

## Harry Potter and the Numbers Game

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Since the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997, Joanne K. Rowling has held hundreds of millions of readers worldwide spell-bound with her imaginative, thrilling, and humorous Saga about Harry Potter. In the books, J. K. Rowling has presented readers with girls' and boys' lives in the course of childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and – in Harry's case - a mature acceptance of ultimate death. Frequently tongue-in-cheek, Rowling moves effortlessly from light-hearted wordplay and repartees to allusions to some of the darkest moments in the history of Mankind. In addition, she also plays a numbers game which includes both internal and external allusions. In the following discussion of this "numbers game", I shall refer to the British books by one keyword as follows: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).

The story about Harry Potter has been conceived and drafted with great attention to detail and infinite care over a five-year period. Clearly the initial master plan was not followed slavishly: new features have been added in Rowling's creative process of writing and publication. Some of them connect with the numbers game. There are indications that others in the production line have known Rowling's ideas. It is thought-provoking that all British paperbacks are made with the precisely same layout as the British hard-cover editions.

However, as a critic with a foot in Continental Europe and a toe in British culture, I believe some of the storytelling involving the numbers game will not travel beyond the British Isles, let alone in translation. Not because of "loss in translation" but because it is tied to the British books.

All cognoscenti of superstitions, folklore, and numerology must relish Rowling's juggling with all the special numbers so close to our hearts:

'Three' is in a category by itself. In the first book we are captured by Harry's feelings before his birthday: 'Three minutes to go' (*Philosopher*, 54) which is followed by Hagrid's noisy approach 'BOOM. – BOOM. – SMASH' (54-55). It goes without saying that many things must be done three times, that often three days elapse, that usually characters knock three times on doors, that the Three Broomsticks must be the favoured "pub", etc. The figure of three also appears e.g. in the injunction about the Invisibility Cloak to 'Use it well' (*Philosopher* 218, 221 (twice)), as well as in Harry's promise to his Uncle Vernon that 'I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there,' said Harry tonelessly /... dully / -.' (*Chamber*, 12-13) In the same way that Harry, Hermione and Ron constitute a trio from the first book on, there are three brothers in the tale introducing the Hallows in the final volume, etc.

It is not surprising that 'seven', often crops up: there are seven volumes in the Harry Potter Saga. In *Philosopher*, the House of Slytherin stands to win the House Cup for the seventh

year in succession. In *Chamber*, Gilderoy Lockhart has (immodestly) written seven of the eight books needed for school work that year. There are seven players in Quidditch teams, seven siblings in the Weasley family, the Hogwarts school programme comprises seven years including NEWTs, and, most significantly, there are seven Horcruxes, i.e. fragments of Lord Voldemort's soul, to track down and destroy in *Prince and Hallows*.

'Twelve' figures prominently. There are always twelve Christmas trees at Hogwarts. In *Philosopher* there is a twelve-foot troll and Neville Longbottom has it that he is worth twelve Malfoys (236, 241). The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix turns out to be at 12 Grimmauld Place and Harry's hearing at the Ministry of Magic appropriately takes place on 12 August (*Phoenix*).

Only people ignorant of superstition and numerology are unaware that 'thirteen' brings bad luck. When Voldemort meets the Death Eaters after his long absence, he notes that there has been a lapse of 'Thirteen years ... thirteen years since we last met.' (*Goblet*, 561) The teacher of Divination, Professor Sibyll Trelawney, is fully cognizant of imminent dangers when she reluctantly joins the Christmas luncheon-dinner in *Prisoner* (247-249). The newspaper interview in *Hallows* with Rita Skeeter concerning her forthcoming book on Albus Dumbledore is printed on page 13 in the *Daily Prophet*. Hagrid was thirteen when he was expelled from Hogwarts, Sirius Black was imprisoned for killing thirteen people, and every time Harry receives a ministerial reprimand for using spells at Privet Drive, there is a menacing reference to section 13.

Of course most of these numbers will make it in translation to readers internationally – except for those connected with 'inches' and 'feet'. Yet there are signals, sometimes obvious, sometimes subdued, that these numbers should not be taken not all that seriously:

It may be that Harry is hungry since he is served three fried eggs (*Chamber*, 41) but it is definitely tongue-in-cheek that Moaning Myrtle is only three toilets away from Ron (305). Nevertheless the multitude of 'threes' is quite overwhelming, so on balance the figure appears to be predominantly good – but not "magical".

'Seven' is not all that sacred: Dumbledore's intervention robs Slytherin of the House Cup the seventh year in succession. Gilderoy Lockhart glories in fraudulent exploitation of the merits of others. Harry is singularly prone to accidents in Quidditch games. Our three heroes leave school after the sixth (not the seventh) year in order to pursue Horcruxes instead of academic studies, and the seven-year programme actually completed at Hogwarts that year is barely scholastically sound. The Weasley family is large by modern Western standards and enormous in the eyes of the wizarding world. The children's mutual teasing is entertaining but numerologists may have problems: in the fights towards the end, Bill's face is mutilated, George's ear is ripped off, and Fred is killed. In the narrative, 'seven' is far from perfect and by no means safe protection against evil. And it is even doubtful that there were precisely seven Horcruxes.

It is hard to find anything consistently positive (or negative) about 'twelve' in the books although the unsympathetic Aunt Marge has twelve dogs (*Azkaban*, 35). Most mentions are neutral in the narrative.

'Thirteen' signals flaw rather than horror and awe: whereas Voldemort's greeting has sinister overtones, nothing untoward happens at the Christmas dinner, Rita Skeeter's book is a chaotic mess of distorted information, Hagrid is innocent of the crime for which he was expelled, Sirius

Black is cleared of all accusations of killing anybody, let alone thirteen killed people, and Harry is not expelled from Hogwarts for using spells. It brings bad luck once: during the final flight from Harry's childhood home in Privet Drive the old warrior-wizard, Mad-Eye Moody, is killed when the party has been reduced to thirteen.

Overall there is nothing consistently "superstitious" about Rowling's use of these figures in the narrative (except that they appear so often that obviously she knows they are "special"). Definitely not enough to have Rowling burnt at a stake as a witch: in 2007, TIME magazine reported that the books are banned at some US schools for propagating superstitions.

However, I do believe that there are other aspects of the numbers game that are destined for discerning readers. It seems that, in collaboration (or collusion) with her British publisher, Rowling has chosen to use some 'Peruvian Darkness Powder' so that it requires special twists of mind to find them unless readers resort to using 'Hands of Glory.'

It is part of the slightly warped reflection of "our" world that wizards come of age at seventeen in the Harry Potter universe.

Although it covers 3 times 7, references to 21 are few. Yet the 21<sup>st</sup> of April is the date set for the Apparition test (*Prince*, 420).

It may be significant that the competitions in *Phoenix* take place on the 24<sup>th</sup>, since the second one takes place on the day added to a leap year, the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, which in some cultures is the day on which women can propose to a man. The third task is on June 24<sup>th</sup>, Midsummer's Day, the centre point of summer and magic (notably, it seems, in the Nordic countries). This last task leads directly to the return of the master of dark magic, Lord Voldemort, and Harry's fight with him. Yet these dates link up with tradition rather than superstition. The Christmas Eve in which Harry visits the house in which his parents were killed and he himself nearly falls victim to Voldemort, connects with the theme of evil vs. good rather than superstition (*Hallows*).

Another date is more worthy of note: Professor Quirrell's attempted burglary of the bank of Gringotts takes place on 31<sup>st</sup> July (*Philosopher*, 155, 313). Sturgis Podmore tries to break into the Room of Mysteries in the Ministry of Magic on the last day of August (*Phoenix*, 258) and it is also the birthday deadline for students allowed for lessons in Apparition. Harry, Ron and Hermione become bosom friends on Hallowe'en, 31<sup>st</sup> October (*Philosopher*, Chapter 10) – and Hallowe'en is duly recorded in the Saga, including the year Sirius Black breaks into Hogwarts (*Prisoner*) and the day when the champions for the Triwizard Tournament are selected (*Goblet*). The ghost Nearly Headless Nick was executed 31<sup>st</sup> October 1492 (*Chamber*, 146). Harry's parents were killed on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1981 (*Hallows*, 272). Lord Voldemort was born New Year's Eve (*Prince*, 249). And on top of this, Harry was born on 31<sup>st</sup> July (*Philosopher*, 54, 155) - incidentally on the very same day as the well-known Muggle author, J. K. Rowling. The Ministry of Magic may only keep a deceased wizard's possessions for examination before passing them on to the rightful heirs for a maximum of thirty-one days (*Hallows*, 105). Thirty-one is a special figure in the Harry Potter universe.

These numbers are interwoven with the plot and the unfolding of the Saga.

At another level, the numbering of chapters is as suggestive as their titles are often misleading. Both the Sorting Hat that determines which house Harry will belong to and the crucial distinction between purebloods and Muggles make first appearances in chapter 7 – albeit in different books, viz. *Philosopher* and *Chamber*. Similarly it is interesting that, as the first book, *Philosopher* has 17 chapters corresponding the number of years it takes to come of age in the wizarding world. In the same vein we may note that the third task in the Triwizard Tournament on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June is described in chapter 31.

This is a far cry from the numbers held in awe by superstitious people.

The most intricate numbers games start the moment Hermione gets a Christmas present: “Thanks for the book, Harry,” she said happily. ‘I’ve been wanting that *New Theory of Numerology* for ages!’ (*Phoenix*). This happens on page 444. It is suggestive that the horrid Professor Dolores Umbridge tries to wheedle Dumbledore’s whereabouts out of Harry by means of a truth drug (Veritaserum) on page 555 - and that centaurs eventually carry her out of the book on page 666.

In *Prince*, then, the Apparition lessons are reserved for students turning seventeen before or on 31<sup>st</sup> August: the announcement is published in *Prince*, in Chapter 17 - on page 331 = (3)31. It is suggestive the fight to kill Dumbledore comes to a violent climax on pages 555-556, and not only on 555. Perhaps the narrative got the better of author? On hindsight, it is suggestive that Draco darkly refers to the time when Dumbledore is not around on page 111, perhaps also that on page 222 Harry appears to accept that Malfoy could not smuggle dangerous objects into Hogwarts. Malfoy’s name appears on pages 333 and 444 but this is probably coincidence.

In *Hallows* the three things Dumbledore bequeathed to Hermione, Harry and Ron are handed over to them in chapter 7; on page 111 Harry decides they should discuss them in private and Hermione makes sure they cannot be overheard. On page 222, Hermione saves Ron’s life by applying three drops of the healing medicine, Dittany.

Although it is not mentioned until the last book, ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’ is a central, indeed crucial, clue to the entire Saga. The original version is found in the collection of tales that Dumbledore has willed to Hermione. It is written in runes and Hermione studies it intensely. When she reads the tale aloud to the others, she is therefore doing *prima vista* translation. In the collection the tale stands apart by having the sign of the Three Hallows over it instead of the usual picture (*Hallows*, 260). The English version is found in Rowling’s narrative in the British Saga’s volume 7, chapter 21 (7 x 3). On page 333 the story is finished and the interpretations take over: ‘That is a children’s tale. Those of us who understand these matters, however, recognise that the ancient story refers to three objects, or Hallows, which, if united, will make the possessor master of Death.’

Before the final battle about Hogwarts begins, Lord Voldemort thinks of the four Horcruxes he believes Harry has not found yet, viz. (a) the Ring, (b) the Locket, (c) the Diadem, in addition to (d) the snake, Nagini. This enumeration is found on page 444.

And page 555 Harry is preparing to meet his own death.

It gets even trickier: Interwoven with the conflicts in the wizarding world, there are frequent allusions to something reminiscent of “our” history which is thus reflected in oblique ways in the Saga. In this discussion of the “numbers game”, it will suffice to identify two references:

When executed, Nearly Headless Nick was hit forty-five times with a blunt axe that failed to sever his head completely from his body in 1492 (*Chamber*, 135). It is not until *Prince* that Nick reminds us of his sanguinary execution (157). Later Harry is desperately looking for a hiding place in the magical Room of Requirements and runs past shelves on which ‘... there were what looked like dragon-egg shells, corked bottles ... several rusting swords and a heavy, blood-stained axe.’ This description is found on page 492. Surely a reference to 1492, the year Columbus landed in America and thus opened up for new worlds to discover (for Westerners). At a higher thematic level it also alludes to Harry’s own voyage of exploration of the meaning of life and death that Dumbledore heralded in the first book: ‘After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure.’ (*Philosopher*, 320)

From early on in this first volume (*Philosopher*, 114), readers have known that Professor Dumbledore defeated the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, a year that coincided with the end of the Second World War. When Voldemort prepares to attack Hogwarts, the junior students are evacuated in good order at the very beginning of “The Battle of Britain” - sorry: ‘The Battle of Hogwarts’ - in Chapter 31 (*Hallows*). Hogwarts is not taken in the first assault. The fighting continues in ‘The Flaw in the Plan.’ At this stage, reinforcements, including all relatives of student fighters, the inhabitants of Hogsmeade, centaurs, Thestrals, and the house-elves in the kitchen join the battle: ‘Everywhere Harry looked Death Eaters were folding under sheer weight of numbers, overcome by spells, dragging arrows from wounds ...’ This smacks of descriptions of superior English lightness and manoeuvrability in the naval battle with the Spanish Armada in 1588. The page number is 588. The tongue-in-cheek allusion is here OK.

The British-English edition has 3,407 pages vs. the US edition’s 4,100: the numbers game did not make it across the Atlantic in its entirety.

The last book, *Hallows*, was published both in the US and in Britain on 21-07-07 (21<sup>st</sup> July 2007). The launching was a carefully planned, deftly executed, and wonderfully orchestrated part of the narration itself: this is a work of beauty, combining fantastic magic with true and professional craftsmanship in our contemporary world of reality.

If my reading is not wide off the mark, Rowling has not only given her humorous, affectionate, and captivating tale of the coming of age of a man who has, of his own choice, decided to work for the betterment of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for Muggles and wizards alike. She has also, with wit, imagination, and a storytelling skill rarely (if ever) matched, blended her story of the wizarding world in its hour of need with allusions to crucial moments in the parallel British and world history. She has poked fun at many British, European, and American phenomena. And she has played a numbers game that would have been impossible in other epochs when authors worked with quill pens and on their own. She has been singularly creative and imaginative in using the instruments and aids of this age: word-processors, house-editors and publishers, blending their efforts with her own immense narrative talent and humour.

It is superb storytelling that defies dry-as-dust scholarly wishes to confine narration and literature to specific categories. The international success of J. K. Rowling as a brilliant master narrator is well deserved.