fantasy

Between 1500 and 1700 an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 people were executed for practicing witchcraft**.** Gradually the burning alive of innocent women went out of style, and in 1735 the Witchcraft Act in Britain ruled that witchcraft was no longer a legal offence. By the time Samuel Taylor Coleridge was writing in the late 1700s, poetry and fiction involving the supernatural had also gone out of fashion. Who wanted to write about witches and magic if no one believed in them anymore?

But Coleridge wished to revive the use of fantastic elements in poetry, notably in his work *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. He devised the notion of the "willing suspension of disbelief" which explained how a modern, enlightened 18th century audience might continue to enjoy the fantastic in story. Coleridge suggested that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantasy tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative.

Coleridge called it “poetic faith.”

I confess that I struggle with poetic faith.

I believe this is a personal failing of sorts. My disbelief is so unwillingly suspended. In fact, I rarely suspend, and not just in my reading habits. I do not believe advertisements of any kind, nor the media through which they come. I find newspapers to be equally as unbelievable as the most unbelievable of fantasy. I do not believe much of anything my neighbors tell me about other people. I do not adhere to chiropractors or herbal

medications, and I am highly sceptical of the *usual* kind of doctor. I am afraid of airplanes because I do not believe in them. I have only just begun to believe in cell phones. I do not believe in most people unless they persist in being themselves over an extended period of time. In short, I hold my disbelief dear and give it over for God and very little else.

But one time and another, I have been made to believe.

I become devoted and worshipful to any author who can divest me of my poetic faithlessness and make of me a convert. The books that do so create worlds so true and real that I do not have to *believe*, for I have touched and tasted and walked for a little while in their magical worlds.

One of those times was just before my final exams in my senior year of high school. I picked up a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* and that was it for studying for finals. This book made me so poetically faithful, I was ready to throw off reality all together. I was unconcerned about failing my entire year because as I read I knew I was going to be a writer of fiction some day, and I would begin my new bohemian life as a high school drop-out. Tolkien said, "When fantasy is done right, it is not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so the most potent."

The most recent book that made me believe, that made of me a devoted follower and convert, at least in the beginning, was J.K. Rowling's, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.*

The first time I heard of Harry was when Rowling appeared on *60 Minutes.* We were treated to twenty minutes of airtime about her initial and unparalleled success, the devotion of her new fans that bordered on mania, and the surety of her future multi-millions in royalties and movie rights.

When the show was over, my husband looked at me strangely, in a way that indicated I had failed him in some essential way. Friends phoned me the next day asking me please to write a book like *Harry Potter*. When next I visited my mother's house, I found a copy of Harry Potter in her nightstand drawer. None of *my* books could be found in her nightstand drawer. She declared her unwavering belief that I could write something that great someday. To this day, all seven volumes of Harry Potter are in my mother's nightstand drawer. Not one of my books has yet earned this honor.

How I hated Rowling's book, sight unseen. I was sure it would be a dreadful book, and someday I would die and the whole world, including my mother and husband, would realize that I had been misunderstood and underappreciated. I magnanimously bought the book and held onto it for several weeks without reading it because of the aforementioned hatred. I simply didn't have time to read such a horrible book. One morning I woke up very early, unable to sleep for some reason, at around 4 a.m. I thought I would just read a few pages before my family woke up.

I read those few pages. And then I read more, and more. My husband left for work with me still reading on the couch. I kept my toddler quiet with crackers and cheese and Cheerios all day until I read the end. Millions of dollars? I said to my husband when he got home. Is that all? This writer is seriously underpaid!

Now let me say that I know the literary merits of the Harry Potter series is controversial. Ursula Le Guin said this: "I have no great opinion of it. When so many adult critics were carrying on about the incredible originality of the first Harry Potter book, I read it to find out what the fuss was about and remained somewhat puzzled. It seemed a lively kid's fantasy crossed with a school novel, good fare for its age group, but stylistically ordinary, imaginatively derivative and ethically rather mean-spirited." End quote. If you read it with a critical eye, you find that all this is true.

LeGuin's books suspend my disbelief and give it a shake for good measure. If the world were just, *she* would be richer than the Queen of England. But I would ask, what *was* the appeal if it wasn't incredible originality? What was it if it were indeed stylistically ordinary and derivative?

Kinder evaluations include one from author and essayist Fay Weldon, who said, "The series is not what the poets hoped for, but this is not poetry. It is readable, saleable, everyday, useful prose."

But I thought, we have lots of books on the shelves that offer readable, saleable, everyday useful prose. What makes Harry different?

The Prisoners of Azkaban won the Whitbread Award in 1999, but one of the judges for the Whitbread, a critic named Anthony Holden, must not have agreed with the other judges for he wrote, "Potter was essentially patronizing, conservative, highly derivative, dispiritingly nostalgic and pedestrian." Millions of readers waited in line for patronizing and conservative? Why?

It is not my intent to hold up *all* the Potter books, based on literary merit, as the kind of work to which all of us should necessarily aspire, but I do think the first book at least showed a true genius for story and that is the one I'm discussing today. For the purposes of this paper I turn away from worship of literary art at its pinnacle and bow humbly before the first billionaire author ever.

I studied the book to see if I could discover the reasons for my conversion. I asked, *how* did she do what she did? What could I learn from her work and how could I apply that learning to fantasy or realism of more artistic depth or complexity? This is what I discovered:

1. Desire

JRR Tolkien said, "When you know you're *really* in Faerie is when the magic that it wields is the power to play on the *desires of the body and the heart*. Among the virtue of its operations are the satisfaction of certain *primordial human desires*, including the desire to survey the depths of space and time. If you awaken desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, you have succeeded."

How Rowling awakens, satisfies and whets desire!

- As a child, I wanted to fly. Harry gets to fly on a broom.
- As a child, I wanted to be able to be invisible. Harry has an invisibility cloak.
- I wished to see a real live ghost. Harry gets ghosts as hall monitors.
- I desired dragons with a profound desire (as did Tolkien, whom I quote). Harry gets every species of dragon, including Common Welsh Green, Hebridean Blacks and Norwegian Ridgebacks.
- I wanted to talk to animals. Harry talks to animals.
- Harry's powers resist the control of hostile adults, such as when his hair grows back overnight after the Dursley's cut it badly.
- Harry's parents die, leaving him, conveniently, a good name and unspeakable wealth. Harry's parents will never discipline him, nag him, ground him or disappoint in any way.
- Harry is also fortunate in his substitute parents, the Dursley's. They are so deliciously and consistently shallow and cruel that he can live his whole life in blissful hatred of them. So unlike most of us, who must grow up to one day understand, sympathize with or come to a kind of peace about our parents.
- School is in a castle that you enter by boat. The cafeteria food is spontaneous and abundant, and low in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. (Well, I guess that's kind

of like real life.) Students find their school books interesting – and all learning is immediately useful for manipulating the elements of the world. The severest punishment for breaking the rules involves looking for unicorns in a forbidden forest. And the principle's opening speech for the school year goes like this: "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts. Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words, and here they are: Nitwit. Blubber. Oddment. Tweak. Thank you." What child has not desired a principal with such wisdom? Dumbledore is every child's dream significant adult – he lets them do whatever, and only shows up occasionally to divulge some adult secret and ask if the children can please save the world in behalf of all the inadequate adults.

Freud believed that all artistic creation was wish fulfillment or fantasy gratification of desires denied by the reality principle or prohibited by moral codes. If that is true, readers may seek artistic creation for the same reason. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* offers the ultimate in wish fulfillment. I will add, however, that Harry offers a different sort of desire than the one I experienced when I read *The Lord of the Rings*. That desire changed me, explained me to me. Harry offers a kind of involvement with the text that is pleasurable but seems to whisper, "don't think too much, don't feel too much." This is a choice a writer makes.

2. Reader identification

John Adams said, "A desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved and admired by his fellows is one of the earliest as well as the keenest dispositions discovered in the heart of man." Harry is a celebrity from birth, is known with gratitude universally by all wizard-kind, is expected one day to have a holiday named after him, and is counted on to save the magic world. At the same time, he is humble, generally

always in trouble and frequently abandoned by his peers. He is at once everything we desire to be, and everything we already are. We relate to Harry, we identify with him, we vicariously bask in his glory. Our brains fill with serotonin.

Harry is every child, and every adult who remembers what it was to be a child. What child has not had to wear the hand-me-downs of a preferred older sibling? Or looked with longing at the better birthday gifts of a favored younger one? What child has not thought himself tormented, if only for a moment, by a teacher, for what surely must be arbitrary if not sinister reasons? What child has not secretly thought himself a sports hero who never got his or her break? Hasn't every child thought herself in some way banished to under the stairs? Has he waited anxiously for his metaphoric letter announcing that he is special? What child has not known that within him is the power to defeat the dark forces of the universe, if only people would stop treating him the way they do – as if he were ordinary!

John Gardner also said: "All we need for our sympathy to be aroused is that the writer communicate with power and conviction the similarities in his characters' experience and our own."

- Harry is *loved* – we know to love him because he is loved by all wizard kind
- he is in *jeopardy* – in the beginning of the book he is abused and neglected, lives under the stairs with spiders and has never been to the zoo. Later in the story, he is up against Voldemart. Nothing elevates the stature of a protagonist in a reader's eyes quicker than elevating the evilness of his antagonist.
- he is *talented and gifted* – he is the only wizard ever to have defeated Voldemort and his name is already in the history books. Furthermore he is a gifted Quidditch athlete.

- he *never feels sorry for himself* – if you are one of my students you'll know I harp on this a lot. As soon as your character feels sorry for himself, your reader doesn't have to. Death to story.
- Harry is loyal and brave, and makes *sacrifice*s for others, putting himself in danger to get the sorcerer's stone before Voldemort does.

You don't have to make your characters good to make them likeable. I like Snape very much in the book – he is also talented and gifted and persists in being himself over a long period of time. He says things to annoying children that I have myself wished at times to say.

3. Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude is simply the semblance to truth that Coleridge talked about. I've read that verisimilitude is for contemporary realism and suspension of disbelief is for fantasy. Tolkien also invented the notion of subcreation. It's all the same to me. It means it feels real. Whether you are writing fantasy or realism, you must make the world of your story real to your readers. John Gardner said, "In any piece of fiction, the writer's first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened, given small changes in the laws of the universe."

identify with the magic makers

Rowling makes the magic real by making those who *don't* believe in the magic the bad guys. Harry Potter begins like this: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four Privet Drive were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious because they just didn't hold with such nonsense." By the end of page one, the reader wants not to be counted among the folk of Dursley kind and is more than willing to cast her lot with those strange people in emerald green cloaks.

Harry has no trouble at all with things strange and mysterious. If *he* likes them, then so do we. Rowling uses this technique to help us believe in a world where everything runs on magic.

Nothing makes the magic of Harry's world seem more real than Mr. Dursley's fear. The Dursleys say they do not believe in magic, but his fear proves otherwise. Of course, all the *magical* people believe in magic. But it is Mr. Dursley's fear that makes the unmagical reader believe that this time, it might be real.

C.S Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* uses this technique as well. Poor little Lucy tries to tell her siblings what has happened to her in her walk into the wardrobe. Peter and Susan don't believe her, and Edmund spitefully torments her about telling such a story. We feel sorry for her and identify with her over her obnoxious and unbelieving brother. We would rather be the believer than hold onto our precious poetic atheism.

Whether writing fantasy or realism, we do well never to underestimate the power of creating a reality within the context of the story world.

concrete and precise details

Gardner says that "All kinds of writing depend heavily on precision of detail…. Moment by moment authenticating detail."

This is the first paragraph from a workshop manuscript submitted by Amy Rose Capetta:

"There was a long history of magic in the little New England town of Cheswick- it was just as predictable there as a white picket fence or a stone wall, and it hemmed the town in from the outside world in just the same way. People brought it from their old countries and dragged it in from the sea and coaxed it out of the rocky soil, carefully.

But as time wore on and the world got older, most of the magic wore away, like the shine off a penny. The numbers of magical folk whittled down until there was just one able family left in the whole valley. And in that family there was only one son. This is the story of how I broke his heart."

She uses concrete images to describe the magic – compares it to a picket fence, a stone wall, an old trunk, a plant, a penny. It feels real to us because her imagery gives it weight and presence. (Please, Amy Rose, write this book!)

You don't have to crowd your story with thick descriptive passages in order for it to seem real. A few details in the proper places will work. However!

Hemingway said, "Not every detail about the world will make it onto the page, but the writer – the writer needs to *know everything*. If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader will have a feeling of those things as strong as though the writer had stated them. A writer who omits things *because he does not know them* only makes hollow places in his writing." This is no less true, and perhaps more important, when writing fantasy.

Rowling had boxes and boxes of notes about Harry's world before she started writing – and that was part of the genius of the *Sorcerer's Stone*. She knew everything about this world.

A serious sceptic such as myself may have read the first four chapters of the *Sorcerer's Stone* with her belief still unwilling and her disbelief still unsuspended. But once she arrives at Diagon Alley, she is sure that here is magic much more real than that of the local shopping mall.

Harry brings his list of school supplies, which includes instructions on uniforms and a list of required books. When Harry goes to buy his cauldron, the shop has a sign saying, "Cauldrons, all sizes, copper, brass, pewter, silver, self-stirring, collapsible." This kind of clever detail became less apparent in the final books. In the first book, however, the magic is as real as a brass cauldron, as real as a shop sign that says, "Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC."

parallel world

I remember everyone talking about Rowling's *parallel world* and wondering, what was the big deal? Parallel world shmaralel world – who cared? But after I read it, I realized that the reason they kept saying it was because they were trying to say why this world felt so real…. because every detail of the real world found its equivalent in Harry's world, right down to school supplies and banking. The magic world existed just around the corner of our own world, and we could go there if only we could find that corner. The fascination with the parallel world was simply about verisimilitude.

Tolkien said, "Fantasy may be not less but *more* subcreative… the inner consistency of reality is more difficult to produce. To make a secondary world inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding secondary belief, will require labor and thought and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. How powerful the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent."

confidence

Gardner puts it this way: "The tale writer simply walks past our objections, granting that the events he is about to recount are incredible but winning our suspension of disbelief by the *confidence and authority of the narrator's voice*."

On the second page of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, after it has been established that the Dursleys are a family with zero tolerance for the unordinary,

Rowling writes: “It was on the corner of the street that Mr. Dursely noticed the first sign of something peculiar – a cat reading a map.”

No apologies, no fanfare – simply one cat reading one map. If you read that sentence, and if you then continue reading, you have accepted map-reading cats. You have begun to believe. Rowling does not apologize or dissemble. She states the truth of Harry’s world immediately, boldly, and challenges her reader to believe or move on.

William Goldman’s *The Princess Bride* begins: “The year that Buttercup was born, the most beautiful woman in the world was a French scullery maid named Annette. The year Buttercup turned ten, the most beautiful woman lived in Bengal, the daughter of a successful tea merchant. When Buttercup was fifteen, Adela Terrell of Sussex on the Thames was easily the most beautiful creature.” At this time, Buttercup was barely sixth in the world.

Goldman cheekily asserts a world where beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but a quantifiable fact. Beauty quotients can be charted, and the most beautiful woman can be located and named. The fantastic is assumed, stated without apology, and one chooses to believe or is evicted from the novel all together.

Tolkien wrote: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” Someone I know read this first sentence and put the book down. She had no trouble believing in an infallible Belgian private detective named Poirot, a Sherlock Holmes on steroids. But a hobbit she could not tolerate, and consequently, though an avid and intelligent reader, she has never read Tolkien. But I, poetic backslider though I am – succumbed to the declaration. I read on, and by doing so, made a certain commitment toward belief.

stylistic competence

Gardner says, “The writer of tales can simplify, persuading us partly by the beauty or interest of his language…”

I’ll read a couple of passages in the *Sorcerer’s Stone* that in my opinion are examples of what I believe Gardner means by interest of language.

Here’s one: “Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Gurnnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.”

This passage gives the reader a clear idea of these people in just a few words, both their physical makeup and their character. The description is precise and fresh.

Here’s another: Referring to baby Harry’s scar, Professor McGonagall says, “Couldn’t you do something about it, Dumbledore?” He replies, “Even if I could, I wouldn’t. Scars can come in useful. I have one myself above my left knee which is a perfect map of the London Underground.”

What I think Rowling does so well in the first book is show incredible restraint.
This passage has wit, humor, and tells us that there are limitations to Dumbledore’s powers – essential to making us care about the story. If the power behind the magic were limitless, all the problems could be solved with the wave of a wand, diluting all the possible tension of the story.

Here is a passage from the chapter when Harry first gets his letter from Hogwarts:

“Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives – he didn’t belong to the library so he’d never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:
Mr. H. Potter
The Cupboard under the Stairs
4 Privet Drive
Little Whinging
Surrey”

Again – witty, original, and restrained.
In subsequent books, there was less stylistic interest until there was virtually none.

4. Cross genres

John Gardner stated: “Novelty comes chiefly from ingenious genre-crossing or elevation of familiar materials. Genre crossing of one sort or another is behind most of the great literary art in the English tradition.”

The *Sorcerer’s Stone* is a fantasy, of course, but it is also a school novel (much of what I love about the first book is that it is set in Hogwarts); it is a sports novel – we are all rooting for Gryffindor to win the House Cup in quiddich; it is a mystery, as Harry tries to solve the puzzle of the Sorcerer’s stone; and it also has a little touch of horror thrown in with the overarching Voldemort plot line.

Sadly in the final book, things have deteriorated to the point that there is no quidditch (wasn’t Harry destined to be the greatest Seeker of all time? instead he grows up to work for the government). In the final book Hogwarts plays virtually no part in the story. No mystery, not even much horror – just a predictable and uninspiring battle. What

happened to the power of love that protects even an infant from the attack of consummate evil? Why did the last book have to reinforce the tired ideology that war is the ultimate heroic? For that matter, what happened to the Dursleys? Weren't they supposed to grovel at the end and shout Harry's praises from the rooftop of Grunnings Drills?

Okay, I may be getting off topic.

5. Speak of true things

Fantasy offers us metaphor, and metaphor reminds us that we live in the world we create – it trips up the supposed reality of what we look at or read and allows us to see reality in a new way, to understand our own shadows, or to lift, if only for a moment, the ideological veil behind which we all live.

In fantasy is an impulse to entertain, to have fun, to escape, but also the counterimpulse to tell the truth, to speak of truths that can barely be expressed, to speak of things that are true in any given world, even made up ones. C.S. Lewis makes a case that fantasy can actually be truer that realism. He said, "I think what professes to be realistic stories for children are far more likely to deceive them. All stories in which children have adventures and successes, which are possible in the sense that they do not break the laws of nature but are almost infinitely improbable, are in more danger than the fairy tales of raising false expectations."

Does *The Sorcerer's Stone* speak of true things?

Northrop Frye might say it does what fantasy does best: it reassures, comforts and consoles us, tells us the world is human in shape and meaning, helps us organize reality

in a way that offers the escape and consolation, that speaks of an order beyond what we see with our eyes. Fantasy, according to John S. Morris, is a modern response to a mythless world, and is closer to theology than to literature.

In conclusion I would like to read a little experience told by G.K. Chesterton that serves as a rebuke to me and others like me who struggle with poetic faithlessness:

He said,
“I met a man the other day who did not believe in fairy tales; he was a short-sighted young man, who had a curious green necktie and a very long neck. By a curious coincidence he entered the room when I had just finished looking through a pile of contemporary fiction, and had begun to read "Grimm's Fairy tales" as a natural consequence. The modern novels stood before me, however, in a stack; and you can imagine their titles for yourself. There was "Suburban Sue: A Tale of Psychology," and also "Psychological Sue: A Tale of Suburbia." I read them with real interest, but, curiously enough, I grew tired of them at last, and when I saw "Grimm's Fairy Tales" lying accidentally on the table, I gave a cry of indecent joy.

Here at least, here at last, one could find a little common sense. I opened the book, and my eyes fell on these splendid and satisfying words, "The Dragon's Grandmother." That at least was reasonable; that at least was true. "The Dragon's Grandmother!" While I was rolling this first touch of ordinary human reality upon my tongue, I looked up suddenly and saw this monster with a green tie standing in the doorway.

I listened to what he said politely enough, I hope; but when he incidentally mentioned that he did not believe in fairy tales, I broke out beyond control. "Man," I said, "who are you that you should not believe in fairy tales? It is much easier to believe in Blue Beard than to believe in you. A blue beard is a misfortune; but there are green ties which are sins. Look at these plain, homely, practical words, 'The Dragon's Grandmother,' that is

all right; that is rational almost to the verge of rationalism. If there was a dragon, he had a grandmother. But you--you had no grandmother! If you had known one, she would have taught you to love fairy tales. You had no father, you had no mother; no natural causes can explain you. . .”

It seemed to me that he did not follow me with sufficient delicacy, so I moderated my tone. "Can you not see," I said, "that fairy tales in their essence are quite solid and straightforward; but that this everlasting fiction about modern life is in its nature essentially incredible? In the excellent tale of 'The Dragon's Grandmother,' in all the other tales of Grimm, it is assumed that the young man setting out on his travels will have all substantial truths in him; that he will be brave, full of faith, reasonable, that he will respect his parents, keep his word, rescue one kind of people, defy another kind.”

I saw him still gazing at me fixedly. Some nerve snapped in me under the hypnotic stare. I leapt to my feet and cried, "In the name of God and Democracy and the Dragon's Grandmother--in the name of all good things--I charge you to avaunt and haunt this house no more." Whether or no it was the result of the exorcism, there is no doubt that he definitely went away.’ End of story.

Conclusion

The fantasy that makes me willingly suspend, is the kind that is common sense, splendid and satisfying; the kind that is plain, homely and practical; that is solid and straightforward. It satisfies desire and troubles itself to be real. It lets me find myself in the pages. It loves the language.

What is the secret of Harry Potter? In the end there is no secret, million-dollar or otherwise. What made Harry Potter resonate with children and adults were nothing more than the age-old and powerful techniques of storytelling, the subject of every lecture and every packet response letter. Whether Rowling did it consciously or

intuitively, she neglected no element of engaging storytelling in her first book. The truth we learn from Harry is that a story well told casts a *powerful* spell over readers, a spell that readers long for, will line up for, and pay dearly for.

Thank you.