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Living with Harry

Ann Brunjes



"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" Dumbledore beamed at him. "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"
—Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (721).

It is a still July evening, not yet dark. Fireflies begin to flicker as cries of "Stupefy!" and "Expelliarmus!" burst in the back yard.

My seven year old cousin shoots by the screen porch, in hot pursuit of my daughter. Their wands wave, they shriek with laughter, tumble on the grass or freeze into position, shouting spells and hexes as they careen across the yard. My oldest daughter sits on the front porch, a one-woman wand manufacturing operation, churning out wands and replacement wands as the orders roll in. Curls of bark from her jackknife lie in twisty heaps on the front steps.

My children and my cousin Ann's children—six in all, ranging in age from five to twelve—are Harry Potter aficionados. They are, it might be said, obsessed with Harry Potter. They love those books. We read them aloud. We listen to Jim Dale's readings on Books on Tape. They sometimes read to one another, and they read by themselves. But my children and Ann's kids do more than just read the books. They inhabit them. Harry Potter, his friends and enemies have become intertwined with my children's imaginative lives and their relationships to one another. While fans write new

chapters of the Potter books online, my kids and their cousins invite Harry, his friends and enemies out to play on summer evenings and cold winter afternoons, invite them into their lives, make them a part of themselves.

If sales figures are any indication, they are not alone. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories are the most commercially successful book series ever. According to



Nina, center, reads to Julia and Olivia.

Crain's New York Business (February 5, 2007), the "series has sold 325 million copies worldwide and contributed more than \$800 million to revenues at...Scholastic"—this before the final installment, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Scholastic, 2007) sold a record-breaking 11.5 million copies in its first ten days on bookstore shelves (AP Financial Wire, August 2, 2007). Despite—or perhaps because of—the series' popularity, critical assessment of Rowling's novels is divided. Harold Bloom, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* (July 11, 2000) asserts that the only reason a child should read a Potter book is so that he or she "may not forget wholly the sensation of turning the pages of a book, any book." Ouch. As Bloom sneeringly predicted, academics have flocked to Harry: a recent Modern Language Association

International Bibliography search resulted in over 220 hits for academic essays, books and book collections on the series. Even those like Bloom who loathe the books are gratified to see children reading... but even this is no reason for unqualified joy. As David Mehegan reported recently in the *Boston Globe* (July 9, 2007), "While millions of kids snapped up Harry Potter, some of

those interested in youth reading believe that they are not necessarily committed readers. 'People said, "Children are reading again—all hail Harry Potter"' said Roger Sutton, editor of *The Horn Book*, the Boston-based children's book-review magazine. 'But lots of kids read only Harry Potter. It doesn't necessarily turn a kid into a reader.'

As a professional reader of early American literature, what I do is reread novels, reread poems, reread autobiographies and memoirs and sermons. I augment this reading, of course, with others' interpretations (in the form of critical essay) of those same texts...which I then read again. I have built my life as an academic—all academics do—at least in part on a practice of rereading. Yet the expert quoted above finds this poor practice for children and Harold Bloom thinks reading Harry Potter—never mind re-reading Harry Potter—is a colossal waste of time. I think they're all being rather silly. As my kids delve into Harry's exploits, they create room for themselves in Harry's world and for Harry in their world. They push the boundaries of reading, explode the limits of the printed page and engage in powerful, exciting readings of what may indeed be mediocre books by Bloomian standards. Whatever the final critical take on Harry Potter, for my daughter Nina (age twelve), the appeal of the books is straightforward: "They're fantasy but they're so real. Harry and his friends have been together since they were ten and they're now seventeen and figuring out if they're going to continue being friends. Harry's going after this bad guy, but Harry's an orphan who's avenging his



Photographs by Gary Stanton.

parents. He's really powerful! The prophesy tells him he has to kill Voldemort, but even without [the prophesy] he wants to kill him. So it's very real, crazy intricate, and extreme. And even the bad characters are interesting." What more can we ask from a children's book? Crazy intricacy; heroism; complex characterizations; friendship; love. My girls can read and reread Harry all they want, and I will be content.

When I was young, I was a mad reader—I read all the time, read whenever I could. But I had a secret about my reading: I pretty much read, for most of my childhood and early adolescence, only eight books: Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series. I had favorites in the series, and my choices, if you know these books, were a little perverse: *Farmer Boy*, which imagines a year in Laura's husband Almanzo's childhood, and *The Long Winter*, which describes (as the title implies) a dreadful winter in South Dakota during which the Ingalls family nearly starves to death. I loved Laura, and I loved Almanzo, and I am sure that the better parts of my character were formed through the time I spent with them. Laura was so tough—smart and resourceful, reliable and hardworking. She wasn't as pretty or kind as her sister Mary, but she had nerve. Laura's everyday courage, to a sheltered child living in middle-class comfort, was astonishing. Her bravery wasn't easy; she often had to talk herself into it in the midst of tremendous fear. In puzzling over Laura's courage, it gradually dawned on me that she had no choice. There was no room for her

to start blubbering and bewail her or her family's fate, no time for self pity or really even self-reflection. Laura was all about forward movement – completing chores, learning to teach, getting to spring and planting and better times.

In my habitual rereading of the Little House books—a practice that should not have turned me into the “real” reader I have become, according to Roger Sutton—I absorbed Laura. I often imagined myself in a tight spot with my own family or at school, imagined how Laura would handle the little problems I encountered. But I never lived with Laura and Almanzo the way my kids do with Harry and Co. This is partly due to the nature of the books: as you might imagine, a reenactment of starvation in a shanty on the prairie doesn't carry quite the same appeal as saving the wizarding world from destruction. But more importantly, I didn't read the Little House books with anyone else. My parents had never read them, my brother certainly didn't read them, and I didn't know anyone else who loved them the way I did. My enjoyment of Laura and Almanzo lived completely inside my own head.

My children's experience of the Harry Potter books is different than my reading of the Little House series for many reasons. Their first encounter with Harry was through my and my husband's voices—reading Harry has always been a joint enterprise for them. Only my oldest daughter has read each book herself, and my youngest girl, who is five, is just learning to read now. But all three know the intricacies of plot and the full panoply of characters as well as I know the residents of DeSmet, South Dakota. What takes them beyond my experience with Laura and Almanzo is their performance, never the same twice, of chapters or even whole books, carried out with their cousins whenever our families are together. There is a communal element to

their reading that played no part in my experience of the Little House books, and it is different than anything I have ever experienced as a reader, and far richer.

What fascinates me is the vividness of Harry's participation in their lives. Watching the kids chase one



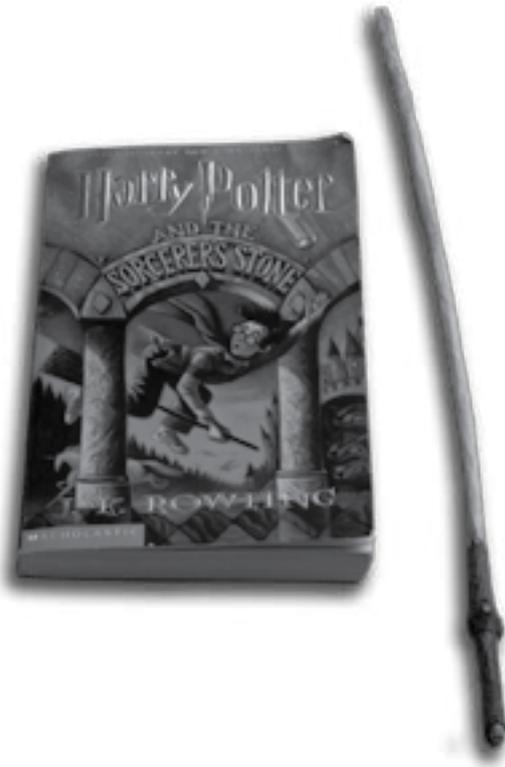
another around the yard, I can figure out that they're doing something Potter-related; the wands are a dead giveaway. But until I asked I had no idea how intricate these games are. The first game they play is called Filch. Filch is the caretaker of Hogwarts, the wizarding school Harry attends. He is a “squib”—a wizard who can't perform magic. This is essentially a fortified game of tag where the unfortunate child playing Filch is It. The game of Filch has the lowest magic quotient—according to Nina (a primary organizer with her cousin Emily, also twelve, of all these games) the game has “some magic and spells but not really.” A game with a higher proportion of magic involves reenactment and revision of various parts of the books. The kids adopt the persona of any character they choose, and decide together which part of the story to play. Gradually the scene changes as play proceeds, above and beyond what happens in Rowling's series. Sometimes the kids create new characters, like a sister for Harry, and sometimes they play themselves with a new name, casting spells and hexes in Hogwarts or Pittsfield or Bridgewater. Thus, Rowling's books are only the start of my kids' relationship to Harry. Perhaps a dearth of interesting female characters led them to decide Harry needed a sister—and poof!—now he has a

sister, whose name (Emma) sounds a great deal like Emily, the child who invented her. The kids don't simply reenact Harry, looping the tape over and over again. They augment, tweak, change. They play out scenes that reflect their moods that day. They bicker over how Harry should attack the ogre, how Hermione should dance at the ball. Together, they own the books in a way I never owned Laura or Almanzo's stories.

Tonight I read the closing chapters of *The Deathly Hallows* with my daughter Olivia, who is eight. (If you haven't read this book and don't want to know what happens, stop reading here).

As we read chapter thirty-three, "The Prince's Tale," Olivia almost levitated off the bed with excitement. "So Snape is really good! Snape really loves people! But why did he ever want to be with the Death Eaters? Why was he so mean to Petunia?" We had to set the book aside for about ten minutes as we explored the complexities of that most intriguing character, Severus Snape. Snape, like Harry, is a rich and interesting character because when he is "good," it is because he chooses goodness. He doesn't do the right thing, like Laura, solely out of duty or necessity or because he can either be good or be dead. Snape is good—he bears the derision and hatred of others, and he sacrifices his life for these same people—for many complex reasons, not the least of which is his need to ease the guilt he bears for having betrayed the woman he loves. This is much more grown-up stuff than I ever faced when reading about Laura.

Olivia's questions and the problem of Snape reflect the "crazy intricacy" of the Potter series: if Snape really is good, why does he do such bad things? This is a big and thorny subject for an eight year old—hell, it's a big and thorny question for me—and my wish for her is that as she puzzles through Snape's perplexing behavior she will be able to transfer what she learns there to her interactions with people in that other, non-reading part of her life. Laura taught me to be dutiful, a character trait that has not always served me well. Harry and Snape might teach Olivia that true goodness is a path we select and that being good—being decent—often requires disobedience. In doing so, Snape can be as real to Olivia as the annoying boy who pokes her dur-



ing library period. As Dumbledore tells Harry, because something exists in your head doesn't mean that it isn't real. Olivia can return to the conundrum of Snape her whole life. In reenacting his best and worst moments with her cousins, in arguing about why or how he does what he does, perhaps she can figure him out. And the wisdom she gains from that rereading is as solid and meaningful as anything she encounters in the physical world.

Reading, for me, is about love. It is about intimacy. When we read a book—when that book inhabits

us, and we inhabit it—we come to know and love (but not necessarily like) the characters in it perhaps better than the people in our own lives. And when we reread, we have an opportunity to revisit those people and our moments with them in a way we never can do in the workaday world. This is the joy and solace that reading has brought me. And no matter what Harold Bloom says, by reading Harry Potter deeply and repeatedly and with others who are doing the same thing, my children can have that same joy...only better.

—Ann Brunjes is Associate Professor of English and Chairperson of the Department of English.