

# INTRODUCTION

## Just Between You and Me

This book is a guide to the rereading of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books. I assume you will find, as I have and still do, plenty of rewards and surprises by going back through the series. We will do so in a semi-systematic way, but always with additional reading pleasure as our goal. I'll speak in the first-person, and I'll use contractions (see?). I'll just talk to "you," the re-reader, and I'll not burden us with forests of footnotes or, hopefully, not bog us down in too many details. I'll try to abide by "lead us not into digression," but sometimes we'll find ourselves a little off the path in the Forbidden Forest.

Many times I will approach passages in the books in a lighthearted way, which I hope will be appropriate to the richly humorous nature of these parts of Harry's story. Throughout *Repotting Harry Potter*, I'll also recommend "classic" literary works, large and small, that parts of the Potter books remind me of or resemble. Maybe you'll enjoy those works as well, if you check them out.

Many of you, my fellow Rowling re-readers, might be like the countless numbers of people I've met over the years who, upon finding out I'm a literature professor, tell me they've always loved to read and wish they could have majored in English in college. Often they'll explain that since Uncle Louie was a C.P.A., they went into accounting, or since the family business had been founded by Grandpa, they majored in business administration. If that's at all descriptive of you, this book, I hope, will feel especially comfortable.

So, imagine that we're sitting in my den (not in a classroom or a lecture hall) on a winter afternoon, and the weather has turned a

bitter cold, dipping down into the low 50s outside (I live in Southern California), and the subject of the Potter books has just come up. Since I might have more practice than you at going back through a literary text, I just start to talk about each of the books, section by section, and about what you might not have noticed there before. That's what I hope reading *this* book will be like for you and me—a conversation about Harry's world among us friends who just enjoy going back there.

### Premature Rejection

I'm a real Harry-Come-Lately to Rowling's books. Maybe you are too. I'm sure millions of readers are, and I'll bet they have stories similar to mine about their first encounters with the Potter series and about their becoming hooked on Harry. My story goes back to the Fourth of July in 2003 when our houseguest, an old friend and fellow academic, asked me if I'd ever read the books. I told her I had read a few pages of my daughter's copy of *Sorcerer's Stone* once but hadn't felt compelled to read further. I didn't know it at the time, but I was afflicted with a malady so many suffer from still today: Presumptive Reader Unworthiness Based on Non-reading, or PRUBON.

Certainly after many years of teaching great literature on the university level, I felt qualified to make a judgment about reader worthiness or unworthiness without having to read thousands of pages to confirm my opinion. In my early assessment, in fact, I was even worse than the dozens of other PRUBON victims I've come across since. At least some of them had read *all of Sorcerer's Stone* or had seen one or two of the Harry Potter films before concluding that Rowling's books are, like TRIX, for kids.

When my friend recommended the books that Fourth of July, I was aware of the trashing of the books by Professor Harold Bloom of Yale (he's called them "rubbish," so I'd say that's trashing them). Professor Bloom, author of dozens of books and a giant in Shakespearean studies, read only *Sorcerer's Stone* before writing his article "Can 35 Million Book Buyers Be Wrong" in the July 11, 2000, *Wall Street Journal*.

Professor Bloom is my poster boy for PRUBON and is a constant reminder of the frustration that comes not so much from Potter readers trying to convince non-readers of the worth and wonder of the books, but from *non*readers trying to convince readers of their worthlessness. And there's a lot of that still going around in academic circles, within conservative Christian groups, and among the "cultural elite." There's

still a PRUBONic plague out there. How can you have an opinion, indeed a strong opinion, about something you haven't even read? Might that just lead to a premature rejection of something you might just like or even love for life? Can you imagine judging the whole Potter series on *Sorcerer's Stone* alone? Or, think of this: can you imagine asking someone, "Have you read *Hamlet*?" And they answer, "Yes . . . well, I read part of the first act, and I didn't think *Hamlet* was so great—just a bunch of palace guards and a ghost."

**Harry Goes to College:  
The Academics' Three Deathly Hallows**

Some academics condemn the Potter books and do not consider them "legit lit" for one or more of these three reasons: they're too juvenile, they're too recent, and they're too popular. In the *TIME* magazine article on Rowling as a "Person of the Year" runner up, I am quoted as calling these condemnations of the books "the three Deathly Hallows for academics."

Let's consider the first Deathly Hallow: too juvenile. Academics in traditional adult literary fields tend to hallow "serious" literature written for adult readers, not juvenile fiction; they write articles and books about Moby Dick, not Flipper. Yet, as C. S. Lewis pointed out long ago, a children's book that is not enjoyable to adults is not a very good children's book. Is it inconceivable that a book *is* for both children and adults—is a really good, if not great book for both? What does reader reaction suggest? Do a significant number of adults find Rowling's "juvenile" books enjoyable? Apparently so; this would appear to be a safe assumption from the hard evidence of adult sales statistics in the millions, to the soft evidence of simply looking around in a public place a day or so after a new volume has come out and noticing who's reading Harry (not to mention the "adult" book covers).

*The New York Times* best seller list would have continued to be dominated by Rowling's books for years to come, I'm sure, until the separate "juvenile" category was created (in her honor, or to her dishonor?) in the summer of 2000—so that Rowling became the woman who parted the "read" sea at *The New York Times*. That renowned newspaper or any publication or person can label the Potter books as "juvenile" all they want, but we know those millions of "juvenile" readers from their late teens to, perhaps, their nineties are smiling and turning the pages constantly even as we write. You, my fellow adults, know what I mean as you have already read and reread, or plan to reread, right?

Secondly, let's think about the second academics' Deathly Hallow, the assumption that the Potter books are too recent to be considered serious literature. Academics hallow books that have "stood the test of time." It would seem that the world has to wait until the author has been long and safely dead before the work is fully appreciated and praised. By this scenario, the phrase "starving artist" is redundant, since the artist will *always* be starving during his lifetime; such has been the case from time immemorial, from Poe to Van Gogh. Time, much time, must pass before greatness is recognized. Don't think I haven't been struck by the irony of driving to teach my Harry Potter classes at Pepperdine University in a car considerably older than the books I'm going to teach (my car is a 1992 Acura and is a serious candidate for *Pimp My Ride*).

However, I would argue that—whether old or recent, whether a centuries-old "classic" or an oxymoronic "instant classic"—a good book is a good book. Relevant to this point may be what Robert Frost once said about how a great poem affects us, that readers of such poems don't have to wait a long time to see if they remember the poem; they know at first reading that they'll never forget it. After all, I know how I felt about *Othello* the moment I first read it when I was about sixteen years old. The play just happened to have been written almost four hundred years before I first discovered it, but I would have felt the same about it if it had been written a week ago last Tuesday.

Thirdly, let's think about the academic Hallow that a book really popular with unwashed masses of readers (like you and me) could not possibly be great literature. After all, literary history seems to teach us that the masses will always be wrong, will always prefer N. P. Willis to E. A. Poe, Richard Henry Dana to Melville, and John Neal to Hawthorne (Willis, Dana, and Neal are real authors who were once more widely read and appreciated than those other guys). To some in the academy, a popular book is the antithesis of "serious" literature. I happen to have a Ph.D. in literature; so I'm not supposed to teach popular lit, I'm not supposed to like popular lit, and I'm not even supposed to read popular lit. And now I find that in the twilight of my career, at least in the case of Rowling, I'm doing all of the above—and loving it.

Rowling's books are examples of many of the characteristics of popular lit: for example, they are exciting, suspenseful, plot driven, and formulaic. Moreover, popular lit tends to be ephemeral; it is soon forgotten. Historically, best-selling authors are not Pulitzer- or Nobel-prize winning authors (Hemingway would disprove this point, but

Faulkner and a few hundred others would prove it). Popular lit is not literature that rewards with rereading. Once we know “who done it,” we don’t revisit the book to see if he/she “done it” again.

Yet, the facts that Rowling’s popular books are being taught in dozens of prestigious universities all over the world, that they are the subjects of a growing number of scholarly studies, and that they are reread continuously by millions of readers indicate to me that she has done the more than improbable: she has written immensely “popular classics”—which richly reward “ordinary” re-readers and scholarly researchers alike. Her works exemplify and yet defy the characteristics of popular lit. Like all classic lit, a Potter book remains a thing of beauty that is a joy even after we know that Harry lives, that Dumbledore dies, and that Snape is not pure evil—which is precisely like still loving and still rereading other classics even though we know that Dimmesdale is the father, that Mr. Darcy is really good, and that Daisy was driving the car.

I realize I’ve been on a bit of a rant here and, even more inexplicably, have been “preaching to the choir,” my fellow re-readers, for the last few paragraphs. But (1) maybe you can use some of my arguments with *your* hostile non-reading friends; (2) maybe I can relieve you of any doubts about the time and effort it will be worth for still another reading of all the Potter books as you read this book; and (3) it felt good just to say a few things one more time in print. Whew! Hose me down.

### **When You’ve Read 4100 Pages, We’ll Talk**

After starting (and finishing) *Sorcerer’s Stone* on July 4, 2003, “all” I could read over the next few days were the first four books, and I think I’d read those 1819 pages by about July 15, waiting with baited breath for Book 5 to arrive later that month. But as of July, 2007, a few hundred million of my friends and I were able to say we’d read all 4100 pages of Rowling’s story. And, call me a Pottersnob if you like, but I’m really not interested in hearing how bad the books are, or how unworthy as classic lit they are, or how inferior they are to those of “Saint C. S.” or “Sir J. R. R.,” *by* people who’ve read fewer than all 4100 pages. Again, would a lover of *Hamlet* want to sit down to the taking of toast and tea and talk about the play with people who didn’t make it to the “to be or not to be” part or who don’t know their Fortinbras from their Guildenstern?

How can you explain a Horcrux to a reader who thinks Fluffy is as menacing as it's going to get? How, except by reading the whole, could you possibly explain how Harry's saga progresses from a fear of being hit by a Bludger to a fear of being bludgeoned to death by a killing curse; from a dread of detentions to a dread of dementors; and from dying of embarrassment in Potions class in a dungeon to a decision to die for those dearly loved in the depth of the Forbidden Forest?

Much has been said about how much better the books get. We re-readers know this and, in frustration, know that partial readers don't and can't possibly know this. Forgetting for the moment that Rowling conceived and planned so much, much more than even the most sophisticated first readers realized, there is, too, a natural authorial phenomenon often observed—the maturing of the writer on the pages of the books, right before our eyes. So it's useful and accurate to think not only of the difference in sophistication, complexity, deftness, and style between *Sorcerer's Stone* and *Deathly Hallows* as comparable to the differences between an eleven-year-old child and a seventeen-year-old young man. But it's also instructive to think, by way of comparison, of the differences between Faulkner's early novel *Mosquitoes* and *The Sound and the Fury* or Melville's first novel *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*.

I have had a great number of wonderful conversations since the summer of 2003 about the Potter books—some with people who've written, wonderfully, about the books, like John Granger, Connie Neal, Philip Nel, Karin Westman, Carrie Birmingham, and Daniel Nexon. I have also had countless awkward and sometimes confrontational conversations with fellow academics who, at best, are worried about me and my new literary passion and who, at worst, are maybe worried about a tarnishing of the sacred British literary canon. These unpleasant conversations, in my case, have always, ALWAYS, been with a non-reader or a partial reader (the PRUBONic plague strikes yet again).

In fact, since Book 7 was published and Rowling's story was complete, I have yet to find a single reader of all 4100 pages who thinks the books are worthless or are vastly inferior to those famous fantasy worthies, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, august members of the famous Inklings. Many readers of Rowling, though, have an inkling (sorry) that she is equal to or better than Tolkien and Lewis, but many non-readers remain so convinced that this is impossible, outrageous, and a sacrilege that they will remain Rowling non-readers forever, chronically impaired by PRUBON. Let's get a few things straight. As a *bona fide* academic, a professor, a thirty-plus year teacher and reader of literature, reader

and re-reader of more than a few books (*including* those of Tolkien and Lewis), I will tell you right from the start, here in my Introduction, that I prefer the Potter books over those by Tolkien and Lewis *and* that I consider them superior literary works. In my view, Tolkien’s trilogy seems to be more for adults than for children; Lewis’s chronicles seem to be more for children than adults. Tolkien seems to me to be more for the head than the heart; Lewis more for the heart than the head.

Rowling’s seven-part story, in my view, is one that is so rare as perhaps to be unprecedented in contemporary literature in that it is equally for child and adult, equally touching the heart and challenging the mind. It is solid gold; and, like the porridge, the chair, and the bed in *Goldyllocks*; it is “just right.” Carl Jung once wrote: “In every adult, there lurks a child—an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed . . .” The Potter story seems to speak uniquely to the child in the adult and the adult in the child. To write such a story Rowling has found some deep and ancient magic indeed.

### I Get the Last Word, Professor Bloom

Professor Harold Bloom of Yale has published a great number of books. I have, before this one, published one (a biography of a Louisiana writer named Lyle Saxon, who, before my book, was *not* a household word; I surely turned that around, didn’t I?). So, I would remind my readers that even if Professor Bloom has published a few more books than I have, I have *read* six more Potter books than he has, and, with apologies to Robert Frost, “that has made all the difference.” So, on this subject, the incredibly rich rewards of rereading Rowling, I claim authority and academic superiority. I cured myself of PRUBON in the summer of 2003; and so, my fellow Rowling readers, did many of you at some point.

We readers know a secret—that the Potter books are better, deeper, more touching, lovely, thought-provoking, and unique than any non-readers could possibly know. So, while you and I go back through the seven books together looking at what we missed, overlooked, took for granted, and outright ignored as insignificant the first time(s) through, encourage your non-reading friends (or at least your non-hostile, non-reading friends) to join us. But, above all, my rereading friends, allow me to try with all my literary professorial might to convince you of how much, much more you can gain and see and appreciate from a “serious” (not somber or boring, but serious) rereading of these rich

books. “Serious” literature is literature we reread with pleasure and surprise—delighted or even amazed at what we initially missed that was there, and moved yet again at what we felt the first time. I feel strongly that a book-by-book rereading of the Potter series will enhance our appreciation of the novels and that re-readers will be impressed, at times will be amazed, at what all Rowling has encoded for us to decode as we revisit these magical books.

As Lucy says near the end of C. S. Lewis’s last Narnia book, “This garden is like the stable. It is far bigger inside than it was outside.” Bigger on the inside than on the outside; that’s an intriguing concept, isn’t it? Think of Rowling’s tents, the Ford Anglia’s trunk, and Hermione’s beaded purse. These big books she’s written, large as they are, are indeed bigger on the inside than they are on the outside. That’s precisely what I want to show you in this not-so-big book, and we’ll start by looking inside the smallest, the earliest, and, in many ways, the least pretentious book of all: the one Professor Bloom based his judgment on, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

*This* book is, not surprisingly, divided into seven parts, each devoted to a volume in the Potter series. Within the seven parts are sections focusing usually on three or four chapters of the text we’re going back through together. As we progress, you may want to reread Rowling (entirely or in the chapter sections I have divided them into) and then read my discussions, or vice versa. Whether you’re progressing through Rowling’s books with me (or ahead of me or behind me), you might find my appendix helpful. There you’ll be able to locate in *this* book my comments on any given passage in the Potter books.

Obviously, we don’t need to worry about spoilers, and I won’t issue a single spoiler alert. That’s because for “students” (that’s us) of serious literature (that’s Rowling’s Potter books), there’s no such thing as a spoiler; there’s nothing to be spoiled. We’re reading beyond plot, (*metaplot* readings, let’s say), looking now for other rewards. The American poet Wallace Stevens once wrote:

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

First-time readers of the Potter books, or any books for that matter, enjoy the beauty of inflections, the blackbird whistling. What we re-readers get to do now is enjoy the beauty of innuendo, which comes “just after” (and lasts forever).

*Now*, if you’re ready, let’s get started and see if we can’t get by Fluffy and the other obstacles and get that stone!

