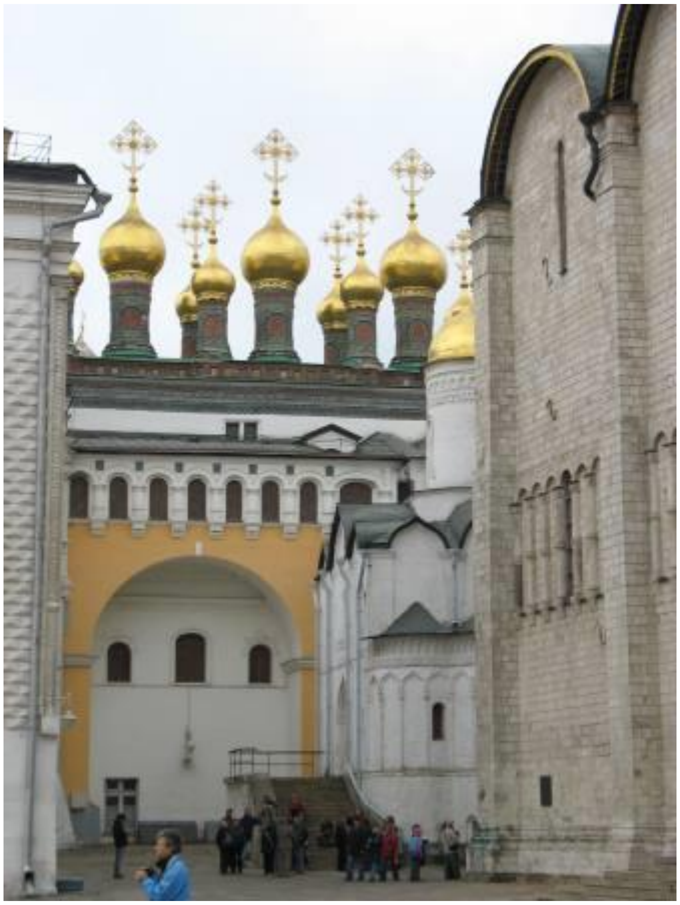

Cupolas in the Kremlin, Moscow, Russia

The Global Appeal of the Harry Potter Saga

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‘Harry Potter’ and ‘high’ literature

Many readers of ‘high’ literature sneer at the ‘Harry Potter Saga’ and hold its global popularity against it. Before I read the books, my views were negative because of what I perceived as a commercial hullabaloo, but – like that of my friends’ – my criticism was private, informal, and muted. However, after the release of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (henceforth: *Phoenix*) in 2003, the prominent British author A.S. Byatt publicly claimed that Rowling’s world was made up of ”intelligently patchworked derivative motifs from all sorts of children’s literature …” and that “Ms Rowling’s magic world has no place for the numinous. It is written for people whose imaginative lives are confined to TV cartoons, and the exaggerated (more exciting, not threatening) mirror-worlds of soaps, reality TV and celebrity gossip.” (as quoted by Allison 2003) Referring only to *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (henceforth: *Stone* (1997)), the American literary academic Harold Bloom (Yale) attacked the literary worth of the Potter books in 2000 and 2003, claiming that “Rowling’s mind is so governed by clichés and dead metaphors that she has no other style of writing.” (*Wikipedia*: ‘Criticism and praise’ (Harry Potter))

This is a matter of taste, and although hotly debated, ‘taste’ is not usually a cornerstone of educated discourse. Therefore, I shall from now on disregard negative views of the Harry Potter Saga.

Instead, I shall address more interesting questions such as “What makes it tick?” – “Why is so popular?” – “Why is it widely read in today’s globalised world?”

The Saga as globalised literature

The Harry Potter series is popular beyond measure. The first volume came out in the United Kingdom in 1997 and became a smashing success in the US. Since then, the books have been translated into more than sixty languages, all shortly after the publication of the books in English. Even though one may question both the number of translations and point out that in some countries (e.g. Russia) there are several competing and not equally ‘legal’ translations, this figure bears witness to an extraordinary appeal and to a worldwide success.

Let us have a look at some languages that the books have been translated into according to *Wikipedia*.

Virtually all European languages are represented, including some with few native speakers, such as Faerose and Greenlandic (both of which have less than 50,000 native speakers); minority languages such as Welsh and Scots Gaelic in Britain; and Catalan, Galician, and Valencian in Spain. Some of the European languages that the Saga is translated into do not belong to the Indo-European language family. This goes for Basque, Estonian, Finnish, and Hungarian, but as with Greenlandic (which is an Inuit language), it can be argued that the appeal of the Saga is promoted by geographical, cultural, or political proximity. This might also have a bearing on the stories’ popularity in Turkey and Egypt.

But apart from this, there is a wide array of Asian countries that have translations of Harry Potter. India can boast of Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and several other language versions and Pakistan of Bengali and Urdu. One could try and explain this as some lingering nostalgia for the rule of the Raj, but then we still have to account for the translations in East Asian nations that were never part of the British Empire: China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Although there are books that have been translated into more languages, none surpasses the Potter Saga in terms of

(a) its appeal to a broad readership and
(b) the brief time span between the release of the English books and the first translations.

Let us therefore examine the larger narrative and historical contexts of the Harry Potter books in detail.

‘Harry Potter’ and oral narratives

As early as 1819, the German fairytale collector and editor Wilhelm Grimm pointed out that there is something universal about narratives. He did so in his ‘Introduction: on the nature of fairytales’ in the Second Edition of the German Grimm *Tales* (‘*Kinder- u. Hausmärchen*’):

> “[Märchen] are found not only in the most diverse areas where German is spoken, but also among our racially related northern neighbours and the English; they exist in … related forms even among Romance and Slav peoples. … And, finally, individual features, idioms as well as the cohesion of the whole, correspond with Eastern, Persian and Indian fairytales.” (Here from Dollerup 1999: 353-354 since the forty-page ‘Introduction’ is not found in modern textual German editions and reprints)

These comments must be combined with the preface that the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s wrote for their collection of tales. This preface is found in the First Edition vol. 1 (1812) and is reprinted in most scholarly German editions. The brothers note that “Everything has been collected, with a few exceptions as noted, from oral traditions in Hesse and in the Main and Kinzig regions in the duchy of Hanau, from where we hail. …The custom of telling tales is ever on the wane. …Telling these tales is so extraordinary a custom … that one must like it whatever others say.”

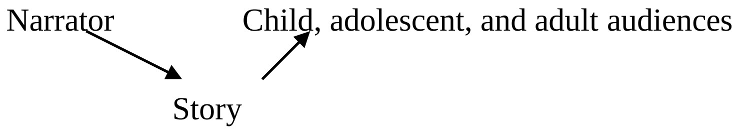
The brothers Grimm claimed that they had collected oral narratives: “At any rate, one can quickly see that the custom persists only in places where one finds a warm receptivity to poetry or where there are imaginations not yet warped by the adversities of life.” (All excerpts from 1812 are from Tartar’s translation 1987: 205)

Many readers of this piece may not be aware that the first Harry Potter books were marketed as children’s literature. “Despite Rowling’s statement that she did not have any particular age group in mind when she began to write the *Harry Potter* books, the publishers initially targeted them at children aged nine to eleven.” (*Wikipedia*. ‘Origin and publishing history’ (Harry Potter)).

Many foreign publishing houses that acquired the rights for their own countries believed so – and sometimes even commissioned translators specialising in children’s literature. They would issue ads which convinced many first-time purchasers worldwide that the books were meant for reading aloud for children and used them accordingly. And let me add that in English at least, they make for splendid reading aloud.

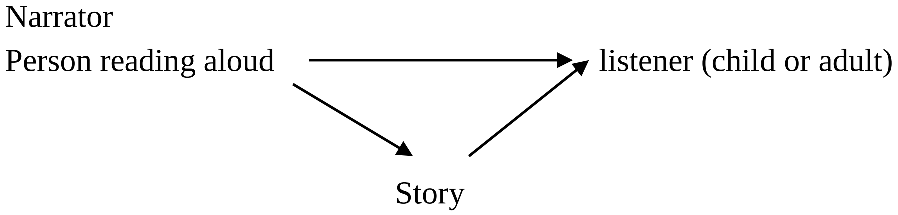
It is therefore in place to consider oral narratives and mediation in a historical perspective. We focus on the notion of mediation, specifically on ‘interaction’ between narrators and audiences in the telling of tales:

Illustration 1


Narrator
Child, adolescent, and adult audiences
Story

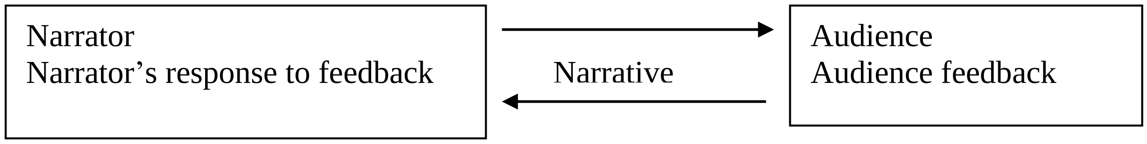
The illustration implies that any child, adolescent, or adult may prompt another person to tell a story or to one read aloud from a book. In order not to complicate matters unnecessarily, we stop here, asserting that there is interaction between the parties involved:

Illustration 2


Narrator
Person reading aloud
listener (child or adult)
Story

Introducing the concept of ‘a narrative contract’, a situation comprising a narrator and an audience willing to hear a story, we get a much more complex picture of sending and feedback in storytelling (including reading aloud) which, in a simplified form, looks as follows:

Illustration 3


Narrator
Narrator’s response to feedback
Narrative
Audience
Audience feedback

It is appreciated that the narrative contract includes the telling of a story, the story, and the feedback. Consequently, it involves the age, the gender, and the whole ‘cultural background’ of all parties. Provided this narrative contract satisfies everybody involved, there may be requests for more storytelling between the narrator and the audience. (For further discussions, see Dollerup, Holbek, Reventlow, and Rosenberg 1984; Dollerup 1999: 28-29 + Index)

Narrative contracts have drawn audiences, small as well as large ones, throughout history. In various epochs, oral epics, romances, ballads, folktales, and the like have entertained listeners from different social strata and age groups, including children.

It is noted that I do not distinguish clearly between oral and written literature. This is deliberate: if we consider only prose stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end as narratives, they have existed only for a relatively short period, which varies according to whether our definition connects with novels, short narrative pieces, or short stories. If we expand the definition to comprise epics and dramas, the earliest ones date back beyond classical antiquity: the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad* must have been recited, sung, or sometimes read aloud from scripts. Similarly, the inscriptions on statues of heroes in ancient Rome were meant to be read aloud to admiring crowds; there were precious few people around who could actually read.

The whole concept of narrative, indeed of much communication between rulers (senders) and their subjects, was based on 'contracts' along the same lines between mediators such as messengers or readers and audiences until well into the 19th century. However, in the larger perspective on reading, the European Renaissance (14th-17th centuries) saw improved education, and with the establishment of middle classes in Europe and revolutionary ideas about equality, educational systems gradually evolved over the centuries, so that, around the end of the 19th century, illiteracy was largely a thing of the past in most of Europe, the Americas, and many other parts of the world.

Oral vs. written literature

But in the period that we may roughly define as 16-18th century Europe, the lopsided socio-economic development of literacy created a split hitherto not noticeable, namely that between

- **silent reading** as an individual activity and
- **story-telling or reading-aloud** as a social activity. With blurred borderlines, we may cautiously divide these two last ones into oral forms (delivered orally and directed at illiterates and underprivileged people, including children) and written forms of narration, primarily written by 'established' authors but also material from oral tales edited and cleansed of crude features for reading aloud to audiences, sometimes including children, often by educated women, first in bourgeois and subsequently in middle-class households.

Around 1800 general cultural movements in Europe, notably Romanticism, rediscovered oral narratives and sometimes claimed that they were part of the common shared cultural heritage as did the brothers Grimm. In 1823, their stories were sifted and translated into English by Edgar Taylor and David Jardine as *German Popular Stories*. The two translators disregarded the ancient cultural aspects and targeted their selection towards British children. Back in Germany, Jacob Grimm was already a famous linguist, and accordingly Wilhelm Grimm was the sole curator of the *Tales*. He took his cue from the English selection. Out of the nearly 200 tales in *The Large Edition* (*Die grosse Ausgabe*), he therefore chose fifty stories that he considered appropriate for children, *The Small Edition* (*Die kleine Ausgabe*).

By strange ways and means the Grimm *Tales* inspired the Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen to write his fairytales which he – initially unabashed – termed “for children”. (Dollerup 2006)

Fiction for adolescents

Although e.g. France and Germany had seen precursors, ‘literature for children’ now became recognised as something in its own right. Education continued to gain ground and soon there were niches for textbooks for school as well as books for children that they could read on their own or which were read aloud to them. In Britain, for instance, the distinguished royal navy captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848) wrote stories about young men and their adventures in the British navy such as *Peter Simple* (1834) and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836).

In 1857 Thomas Hughes (1822-1896) published *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, a eulogy on his own days at Rugby under the Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) who was the headmaster 1828-1841 and whose ideas had a great impact on educational views in Britain. With his book, Thomas Hughes founded the British public school novel, a genre which was kept alive for more than one and a half centuries by e.g. F. W. Farrar’s (1831-1903) moralistic *Eric, or, little by Little* (1858) and a host of other novels about boys at British public schools, books that were mutually indistinguishable but definitely distinct from other literature for young and adolescent boys.

Let us note in passing that the public (or as today’s preferred term goes: ‘private’) school establishment is a powerful institution for the upper middle-classes in the United Kingdom to this very day. Thus a *Time Magazine* article on British public schools reported that in 2005 “97 [students] out of a class of 263 [from Eton] were offered places at Oxford or Cambridge,” and that, “[e]ven though they educate only 7% of secondary school children, private schools are responsible for 68% of barristers, 42% of top politicians and 54% of leading journalists.”

Today few foreigners are likely to be familiar with more than one or two British public school novels. A few students of English may have read Thomas Hughes’ first attempt in the genre, although whole chapters are poorly written and the tone is unbearably patronising and patriotic. The occasional film buff may have seen the film *If* directed by Lindsay Anderson (1967) which is an incisive and withering attack on public-school norms, suppression, and barbarity and which leads up to a revolt resulting in a sanguinary massacre; more film aficionados are likely to know the American director Peter Weir’s film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) which delicately describes the mental destruction of a sensitive boy at a US private school. One collection of short stories, Rudyard Kipling’s *Stalky & Co.* (1899), stands apart by being savage, unorthodox, and hilariously funny to most European readers even today.

Harry Potter and the public school novel

Echoes

Although J. K. Rowling never went to public school herself, it is obvious that her frame story is inspired by the British public school novel. Virtually all ‘normal’ public schools in the literature are located at manors or in impressive buildings with extensive grounds in southern England, whereas Hogwarts, Harry Potter’s “school of witchcraft and wizardry”, is a grand castle, situated far up north in never-never land.

Lindsay Anderson’s film *If* is referred to in Dudley’s knowledge that at Stonewall, the school Harry is supposed to attend in *Stone*, “[t]hey stuff people’s heads down the toilets first day.” It is hard to tell whether Peter Weir’s film has affected the mood of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (henceforth: *Prisoner*). But two other precursors have indubitably left their imprint on the Saga.

Tom Brown’s Schooldays

Tom Brown’s old school horse at Rugby has been hovering elusively above ‘Dobby’, the trusty house elf, and it is finally revealed for good in *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince* (henceforth: *Prince*) when the teacher of divination, Professor Trelawney, disparages her rival teacher who is a centaur, by using the full name: ”Or **Dobbin**, as I prefer to think of him. … [Now] that I am returned to school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse.”(My emphasis) This is, however, only an aside.

Conversely, on his arrival at Rugby, Tom Brown is immediately embroiled in a strange game that is described in much detail, namely ‘rugby’. This game was ‘new’ when the book was written and therefore called for a technical description. Rugby is rough and tough as the players may grab opponents and make them fall. The main points are that the ball is oblong, that the goals are scored by throwing the ball between the poles above the crossbar, and that they are counted in a special way. Furthermore the players may run with the ball, kick and throw it to one another but only sideways or backwards.

This is the precursor of “Quidditch”, the game that delights witches, wizards, and readers of the first Harry Potter books. Quidditch games are definitely turning points in the Harry’s social rise and physical falls and – unlike *Tom Brown’s* rugby – the game is integrated in the plot of some of the Harry Potter books.

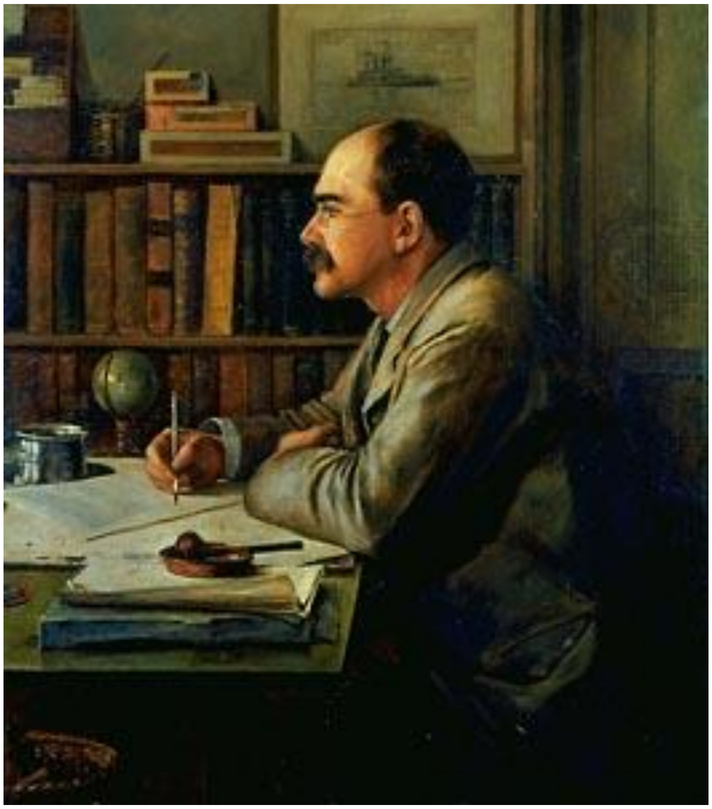
Stalky & Co.

Rudyard Kipling’s book takes place at modest public school largely financed by army officers for their sons. Accordingly most pupils are destined for (and look forward to) careers in the army of the British Empire. There are echoes from this collection in the Saga.

Thus the name of Harry’s obnoxious uncle, Vernon, is identical with that of a minor character in *Stalky*.

Two other points are worth noting, one is the feature that the author of *Stalky*, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1935), Harry is of small stature; this therefore seems to be an ‘inside joke’ since this appears to have little impact on the plots. Like Kipling, Harry also wears glasses – until the end of *Harry*

Potter and the Deathly Hallows (henceforth: *Hallows*) at which Harry becomes a rounded and near-perfect personality which implies that the disappearance of the glasses is part of the final cleansing. Kipling himself attended 'Westward Ho!' the school depicted in *Stalky*, but unlike the other pupils, he was never meant to be an officer in the British imperial army. He became a journalist in India and subsequently a famous writer. In *Stalky*, Kipling's alter ego sounds the name of 'Beetle' – which we can easily associate with Rita Skeeter, the aggressive and unscrupulous reporter in Rowling's Saga who is, furthermore, transformed into a beetle.



Rudyard Kipling 1865-1936

The final short story in Kipling's book deals with Stalky's gallant - or foolish - military skirmishes with Afghan warriors. Do we see the British Empire builders in peril in *Chamber*? I think so:

"… Even as … Harry … tried to stand, ready to die fighting, a loud, long note sounded, and a blaze of light flamed through the hollow … . Mr Weasley's car was thundering down the slope, headlights glaring, its horns screeching, knocking spiders aside; several were thrown on their backs, their endless legs waving in the air."

Having read a number of public school novels in my youth, it seems to me that there was too much ‘social life’ (concerning both positive and negative aspects of school life, e.g. sports and bullying) to give alumni time to roam the school grounds extensively. I am therefore inclined to believe that rambles of the boys in these two precursors may presage the explorations of the Hogwarts grounds that Sirius, Lupin, the treacherous Peter, and James, Harry’s father embark on in the course of their school days. This roaming is undertaken to keep it secret that Lupin is a werewolf and leads to the creation of the Marauders’ Map which plays a major role in the Saga.

The British public school and the Harry Potter Saga

The Harry Potter books have some **features in common** with traditional public school novels.

Like all other headmasters of prominent public schools, Professor Dumbledore is a figure of towering importance and influence in society at large. We may note that at Hogwarts intimate friendships are established (e.g. Ron, Harry, and Hermione), that there is peer-influence, and that fair play is encouraged and considered praiseworthy. Sports are extremely important to the individual as well as to school life, since the houses compete with one another, etc.

However, even when we disregard the fact that Hogwarts is a school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, there are striking **differences**.

There is a technical feature: public school novels are usually one-volume stories while the Harry Potter Saga is an epic comprising seven tomes. Old school traditions are strong in genuine genre novels and virtually absent in Rowling’s stories. The syllabi are totally different not only because of the magical subjects, but also in their thematic implications: although we do hear about “maths” in *Stalky* and *Poets*, most subjects taught in traditional public school novels such as Latin are fairly unnecessary in ‘real life’, whereas most subjects at Hogwarts turn out to be useful somehow or other in the end. And in so saying, I refer both to the context of each volume as a story in its own right as well as the Saga as a whole with an ending gathering up (nearly all) loose ends and hints.

Then there are numerous **deviations**. Traditional public school novels delight in descriptions of private “feasts” in which the boys eat their fill of such modest ‘delicacies’ as cold meat. Conversely, the meals in Harry Potter are colourful, immediately recognised as tasty, and elaborated upon with gusto, e.g. “roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup and for some strange reason, mint humbugs.” (*Stone*) Although thoroughly British, the sheer abundance and variety definitely smacks more of *Arabian Nights* than of Spartan British public school life.

In traditional public school novels, the servant classes are virtually invisible except as menial labour whose intervention may be beneficial or obnoxious at some low level and whose importance to the ‘main story’ is marginal. This applies in particular to women; they are absent or distant (e.g. matrons and in some cases the wives of headmasters or teachers).

In the Harry Potter Saga, women hold key positions. Professor McGonagall, the strict head of Gryffindor, Professor Sprout whose medical and herbological expertise saves Harry from being crippled and Ginny from petrification in *Chamber*, and all the girls who join or compete with Harry (e.g. Hermione, Fleur Delacourt) are all significant in the plots. And so are, in other ways, the tyrannical Dolores Umbridge, the haughty Narcissa Malfoy, and a risible character like Professor Trelawney whose prophecies have an enormous impact.

Other staff members are also highly visible in Harry Potter's world. Hagrid, the gamekeeper who takes care of the magical creatures, shifts between being humiliated and rejected by the wizard community and being a teacher and Dumbledore's confidante. The community of house elves that, much to the astonishment of Harry (and why not admit it: most readers) so quietly and discreetly see to the smooth operation behind school life, also participate in the main story, e.g. when, at the beginning of *Chamber*, Dobby warns Harry about impending dangers; and in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (henceforth *Goblet*) in which, after the Quidditch World Cup has finished, Winky is blamed for having conjured up the Dark Mark.

The relationships with the surrounding world are even more different. Traditional public school boys are condescending and feel infinitely superior to 'others' and behave as if they live in a different world (which, of course, they do). In the wizard community everybody's prime concern is the welfare and care of Muggle society. This is amply evident by the importance Ron's father attaches to his employment at the "Office of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts" (although it appears to be a dead end to all others), poignant when Fudge and Scrimgeour, Ministers for Magic, pay their visit to the real British Prime Minister in Downing Street no. 10 in *Prince*, but it is pervasive in all aspects such as Professor McGonagall's transformations into a cat, Dumbledore's care not to be seen in the Muggle world, and in the final outcome that brings about peace.

In sum: the Harry Potter books have so few points in common with traditional public school novels that they do not belong to the genre except for the trappings and some borrowed terms.

The English language

The books are full of wordplay, puns, and hints that are so hard to uncover in rational detail that even linguists, critics, and scholars had better give up rather than come up with "the one and only solution".

A few cover whole paragraphs but most are found in words and phrases. Of course, the name of the house "Slytherin" is not meant to be complimentary, but others are complex such as "Gilderoy Lockhart" (Goldilocks? Roy(al)? Locks? Blonde? Charming man?). Rather than delving into these matters, we note that there are innocent surprises such as the Sorting Hat's "Bee in your bonnet?" when Harry puts it on his head in Dumbledore's office, not to mention the playfulness involving puns and wordplay e.g. in the list of textbooks and their authors for first-year students:

… Magical Theory *by Adalbert Waffling*

A Beginners’ Guide to Transfiguration *by Emeric Switch*
One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi *by Phyllida Spore*. (*Stone*)

Autumn

Other aspects of British life and the Harry Potter Saga

The Harry Potter books are most obviously British in that, apart from Hogwarts which is somewhere up north with views of snow-peaked mountains, the story unfolds mostly in southern England around London in which we find the King’s Cross station and Diagon Alley with wizarding shops. They appear to be within striking distance of both the Dursley and the Weasley homes.

In addition, the names of the central characters are British. Harry Potter and Hermione Granger’s surnames point to ancestors working with ceramics and agriculture, whereas their first names span from the common ‘Harry’ to the Shakespearean ‘Hermione’ and thus from unpretentious living to the most exalted spheres of literature (and royalty since ‘Hermione’ is a queen in *A Winter’s Tale*). Conversely, the Malfoys and their claim to being true-bloods hark back to French or Norman nobility in British history.

Hovering between ‘public schools’, the educational establishment, and Britain as a whole, we find many names that connect with classical antiquity and mythology, e.g. “Remus”, “Sirius”, and “Minerva”. In this context, it is interesting that many spells are in (some kind of) Latin: “Accio “, “Lumos”, “Impedimenta”, sometimes with some English thrown in: “Muffliatio”, or in a totally unexpected language such as Aramaic: “Avada Kedavra”. In order to appreciate the Latinate terms fully, one has to know some Latin. This cannot be a coincidence, for the teaching of Latin has held out in Britain much longer than elsewhere in the world: it was not until the 1960s that Latin was dropped as a requirement for university studies and it still taught at some public schools.

There are teasing references to British life. Here it suffices to point out that in the Quidditch World Cup, we do not only find the usual players in international tournaments such as England and Ireland but also Scotland and Wales, the latter two being introduced from such inter-British events as the ‘Triple Tournament’ in rugby.

And all through the Saga, there are allusions to what continentals consider typically British. There is grandeur reminiscent of nobility in Hogwarts itself which has paintings, coats-of-arms, armours, staircases, halls, battlements, and towers. This is entirely in keeping with the crescendo in *Hallows* and the final battle which has a distinct flavour of medieval sieges and combats. Haughty aristocracy is represented by the Malfoys and Draco’s mother draws the uncomplimentary comment that “[she] would have been nice-looking if she hadn’t been wearing a look that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.” (*Prince*) There is even an outcast, namely the ghost Nearly-Headless Nick, whose ambitions of joining the ‘Hunt’ are thwarted. Then, of course, there is the abundance of tea that is served including as a kind of “cure-for-all” served under extreme duress and to calm the nerves in *Hallows*. And in addition to the names already cited there are others that evoke other things British: Fawkes, the phoenix, burns to ashes only to be reborn as an illustration of the death-rebirth theme. But its names remind one of Guy Fawkes, one of the ringleaders of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 whose effigy was traditionally burnt on Guy Fawkes Night (5 November) year and year again.

Let me finish by stressing that most foreigners feel familiar with these British features no matter whether they have been in Great Britain, learnt about them from reading Jane Austen or seen them on television: they are, to a large extent, well-known and appreciated by many readers worldwide. Let us now look beyond the British Isles.

Allusions to other nations and cultures

Part of the global appeal of the Harry Potter books can be ascribed to their more or less explicit allusions to other countries and cultures.

In both *Stone* and *Chamber*, Harry lives in the cupboard under the staircase. This will ring bells with many continental Europeans, perhaps mostly with **Germans** who will recognise this as the humble place where *Cinderella* and *All furs* in the eponymous fairytales (KHM 17 and 65) live in the *Tales* of the brothers Grimm. Echoes of Grimms’ *The brave little Tailor* are found in *Stone* as Harry attacks a dangerous troll when Hermione is trapped in the girls’ toilet. These allusions are so brief that they may defy detection. They are found only in the first books that publishers targeted at children and, of course, in *Hallows* in which book we notice that visiting the cupboard under the staircase, Harry-‘Cinderella’ can now look back with equanimity at this abode. Later on, Hermione astutely scorns the belief that fairytales are only for children – eventually to establish that a wizard fairytale is one of major key to the overall plot.

In addition, there is a cultural allusion: one of the continental schools of witchcraft is ‘Dumstrang’ which, with readers familiar with German literature, calls to mind the German ‘Sturm und Drang’, a literary movement characterised by revolt against conventions, longing for nature, and the cult of genius (c. 1770-1800). It comprised such towering figures as Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832). In the Saga, there is some glumness about Durmstrang which in its own way houses a genius who outshines everybody else in Quidditch, Victor Krum.

There are culture quotes galore for **Spanish readers**. Mrs Weasley is particularly fond of the crooning singer Celestina, a namesake of the crafty witch who is a major figure in *La Celestina*, a Spanish play from 1499 by Fernando Rojas. Most momentous of all is, however, the innocent information that Nearly-Headless Nick died in 1492.

This was a memorable year in Spanish history since this was the year that all Spain was united when the city of Granada was conquered from the Moors. It is therefore a symbolic moment when oppression is overthrown and freedom introduced.

It ought also ring bells with all readers globally, for this very year Columbus ‘discovered’ America and ushered in a new epoch of exploration in world history.

Other national references are not quite as noteworthy, but the French like their food and have the Beauxbaton School which appears to be for girls only; Romanians, Norwegians and Chinese and many others have dragons. We may note that at the second Quidditch match in *Stone* supporters are waving a banner of “Harry for President”, that there is American attendance at the World Championships and that, as a verb, the name of the school Harry should have attended, “stonewall” was President Richard Nixon’s standing orders to his staff about how to handle awkward questions during the Watergate affair. In the same vein, there are student exchanges with Brazil. The Weasleys’ holiday trip to Egypt and the picture taken of them there is of considerable importance in *Prisoner*.

The world at large gradually gets involved in the Saga throughout the books with, curiously enough, *Hallows* as the ending that downplays this dimension.

The global influence

The stories thus interact with the internationalisation and globalisation in the world. This goes for elements, happenings, and plots, including Rowling’s own narration. It is generally known that the British title’s “the Philosopher’s Stone” did not manage the transatlantic trip but had to be converted to “the Sorcerer’s Stone” in American territory. There is another funny deviation between the two ‘English’ versions: in the American book, there is all of a sudden a “black boy”. My initial guess was that this boy was introduced by an American in-house editor who realised that it was terribly “politically incorrect” to publish a book with an all-white cast for children in US, but Rowling has subsequently stressed that it was the British editor who omitted the reference (Wikipedia (August 2007)). However this may be, J. K. Rowling has taken in the migrations of the present age since the number of non-British participants in major roles has increased perceptibly in the course of the Saga. Witness Cho, Angelina, and the Patil twins. But here again the overall conclusion is that this involvement is not explored fully in the last volume.

There are definitely also other levels at which we see complex interaction between worlds. The interplay between the wizarding world and ours is of paramount importance and ranges from minor details via major plots to include the overall one. All reflect on one another at some level.

Let us consider a few examples that are clearly inspired by international television. In *Goblet*, the umpires display numbers when they assess performance the way it is done in e.g. ice-skating competitions. The Quidditch World Cup with patriotic fans and a roaring and enthusiastic audience is modelled over football matches and includes rampaging hooligans to boot.

Would the notions of riding in space on a hurtling cart through subterranean tunnels the way Hagrid and Harry do in the vault of the Gringotts Bank, or of moving through time as Dumbledore and Harry do thanks to the pensieve be accepted as entertainment in previous ages? My guess is that before 1850 it would have spelled ostracism and before 1500 possibly physical death, to anybody who came up with such ideas. It is true that something similar is found in literature preceding the Harry Potter Saga, from H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) through science fiction and fantasy. Yet there is, I suggest, more to it: these features reflect on rapid changes, swift movements, and lightening speed in many contexts of modern life on the auditory as well as the visual side.

Notice how precisely scenes are presented: "The walls of the Hall had been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling." (*Goblet*), "[t]he chilly mist … drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous." (*Prince*).

Events are intensely visual:

"[Harry] was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air: for a split second he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull, and then he fell slowly backwards, like a great rag doll, over the battlements and out of sight." (*Prince*).

This is good narration with evocative imagery. This is one of Rowling's strengths; she touches the right chord, is in tune with and clearly interacts with a worldwide audience that has been nurtured on films, television, animation and other visual material on the Internet.

In this sense, the Saga unites the tribes of the global village in the ways and modes of modern living.

The global themes

It will be obvious from what I have said above, that the Harry Potter Saga is not popular only for being a (specious) public school novel, not for being British and hence reasonably familiar to Europeans, and not for referring to different countries in which the book is (also) popular. I suggest that it has to do with the narration. J. K. Rowling is a brilliant teller of tales. She weaves into her yarn about her world of magic, rhyme and rhythm, superstition, numerology, ancient lore, references to the well-known, the allusive and elusive, the abstruse and obscure, clichés, half-quotations, old wisdom, and culture.

Yet, as mentioned, her world of wizards and magic reflects on our own.

It is a tale which deals with a theme of growing awareness of the world around us at many levels:

As readers we know more about Harry than he himself does at the beginning, but gradually we are lost and find it just as inexplicable and hard to understand what is going on as he does and, therefore, we welcome the rational explanations however they come about: offered by Sirius, Dumbledore etc. – and we can laugh at the mistakes made by Uncle Vernon and Mr Weasley who both get 'the other side' all wrong.

Harry himself becomes first aware of being alive, then mobbed, bullied, and humiliated. Subsequently he is recognised as 'somebody', and from this moment on, he gradually rises to face more and more challenges and tasks that become increasingly dangerous, finally to prepare for, experience and undergo death.

As readers we follow a growth in the potential of evil as Lord Voldemort gains more and more power. The readers see his ascendancy in the increasingly dangerous and fatal outcomes for central characters in the Saga, and as human beings we are relieved eventually to find a world cleansed of him, his followers, and whatever fragments, remnants, and scars he left in the bodies and minds of others.

It is also a story which refers to the individual development of moving from childhood through adolescence, adulthood and maturity, to the conscious recognition and acceptance of the inevitability of death. To be true, in Harry's case, like with the phoenix Fawkes, this embrace of death is also a process of purification and rebirth.

In a way, all the stages Harry moves through, all the tasks he undertakes or which, rather, are thrust upon him, we are dealing with a prolonged series of ritual initiations, into consciousness of self, into an understanding of one's strong and weak points, into knowledge of oneself, of one's surroundings and one's place in the world.

Like Columbus', Harry's is a voyage of exploration, not only of and for himself but also the readers.

It is also a story about the importance of free will, of making our own decisions and standing by them. As Dumbledore puts it: "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities …" – "… you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophesy!" (*Prince*)

At a deep level, the Saga also deals with the perennial conflict between good and evil. Only we cannot be entirely sure whether there are characters that are truly unambiguously good or evil. Harry and Voldemort have the same kind of background so, essentially, either could have ended in the other's position. Is Neville reliable and a strong character? We do not know until the final chapters. Is Snape evil? Dumbledore does not believe so and in the end our scales may fall out differently. But the shading in the characters is not a bad reflection of real life at all.

All through the Saga, Rowling has distorted notions and ideas: instead of weeping willows, we hear of the Womping Willow which is something totally different and unknown in previous literature. There are both caricatures of hardboiled American crime fiction and fond (but highly unorthodox) references to war novels:

Even at the end, readers schooled in old literary genres find this funny shuffling of the cards baffling, perhaps even disconcerting. Since Harry survives, we might argue that J. K. Rowling has created the first convincing *Bildungsroman* in British literature; yet it is not like the traditional continental ones. We do not find a truly mythological ending with a Götterdämmerung: although the battle is fierce and, admittedly, costs lives, there is a certain air of unreality. The ending does not do away with the worlds of either wizards or Muggles. But it has brought the perennial conflict between the most vicious powers and ‘good’ to an end by cleansing the world of something reminiscent of Nazism.

In sum, the wealth of themes universal to human life is obviously part of the appeal to the global audience: we are all born to grow up, to be embarrassed, to be happy or crestfallen, to fall in love, we all become mature, and we all eventually die. Only we did not know when we were born and not as children.

J. K. Rowling’s narrative contract

In this piece, I have discussed some ways in which J. K. Rowling establishes narrative contracts with her audiences. Therefore, this is the time to stress that each reader has her uniquely personal response to the Harry Potter Saga.

This individuality of response to reading is not only established ‘the usual way’, but very deliberately by the author’s appeal to diversified responses with different audiences. Each reader will have personal prejudices, preferences, and a personal background. Each piece of arcane knowledge that the inquisitive scholar can uncover in the books will make it in different ways to individual readers. They span from not being noticed at all, via vague knowledge and familiarity, to cognoscente appreciation of any feature, be it alliteration, pun, word play, quotation, composite animal, superstition, other countries, common beliefs, understanding of themes, etc.

Therefore J. K. Rowling creates, in the course of each reading, a narrative contract which is unique to that particular reader at that particular time in that specific place: yet all these narrative contracts exist within our global culture.

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