

# Why I Like Harry Potter

by Starhawk

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I admit it: I've read all the books and seen the movie twice, once with my Goddess daughters, and once with my partner who usually only wants to see depressing films with subtitles, preferably made in Poland or Romania under the occupation of the former Soviet Union. When he developed an inexplicable desire to see Harry Potter, I felt I should encourage him. Further confession: I like Harry Potter. In contrast to much of the Pagan discussion I've seen, I think the books and movie do teach some of our basic Wiccan values in a subtle and entertaining way, and that's part of their appeal.

Courage, empathy, ingenuity and generosity are some of our core values, found in the heros and heras of thousands of fairy tales. Harry and his friends exemplify them all. They contend with the values of his loathsome relations who represent utter conventionality (the adults) and utter selfishness and bullying (his cousin Dudley). One of the first things we see Harry do is to talk to a snake with empathy. He stands up for his friend Ron against the snobbery of some of the other Hogwarts students. He and Ron risk their own lives to defend the annoying Hermione from a troll. Ultimately, he, Ron and Hermione all use their special gifts and strengths to defeat the forces of evil.

Magic in the Harry Potter books is a somewhat neutral force, a technology and a talent rather than an ethos. There are good wizards and some very bad wizards. Part of the genius of the books is that the shadow side of life is dramatized so vividly. Childhood is full of intense passions and contests of power. Witness a pair of five-year-olds playing together, and you'll see anguish, outrage, affection, hurt, jealousy and selflessness succeed each other like rapid changes in the weather. Children's lives are determined by powerful figures who set the ground rules, provide or don't provide love, nurturing, nourishment, pleasure and privileges.

The psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, in his classic discussion of why children need fairy tales, pointed out how important it is for children to see both their positive and negative impulses mirrored, to know that greed and envy and rage are part of the common human condition. Only then can they eventually develop the maturity to grow beyond greed and hate. Hogwarts includes four Houses, one of which, Slytherin, is known for producing the wizards who go wrong. The shadow side is not disavowed, it's acknowledged and recognized. Slytherin is clearly a negative and undesirable force: "Anything but Slytherin!" Harry murmurs to the Sorting Hat which will determine which house he'll be in. But Slytherin also has its place. It's not disavowed: it's part of the school.

Children are certainly influenced by the values in the books they read, but often in ways that are more oblique and paradoxical than we think. As a child, I read books about magic voraciously. I so desperately wanted magic to be real. My very favorites were C.S. Lewis's Narnia books. On perhaps my tenth rereading of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, I realized it was a Christian allegory. I came from a strong Jewish home, in which we never allowed a Christmas tree. In school, I remained silent when we sang Christmas Carols, and always felt uncomfortable when Christianity was assumed to be our common belief system. But I was able to set my discomfort aside, and still enjoy the magic. At the same time, the books introduced me to what is deep, true and universal in Christianity: the willingness to sacrifice, the concept of a deity who represents powerful, unconditional love, in a way I could understand and accept.

I identified with Lewis's characters, even though their class, religion, background and life experiences were very different from mine. Today, I see my African-American Goddess daughters identifying with the Harry Potter books. I suppose it's a lot to ask of stories set in an upper class English boarding school, but I wish that at least in the movies there were more strong characters of color, not just token extras.

I know that C.S. Lewis's English stiff upper lip stoicism, his view of what was honorable behavior affected me deeply, even though his standards were very different from my family's values. In his books, brave children don't cry. In my family of Jewish immigrants and psychotherapists, yelling, screaming, shouting, weeping and whining were simply how we expressed ourselves.

Today, rereading the books, it's not Lewis's Christianity that disturbs me but his misogyny, the way evil stems from women and beneficent power is male. He does have heroines as well as heroes in his world. Young girls can be strong, courageous agents, but grown up, sexual women are suspect. The Witch in his stories is clearly negative, and yet my love of the magic world he created is undoubtedly one of the reasons I became a Witch.

The magic in Harry Potter takes us back into an animate universe, where hats talk, pictures move, and snakes hold conversations. This world lies just on the other side of ordinary reality, behind a door or through a seemingly solid wall. In that world, consciousness is not limited to human beings. Animals, plants, and objects all carry their own awareness and can be communicated with.

Isn't that the essence of the Pagan worldview: that the earth is alive, that all being has consciousness, and that we can learn to communicate with that consciousness if we are sensitive and empathetic. Real magic is the process of learning to hear and speak in multidimensional ways. In time, I think we'll reap a crop of future Witches and Pagans from the Harry Potter books. I don't worry that their Harry Potter version of magic will prevent them from discovering the true depths of our spirituality. As they mature, their understanding will grow. It's the responsibility of those of us who practice real magic and Witchcraft as the spirituality of nature and the Goddess to convey their depths and teach their true disciplines.

In a global culture increasingly devitalized, corporatized, logoized and shopping malled, where everything is reduced to a commodity that can be bought and sold, I find it

cheering that kids still yearn for magic. I hope their love of Harry's magic will inspire them to cherish and defend the natural world upon which real magic is based.

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