



HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE

J. K. Rowling

OVERVIEW

First published under the title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in the United Kingdom in 1997, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by British writer J. K. Rowling (1965–) is about an eleven-year-old orphan who discovers he is a wizard and has been admitted to Hogwarts, a boarding school for young witches and wizards. Leaving the home of his unkind relatives to attend Hogwarts, Harry learns spells, plays the wizarding sport of Quidditch, and makes friends and enemies. The story culminates in a confrontation with Lord Voldemort, the dark wizard who killed his parents, over the Sorcerer's Stone, a magical object with the ability to grant unlimited wealth and immortality. The book is the first in a series of seven, with the last volume published in 2007.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone quickly became a hit with young readers and critics alike. By 1999 it had topped the *New York Times* best-seller list. It has since been translated into seventy-three languages and become one of the best-selling books of all time. Within a few years, Rowling's Harry Potter series had become a worldwide phenomenon, with each new volume selling millions of copies within days of its release. The series' immense popularity has led to an enormously profitable media franchise, including films, a play, theme parks, and merchandise. Literary criticism on the Harry Potter books has been extensive, with many focusing on Rowling's treatment of wizards and magic, although critics often question her place within the canon of children's literature as well as the series' suitability for adult readers.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

The Sorcerer's Stone in Rowling's novel is based on the Philosopher's Stone, an object from legends that dates back as far as 300 CE. According to lore, it was used in alchemy, a medieval science that attempts to transmute base metals into gold and to create an elixir of immortality. Nicolas Flamel, portrayed in the novel as a 660-year-old friend of Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore, was an actual historical figure who lived from about 1330 to 1418 in France. In his lifetime

Flamel was a successful scribe and seller of manuscripts. He became an infamous figure two centuries after his death, when a number of books on alchemy were published and attributed to him, such as *Livre des figures hiéroglyphiques* (1612). It was alleged that Flamel had created the Philosopher's Stone and gained immortality.

Rowling has stated that she was influenced by various other texts when writing *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Many observers have made comparisons to the children's novels of English writer Roald Dahl (1916–1990). Dahl's child heroes, such as James in *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) and Matilda in *Matilda* (1988), are often exceptional children raised by horrid adults and eventually rescued through supernatural circumstances. The Harry Potter series has also been compared to other popular children's fantasy series, including the Chronicles of Narnia series (1950–1956) by British writer C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) and the *Lord of the Rings* series (1954–1955) by British writer J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973). Dumbledore, the wise old wizard who guides Harry, has frequently been compared to Tolkien's Gandalf, an aged wizard who similarly guides the protagonist Frodo Baggins. The Harry Potter series has also been compared to other texts about young wizards becoming educated in the art of magic, often at boarding schools. These include books as diverse as *The Sword in the Stone* (1938) by English writer T. H. White (1906–1964), in which the young King Arthur trains with the wizard Merlin; the Earthsea series (1964–) by American writer Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–), a fantasy series about young people with magical gifts who train to become wizards; and the Worst Witch series (1974–) by English writer Jill Murphy (1949–), about a clumsy witch at a boarding school for students of magic.

With her series Rowling continued the tradition of literature about the education of wizards but created her own unique magical society. Unlike Narnia or Middle-earth, which are their own worlds, Rowling's magical society functions secretly alongside 1990s British non-magical (“Muggle”) society. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, wizards have a highly





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POTTER-THEMED ATTRACTIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE

Although the Harry Potter book series and film series ended in 2007 and 2011 respectively, worldwide “Pottermania” remained in full swing. In 2010 the first Harry Potter theme park opened at Universal Studio’s Islands of Adventure in Orlando, Florida. By 2016 three other parks had opened, including another in Orlando, one in the Universal Studios in Osaka, Japan, and one at Universal Studios Hollywood in Los Angeles, California. The parks include a flight-simulated ride in a replica of Hogwarts called “Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey,” as well as other rides, a replica of the Hogwarts Express train, and many Potter-themed stores. Since 2012 Harry Potter fans in the London area have had the chance to go on the Warner Brothers Studio Tour, a popular attraction offering a behind-the-scenes look at the making of the films.

In 2016 the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* opened in London’s West End. It was written by Jack Thorne (1978–) in consultation with J. K. Rowling and is considered an official continuation of the Harry Potter universe. The play’s script in book form sold more than two million copies in two days. Rowling’s 2001 book *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, a spin-off of the Harry Potter books based on one of Harry’s textbooks, was adapted as a 2016 film directed by David Yates (1963–), director of the final four Harry Potter films.

developed community, with a magical government, schools of magic, magical currency held in banks run by goblins, and stores catering to their magical needs. Most Muggles are unaware of the existence of the wizarding world, but ignorance between Muggles and wizards runs both ways; although wizards know about the Muggle world, children from wizarding families are generally unfamiliar with Muggle society and culture.

The tremendous success of the Harry Potter series was deeply influential on children’s books and the publishing industry, with many attempts to create “the next Harry Potter.” *The Lightning Thief* (2005), the first book in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series by American writer Rick Riordan (1964–), is about a normal boy who discovers he is the son of a Greek god. Percy attends school to control his powers and has a male and a female best friend, like Harry. *The Magicians* (2009) by American writer Lev Grossman (1969–) is also a story of a normal boy discovering he has magical powers, and many critics have described it as a dark and adult response to the Harry Potter series.

THEMES AND STYLE

As in most coming-of-age stories, discovery of the self is an important theme in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Harry’s aunt and uncle do not want

Harry to know anything about his parents, including the circumstances of their death and the world that they came from. It is not until Harry receives his invitation to Hogwarts that he realizes that many strange incidents in his life are the result of his own supernatural powers and that he belongs to (and is, in fact, a celebrity in) a community of people just like him. The self is further explored through the wizarding students’ purchase of their wand. Every wand is unique to its owner, demonstrated through the saying “the wand chooses the wizard.” Another step in the young wizard’s self-discovery involves the Sorting Hat, which places each new Hogwarts student into one of four “houses,” depending on his or her characteristics.

Another theme in the novel is the dangers of excessive desire. This is first demonstrated by Harry’s cousin Dudley, a spoiled bully with an extra bedroom full of broken birthday presents. When Harry arrives at Hogwarts, he encounters the Mirror of Erised (“desire” spelled backwards), a magical mirror that displays whatever the person viewing it most desires. Dumbledore warns Harry against spending too much time in front of the mirror: “Men have wasted away before it, not knowing if what they have seen is real, or even possible.” Another symbol of excessive desire is the Sorcerer’s Stone. The evil wizard Lord Voldemort tries to steal the stone because he wants to sustain his existence at all costs. After Harry successfully foils him, Dumbledore decides to destroy the stone, bemoaning the fact that “humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.”

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone is written in a third-person omniscient point of view. Although the novel tends to hew closely to Harry’s perspective, it also narrates events that Harry could not have had knowledge of, such as the opening chapter, when he is a baby. Many reviewers have noted the humor of the novel. The first sentence, “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much,” is an example of the narrator slipping into the voice of the characters, a technique called “free indirect discourse,” which pokes gentle fun at the attitudes of Mr. and Mrs. Dursley using their own words.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

When Rowling’s novel was first published in the United Kingdom in 1997 under the title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, it received generally positive reviews. Reviewing the book for the *Scotsman* in 1997, Lindsey Fraser wrote that the novel had a “complex and demanding plot in the form of a hugely entertaining thriller,” observing that “what distinguishes this novel from so many other fantasies is its grip on reality.” In her 1997 book review for the *Financial Times*, Nicola Hopkinson said that “Rowling is clearly an exciting new talent, and her book is excellent fun and very readable.” The novel quickly became a best seller in the United Kingdom and began



to win British awards, including the National Book Awards Children's Book of the Year and the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize. In 1998 *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was published in the United States, where it also received good reviews. Reviewing the novel for the *New York Times* in 1999, Michael Winerip called it “funny, moving, and impressive.”

In the years following its initial publication, Rowling's series became an unprecedented and ubiquitous cultural phenomenon. The Harry Potter series is the best-selling book series of all time and has spawned theme parks, eight films ranked as the second-highest-grossing film franchise of all time, and a devoted fan community of adults and children alike. As Rowling's series grew darker and more complex, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* came to be seen as a lighter and more innocent book, as noted by Michiko Kakutani in her 2007 *New York Times* review of the final book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. As both a literary series and a popular-culture phenomenon, the books have been attracting critical attention since the early 2000s.

Although some critics, such as Harold Bloom (1930–), have questioned the literary merits of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, scholarship on the book and its sequels has proliferated since its publication. In a 2002 essay, Karin E. Westman analyzed the consumerism of the wizarding world, “a community complete with its own international bank, global trade and thriving monopolies alongside entrepreneurial ventures,” and explored the series' engagement with the legacy of conservative British prime minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013). In a 2011 article in *Children's Literature*, Sarah Cantrell read the series in terms of the ideas of French theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984), calling the wizarding world a “heterotopia,” or space of otherness, “regulated by sign systems” such as passwords and secret knowledge required for entry.

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Author J. K. Rowling reads from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* on the South Lawn of the White House in April 2010. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

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Emily Jones