

Harry Potter and the Joyless Prigs

Terry Teachout

Amid the reams of journalistic verbiage about how the film version of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone broke every box-office record in the history of the universe, I ran across the odd report of public protests by religious types who believe the world's most popular movie to be a tool of Satan.

I knew these protests were coming, and I also knew the eye-rolling reflex they would trigger in virtually everyone who read them. It doesn't matter how unrepresentative of religious people in general the parties in question may be: Secular editors can always be counted on to play this kind of story up precisely because it makes all believers look like prigs. And needless to say, some of them are exactly that. H.L. Mencken famously defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." Puritanism was and is a lot more complicated than that, but Mencken was onto something. Looking over the list of items banned by Afghanistan's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, one finds "any equipment that produces the joy of music." Not just music, mind you, but the joy of music. Give the Taliban this much credit: They didn't beat around the bush.

I wouldn't say that J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books qualify as high art, but they are charming, wonderfully well-made fantasies, as well as old-fashioned moral tales whose youthful characters learn a great deal about virtue and valor from their fanciful adventures. While she is not writing from the explicitly Christian perspective that animates such classic children's books as C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, the moral content of her work seems to me unexceptionable, even admirable, and it is not at all surprising to learn that she is a member of the Church of Scotland. "I believe in God, not magic," she says firmly whenever anybody asks her.

So why the fuss?

The ostensible reason is that Harry Potter is a student at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, meaning that innocent children who take an interest in his exploits might develop an unhealthy obsession with the occult and thereby wander into the waiting arms of Screwtape. No doubt such things are remotely possible-I tried to fly off a bookshelf after seeing Superman on TV when I was a kid-but the notion that the Potter books are spawning a generation of Charles Mansons seems to me laughably silly. In the ever-applicable words of the duke of Wellington, if you can believe that, you can believe anything.

The real reason, I fear, is that America contains far more than its share of earnest, well-meaning folk who don't like art-any art. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they don't get art. An extreme example of this tendency is the literal-minded person who can't see why anyone in his right mind would want to read made-up stories about people who don't exist. Less extreme but more troublesome are those who believe that art exists solely as a medium for the transmission of moral messages. Take, for instance, Mrs. Crowley, the nice but narrow-minded small-town Catholic lady in Jon Hassler's novel *Grand Opening*. She reads fiction, but only the right kind: "Philip and I don't read Hemingway, his philosophy's wrong. We read Catholic writers, Bernanos and Mauriac and people like that." (The joke here, of course, is that Hassler is a Catholic writer, too.)

To her credit, Mrs. Crowley is not a hopeless case: At least she does read novels and probably also senses that truth has something to do with beauty, which puts her ahead of the game. But she is severely confused about the purpose of art. In addition to writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis also penned these unforgettably beautiful words about what art does: "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like a night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do."

I suspect that at least some of the people who are picketing Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone are doing so for the worst of reasons, which is a fundamental detestation of this miraculous ability of art to let us live in other

men's skins, to test our perceptions and beliefs against theirs-and perhaps to be changed as a result.

If, on the other hand, they're protesting because they believe it is better for children to read Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone than to see it on the silver screen, then I'm sympathetic, sort of. I'm not opposed on principle to filmed versions of famous books, so long as they don't stop anybody from reading the books. It's fun to hear Humphrey Bogart rasping out Raymond Chandler's wisecracks in *The Big Sleep* or to see what the makers of *Brideshead Revisited* thought *Brideshead* looked like-a minor pleasure, yes, but a genuine one. But the remarkable and significant thing about J.K. Rowling is that she has taught hundreds of thousands of children that reading is fun, too. Instead of sitting in a darkened theater watching a bunch of kids flying around on digitally animated broomsticks, they've been imagining the same scene in their minds, which is to watching a movie what playing baseball is to playing video baseball: Both may be entertaining, but only one will make you grow taller.

All this might be less relevant if Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone had been a different, more imaginative sort of film. Instead, it turns out to be a painstakingly precise pictorialization of the book-one whose sole purpose, so far as I can tell, seems to have been to make a great big heap of money. I expected better of Steve Kloves, who wrote the script-he wrote and directed *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, one of the half-dozen best movies of the 1980s-but I'm sure he was under strict orders from the producers to stick to the straight and narrow. Likewise Chris Columbus, the director, who really should have known better than to let a children's movie run for two and a half hours. The pacing is odd, at once overcompressed and insufficiently brisk, an unintended consequence of trying to cram too much plot into not enough time.

On the credit side, all the children are perfect or close to it, and the adult characters often seem to bear an uncanny resemblance to their models, especially Alan Rickman as the seemingly evil Professor Snape. For the most part, Hogwarts looks equally plausible, though many of the film's special effects are too obviously computer-generated, especially the game of Quidditch, which I found stiff and cold-looking. And that goes to the heart of the matter:

Even with the most sophisticated computers at your disposal, it is simply not possible to make a live-action film of a book like Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone look remotely as good as the one you unreel in your head when you read it.

Somebody once asked the sharp-tongued conductor Hans Knappertsbusch why he used a score when performing symphonies he knew by heart. He replied, "I know how to read." So do I, and if you do, too, you won't get anything more than mild amusement out of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. As for your kids, it definitely won't turn them into Satan worshipers...but please make them read the book first.

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