

The Evangelical Mind

They're Not So Wild About Harry

By Richard Mouw

I recently read "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." I decided to read the first book in J.K. Rowling's hot-selling series because I had heard so much about the stories. While my initial motivation was to keep up on an important item in popular culture, I plan to read further installments simply for the sake of enjoyment. The Harry Potter books may be written for children, but they are also a good read for adults. I highly recommend them.

I must quickly add that my endorsement here would upset some Christians, especially in the evangelical world. They are warning against these books, as they have since the Potter books have become popular, and in some cases have succeeded in having them banned from schools. These folks worry about the fact that Harry Potter, an orphan who at the beginning of the story is living with a mean-spirited aunt and uncle, discovers that he is a wizard. He finds his way, helped along by people who know he has unique magical powers, to a school for wizards, where he learns the occult arts.

Harry's Christian critics think they see some dangerous ideas at work here. Not too far beneath the surface of these seemingly harmless adventures, they insist, lurks a worldview that stands in stark contrast to the biblical story. And they don't want Christian children exposed to a view of reality where magical spells and curses and trickery is the rule of the day.

The Bible doesn't look too kindly on sorcerers and witches. In the New Testament's Book of Acts, for example, the apostles come across a sorcerer who tries to compete with them for a potential convert. The Apostle Paul addresses him with some harsh words: "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10).

I take these concerns seriously. There is indeed a new fascination with the occult in our culture. Disillusioned with the notion that scientific technology can provide all the answers to our problems, many people want something that allows for more mystery and that gives them access to more "spiritual" forces. They are fascinated with wizardry and witchcraft, astrology and tarot cards. And have no doubt, Christians should not rely on magical means to deal with our problems. Biblical faith is grounded in our total dependence on a sovereign God who cannot be made to do our bidding by magical incantations or the casting of spells.

J.K. Rowling's Christian critics are deeply concerned about their children. They see so many things in our culture that make raising children in the Christian faith difficult. Many evangelical teachers and preachers make much these days of the theme of "spiritual warfare"; Satan, they insist, is very busy attempting to influence our hearts and minds, turning us from the paths of obedience so clearly marked out in the Scriptures. It doesn't help that Harry Potter, unlike other fantasy-fiction characters, lives in contemporary London and works his magic in homes and schools not all that different from the ones that we know so well.

I don't think these concerns are silly. Christian people must be continually on guard against the designs of the Evil One. But I still like the Harry Potter stories. And my positive verdict is also grounded in Christian considerations. I take some comfort from the fact that other evangelicals have come to Harry Potter's defense. Charles Colson wrote a short commentary speaking well of the books. Alan Jacobs, a Wheaton College literature professor, recently wrote a lengthy review in the journal *First Things* that defended Harry Potter. Both evangelical leaders point out that, unlike so much that is associated with the occult, the Potter stories make a clear distinction between good and evil--which means that these tales have much in common with the wonderful

fantasy stories written by C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and other Christian writers who also used "magical" themes.

I was raised in a home where the Bible was an important part of our daily lives. But I also loved the old fairy tales as a child. And I have never thought that the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm stood in radical opposition to the Gospel. In my adult life, I still enjoy fantasy tales and am a fan of Lewis and Tolkien.

Recently, I preached at my seminary about the importance of cultivating our imaginations. I acknowledged at the outset that when the Bible uses words that we translate as "imagination," it usually means something bad--people are described, for example, as following their "vain imaginings." But this merely underscores the fact that imagination can serve unrighteous purposes. There is, however, a good role for imagination in the Christian life. My text for that sermon was a wonderful verse from the Psalms, where the psalmist says to the Lord: "I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding" (Ps. 119: 32).

We need good imaginations--an "enlarged understanding"--as we think about how best to relate the Gospel to our present-day culture. If Christians are unimaginative, we risk engaging in something very much like the magic we criticize: We will act as if just saying the right words will produce the right results. Effective preaching and evangelism require that we probe deeply into the hopes and fears of people who live in a confused and broken world. Christians need to cultivate empathy, and this in turn requires active imaginations.

Tolkien, who wrote the Hobbit stories, once said that he liked to create fairy tales because as a Christian, he believed that the Gospel is a fairy story--except, he quickly added, the Gospel is the *true* fairy tale. There really *is* a curse on us, as a result of our fallen condition. And Jesus really did wipe out the curse and defeat the evil powers at Calvary and when he burst forth from the tomb on Easter morning.

I thought about Tolkien's remarks when I was reading the Harry Potter book. As Harry went about his struggles against evil powers, I was reminded of the fact that Jesus Christ has secured the ultimate victory over all those forces in the universe that threaten to undo us. And I gave thanks that when I immerse myself in the magical tales that are so fascinating to children, I can enlarge my own understanding of that larger and most wonderful story of God's plan of redemption.