

The Great Controversy over You-Know-Who

By Nancy Lecourt

At the Adventist elementary school near my home there was quite a ruckus over the Harry Potter books a few years ago. Parents complained because some children were bringing the books to school in their backpacks, and their own children were thus getting an opportunity to read books that they had forbidden. The books were banned from the campus, and a black friend of mine spoke at a board meeting where this decision was discussed.



Fantasy or reality? The author attempts to head toward Hogwarts on Platform 9³/₄.

“I would like to call your attention to a book currently being read at this school—*The Little House in the Big Woods*. The father in this book sings a song about ‘Uncle Ned,’ who is called an ‘old darkey,’ who’s ‘gone where good darkeys go.’¹ I haven’t complained about this racist language because censorship and book-banning are so offensive to me. But if I can stand to have my daughters read about ‘darkies,’ then I think you should be able to stand to have your children watch mine read *Harry Potter* during recess.”

“I see your point,” replied another father, “but in Harry Potter we’re talking about real evil.”

The books are still banned from the campus.

How Have Adventists Reacted to Harry Potter?

In Australia, Rowling’s books have been banned from all sixty Adventist schools.² In the United States, although no official actions have been taken, it appears that the majority of SDA schools do not allow them on campus. Responding to my e-mail question, Gerald Kovalsky, vice president for education in the North American Division, replied, “I do not have a sense of how many schools have actually banned the books in terms of board or conference office of education action. My logical expectation is that no school will allow them on campus.”

In Britain, a policy not to allow books with witches

and wizards in them was put in place about ten years ago (though an exception is made for the Narnia books), and thus when the Harry Potter books appeared they were banned automatically.

Contrariwise, as Tweedledee said to Alice, children's literature classes at Adventist colleges and universities teach or at least discuss the Harry Potter books, and Adventist scholars are busy analyzing them. At the meetings of the Popular Culture Association both last

mentioned above, they were the basis of a presentation at the North American Division Teachers Convention in Dallas in August 2000.

Her *Journal of Adventist Education* article begins and ends with a statement about children learning to think for themselves, and people making their own, informed decisions. "Should Harry Potter come to your Adventist school? I leave that decision to you" (9). In between, however, Oliver describes the Potter books as promoting

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spring and again next, panels discussing Harry Potter did and will feature several Adventists reading papers.³ Many Adventists—young, old, and of a certain age—are happily reading and rereading book five, whereas others are just as determinedly choosing not to read.

Clearly, we Adventists are as conflicted and divided over Harry Potter as are many other conservative Christian groups, with some, like Charles Colson and *Christianity Today*, finding the books to be stories about courage, loyalty, friendship, and love, and others, like Richard Abanes, seeing in them the Devil's latest tools for entrapping children.

Although the arguments over Harry Potter among Adventists touch on many subjects—the use of time, the representation of violence in books for children, the role of fantasy and the imagination, the duties of parents and educators in guiding children's reading, the state of the dead—at the heart of the debate seems to be a disagreement about what constitutes "real evil."

By far the longest and most widely circulated article to appear in an official Adventist publication is "Should Harry Potter Come to Adventist Schools?" by Anita Oliver, a cover story in the *Journal of Adventist Education* for February/March 2001. This article (slightly modified for a broader audience) was reprinted by the South Pacific Division *Record* in December of that year. The revision then appeared as a cover story for the *Adventist Review* in November 2002. With it were "Two Perspectives" (predictably, Yes and No) by Soraya Parish and Richard Abanes, several links from the online version, and a resultant flood of readers' letters.

Oliver is chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education at La Sierra University. Her views on Harry Potter have had wide coverage; before they were published in the three sources

revenge, and discusses their characters' use of power to control others, the books' shocking violence, and a positive attitude in them toward paganism and the occult. She then offers some guidelines, including Philippians 4:8 ("Whatever things are true") and Mathew 5:44 ("Love your enemies").

Although Oliver makes an effort to be balanced, the article's argument depends on many rhetorical questions ("Will knowing the difference between right and wrong enable us to ignore the 'bad parts' of a book? Is reading Harry Potter or similar books a matter of right and wrong or is it just good fun?" [8]), which leads the reader straight to a conclusion that no, Harry Potter should NOT come to Adventist schools.

Not surprisingly, Rowling's homeland provides the only other official Adventist article of any length about Harry Potter. Isobel Webster's "Your Teenager and the World of Harry Potter" appeared in the *British Union Messenger* in June 2001. Webster is described as a "journalist and counselor," and her article is far more negative than Oliver's.

She begins by suggesting that contemporary standards of entertainment are at an all-time low in earth's history, as evidenced by the popularity of crime and detective novels, movies, and TV series. She claims that "in past generations murder was such a shocking thing, no decent person would enjoy a story based on it for entertainment" (6). (One is tempted to wonder whether Homer, Shakespeare, and Dickens had no "decent" people in their audiences.) Unlike Oliver, she does not leave the decision to her readers. Rather, she affirms that the Harry Potter books promote "positive attitudes toward



the occult in a guise that Christians find tempting. The tempter is no fool" (7).

The only other substantive article on Harry Potter by an Adventist that I could find appeared in an unofficial publication, *Adventist Today*, in the January/February 2002 issue under the title "Frodo Good, Harry Bad." The author, Glen Greenwalt (described as "an artist and theologian") argues that "our world really is enchanted—for good and evil" (23), and (somewhat gleefully) points out that the reason "fundamentalists" don't like the Harry Potter books is that they themselves are parodied in the books.

Rowling is explicitly critical of literal-minded muggles who cannot sense the enchantment that is under their noses. If they mistake the Potter books as literal, the fanciful world of wizards and spells becomes indeed an entre [*sic*] into the world of the occult. (23)

Is it no surprise, of course, that the issue of literal versus metaphorical or "imaginative" readings appears repeatedly in this debate. Isobel Webster affirms that "Adventists claim ... to hold fast to the Word as it stands. We take it literally," (7) and applies this hermeneutic to Rowling:

Harry Potter books are full of ghosts, poltergeists, spells and curses, witches and wizards, divination, and dark powers. Whether this is suitable reading for Christians of *any* age depends on whether you believe that these things are real. If they do not exist, then perhaps Harry Potter is harmless enough. If, however, such occult powers *do* exist and are involved in the great controversy which rages around us, then being entertained by them is like offering our children a ouija board or taking them to a séance. (7)

This question of what is "real" is central to the Harry Potter debate. When Rowling's fans protest that the books are fantasy, their detractors argue that they are only fantasy *if you don't believe* in witches, wizards, and divination.

Oliver, although acknowledging that the books are fantasy, argues that "our senses tend to blur the distinction between the imaginary and the actual" (7). In response to protests that the world of Hogwarts is imaginary, she poses more rhetorical questions: "Is the occult

real, or only imaginary, as some argue? Does Satan attack us only in the garb of ugliness, or does he come with charm and enticements as well?" (7).

Richard Abanes, who presents the "No" perspective published in the *Review* along with Oliver's article, makes this same argument: "It cannot be denied that the Harry Potter books contain real-world occult practices. For example, they contain astrology, numerology, divination, mediumship, channeling, crystal gazing, necromancy."⁴

The argument on this side is that although the Potter books may be fantasy, the occult is real, and if children are exposed to the idea of these kinds of practices, they may want to learn more, will become more susceptible to real pagans and wiccans who want to "recruit" them. Here's Oliver again: "Since children have been reading the story of Harry Potter, they have become more interested in paganism and the occult than ever before" (7).

Adventists who argue on the other side reiterate that, although the occult is real, the "magic" in Harry Potter is certainly not (though Rowling did her research and uses terms and names associated historically with witchcraft). Writing to the February 20, 2003, issue of the *Adventist Review* from Courtice, Ontario, Rex Strom reminds readers that "the magic in these books is typified by flying on broomsticks, waving magic wands, and making things disappear. This is quite different from spiritualism, which is worship of the devil and evil spirits" (28).

And writing to the *Review* on January 16, 2003, from Clifton, Colorado, to cancel his subscription, Fredric Openheim asks, "Does Oliver not know that children have always invented fantasy for themselves and for others? In truth, Oliver herself lives in a fantasy world if she sees harm in the likes of Harry Potter" (3).

Finally, Connie Neal, whose August 22, 2003, article, "Guarding Your Child: 10 Ways to Protect Kids in an Occult-filled Popular Culture" at ChristianityToday.com, is linked to the *Adventist Review* Web site area on Harry Potter, writes that "our family differentiates between literary 'magic' in a fantasy world and stories in which witchcraft is used in real-life settings" (4).

Arguments about what is real pale, however, before the central issue of what constitutes evil. For Rowling's detractors, evil means the Devil and his works: paganism, occult practices. Lisa Grant writes to the *Review* of February 20, 2003, from Kissimmee, Florida: "I had a sense that I was getting too close to demonic powers. I chose not to finish the book" (28). In correspondence published in the same issue, Lee Belcher of Columbia,

Maryland, likens reading the books to visiting the witch of Endor.

Along similar lines, Richard Abanes, in an excerpt from *Harry Potter and the Bible* at adventistreview.org, spends pages detailing every allusion to alchemists, Theosophists, Greek myths, and Arthurian legends. “The allusions could easily stir a child’s curiosity about occultism—perhaps enough for that child to one day dabble in it.” The danger in the books lies in the words

great courage, to suffer terrible pain, and even to risk his own life for the sake of others, as his mother risked (and lost) her life to save him.

Indeed, her selfless love is what protects Harry from Voldemort’s murderous rage. From this point of view, the books follow the classic “high fantasy” model of both C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien: cosmic good and evil fight for human souls; the protagonist must choose, often at great peril, whether to fight for good or give in to evil.

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themselves, which will lead the unsuspecting reader toward a desire to learn more about “occult practices.”⁵

Readers who enjoy the Harry Potter books seem to be more concerned about evil as it plays out in relationships between people. Not “Evil” as an invisible force emanating from the Devil and anything associated with him, but evil thoughts and actions as they affect human beings. For these people, racism is “real evil” because it diminishes human lives. People, like my friend, who feel that we must fight racism and injustice, and that to do so we require courage, loyalty, intelligence, and love are happy to have their children read the Potter books because they interpret them as promoting these values.

Connie Neal “discovered [that] Rowling’s central characters are imperfect kids who aim to do good. They model self-sacrifice, courage, and kindness, while learning to identify and resist evil” (1). Rex Strom argues that the books emphasize “the power of love over evil.... When Harry and his friends have an opportunity they work to liberate the oppressed—again a major Christian theme” (28) And Glen Greenwalt describes the books as “the Christian story in outline form—tinkering a bit with words like ‘magic,’ ‘wizards,’ ‘spells,’ and the like” (22).

“Evil” for such readers is represented in the books by Lord Voldemort, a satanic figure who will do anything to attain life for himself, including torture and murder, and who rules by fear. Voldemort is evil because he and his followers hurt others to benefit themselves. They are the antithesis of love, trust, caring, loyalty; his followers are also elitist and “racist” in the sense that they despise all but “pureblooded” wizards.

Looked at in this way, magic in the books represents power, the kind of power we all have: “the power to will and to do.” This power may be used for good or ill; choosing the good often requires Harry to summon

Ironically, both types of reader see Satan in the Harry Potter books. One group identifies particular words and phrases associated with Satan in our world; the other explores the characters, plot, symbols, and other literary techniques and finds a Satan figure. To the first group, the books themselves “are” evil; to the other, the books are “about” evil—and goodness. Clearly, the twain shall never meet.

Notes and References

1. The song is on pages 99–100.
2. “Australian Schools Ban Harry Potter,” *Adventist Review*, Dec. 27, 2001, 20.
3. Organized by Winona Howe, chair of the Department of English at La Sierra University, the panels include papers by Winona Howe (“Bands of Brothers and Circles of Friends: Bolstering the Fantasy Hero”); Doug Jones of Andrews University (“Right Reading: The Religious Right Reacts to Harry Potter”); Renard Donesky of Southwestern Adventist University (“You-Know-Who”: the Naming of Names in Harry Potter”); Andrew Howe of La Sierra University (“It’s All Greek to Harry: The Classical Influence on Rowling and Lewis”); and Linda Gill of Pacific Union College (“The Snake Problems: Adolescence, Masculinity and Power in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets”), among others.
4. “Sorcery in a Stone: A Closer Look,” *Adventist Review*, online ed., Aug. 8, 2003, 11, <www.adventistreview.org/2001-1547/story5.html>.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.

Nancy Lecourt writes from Pacific Union College, where she chairs the Department of English.

