



Re-Reading Harry Potter

By S. Gupta

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This is the first extended text-based analysis of the social and political implications of the Harry Potter phenomenon. Arguments are primarily based on close readings of the first four Harry Potter books and the first two films - in other words, a 'text-to-world' method is followed. This study does not assume that the phenomenon concerns children alone, or should be lightly dismissed as a matter of pure entertainment. The amount of money, media coverage, and ideological unease involved indicates otherwise. The first part provides a survey of responses (both of general readers and critics) to the Harry Potter books. Some of the methodological decisions underlying this study itself are also explained here. The second part examines the presentation of certain themes, including gender, race and desire, in the Harry Potter books, with a view to understanding how these may impinge on social and political concerns of our world.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

J.K. Rowling's young wizard has already conquered dozens of languages (along with the silver screen), building a durable brand and a fan base of perhaps unprecedented scope: it's past time for academics to seek their share. Though this volume is not (as Gupta acknowledges) the first academic study of "the Harry Potter phenomenon," it attempts new critical ground: where other critics look at Rowling's life, her books in the context of writing for children, or their specifically British meaning, Gupta seeks a "text-to-world" interpretation focused on Hogwarts' potential "social and political effects" anywhere the books are read. Fully half this relatively short volume outlines the theoretical approaches Gupta rejects, with sometimes extensive reference to their champions (Wolfgang Iser, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes). Actual readings of the Potter books move quickly through chosen, sometimes obvious, topics ("servants and slaves," sex, advertising), mixing attractive insights with responses to previous Potter critics and very broad, sometimes unconvincing claims. Gupta concludes that the books' antiracist themes conceal a crypto-imperialist paternalism (wizards will always dominate Muggles); that attempts to map Rowling's world onto ours often fail (house-elves, for example, have no real-world analog); and, finally, that the "books are an extended celebration of unthinking courage and luck at the expense of seeking explanations and using rational principles." Though Gupta (Marxism, History and Intellectuals) has produced a useful, well-meant contribution to an expanding academic field, general readers who enjoy both the Potter books and well-written, careful literary criticism will probably be disappointed.

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Review

'Suman Gupta's book, *Re-Reading Harry Potter*, should be required reading for anyone who takes the Harry Potter novels seriously. His study will make a major contribution to the already-flourishing scholarship on the Harry Potter series/phenomenon because it is incisive, reflective, and original. Gupta's major purpose is to understand what constitutes the popular phenomenon of the books and their social and political implications and effects by using a text-to-world methodology. He is critical and most perceptive, pointing out the contradictions and ideological tendencies of the novels with great clarity. His explanation of the Harry Potter phenomenon is most convincing and fits well with his critique of unthinking reading and of elitism that are disturbing forces in modern society which often account for literary bestsellers.' - Professor Jack Zipes, University of Minnesota, USA

'...a closely argued piece about the sinister side of the Potter phenomenon...If Gupta is right, the secret of Harry Potter's success must be that the books offer what we 'unthinkingly' desire, or, worse, that there is a growing tendency towards irrational belief.' - Times Higher Education Supplement

About the Author

SUMAN GUPTA teaches at the Open University UK. He has written five books, the most recent of which are *Corporate Capitalism and Political Philosophy* (2002) and *The Replication of Violence: Thoughts on International Terrorism After 11 September 2001* (2002).

Users Review

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