

A Curious Outing

Written by Margaret Evans

When I came to the end of the final book in the Harry Potter series, I remember thinking, “Wow, how about that? After all the analysis, all the scholarship, all the speculation and debate... it’s just a children’s story after all.”

With three little words – “All was well” – J.K. Rowling gave her legions of fans, both young and old, a parting gift of grace. She reminded us not to take her books, or our selves, too seriously.



But now she’s gone and mucked up the works. In case you missed the shot heard ‘round the Potter-verse, Rowling recently announced that Dumbledore, the esteemed Headmaster of Hogwarts, is gay.

Controversy is nothing new to J.K. Rowling. The Harry Potter books sparked a mini-explosion of criticism when they first appeared, mainly from Christian fundamentalists who worried about the influence of magic and witchcraft on young minds. But by the time *Deathly Hallows* arrived last summer, most of that hoo-hah had fizzled out; even the strictest of Christians had come to embrace the books for their inherent goodness and morality. Recently, Rowling herself cleared up speculation by admitting she had purposely infused the books with religious symbolism and meaning, acknowledging that she is a lifelong Christian who struggles daily to maintain her faith in this increasingly secular world.

Man, do I get *that*.

But what I’m *not* so sure I get is the impulse behind Rowling’s recent revelation about dear, departed Dumbledore. Why did we need to know that this wise old wizard, the beloved and revered father figure of Hogwarts, was a homosexual? Especially after the fact?

I need to state here, for the record, that some of my favorite people in the world happen to be homosexual. I wish I *didn’t* need to state that for the record, but in today’s cultural climate, you can’t espouse a reasonable opinion – in this case, that children’s literature should tread lightly, if tread it must, on the topic of sexuality – without having a whole passel of other, less savory, opinions ascribed to you against your will. We make such quick, easy assumptions about each other these days, based on so little information; those assumptions prevent us from actually getting to
know each other; this, in turn, prevents us from ever
coming to understand each other. And the culture wars rage on.

For reasons I don’t fully comprehend, I feel compelled – maybe even “called?” – to be a peacemaker in those wars. As someone who appreciates the grievances on both sides, I’m not quite ready to deem them irreconcilable.

Because here’s the thing – while some of my favorite people in the world are gay, some of my other favorite people happen to be conservative Christians, some of whom believe homosexual behavior is morally wrong. You, dear reader, may believe such people are ignorant and even hateful. I did, before I got to know a few. I can tell you now that these are some of the kindest, warmest, least hateful folks I’ve ever met. As to their so-called “ignorance,” I will just say that, unlike many of us, they look to only one source for wisdom and guidance, and that source (the Holy Bible) *does* arguably provide a basis for their beliefs about homosexuality. They care deeply about living virtuous lives, and they sincerely believe they are following God’s teachings in opposing homosexual behavior. (And by the way, that stuff about “hating the sin but loving the sinner”? It’s not a crock. They really mean it.)

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Where do I come down on all this? Frankly, I don't spend much time worrying about it. As a newly committed Christian, I've got my hands full with the whole "love thy neighbor" thing. This mandate clearly refers to *all* my neighbors, not just the straight ones, and, along with "love the Lord, thy God," it trumps all the other rules and regulations. It's what you might call The Bottom Line. Whenever my over-analytical, always-second-guessing, highly imperfect human brain starts working overtime on one social issue or another, I now refer it to The Bottom Line. Does the issue suddenly become simple and clear? Not exactly. But my marching orders do.

So, back to Dumbledore. (Smooth segue, huh?) This belated revelation about his sexuality just seems so unnecessary – almost like a cheap publicity stunt. You know how movie stars are always telling magazine interviewers they'll do nudity in a film, but only if it's integral to the story... not "gratuitous," as they like to put it? That always made a certain amount of sense to me. Otherwise, you're just baring your boobies to sell more movie tickets, right?

Well, it almost feels like J.K. Rowling is baring her boobies gratuitously with the outing of Dumbledore. If Dumbledore's sexuality was really integral to the story – or even remotely relevant – why wasn't it *in* the story?

The answer could be, of course, that Harry Potter is, at heart, a children's series, and that Rowling didn't think homosexuality was an appropriate topic for her younger readers. But then, why put it out there now? Granted, her earliest readers have matured, but what about those coming behind them? She had to know, when she answered that question from a fan at Carnegie Hall, that her answer would swiftly make its rounds through the media – She's J.K. Rowling, after all! – ensuring that children of all ages (my six-year-old, for instance) would hear it discussed on the nightly news. She has also managed to ensure that her books, already considered classics, will never be read in quite the same way again. Children talk amongst themselves, especially about things that titillate, grown-up things they don't quite understand. Now, along with all the other qualities attributed to him, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, age 150, will forever be known as the gay headmaster of Hogwarts. For most modern parents, that won't be a big deal. But for some, it'll be a deal *breaker*. And the children of *those* parents, not to mention the parents themselves, will miss out on a wonderful story about the redemptive goodness deep down in people – all sorts of people. And another opportunity for coming together, for understanding and loving each other, will have been lost. How sad.

I really don't believe J.K. Rowling dropped this bomb in an effort to sell more books. From what I know of her, such behavior is simply not in her character. And because of the great gift she's given me personally – the gift of Harry Potter – I am predisposed to give *her* the benefit of the doubt a thousand times over. So I've come up with my own explanation, which should be taken with the proverbial salt grain. It is simply this: Maybe Rowling is someone like me. Way more talented, imaginative, motivated, disciplined, and wealthy, of course, but, nonetheless, someone like me. What I mean is that maybe she, too, feels called to be a peacemaker in the culture wars. Her revelation about Dumbledore came fairly hot on the heels of her admission that the Harry Potter saga was inspired by her Christian faith, right? Maybe by telling the world (even those who, in my opinion, are too young to process such information) that she'd always seen Dumbledore as gay, Rowling hoped to temper the effects of that prior admission, to reach out and say, "Look, this story is for everybody – believers, secularists, blacks, whites, gays, straights... the whole tiresome, mixed-up, bickering lot o' ya!" Maybe it was her way of making sure none of us could claim Harry Potter as our own, so that we *all*

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would.

If this was Rowling's motive, then I certainly applaud it. I'm just not sure it's going to work. I spent some time on one of my favorite blogs yesterday, where a debate was raging about the outing of Dumbledore. Several readers expressed the opinion that Rowling's announcement was inappropriate, and for a wide array of reasons. Some were parents who weren't yet ready to have this conversation with their children; others were English major types ("purists" you might say) who believed it unethical for an author to publicly attribute a fairly major trait to a character, when there is no mention, or even sign, of said trait within in the text itself. Still others made good sport of the issue, cracking that there were, in fact, plenty of signs all along – the flamboyant robes, the "flaming" bird, etc, etc.... Those readers were predictably attacked by others, who couldn't wait to accuse them of homophobia. Some of that second group believed Rowling was brave and noble for proclaiming a widely-revered character like Dumbledore gay. Others called her a coward for having done too little, too late. The argument went on and on. It's still going on as I write this. And it's just one of many.

So now, the grand and glorious Dumbledore seems a bit diminished. Not because he's gay, but because he's become a political football. All this crass discussion – the wisecracks, the conjecture, the demagoguery – it all seems somehow beneath the Albus Dumbledore I came to know and love, a figure who transcended politics, religion, and certainly mere sexuality.

I don't begrudge Dumbledore his private life. I just wish, like I do for so many other public figures these days, that he'd been allowed to keep it private.