic one, and it’s characterised by mutual responsibility. It places demands on the reader, because that is the nature of a democracy: citizens have to play their part. If we don’t bring our own best qualities to the encounter, we will take little away. Furthermore, it isn’t static: there is no final, unquestionable, unchanging authority. It’s dynamic. It changes and develops as our understanding grows, as our experience of reading – and of life itself – increases.”<sup>8</sup>*

Significantly he points out that moral views change over time. For young children, the Harry Potter series is a morality tale — a struggle between good and evil — however life isn’t always that simple. Many of the characters in Potter are complex, and the older one gets the more one comes to realise that often doing good means doing that which is the least bad. Thus, over time Harry comes to realise that being Draco is not easy; and whilst rejecting Draco’s initial hand of friendship was understandable — he was a spoilt, prejudicial snob and in the rival school house to boot — he eventually learns that he has some redeeming qualities.

In the final analysis, good triumphs over evil, but at a cost. Importantly, the moral values are intelligently drip-fed into the readers as the series progresses. Readers and my students explore issues such as love and death; forgiveness, atonement and redemption; friendship, courage, loyalty and duty; evil, sacrifice and regret. By the end one comes to realise that matters of morality are not always clear cut, and that for many of us life is a work in progress. It seems no different from reality — just as we have multiple identities, can we not also have multiple realities? Perhaps Hogwarts is inside all our heads, but that doesn’t mean it’s not real!

What of Sophia? Reserved but confident she marched steadily on. I suspect she didn’t hear me get to the final syllable of the word ‘Gryffindor’ before the cheers of the others in the Great Hall drowned me out. Whilst the ever so slight movement of her mouth suggested that for her the result was never in doubt!

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*