

Why *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the Harry Potter series are 'classic' children's books

By Bethany Langston

This essay aims to look at classic books and whether all children should be introduced to them. In particular, two books, one of which is completely recognised as a classic and one of which could be seen as a modern classic; *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) and the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 1997- 2007).

This essay will look at the definitions and ways in which a classic book is recognised and will look at the history behind children's literature and how it came into being and the popularity today as well as looking at the history behind the writing of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Harry Potter* and their authors, Lewis Carroll and J.K. Rowling. It will look at the categories these books fall into and whether there is such a thing as 'children's literature' or literature alone and whether a distinction should be made. Further analysis shall be made on what makes *Alice* and *Harry* 'classic' books that children should be introduced to and the implications of this for practice with children, looking deeper at some of the subjects in both books that make them appealing and so popular.

It is debatable as to what constitutes a 'classic' book. Hand (1994, p.36) says that the mark of a significant piece of literary work is one that generates critical interpretations but ultimately defeats them. Calvino (1999, p.3-9), in one of his many definitions describes classic books as those which people say they are 're-

reading' as opposed to reading and offer as much discovery each time they are read. Rereading a book is seen as a commitment as something has caught a person's attention and they will be rereading with different expectations and discovering new things (Styles, Bearne and Watson, 1992, p.23). Classic books seem to be those which make a person feel reminiscent or nostalgic, so perhaps not everyone will feel this way about the same books. A classic book to one person may not cause the same feelings in another. Calvino (1999, p.3-9) also says a classic is a book which you cannot remain indifferent to. This can be said of Harry Potter where it is a part of the literature landscape today with casual conversations happening about it daily (Eccleshare, 2002a, p.51). The word 'Muggle', one from the Harry Potter novels is now even found in the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2015). Similarly with Alice in Wonderland, Jordan (1971, p.3) says that there is no other book so well known as a classic as it delights people when they are young and is cherished and reread, quoted as they get older with many relatable characters and conversations within it.

Many people such as Townsend (1971 in Hunt, 1991, p.60-61) feel there is no such thing as children's literature, merely literature alone and that children's books are just books. Thacker (1994, p.86) feels that the barrier that separates children and adults in terms of books is false. By disregarding children's books from literature it is giving the impression assumptions have already been made about what is appropriate for a 'children's book' (Hollindale, 2001, p.83) and it should be explored in two ways by the two terms; 'children' and 'literature' (Hunt, 1991, p.14). There

were not many books specifically for children until the book recognised as the first, 'A Pretty Little Pocket Book' in 1744 (Hunt, 1995, p.36). It was only in the 17th century that people felt there should be more books used in education that were 'easy and pleasant' (Styles, Bearne and Watson, 1992, p.14). There were a growing number of children in the 18th century with childhood mortality decreasing meaning that more books for children were being published (Hunt, 1995, p.29). Books for children throughout history were supposed to be those which could provide moral and religious guidance (Leach, 1971, p.89). There is still a moral dimension to books today, especially 'classics', such as the importance of right and wrong as well as 'good and bad' characters (Fox, 1995, p.151).

Alice in Wonderland was published in 1865 by Lewis Carroll, a pseudonym for his real name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, to entertain three young girls, one of which was Alice Liddell who the main character was based on and was not a 'gloomy or religious' book like most others at the time (Doyle, 1968, p.46-48). It is a book that explores the nature of human existence by making Alice have a journey of self discovery (Cogan-Thacker and Webb, 2002, p.63). Due to being extremely shy, Dodgson made most of his friends amongst young girls and Hunt (1995, p.141) argues that his own oddities allowed him to encapsulate the childhood confusion about the puzzling adult world, perhaps adding to the appeal of Alice. Gates, Steffel and Motson (2003, p.4) say that Alice in Wonderland was one of the first books for children in the 19th century that was not simply a fairy tale and De la Mare (1932,

p.59) says that the character of Alice was so brilliant that she was a wonderful tribute to not only the author but the picture and memory of Victorian childhood.

Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone was first published in 1997 after being written by Joanne Kathleen Rowling on a delayed train from Manchester to London. This book caused a sensation in children's book publishing with its part school, part fantasy, part adventure story (Eccleshare, 2002b, p.101). Jo Rowling, advised to publish under the pseudonym J.K. Rowling as not to put off male readers, said that Harry 'strolled into her head fully formed', it first being turned down because it was too long for a children's story (Eccleshare, 2002b, p.101-102), however has now caused possibly more of a discussion and a new passion for reading than any other series of books for children, perhaps one of the reasons it could be regarded as a classic (Loftus McGreevy, 2009, p.34). This may be because as Lurie (2003, p.113) says, Rowling is on the side of children- the children are the heroes and have the magical powers and abilities while 'normal' adults or 'Muggles' as they are referred to in the series remain confused and ignorant. The reaction to the Harry Potter series has been described as 'Pottermania' and reviewers of the books have described the way in which Rowling writes as a spell that is cast to enchant readers (Schafer, 2000, p.13 and 215) and the series has crossed boundaries more than any other work of recent fiction, being translated into at least 42 languages (Gupta, 2003, p.17).

Defining a modern classic is difficult as a classic is seen by some as one that has 'weathered at least one generation' (Calvino, 1999, p.3-9). Modern books may have not but can still be seen as a classic. Hollindale (2001, p.70) feels that a book that has stood the test of time is one of the criteria for assessing the 'worth' of a piece of children's literature. Books such as the Harry Potter series could be seen as 'modern classics' as they have had an unbelievable amount of success in the 21st century and should not be discounted by anyone studying children's literature (Hunt, 2001, p.122). The success of a series like Harry Potter may be mainly commercial so it can be asked whether it will stand the test of time as other classic books have such as *The Secret Garden* (Hodgson Burnett, 1911) or *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), but Manlove (2003, p.192) feels that the Harry Potter series is a different kind of literature- a child's way of seeing the world but not a memory of childhood with books that grow as Harry grows- and does not need to be compared to other 'classic' books. Contrary to this, Hughes (1978 cited in Hunt, 1990, p.76) states that commercial success can be the sign of declining standards in literature. However, this was said before the success of many 'modern classics' was evident. Pinsent (1993, p.75) feels that literature provides a safe arena for unreal experiences and emotions, such as those found in Harry Potter and Harry's story and Hogwarts school provides a physical and emotional sanctuary for the reader (Eccleshare, 2002a, p.50). With many broad themes present, the world of Harry Potter is perhaps one that all children should discover. A series of books allows the writer the chance to develop a character fully and for the characters to mature (Meek and Watson, 2003, p.85), something that is very much present in Harry Potter. Those who experienced Harry Potter in its publishing literally grew up with Harry and these

characters; as the children grew up, anxiously waiting for the next book, Harry was growing too. Hunt (2001, p.122) says that Harry Potter saved a whole generation of children from illiteracy and children were and are happy to be seen reading these books (Eccleshare, 2002a, p.106). It could be said that all children should be given the chance to experience 'growing up' with the characters in a book, whether this be Harry Potter or another series.

If a classic book is one that has weathered at least one generation and is undisputed by prestigious critics then it cannot be argued that Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is one of these. The Alice books (Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass) have even been discussed in terms of professional maths, philosophy and theology (Hand, 1994, p.36). The author established new possibilities for children's books (Styles, Bearne and Watson, 1992, p.18) and Hunt (1995, p.140) says that no one was prepared for Alice and regards it as the most brilliant and original children's book of all time. Alice in Wonderland is not only a classic by critics but is a book that people look on nostalgically and provides a treasured experience whenever it is read (Calvino, 1999, p.3-9). Known not just as a classic, Cogan-Thacker and Webb (2002, p.63) describe Alice in Wonderland as one of the 'seminal' texts of fantasy literature for children and was groundbreaking at its time and still as accessible today. Little was said about the gender of the main character, Alice, which could be shocking given the view of women at the time it was written (Labbe, 2003, p.21). For example, the ending to another classic book, The Secret Garden which makes some people feel uncomfortable with the shifting of focus to Colin and disregard of Mary. This was an accurate representation of the attitudes to women at the time the book was written and Gamble and Yates (2002, p.127) say the only possible, realistic

ending for Mary. Fantasy books should not be disregarded as effective literature and even one of the well known authors of fantasy stories, Tolkien (1964, p.44) of Lord of the Rings success was quoted as saying it is not a lower form of reading or art but the most nearly pure form and therefore when achieved correctly, the most effective.

There are many similar reasons for these two books being regarded as classics that all children should be introduced to, one of these being their appeal to all ages.

Adults relate to Alice in that they wish to return to childhood, to 'go small' again the way she was able to and adults see childhood as an area of innocence but in many cases it is written as a state the child wishes to grow out of (Hunt, 1995, p.142 and Hunt, 2001, p.5-6). Despite Alice in Wonderland being known as a book for children, Alice is basically the only child character in most of the story (De la Mare, 1932, p.59). The Harry Potter series was on the bestseller lists, not only for children but for adults too, with 30% of the sales for the first four books being by and for adults over the age of 35 (Gupta, 2003, p.9) and was the first children's book to be in the top place on the New York Times Bestseller list since Charlotte's Web in 1952 (Schafer, 2000, p.14).

Another factor that could help with the popularity of these stories are that they are both fantasy, something people of all ages can enjoy. Gates, Steffel and Motson (2003, p.15) feel fantasy can provide alternative realities and rekindle the faith in good and the eventual victory over evil. Fantasy is a form of escapism and Alice had to fall down the rabbit hole and escape the world above in order to have an

adventure while Harry was taken away from the 'Muggle' world and transferred into a new magical one (Eccleshare, 2002a, p.63). Pinsent (1993, p.35) feels that fantasy can serve as a door from one world to another. In the case of these books, it was not a door but a rabbit hole and a barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters (Carroll, 1998, p. 10 and Rowling, 1997, p.70-71).

One criticism about fantasy classics being introduced to children is that adults can often disapprove of fantasy, feeling children do not understand it is not 'real'. However, adults enjoy fantasy in forms such as movies and television and even though children know the things they are reading are not real, they do not disregard it because of this (Fenwick, 1990, p.51). British children's fantasy as a genre is specifically good at making whole societies within their stories, the example used by Loftus-McGreevy (2009, p.37) being from the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland to the smallest card in the pack. Harry Potter also does this, providing each character, no matter how small, with an often complex story.

Although Harry Potter is known as children's series of books, some of the issues addressed in them are quite challenging and could be potentially troubling for children. Many books that have children as the main protagonists can also be this way. For example, *Lord of the Flies*, a book only including children cannot be said to be a book for children (Chambers, 1985 in Hunt, 1990, p.99). Rowling is not a sentimental writer (Manlove, 2003, p.189). Within the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry's parents are both established as dead and Harry is left on the doorstep of his Aunt and Uncle (Rowling, 1997, p.14 and 17). Meek

and Watson (2003, p.20) say that an 'unusual child' is more interesting and that an orphaned child, such as Harry in this case, offers more possibilities. Despite the fantasy element to Harry Potter, there is something real about it too, with issues that transcend time and are relatable. Rowling does not avoid the issues, such as the elements of class division and racism throughout the series (Eccleshare, 2002a, p.74). In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, racism is one of the main plots (Schafer, 2000, p.235). Hermione feels the brunt of the prejudice towards 'Muggleborn' witches and wizards like her, when Malfoy calls her the well known foul name for witches and wizards with non-magical parents- 'Mudblood' (Rowling, 1998, p.86-87). The class divide is also emphasised in the fact that not all of the students of Hogwarts are viewed as social equals with competition between the houses. Their parents are not viewed this way either (Gupta, 2003, p.125).

Harry is very relatable, as are his friends, Ron and Hermione; the children in these books are not perfect, they have human characteristics that allow them to fail but ultimately Harry represents who readers wish they were (Schafer, 2000, p.14 and 47). A big emphasis in Harry Potter is the emotion of love. Lurie (2003, p.114) says that Harry is in a 'Cinderella' position when the reader first meets him. He is abused, neglected and an unloved orphan. The Dursley's and the way they treat Harry is a stark contrast to the Weasley family who are secure, warm and loving, perhaps exactly what a family should be like, and it is the family loyalties and elements of comfort and reassurance that help to add to the appeal of Harry (Eccleshare, 2002a, p.95 and 101).

There are some elements of horror to the Harry Potter books too, with the possibility of the 'satanic' Voldemort finally beating Harry (Manlove, 2003, p.189) and each book having a plot based around the dark forces that are against Harry and those he cares about (Lurie, 2003, p.116). The emotions found in literature that are described as 'traumatic' such as death are often more troubling for adults than children (Pinsent, 2003, p.74). Death is something found all throughout the Harry Potter series but Pinsent (2003, p.76) notes that it was avoided in children's books until most notably Charlotte's Web in 1952. Meek and Watson (2003, p.54) say that due to things like television and the influences of the media, children are entering the world of adults before they even leave primary school but books are still being censored and age restricted. Overall and perhaps most importantly, Harry Potter has morals- these stories, says Natov (2001, p.312-313) show what children need to find which is the strength to do what is right and develop a moral code that is strong and have 'classic' themes all children should read and learn about.

With Alice in Wonderland, in the world of literature, it is not even seen to be debated as to whether this book is a classic. Children can often relate to the character of Alice as she is growing and maturing throughout the book. Labbe (2003, p.23 and 24) says that the book starts with a huge leap of independence on Alice's part and that Wonderland, similar to the world today, is a dangerous place for Alice as she is not in control. Alice interrogates the creatures she finds and goes against what is being told of her (Carroll, 1998, p.6), stubbornly, even childishly, disregarding the

adult rules (Hunt, 1995, p.141). Alice is courageous, innocent and more intelligent than other child characters in books (Styles, Bearne and Watson, 1992, p.18) however she is still childlike, such as through her exaggeration, saying she is 'opening out like the world's largest telescope' (Carroll, 1998, p.16) and her confusion between antipodes and antipathies (Carroll, 1998, p.11). As a fictional character, Alice is said to have equal importance to the White Whale of Moby Dick and Frankenstein's Monster (Labbe, 2003, p.21). Carroll's 'dream child' Alice is puzzling as she does not fit a stereotype and her curiosity starts the adventure (Leach, 1971, p.90).

Alice can be seen as an adventure story as well as a fantasy story, adventure tales being something children enjoy as they are addicted to the excitement of the genre (Styles, Bearne and Watson, 1992, p.71). 'Good' children's literature is said to encourage children to explore the world they live in as well as other worlds (Vardin, 2007, p.94), something that Alice in Wonderland does well, as even though there is a fantasy and almost magical element to everything that happens in the book, it is still easy to identify with Alice's feelings and journey; loss, sadness, confusion. Carroll manages to encapsulate 'childness' with the way he writes the character of Alice. Childness is made up of beliefs and values, expectations and behaviours and the way these are expressed (Hollindale, 2001, p.76). While Harry Potter has important themes that children should be aware of, Alice in Wonderland is a classic in that the character is so relatable and identifiable and all children should have a character they feel strongly about.

The idea that there are classic books that all children should be encouraged to read can be challenging as practitioners and those that 'teach' children do not always have enough knowledge about books to help children access and read them as children's fiction is seen as a territory controlled by adults (Styles, Bearne and Watson, 1992, p.13). Thacker (1994, p.86) says that people make assumptions as to what children like to read and the children's literature market is heavily influenced by this. Fenwick (1990, p.56-58 and 65) says that practitioners should be encouraging children to go beyond just reading the book, some ways they could do this being through character descriptions and story logs, small groups getting together to discuss the books and allowing the children to keep records of the books they read and enjoy. Chambers (2011, p.13) feels that in order to encourage children to become avid readers who enjoy it, the environment and range of books on offer needs to help with this. All of this, however, relies on the practitioners being well read themselves and aware of the books children should be reading.

In conclusion, classic books are books which all children should be encouraged, however not forced to read and today, Harry Potter and Alice in Wonderland can be regarded as two of these. Children's literature has changed a lot over time, in the past there were no books specifically for children and now there are an abundance. This essay has discussed the themes found in Alice in Wonderland and the Harry Potter series and argued that they are universal and accessible no matter what time period they are being read in, regardless of the reader's age. It has also been

discussed that there are morals and lessons behind both these stories that help cement their classic status and looked at what a classic actually is and how it is defined. De la Mare (1932, p.60 and 63) says of Alice that it has a 'timelessness' of its own and provides a unique sense of mind with morals even if the 'nonsense' story itself has none. Eccleshare (2002b, p.100) feels that Harry Potter was a fantasy story embracing the genre of social realism which gives it the power to attract new readers and bridge the gap between young and old. Rowling says she does not necessarily want to be remembered herself in 50 years but hopes the stories of Harry Potter are (Schafer, 2000, p.429). Time will only tell whether these books will continue to be regarded as classics, but hopefully they are still loved stories.

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