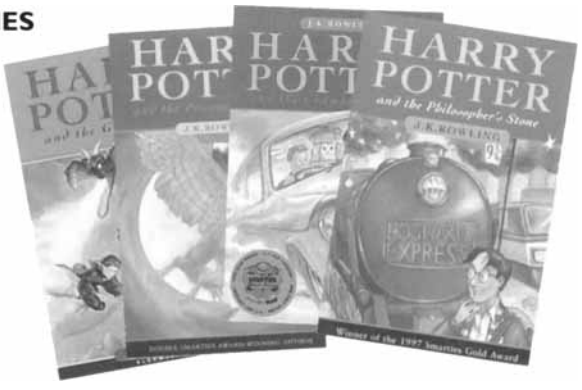
THE HARRY POTTER SERIES

JK Rowling

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone
1997. £5.99 pb. ISBN 0 74753 274 5
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets
1998. £5.99 pb. ISBN 0 74753 848 4
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
1999. £5.99 pb. ISBN 0 74754 629 0
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
2000. £6.99 pb. ISBN 0 74755 099 9
London: Bloomsbury.



Bill Shankley, the great football manager of Liverpool, once was asked whether a particular match was a matter of life and death. 'Oh no,' he said, 'it's much more important than that.' I feel like this about JK Rowling's writing. She deals in morality, myth and magic and much else besides, but bereavement, loss and dislocation are important themes throughout her work. I am grateful to Tom Hendriks, aged seven, for introducing me to Harry Potter in 1997 and, like millions, I have avidly read each new volume as it appeared and now await the fifth.

The series starts deceptively simply, in storytelling language suitable for people with a reading age of eight or nine upwards. Harry's parents have lost their lives protecting him from the assault of the magnificently-named Voldemort, a powerful dark wizard whom the good wizarding community dare not name. Harry is 11 at the start of the first story and with each title he becomes a year older. His awareness of what he has lost, his ability to grieve and to learn, subtly increase book by book. His growing understanding and gradually widening circle of trusted friends and adults gradually make it safer for Harry to find words, feelings and images which create continuity and meaning, from babyhood through the complex, difficult present to a foreseeable future.

It becomes of the greatest importance to Harry, as he matures, to be able to envisage his parents as loving each other and himself. At first he knows nothing of this and has to hold on to his sense of self-worth under extreme difficulties. He is brought up in magnificent Dickensian fashion by the Dursleys, a Muggle (non-magical) household, who hide him in a cupboard under the stairs and give him no love or affection, regarding what little they know of his past as a shameful secret. Their son, Dudley, greedy and self-indulgent, is the centre of his own and his parents' world. Harry's occasional untoward glimpses of his nascent magical powers lead to blame, punishment and further isolation. Many bereaved children in institutions or, unwanted, in alternative care go through similar life-destroying experiences without benefit of magic, or hope.

On his 11th birthday Harry fulfils the dreams of many young people, and indeed all of us, when he discovers that he has this magnificent heritage, learns for the first time that he had parents who loved him, that he is different from those about him, and that he can now be enrolled at Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In that wonderful new place, described with relish (I do not have the space to go into the details but the books gleam with humour, wit and learning), Rowling blends together several stories. The myth and magic theme is developed and a range of very believable wizards, witches and pupils is created within a classical school story, with all the struggles about homework, school houses, rivalries and sports. The fight against evil continues and Harry by the end of his first year has known what it is to be in fear of his life and to survive. The theme of loss and reparation is powerful and moving.

At the end of the first book Harry looks into the mirror of Erised (that is, 'desire' spelt backwards) and sees not just himself, but others. A woman is standing behind his reflection.

> She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes – her eyes are just like mine, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass – bright green, exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying, smiling, but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just like Harry's did. Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection. 'Mum?' he whispered, 'Dad?'

Harry looks further into the mirror and sees other faces just like his own; they smile and wave and he stares hungrily back at them.

On his third visit, his head teacher – one of many parent figures whom the school has made available to Harry – alerts him that the mirror shows the deepest most desperate desires of our hearts but that it can give neither knowledge nor truth. 'Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.' Dumbledore's advice is that it does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live. One has to know about the past *in order* to live, not so as to avoid the present and future.

Harry indeed does learn to live, through close friendships, loving and affectionate teachers and the extended family of his best friend. By the fourth novel Harry has many times faced extreme fear, most vividly described, continued to engage with grief and loss as well as the possibility of trust, and has also learned that good does not always prevail. Though Harry now finds a godfather, this new parent figure has escaped from Azkaban, a totalitarian prison, and is on the run, so their relationship must remain at a distance. Later, Harry discovers why one of his friends, Neville Longbottom, was brought up by his grandmother: Neville's parents were tortured to insanity and now do not recognise their son when he visits them in St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. (It seems likely that this dark story will be continued in future books.) Harry also learns that he must wait to speak of this tragedy to his friend until such time as Neville himself wants to talk.

If I have a concern, it is that brighter children will devour these books, each as they appear, way ahead of their capacity to identify with the maturing adolescents whose lives are chronicled year by year. The series is fascinating in that it attempts this maturation of its characters and increased complexity of language, so different from the substantial number of classical children's stories which pin their heroes and heroines at one particular age and developmental stage.

Clearly the readers do not share my reservations: J K Rowling has smashed so many records in terms of popularity and sales, and the film of the first book is already a hit. However, I hope that parents of younger children who read the books or see the films will share these experiences with them. These are books for everyone – to be read for the excitement, relished as stories, and reread for complex layers of meaning. They belong to world literature. BC

Jean Harris-Hendriks
Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

An introduction to bereavement. Six half-day courses. 14 May- 25 June. Bristol, UK. Contact University of the West of England: ☎ 0117 91599465; education@stpetershospice.org

Sharing a child's bereavement journey. 21 May. **Supervision in bereavement care**. 2 July. Oxford, UK. Contact Sobell Study Centre: ☎ 01865 2258886; ssc@orh.nhs.uk

Group work with children in loss situations.12 June. Birmingham, UK. Acorns Hospice ☎ 0121 248 4800.