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Locating Harry Potter in the "Boys' Book" Market

Terri Doughty

A few weeks ago, in a fourth-year class discussion of gender in children’s literature, one student mused, “Would we read the books differently if they were Harry the Spy and Harriet Potter?”1 Certainly the heroines of Tamora Pierce and Robin McKinley have shown that anything boys can do they can do better. Also, the Harry Potter books are celebrated for their broad readership: adults and children, boys and girls. Gender does not appear to be an issue. However, reviewers have remarked in particular on the books’ appeal for boys, and editorial cartoons across North America have shown boys forsaking their computers and the television for Rowling’s tales.2 No matter who reads them, the Harry Potter books are quintessentially boys’ books. As Gregory Maguire notes, Harry is “a boy’s boy.”3 He is obsessed with sport (Quidditch); he flourishes in the somewhat homosocial world of Hogwarts (although he does have a female friend, Hermione is usually fussing over her studies, and in the earlier books she often either does not accompany Harry and Ron on their most daring adventures, or frets in a shrill voice throughout the action); and he longs to be worthy of Gryffindor, brave and chivalrous, rather than patient (Hufflepuff), learned (Ravenclaw), or crafty (Slytherin). The film adaptation of the first book highlights this aspect of the novel. Harry’s fellowship with Ron is emphasized, and all female students other than Hermione fade into the background. Even the female Quidditch players have almost no lines. The books make use of such standard boy’s school story elements as team sports, interhouse competitions, and escapes from the dormitory for midnight adventures.4

1. I would like to thank Julie Conroy for allowing me to open my discussion with her question.
2. See, for instance, the selection of cartoons at “Darryl Cagle’s Professional Cartoonist Index.”
4. For a survey of sources tapped for the Potter books, see Wendy Doniger’s “Can You Spot the Source,” 26–27.
The elements of the classic boy’s school story used by J. K. Rowling have led to some criticism. The books have been described carefully by Nicholas Tucker as “backward looking,” and more nastily by Anthony Holden as being nothing more than “Billy Bunter on broomsticks.”

I think these criticisms are outgrowths of a particular cultural climate. We are bombarded by media images of children abandoned, children abused, children who kill; the idea of childhood as a privileged, innocent state has little currency. For many critics, the signs of the times point to a need for children’s literature that does not shy from the gritty, ugly, or even dangerous “realities” of contemporary childhood. Michael Cart ends his survey of contemporary young adult literature with a plea that writers address current hard issues facing what he calls “the most-at-risk-ever young adults.”

Many of Harry Potter’s readers presumably fall into this category, as young adult books address readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and although Harry begins his adventures at age eleven, he will be seventeen by the time they are done if Rowling proceeds with her projected seven volumes. For those critics who insist on the need for gritty realism, the early Potter books appear woefully lacking: the world of Hogwarts is, despite He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, too cozy, too safe. Even at the most frightening moment in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry appears to be completely at the mercy of Tom Riddle, the boyhood incarnation of You-Know-Who, after Dumbledore has been sent away from the school, Harry is rescued by Dumbledore’s phoenix, Fawkes (presumably named after Guy), and the homely Sorting Hat. For some, Harry’s safety net of magical guardians and helpers works against the child reader learning how to deal pragmatically with various “real” dangers. It is no accident that Cart’s title, for instance, presents a linear relationship that privileges realism over romance (or fantasy). The accusations that the Potter books do not address “real” issues, or that they offer unrealistic solutions to problems, belong to a long tradition of attacks on imaginative literature.

I will return to the issue of fantasy; however, I want to pursue this notion that there is a group of youth in dire need of stories that address “real” concerns. Frequently, the youth seen as being in need are male. Whether they agree with Christina Hoff Sommers that feminism has emasculated North American boys, or with William Pollock that the myths of masculinity are forcing boys into ever more destructive patterns, the critics seem to agree that being a boy is a problem.

As Peter Hollindale puts it, “girls at the time of writing seem to be making a better job of growing up than boys are. On the whole it is not girls who carry knives, commit assaults, steal cars and crash them. Boys rather than girls resort to negative demonstrations of self-worth. Boys rather than girls currently feel surplus to society’s requirements.” These generalizations could certainly be challenged, but what is of interest is the perception that boys have a harder time of it than girls. In an excellent discussion of “boyology,” Kenneth Kidd shows that the current trend is a replay of discussions at the previous turn of the century.

Then, concern about engendering masculinity followed anxiety about the New Woman; today, the “boys in crisis” message follows a period of perceived sustained attention to girls’ educational and developmental needs.

The idea that boyhood is a socially problematic stage is paralleled in the world of education and reading. When the American Association of University Women released a report claiming that girls are still disadvantaged in schools, the response was swift: test scores show girls outperforming boys in most categories. Commentators on children’s literature take it as a given that boys are more likely to be reluctant readers than girls. It is also sometimes presented as a given that most fiction produced today is aimed at a “girl market.” For instance, on her website *Reading Rants: Out of the Ordinary Teen Booklists*, middle school librarian Jennifer Hubert appeals to boys: “Does it seem like all the books are for girls? Are Sweet Valley High and Teen Angels threatening to overwhelm you with their sickening pastel covers? Well, never fear, Best Boy Reads are here! Believe it or not, there are some great books out there for the teen-aged males of the world who like a little more testosterone in their paperbacks.” It appears that boys must be coaxed into reading, and just as masculinity defines itself against femininity, books for boys must be defined as the antithesis of “girls’ books.” “Testosterone” translates into sports, alienation, and violence, at least in the examples listed on the site. The protagonists in these books are under siege. Their problems are “real life” problems with a vengeance: murder, abuse, and sociopathic siblings, to name a few.

So, if boys need a dose of gritty realism, how and why does a seemingly insignificant Cinderella like Harry Potter earn kudos for “bringing boys back to reading”? A comparison of the Harry Potter books with other “boys’ books” currently winning critical attention suggests that, in part, the popularity of Rowling’s world may be a reaction against some of the
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realism being called for by critics like Cart and Hollindale. I am not suggesting that the Potter books are purely escapist, the equivalent of John Grisham or Louis L’Amour for the junior set, as some reviewers have done; rather, like all good fantasy, they touch on deeply moral issues. Indeed, Rowling addresses many of the same problems treated in contemporary realistic fiction for boys. The one major distinction is that of genre. Another key distinction is the book’s attention to issues of masculinity.

The books I will be discussing, Walter Dean Myers’ Monster (1999), Virginia Walter’s Making Up Megaboy (1998), and Edward Bloor’s Tangerine (1997), address a range of age groups, mostly older than those initially targeted as Rowling’s readers. However, it is fair to group the Potter books with these, as Harry matures from book to book and his readership grows with him. One of the key elements shared by all of the more realistic fiction is a concern with the problem of growing up male. For Steve Harmon, Robbie Jones, and Paul Fisher, learning to be a man is fraught with dangers and tensions.

In Monster, a top-ten selection for the 2000 American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults, the protagonist is concerned in part with what it means to become a man. Sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon tells his story, partly in a journal and partly in the form of a screenplay of his life, in jail awaiting trial for supposedly standing guard during a robbery-homicide. One of the reasons he is even associated with the actual perpetrators of the crime is his half-conscious desire to seem “tough,” like James King and Osvaldo Cruz. In Steve’s world, among his peers, masculinity has to be performed. This desire is what presents Steve with his dilemma. He insists he was not involved in the crime, yet he is guilty of wanting to hang around with the perpetrators to enhance his own masculine status. The prosecutor says that Steve has made a moral decision—Steve wonders just what that decision was, and when he made it. He portrays his confusion as gender-driven rather than moral. Race intersects with gender as well. Myers suggests that Steve is on trial for being a young black man in the wrong part of the neighborhood at the wrong time. Even after his defense is successful, Steve’s own attorney avoids his attempt to hug her. Steve feels that everyone sees a “monster” when they look at him, and the novel closes with Steve obsessively recording his life and trying to see what others see when they look in his face.

There is no doubt about thirteen-year-old Robbie Jones’s guilt in Making Up Megaboy: before the book opens, he has shot and killed an elderly Korean convenience store owner. Instead of figuring out “who-dunnit,” we are invited to ponder why he did it. The text consists of commentary by family members, teachers, friends, and community members, interspersed with graphics. Robbie himself is a cipher, as he never speaks; perhaps he is Sommers’ pathologized, voiceless boy. One thing we do know about Robbie, though, is that he imagines himself as a kind of superhero, Megaboy, who is drawn with bulging muscles, fighting enemies and rescuing “Targa,” a character based on a girl from his class. The main thrust of the text is to push readers to judge family and society who pass judgment on Robbie while revealing their own biases. The race issue surfaces here as well, as Robbie’s mother wants to blame “that Mexican boy who hung around for a while” for being a bad influence on her son. Nonetheless, Robbie’s fantasies of masculine empowerment, present throughout the book on the frontispiece, in the body of the text, and on the back endpaper, clearly suggest that he is motivated in part by masculine anxiety. One reading of the shooting, which happens on the day of his thirteenth birthday, is that he wants to show Tara, and perhaps his other peers, that he is now a man; this is his rite of passage.

Both Monster and Making Up Megaboy raise questions about defining masculinity, the connections between certain ideas of masculinity and violence, and individual moral choices. Rowling raises similar questions about moral choices. As in much fantasy literature, characters in the Potter books choose to align themselves with either the evil Voldemort or with the forces of good, led seemingly by Dumbledore. However, this is not an absolute world, and some of Harry’s most interesting dilemmas address the difficulty of distinguishing at times between good and evil. It can be hard to know who is friend and who is foe. Like Steve Harmon, Harry needs to choose his friends carefully. From the first book, in which Quirrell, the Defense against the Dark Arts teacher, turns out to be sharing his body with Voldemort, there are continual surprising allegiances. The notorious Sirius Black, supposedly the betrayer of Harry’s parents, was actually framed, and is a dedicated enemy of Voldemort. Perhaps the most shocking revelation, for Harry, is the moment when Snape is revealed as a spy for Dumbledore. Snape, the head of Slytherin House, hates Harry passionately, just as he hated Harry’s father and his friends when all were boys together at Hogwarts. Harry in turn dislikes Snape and finds it hard to believe that such an unpleasant person, a Death Eater, is to be trusted.

However, far more difficult for Harry than learning who is and is not to be trusted is learning to trust himself. Harry is somehow linked to Voldemort; after he survived the attack that killed his parents, he was marked with a lightning-shaped scar that aches whenever Voldemort is plotting some evil or is near. Harry also possesses the rare gift of speaking Parseltongue, the speech of snakes, which only Lord Voldemort shares. And Harry’s wand is the twin of Voldemort’s: both have at their core a phoenix feather from Fawkes. Harry’s fears about his own nature are made clear when he encounters the Sorting Hat. The hat has a difficult time placing Harry, and almost

puts him in Slytherin, former home of Voldemort (the Heir of Slytherin) and the house that has produced the most Dark Wizards: “You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that” (Sorcerer’s Stone, 121). It is only Harry’s determined resistance to belonging to Slytherin that makes the hat place him in Gryffindor. Draco Malfoy, a Slytherin and son of a Death Eater, frequently taunts Harry, suggesting he made the wrong choice. When Harry finally shares his fear that he might secretly be a Slytherin, Dumbledore calmly agrees that he possesses many qualities in common with Voldemort, but then insists that what distinguishes Harry from the latter is his choice not to be like him: “It is our choices... that show us for what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (Chamber of Secrets, 333). Clearly, Rowling is establishing Voldemort and Harry as opponents who have similar backgrounds and similar talents to illustrate the importance of free will. Voldemort is part Muggle, and as the boy Tom Riddle, he, like Harry, was treated badly by Muggle relatives; this has led to his hatred of Muggles and his desire to destroy all so-called Muggle-bred and Muggle-lovers. In a realistic novel, Voldemort might be a Robbie Jones.

Voldemort’s history suggests a kind of pop-psychology reading of the abused child who grows up to become a violent offender. Harry, however, is proof that the cycle need not be continued. As you’ll read elsewhere in this volume, the series presents Harry with a number of moral choices to make; these rites of passage mark not only his increasing maturity but also his refusal to become like Voldemort. It is easy to hate his nasty relatives, the Dursleys. They are characters out of a Roald Dahl novel (in fact the Ton-Tongue Toffee joke played on Dudley by the Weasley twins is rather like the grotesque fates of the nasty children in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory). Harry retaliates against Aunt Marge’s insults, but for the most part he comes to terms with the Dursleys (perhaps this is one of the reasons Harry must continue to live with them, as well as because of the protection they afford). By The Goblet of Fire, Harry has achieved a standoff with the Dursleys (thanks to the specter of Sirius), and is able to ensure his own comfort with a secret cache of food while the rest of the household is supporting Dudley’s “diet.” Of course, Harry has more challenging tests. First, when he has the opportunity to kill Sirius Black, whom he believes to be responsible for his parents’ deaths, he hesitates. After being interrupted by Remus Lupin, Harry reflects that “his nerve had failed him” (Prisoner of Azkaban, 343). More deliberately, he decides not to kill the real traitor, Peter Pettigrew. Finally, during the Triwizard Tournament, Harry refuses to benefit from Hagrid’s tip and warns Cedric of the first task. During the second task, Harry refuses to win at the expense of others’ lives. He stays under the lake until Hermione and Cho are rescued, and then rescues Fleur’s sister and his own hostage, Ron. During the last task, Harry insists that Cedric, able to run to the cup faster than Harry, is the real winner; when Cedric demurs, Harry proposes that they each take the cup. This is one of the most difficult choices Harry has to come to terms with, for the cup is a Portkey that takes both boys to Voldemort, who kills Cedric. Up until this point, Harry’s choices have all led to praise and a feeling that right has been done. This time, however, Harry feels guilt for Cedric’s death, even though no one blames him. Choices in Rowling’s world do have consequences, and they are neither always predictable nor always pleasant.

Like some of the other current books on the boys’ market, the Potter books link moral issues to racial and ethnic issues in a reflection of current debates. In the light of the nationalistic and ethnic battles in the former Yugoslavia, or the tribal wars in Rwanda, it is hard not to read Voldemort and his Death Eaters as ethnic cleansers. Supporters of Voldemort wish to promote purity of blood. Mudbloods, wizards or witches born of Muggle parents, like Hermione Granger, are targeted. A number of characters are of mixed blood: along with Hermione, Harry’s mother was a Muggle-born witch, and Voldemort’s father was a Muggle. Another race, the giants, is also hated and feared by most wizards and witches. When Hagrid is recovering from his shame at being outed as part giant, he insists that Harry must win the Triwizard Cup: “It’d show ’em all... yeh don’ have ter be pure-blood ter do it. Yeh don’ have ter be ashamed of what yeh are” (Goblet of Fire, 456). This message that blood does not necessarily tell is reinforced when Barty Crouch, the last heir of a great pureblood family, is unmasked as a half-insane servant of Voldemort.

Barty Crouch’s family history has another important lesson for Harry and readers. His father, a stern judge of Dark Wizards, became so obsessed with fighting the Dark that he became rather like them. When Harry watches trials via Dumbledore’s thoughts in the Pensieve, Crouch becomes grayer and more hate-filled with, each trial, until finally he condemns his own son, claiming he no longer has a son. As Dumbledore notes, the Ministry of Magic’s use of the Dementors and its willingness to bargain with Death Eaters bring it closer to the Dark. Young Barty, cast off by his father, identifies entirely with Voldemort, and, like Voldemort, he eventually kills his father. Barty represents another path not taken by Harry. Each time Harry chooses mercy, he allies himself with Dumbledore, who is well known for the “second-chances” he gives, such as to Snape and Hagrid. The possibility of redemption is a key positive value in the novels.

Rowling has said on more than one occasion that her books are deeply moral.14 Certainly they raise a number of the same kinds of questions that

14. For instance, during an online “Chat with J. K. Rowling” on Yahoo, sponsored by Barnes and Noble, Rowling responded to a question about the controversy over her
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However, the paralleling of the brothers and their sports sends some interesting messages. Erik’s story seems to come straight from the headlines that connect athletic stars with violence off the playing field. There is the distinct suggestion that, individual pathology aside, Erik’s aggressive behavior is encouraged by a culture that values his skill. There is, nonetheless, no simplistic analogy made between violent sport and violent behavior. Paul is shown as participating in equally violent athletic contests, yet he does not translate that aggression into his daily life. Erik represents a certain masculine ideal that is ultimately devalued by the novel. Paul, who establishes boundaries between sport and life, yet who is also willing to cross class and racial boundaries to understand and be understood by the Other, represents an alternative masculine ideal. Physically insignificant, Paul is nonetheless able to compete well at a sport he loves, and he is able to make lasting connections with the students from Tangerine Middle School, particularly the Cruz family. By the end of the book, Paul has found a code of honor by which he can live. Even though he is suspended from school, he is not going to become a rulebreaker for the sake of breaking rules: he will abide by the consequences of a decision he made out of loyalty and a sense of justice.

Harry Potter is another undersized boy who finds confidence through sport. The youngest Quidditch player in a century, Harry earns respect for his skill as a seeker. His flying skills are first revealed when he fights Malfoy to rescue Neville Longbottom’s Remembrall, so early on his ability is partnered by his decency. The degree to which Harry is invested in his identity as a successful player is revealed by his overreaction to losing his first match, when he is beaten by Cedric Diggory. Cedric, in fact, becomes a rival to Harry off the field as well as on; both boys are attracted to Cho Chang, and of course both also compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some might joke that the battle between good and evil is won on the playing fields of Hogwarts, but in Harry’s case, his Quidditch training does indeed stand him in good stead. It helps him defeat the Hungarian Horntail dragon in the first task of the championship, and in a more dangerous situation, it helps him evade the Death Eaters in his escape from the resurrected Voldemort.

As in Tangerine, extreme valorization of sport and sports stars is criticized in the Potter books. From the beginning, Harry is contrasted by, on the one hand the Weasley twins, who rarely take anything (including Quidditch) terribly seriously, and on the other hand by the comically intense captain of the Gryffindor team, Oliver Wood, who is over the top in his obsession with winning the school cup. There is an even stronger message in the person of Ludo Bagman, a former international Quidditch star. It is tempting to imagine Erik Fisher as a more sinister Ludo Bagman, thirty years or so down the line. Bagman is stupid and amoral. His only talent has been for Quidditch, and now, too old to play, he cuts a rather pathetic figure in

books by claiming that “these books are fundamentally moral (that is how I see them, in any case).”

15. Edward Bloor, Tangerine, 165.
his old uniform. He cheats the Weasley twins, and we find through the Pensieve that he managed to cheat the judge as well. On trial for spying for Voldemort, Bagman is acquitted because of his fame; one of the jury members actually asks to congratulate Bagman on his performance in a recent match (Goblet of Fire, 593). These are the same false values that allow Erik to flourish in Tangerine.

Paul’s soccer team and the Hogwarts Quidditch teams are both coed; however, a key feature of playing sport for both Paul and Harry is the entrée it affords into a brotherhood. Paul’s teammates actually come to call him “brother,” and they are more brotherly toward him than his biological brother is. Through the team he meets Tino Cruz, and eventually he is accepted as a member of the crew at the Cruz plantation; this is tantamount to becoming a member of their extended family. Similarly, although Harry is forever set apart by his scar, identified as the one who defied Voldemort, his playing for Gryffindor integrates him into the community of the house, and he develops a sense of fellowship with other male Quidditch players, save for those from the Slytherin team. We do not see him joking and interacting with female athletes; instead, aside from his friendship with Hermione, Harry’s world is mostly a masculine one. During the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, unlike the older boys, Cedric and Krum, Harry must rescue not a girl but his best friend, Ron Weasley.

There are suggestions that Harry and Ron will soon be noticing the opposite sex. I have already mentioned Harry’s interest in Cho (which is tangled up with his rivalry with Cedric), and by the end of volume four, Ron has not only noticed Fleur Delacour but also come to recognize Hermione as a female, as well. However, in the first four volumes Harry is more interested in his relationships with “brothers” and father figures than he is in those with girls or women. Mrs. Weasley plays a maternal role, particularly when Harry has been through horrible experiences, but she is a distant supplier of good food and knitted jumpers rather than a key figure in Harry’s life. Hagrid also feels somewhat fatherly toward Harry; he tells Harry that, on their first meeting, Harry reminded him of himself as a boy, orphaned and unsure of his belonging (Goblet of Fire, 456). Hagrid watches over Harry, providing tea and a sympathetic ear when Harry is troubled, as well as a timely clue about dragons. Finally, his father’s former teacher, Dumbledore, is a paternal figure as well. He is the one who provides explanations after Harry’s most frightening adventures, and he is also the one who assures Harry that he is growing into the right sort of boy.

In his relationships with adult male figures, Harry is quite unlike the heroes of the realistic novels we’ve considered. Paul Fisher admires Luis, the eldest Cruz brother, but there are no other adult men in his life who take an interest in him or who encourage his development. His father is of course obsessed with living vicariously through the Erik Fisher Football Dream, and his soccer coach is a woman. None of the adult male voices in Making Up Megaboy seems to know Robbie Jones at all, and, although Steven Harmon has a father in Monster, his father exists at the extreme sidelines of Steve’s life, bewildered by his son’s actions and interests. This absence of male role models emphasizes these boys’ isolation as they grow. It also suggests that adult men are themselves self-absorbed, absent, or incompetent. It is only by going outside of his class and culture that Paul finds a positive model of manhood. Small wonder, then, that masculinity in North American culture comes to be seen as a problem, or that in extreme cases such as Robbie’s, masculinity appears to be pathologized.

The Harry Potter books do not problematize masculinity; this is, perhaps, one reason for their appeal for boy readers. Rowling follows an older narrative tradition, in which her boy-hero comes to maturity supported by a cast of “fathers” who are there when he needs them, but who also let him find his own way when he needs to do that. In this regard, Harry is rather like Jim Hawkins, who interacts with and learns from the models of Squire Trelawney, Doctor Livesay, Captain Smollett, and even Long John Silver. Like Jim, Harry also has adventures on his own, and indeed, in his most serious tests, he must depend upon himself. In the first volume, Harry must face Quirrell/Voldemort alone; again, in Chamber of Secrets, although Fawkes heals Harry with his tears and the Sorting Hat gives Harry Gryffindor’s sword, Harry alone is responsible for the destruction of Tom Riddle’s diary. In this tradition, the boy-hero has the best of both worlds: he has the security of being supported by positive older male role models, and he enjoys both the pleasures and the responsibilities of independence.

It is important to note that Harry does mature over the course of the books, and not only in terms of his moral choices. He grows in wizardry abilities, signaled by his ability to compete with the older and better-trained champions in the Triwizard Tournament. Rowling claims that she has planned all along to move away from a children’s series; because Harry

terri doughty, toronto: mcgraw-hill, 1999.}

ages a year with each volume, she is able to address issues of increasing complexity and maturity.17 Harry’s challenges become more difficult with each volume. In the first book, Dumbledore arrives just in time to assure that Quirrell does not triumph, although he notes to Harry that he was “doing very well on [his] own” (Sorcerer’s Stone, 296). Next, Harry faces Voldemort’s boy self, Tom Riddle, and once again Harry is sent help when he needs it. It is important to note, though, that Dumbledore still gives Harry credit for his victory: “You must have shown me real loyalty down in [his] own” (Prisoner of Azkaban, 296). Not only does this suggest that Harry has found a connection with his father, but metaphorically he is ready to father himself; the boy is indeed the father to the man. The fourth volume, right in the middle of the projected series, marks Harry’s coming into adulthood. In future volumes, he is likely to take his place beside the adults fighting Voldemort. Indeed, with Minister Fudge’s unwillingness to accept the return of Voldemort, Harry may well fight for adults who will not fight for themselves.

The pleasure of following the adventures of a boy who comes to fight a man’s battles is surely one of the pleasures for boys in reading the Potter series. Just as the playing field provides an acceptable place for exercising aggression, so does the endless battle between good and evil. Another element in the books should not be overlooked, however. Unlike high fantasy generally, these books are funny, and funny in a way boys in particular enjoy. There is a lot of gross-out humor here, from Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans, which can come in such flavors as “vomit” and “ear-wax,” to the Blast-Ended Skrewts, with their exploding bottoms. One of the benefits of having Hagrid as the teacher of the Care of Magical Beasts class is his penchant for monsters and oddities. Looking after unicorns might appeal to girl readers, particularly those who have grown up playing with toys marketed to girls such as “My Little Pony,” but it provides little interest for boy readers. At the first Harry Potter movie, my son certainly delighted in the sight of Harry wiping troll “boogers” off his wand. The giant dollops of slimy drool falling from Fluffy the three-headed dog onto the hapless Ron were also well-received by the young boys in the audience. The humor definitely becomes more sexualized in volume four, as the characters, and perhaps readers, hover at puberty. In Divination class, when Lavender asks to have a planet identified, Professor Trelawney answers, “It is Uranus, my dear,” whereupon Ron trots out the rather tired but endlessly funny joke still to thirteen-year-old boys: “Can I have a look at Uranus, too, Lavender?” (Goblet of Fire, 201). There is precious little laughter in much current realistic fiction dealing with boys’ issues. The Potter books manage to address some of the same moral and psychological issues, but with the balm of humor to balance the horrors. When Harry gives the Weasley twins his Triwizard winnings to finance their projected Joke Shop, he comments that any laughs they can generate will be more needed than ever as a counter to the dark times to come when Voldemort makes his next move (Goblet of Fire, 733).

Finally, I want to come back to the matter of genre. Michael Cart and others have suggested that the complexities and dangers of contemporary life demand a harsh realism in literature. The assumption here is that only realistic fiction provides engagement with “real-life” issues. I hope I have shown that the Potter books do engage with issues that face boys today, even though few boys will be called upon to fight a basilisk. In From Romance to Realism, Cart disdains what he calls the pendulum swing of the eighties, the rise in popularity of the paperback romance, which he sees as part of a reaction against the realism of 1970s literature for young adults.18 While he celebrates the return of realism in the 1990s, I would suggest

that the popularity of the Harry Potter books into the twenty-first century is a reaction against that realism. As Hugh Crago notes in "Can Stories Heal?" interest in bibliotherapy has led to a concomitant interest in finding realistic fiction to match young readers' lived experiences. However, if, as he suggests, the therapeutic effects of reading are most likely to occur when the reader merges with the text, then we need to look at what causes that merging. Crago argues convincingly that this merging is most likely to occur when "the correspondence [between lived and literary experience] is partly or wholly metaphorical rather than literal. Human addiction to 'story' is an aspect of our symbol-making nature." This suggests that fantasy, which addresses experience metaphorically, is perhaps the most appropriate, or even most satisfying, genre for addressing the psychological needs of readers. The fantastic elements of the Harry Potter books, then, are not necessarily escapist; boy readers who enjoy the books are not avoiding the problems of growing up male. Instead, they may be identifying with those problems on a deeper, symbolic level. According to Perry Nodelman, in the act of reading fantasy, "experiencing something clearly and completely different from ourselves, we become acutely aware of who and what we are."20

The series is not yet complete, and we do not know all that Rowling has planned for the remaining three volumes, other than that Harry will continue to grow and mature. Rowling enjoys teasing readers, hinting at dire outcomes, but I would be surprised if the forces of good do not win out, and that brings me to what is probably one of the most satisfying elements of fantasy: hope. Tamora Pierce, herself a gifted fantasist, argues passionately for the necessity of hope in young readers' lives: "one of the things I have learned about [young adults] is that they respond to the idealism and imagination they find in everything they read... YAs are also dreamers... Here the seeds are sown for the great visions, those that will change the future for us all."21 I am not suggesting that only fantasy literature offers this. Although both Monster and Making Up Megaboy leave the reader with troubling, perhaps unsolvable questions and issues, Tangerine certainly presents a hopeful ending. Paul Fisher may have been expelled, but he gets a fresh start at a new school; he has a positive sense of family with the Cruzes, and it even looks as though his father will pay him more attention in the future. Indeed, as he drives with his father to his new school, the sight of Mike Costello's memorial tree and the scent of citrus fruit lead Paul to look forward to new life. The two novels share a similar vein, though. Tangerine, although presented as realism, has many fantastic elements: Paul is "blind,"