

By the time you read this, we'll have had our Harry Potter books in our hot little hands for several days. While you may have finished yours already, I almost certainly have not; I'm the slow, savoring type. If you see me on the street, hands over my ears, babbling incoherently, looking neither left nor right, please don't take offense. I'm in lockdown mode 'til I finish the book, determined to avoid spoilers of any sort. As I began this column, some 48 hours before the book's release, I was already steering clear of cyberspace, where some scoundrel had reportedly leaked *Deathly Hallows* days in advance. (That's vintage Voldemort right there!) My friend K, also a Potterite, is a speed-reading freak of nature. I'm not taking her calls at the moment.



I saw *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* last week. There seem to be two camps of opinion on Movie #5 – those who think it's the best Potter movie yet, and those who appreciate the film, but find its stark harshness (or is harsh starkness?) a wee bit off-putting. I guess I'm in camp #2 – not an unhappy camper, but one who prefers her Potter with a dash of the warm cozies, a splash of sparkly whimsy. Phoenix is so frank, so ascetic. I found myself missing the frosty glitter of the Yule Ball, the ghost-friendly glow of the Big Hall, even the gritty warmth of Hogshead Tavern. Nevertheless, I'm always grateful for my Hogwarts fix, however it comes. Sub-par Potter is still better than almost anything else pop culture has to offer. I was misty just being back in the presence of Harry, Ron, Hermione and the gang. I love those kids.

But, of course, the real Potter event of the summer – the decade, actually – is *The Book*. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* brings to an end a cultural phenomenon that few could have predicted and that critics (serious scholars, even) have spent years trying to understand. Why have these books inspired such unwavering, unending devotion in the hearts of children and grown-ups alike? More than just a rip-roaring good yarn, the Harry Potter saga seems to address something deep and essential in the human psyche; it's as if we each have a personal stake in how this story ends.

As goes Harry, so go we, it seems. But why?

In a recent issue of *Time* magazine, Lev Grossman takes a stab at the answer, calling Harry Potter an ideal hero for our times because "he lives in a world free of any religion or spirituality... He lives surrounded by ghosts but has no one to pray to, even if he were so inclined, which he isn't."

Grossman believes the so-called secular nature of the Potter series is a significant reason for its great popularity in this increasingly materialistic culture. He claims J.K. Rowling has more in common with "celebrity atheists like Christopher Hitchens" than with her own self-proclaimed literary inspirations, Christian writers J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Grossman finds all of the above great cause for celebration.

Alan Jacobs of *Christianity Today* sees Potter through a different lens, as a world steeped in spirituality and transcendent meaning. In a recent online essay called "Waiting for Harry," he muses about Harry's fate, harking back to the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and words spoken there by Dumbledore to Lord Voldemort. Readers know that the Dark Lord's *raison d'être* – even above inflicting unimaginable evil – is avoiding his own death at all costs. When he tells Dumbledore, in *Sorcerer's Stone*, that there is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore replies, memorably: "To the well-ordered mind, Death is just the next great adventure."

Jacobs, who believes Harry will probably die in Book # 7 (no spoilers here – I honestly don't know!), continues this line of thought in his essay:

That there is something beyond death, in the world that J. K. Rowling has made, we know. For one thing, there are the ghosts we meet in Hogwarts. And from one of them, Nearly Headless Nick, we learn that ghosts are those who refuse to leave this world, who fear to learn what lies Beyond. Which indicates that something does indeed lie Beyond. In the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic, there is a veil through which one can pass into the realm of the dead—that is how Sirius Black dies—and Harry and his friend Luna Lovegood both hear quiet, incomprehensible voices through that veil. I expect that Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows will take our hero through that veil—perhaps quite literally—and into that other world.

However you read the Harry Potter books – as the great secular saga of an irreligious age, or as the modern retelling of an old, sacred story – the important truth remains the same. Harry Potter is soul food, and, no matter how you define “soul,” we are all ravenous. Since time in memorium, we humans have been gathering around the campfire (or the radio, or the movie screen, or the TV, or the computer), hungry to hear our story told, over and over, the one we all know. It’s a story of life and death, love and loss, fear and courage, sacrifice and redemption. Homer told it; so did Milton and Shakespeare. And so did J.K. Rowling’s literary idols, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. When a book addresses these essential themes so compellingly, when millions of us, from age 8 to 88, read that same book at the same time – then pine, together, for the next book, and the next – it’s almost like gathering ‘round the campfire again. Maybe, in this cynical, disconnected era, we need a great epic as much as we ever have. Maybe more than we ever have. And if our epic hero comes dressed in slouchy flannel and nerdy round glasses, with a host of insecurities and a bit of an attitude...well, we recognize him as one of our own, much as the Greeks must have recognized Achilles.

Some of you reading this know, by now, what happens to Harry. As I write, I have no idea. But I’m bracing myself for hard times ahead. I know plenty of speculators who say they can’t imagine Rowling killing Harry off – that to do so would be a betrayal of her readers. I completely disagree. As the creator of the Potter cosmos, Rowling never promised us a rose garden. Harry’s world has always been equal parts darkness and light, and our dear boy wizard – with his torturous memories and roiling anger – has all the makings of a classic tragic hero. What the author has promised us, in true epic spirit – for a solid decade and with every page she’s written – is that she’ll remain faithful to the moral universe she’s so lovingly created. For that, we can count on J.K. Rowling.

Ten years ago, she introduced us to a wise and wonderful character named Dumbledore, who told us that “there are things much worse than death.” I trust Albus Dumbledore, and I trust J.K. Rowling. Whatever his fate, Harry Potter is in good hands.

Oh, sure, I’ll cry if Harry dies. But I’ll cry if he doesn’t, too. Either way, it’ll be one heck of a glorious catharsis, and one that’s been a long time coming.

I’ll miss Harry Potter. But then, he’s not really going anywhere, is he? He’ll live on in the books, the movies, the theme park (yes, they’re building a theme park), and the collective anticipation of generations who’ve yet to discover Rowling’s wondrous world. And, of course, he’ll live on in our hearts. As Harry’s adored godfather Sirius told him in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, “The ones who love us never really leave us.”

The same goes for the ones we love.