## "I've walked this street": Readings of 'reality' in British young people's reception of Harry Potter

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Readings of 'reality' in British young people's reception of Harry Potter

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## Abstract

*This paper examines young people's perceptions of identifiable, 'real' elements in their reception of the Harry Potter series, focusing on how fantasy finds meaning in the lives of young people because they connect with reality in reading fantasy. Notwithstanding the abundance of magical hexes, witches, and wand-waving that characterise the series, young people's talk is found to veer towards emotional matters, relationships and real-life elements. The paper argues that this propensity to extract touches of reality out of the world of fantasy, is not visible in aspirations towards an unreachable, 'magic' world hidden somewhere which young people believe really exists, but rather in drawing out of the world of fantasy, elements of everyday life, complete with its characters, bonds, rapports, attachments and socio-cultural references. Analysing data from fieldwork with teen audiences of the Harry Potter series, this paper explores ways in which young people find a sense of location, rooting and grounding in reading fantasy.*

Keywords: Fantasy, young people, audiences, Harry Potter

Biographical Note

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*Life is so cyclical. It'll always come back to the same beginnings, and it's how we develop from those same events, or whether we make the same mistakes.*

Evelyn, 17, in discussing the theme of war and terror in Harry Potter

As 'Harry Potter Studies' begins appearing in handbooks, course offerings and conferences, it seems clear that the series and its social role in young people's and adults' lives has been receiving critical, academic attention whether or not one shares the desire for an entire sub-field called Potter Studies. Neumann (2006) compared the Harry Potter series to an evolved version of religion in Europe and America (Neumann, 2006). The article stated, rightly, that "as social analysts we are supposed to be able to account for cultural phenomena such as this one, and as political analysts we are expected to have something to say about its political preconditions and effects. We must ask what it is about the world of Harry Potter that fascinates our age, and try and excavate the roots of this fascination". (p 82). The author goes on to classify the article as belonging to the genre of fantasy and as has correctly been noted by many, pinpoints the many sources on which Rowling has

based her work. This essay presents findings from young people's talk about the text of fantasy - its 'political preconditions and effects' and 'the cultural phenomenon' of Potter presented in Neumann's essay. Neumann argues that "the Harry Potter novels postulate the return of (an evolved) magical wizarding world to our own lifeworld" (Neumann, 88) and in this essay I present empirical responses from young people about how they read reality and realism in this magical world of fantasy.

In Attebery's 'Fantasy as Mode, Genre and Formula', while he notes that in the genre of fantasy, characters can do anything – fly, transform, metamorphose or talk to animals, he reminds us that we also 'must have some solid ground to stand on, some point of contact' (p 296). This brings the mode of fantasy strikingly close to the mode it is often considered to be the opposite of – mimesis. In the one, characters can do anything, become anything, cross territories unknown to mankind – as does Harry in the Potter series when he flies on a broomstick, as do Lyra and Will in the Northern Lights when they cut their way into a different universe, for instance. In the other – mimesis, the task is the representation of reality. While this essay is not the apt place to go into how fantasy and mimesis might, in fact, weave into each other, it suffices to say that perceptions of reality – quite different from a willing suspension of disbelief – has a role to play in the reception and enjoyment of fantasy.

But why is this of interest in more social, everyday terms? In this paper, which focuses on young people's talk about the popular series of Harry Potter, which, following Evans (2008), is in many sense a 'trans-media' text spanning books, audio books, films, games, art work and Lego, I argue that the identification

of reality within fantasy is sociologically significant for it mediates young people's understandings of the worlds they inhabit, both personally – in terms of close relationships and interpersonal equations, and socio-culturally, in terms of their understanding of contemporary difference, diversity and discrimination in the society they live in. This paper shifts the focus away from exploring perceptions of reality in reading fiction as a moderator of media effects or media persuasion, towards re-iterating how popular young people's genres, such as fantasy, do more complex things in the lives of young people than providing engrossing or enrapturing entertainment alone. Young people use interpretive pathways in the text to relive memories, characterise relationships in their own lives and the lives of those around them, and read political issues in the text by trying to make sense of these issues in the cultures they inhabit (see Burke on literature as 'equipment for living', 1973). These perceptions of the 'real' within a fantasy text are presented in this paper following two streams – first, the 'credibility' of fantasy, and second, their perceptions of discourses of difference and discrimination in the text.

I will argue that this connection to the real, the mundane and the everyday in fantasy-reception indicates the requirement of a more qualitative, less effects-oriented and more socio-culturally rich and complex account of the way fantasy, or indeed all fiction, comes to have meaning in the personal lives of young people. This is important not just, or at all, for understanding how easily (or not) they can be persuaded by the media to do one thing or the other, as is common in much literature on perceptions of realism, but for understanding the truly complex ways in which textual intricacies mediate lives and experiences. As such, fantasy is a pervasive and powerful genre with which children engage from a very young age.

Recalling images of childhoods spent on grandparents' knees listening to fairy tales, or even the joys of waiting for Santa – fantasy forms an integral part of early and later childhood. Unlike fairy tales which often also invoke the same dragons and demons, or children's fantasy play with the many long-living childhood characters, animals, trains and fairy creatures which form part of most childhoods, Harry Potter as a case study involves themes (war, racism, violence, death and bereavement), age groups of protagonists (starting Hogwarts at 11, ending roughly at 17), and consequent readership and viewership of films (highly popular to the pre-teen and teen audience) – which makes it a somewhat different kind of fantasy than ones intended for very young readers. Keeping these factors in mind, this particular project focused on the role fantasy plays in the lives of teenagers engrossed with Potter and the world of Potter – and especially focuses on their "growing up" in a sense with the series – for just as Harry began Hogwarts at 11, and each book then followed each year in his life, the participants in this study negotiated the non-magic world of similar school systems, year by year through middle and high school. Given the study's focus on the relationships between reality and fantasy, this link seemed very important to explore given the thematic nature of the Potter series.

### The textual world of Harry Potter: fusions of fantasy and mimesis?

It is fitting perhaps to introduce the Potter series to the uninitiated in two, sometimes inter-weaving, ways. First, it could be positioned as a war between good and evil happening in a world of magic hidden from Muggles (non-magic people). Harry, the orphan hero, and his friends, the brilliant Hermione and the easy-going Ron, all go to a school of witchcraft and wizardry, where, in every book they

encounter and defeat the darkest wizard of all times – Lord Voldemort. A plethora

of spells, enchantments, magical creatures and transformations complete this

fantastic world. People fly on broomsticks, wear cloaks of invisibility, brew magic

potions. Second, it could be positioned as a story where friendship, loyalty,

bravery and trust fight against manipulation, evil and crime. Strong sub-texts of

anti-racist, anti-class and anti-minority themes run throughout the text. Most notable

among them are the opposition to the 'registration' and 'punishment' of non-magic

or half-magic people who are often called "mudbloods" signifying racial impurity

(reminiscent of oppositions to Aryan supremacy in the Nazi regime), or the

brilliant female lead Hermione's opposition to house-elves whose services are

used in most magic households/schools (an anti-slavery theme). In addition, there

are comments on class, on bureaucracy within the Ministry for Magic, on education

systems, punishment, teacher-student relationships and so on. Both these versions

hold, and strikingly, while the first comes close to fantasy, the second comes

close to mimesis. They co-exist in the same text and have been discussed

widely in textual analysis (note for instance the collection of essays in Anatole, 2003)

likewise, this co-existence of fiction and reality, perhaps fantasy and mimesis, is

taken up even within practice-based contexts such as the school classroom. In an

interview given to Henry Jenkins in February 2012[i], Catherine Belcher and Becky

Herr-Shepardson speak about their new book *Teaching Harry Potter: The Power of*

*Imagination in the Multicultural Classroom*. The authors note "The Potter series

reminds us of the importance of looking carefully and closely at situations--as

things are not always what they seem to be at first glance--and of the importance

of listening to alternative narratives. Both of these things seem particularly salient

in relation to the state of contemporary American education, which, when viewed

as a whole, seems very much like a lost cause". This point – about how the text mirrors everyday concerns, in the lives of teachers and students for instance, is taken up elsewhere within education studies.

Most of the analysis around the Potter series is found within education studies, as indicated above or within literary studies, especially accounts of young people's literature. Very rarely is this research empirical, and very rarely does it listen to real audiences. Kidd, 2007 notes – "Harry Potter fans become friends at book release parties or while standing in line for the movie. These rituals produce feelings of shared sentiment—the excitement and love for Harry Potter and his friends, for instance—and these feelings produce social cohesion by bonding members of society together in relation- ships of trust and shared purpose". (p 78) But, despite recognition of the very empirical nature of understanding the cultural relevance of the series, the analysis has usually been along the lines of textual critique of roles, motifs and representations. Historical backdrops of the series (see Carey, 2003), explorations of political themes around religion (see Neumann, 2006 for example), class, race, gender and ethnicity (see Anatol, 2003a; Gallardo & Jason-Smith, 2003; Ostry, 2003) provide rich analyses of the content of the texts. Note for instance, Ostry's 2003 analysis of the social backdrop of the text where she compares the text to fairy tales and the ways in which it comments on wealth, social situation, prestige and so forth. She notes for example – "Race lies at the root of the two major conflicts in the series: tensions between Muggle-born and pure-blood wizards, and between human wizards and nonhuman magical creatures. Rowling strives to promote liberal values, yet we can see that she is ultimately trapped by the conservative nature of the fairy tale". (Ostry, 2003, 92)

Similarly, Park (2003) comments on class and socio-economic identity in the series where she critiques Rowling as being too tied to her middle-class background.

Empirical investigations of reception can prove fascinating – see for instance Black's account of Carry, a depressed student for whom "the shifting corridors and miraculous dining rooms of Hogwarts are good places to begin the healing process" (Black, 2003; Author 2013) In this section, I have strived to outline three things – first, the Potter text itself is a convergence of fantastic and real moments; second, the analysis of sub-textual themes, focused especially, if note solely on Rowling's borrowed motifs and themes of race, ethnicity, class, gender and discrimination have all been analysed textually; and third, real, lived accounts of young people's experiences of both fantasy and mimesis in the text, are rare. These empirical accounts of young people's responses to fantasy, while still on the rise, provide inroads into fantasy as text, in ways which were not known to literary analysts till recently. One such instance that comes to mind is Götz et. al's *Media and the make believe worlds of children* (2005)*,* where their multi-country project established empirically, the fascinating ways in which young people incorporated mediated stories into their own daydreams. While they focused on the gendered dimensions of this incorporation, the study itself fits in with much of what has been discussed above – the real, lived, societal implications of the media, and of fiction in its myriad forms, in the real experiences and practices of those who interpret these texts (resonating also within sociological approaches to fiction, see Burke, 1973; and cognitive-cultural approaches to literature, see Zunshine, 2006).

**Perceiving reality in the act of interpretation**

Studies exploring perceptions of reality in experiencing fiction have often been motivated by a desire to understand the persuasive effects of media content. This research has been pursued mainly within quantitative, experimental literature. Particularly important in this context is viewer responses to entertainment education, health-related messages etc. (see for e,g Bahk, 2001; Slater & Rouner, 2002) This research has usually been pursued within psychological approaches to the media where respondents are provided the stimulus of or exposure to a particular sequence of scenes in a narrative and then the perceived realism in their narrative comprehension is studied. This has led to conceptual advancements in understanding the role of perceived realism in audience engagement. So, for instance, the model provided by Bussell and Greenberg (2000) outlines ten useful components of perceived realism. Likewise, Hall (2003) comes up with the following conceptual dimensions of perceiving reality in fiction – plausibility, typicality, factuality, involvement and narrative consistency. Hall remarks (2003, p 625) that "a related conceptualization is magic window realism, which was developed by Hawkins (1977) in his work with young people. It refers to the perception that the people and events on television exist not in a drama but rather "in actual existence" (p. 304). Perceptions of this type of realism are often treated as a marker of a developmental stage that young people eventually outgrow (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). This, however was not quite the case with the young people I spoke to. While many of them reported, as Bussell and Greenberg state, to have believed in the magic window at a younger age, the fusion of reality and fantasy that I report here are more thoughtful, pensive accounts of deeper

connections and parallels developed in their talk, between textual relationships, themes and emotions and ones in their own lives.

Here, I make reference to Wolfgang Iser's distinction between the work and the text. If the text represents a moment of encoding specific norms, the 'work' in hermeneutic theory (Iser, 1978), is different from the text, for it brings to the moment of encoding the possibilities opened up by the interpretative act of decoding. In what ways are the products of young people's interpretation extending the boundaries of the text? While the work might take the text into territories not

quite intended by Rowling, textual conventions and the openness or closure (Eco, 1979) of the text shapes the work which is the end product of reading. First, drawing from the phenomenological theory of art, Iser stresses that a text (he speaks of the literary text) is the actual text and in equal measure, the 'actions involved in responding to the text' (p. 274). Ingarden (1968, cited in Iser, 1974) refers to this as konkretisation, that is, bringing the text to light, and Iser concludes that the final 'work' is neither identical with the text, nor with the realization of the text, but lies in between. Hence, the work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. (Iser, 1974, 274-5)

This focus on Iser-ian reception aesthetics within the history of reader response theory brings us close to studies within work in cognitive literary studies on readers' understanding of fantasy. Of note here is Lisa Zunshine's (2006) work on the "theory-of-mind" aspect of literary texts where practices arising in and out of

interpretation are close to the experiences of the protagonists in the text. Writing

about fiction of all forms – mockumentaries, reality tv, musicals, novels etc –

Zunshine develops theoretical links between the experiential journeys of fictional

characters (say Ron's friendship with Harry, as a young person below will speak

about) – and the experiences of readers in interpretation, both of the text and of their

lived lives. While it falls outside the remit of this paper to truly investigate Zunshine's

Theory of Mind as a means to understand authorial intentions behind the Potter texts

and the ways in which these authorial intentions "meet" their intended readership, this

cognitive-cultural inroad into interpretation offers an interesting take on reception,

staying close to theories of text and reader in reception studies which I have already

alluded to.

So my core task, in this project, has been to understand the real-life

experiences associated with reading fantasy. I have been curious about the ways in

which fantasy works in the minds of young people i.e. does it work as an enthralling

escape into a make-belief world? Or does it fulfil real, lived purposes and mediate

real issues and relationships which punctuate the everyday lives of their readers?

These are the kinds of questions I carried into this project, the design of which I

briefly outline below.

**Methodology**

I conducted, on average, hour-long interviews with 20 young people, 13

female and 7 male, conveniently sampled, from families spread across the many

boroughs of Greater London[ii]. I interacted with their families and most usually with at

least one parent in most cases. Sample selection was guided primarily by young people's familiarity with the series. Young people were initially asked if they had read the Potter books – and only those who had read all the books and watched all the films were then invited to take part. A thorough knowledge of the text was very important to this project, hence participation was limited to those who were very familiar with the text. Some of them had in the past participated in fan communities – some of which were online, others offline, in existing friendship groups. This was asked when recruiting participants and it was intended to have some of these kind of participants in the sample, but this was not mandatory by any means.

The young people belonged to a range of socio-economic categories (as shown in the table below) and lived in urban, suburban as well as rural locations. The young people, aged between 11 and 18, were interviewed by me, usually in their bedrooms, and in a few cases in their living rooms, with a parent present or drifting in and out. Most interviewees were white but a few came from black or mixed ethnicities and some snowballing happened in participant selection. The column for parent's occupation in Table 1 refers to the occupation of the lead earning member of the household[iii].

Three conceptual priorities, deductive in nature, guided the interview schedule for this project– i. (the mediation of) real-world relationships, ii. perceptions of realism in fantasy, and iii. Empathy and compassion in interpretation. Questions were not pre-written, although topics and sub-themes were, leading to semi-structured interviews. Some questions asked during the interview included – "You say it's magical, would you say it's magical like fairy tales you read as a child?"; "Which

character did you find most in common with?"; "Was Dobby's loyalty, that you

mention quite a few times, was that loyalty- good for Dobby, do you think?"; "If I might

ask, and do stop me if I shouldn't, can you elaborate what you said right there about

Dumbledore's role in Harry's life reminding you of your Dad?". As will be apparent,

much of these questions were part of the way the conversations flowed rather than

pre-written standardized questions. Interviews ranged in time from 45 to 70 minutes,

and I encountered participants (like Karl) who were initially difficult to involve in

speaking much at length as well as participants who went beyond the realms of my

expectations of a spoken interview by sharing with me their own fiction and poetry

(Evelyn), Tumblr collections (Abigail), or fan merchandise (Anna).  In this paper, I

only present findings from the second of the three conceptual priorities I identify at

the start of this paragraph i.e. perceptions of realism in fantasy. As a result I focus on

those participants whose interviews led to the clearest and most striking

observations within this category, and not all the 20 participants who took part, once

again reiterating my experience of the interviews as diverse moments of

communication, where, in the absence of a pre-decided list of questions, some

interviews tended to lean more towards one or two of my three conceptual priorities,

than others.


The young people showed me games, art-work, videos they had created,

contributing to rich, free conversations. Interviews were audio recorded with full

consent from the participant and their parents, they were transcribed, combined

with field notes made from observations and coded with the Atlas TI software.

Using interpretive strategies used in my previous projects with young people

(Author, 2011; Author, 2012) I combined a priori coding (nearer the

deductive stance, with a pre-set theoretical orientation) and emergent coding (more emergent from the data itself) using the 'in between' models of Lofland (1972) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) as outlined in Miles and Huberman (1994).

Table 1 about here

## "They don't go off on a massive, flying train" - Reality as a contributor to the enjoyment of fantasy

The title for this section is derived from 13 year old Leonard's account of why he can connect with the magical world of Harry Potter. Ignoring the fact that there are indeed flying cars, flying broomsticks and invisible railway platforms in the text, Leonard reminds me that it is precisely because the train to Hogwarts school is a 'real' one, with real steam, real tracks and real guards, that he finds it credible, and hence, enjoyable. He says

Leonard: *The thing is, I like about Harry Potter is that they don't just, like, go on, like, a massive flying train. They have, like, a proper train, like, on the tracks,*

Interviewer: *Like a real train.*

Leonard: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *And you think that's important, because...?*

Leonard: *Yes, because that is, it would be silly, like, having a flying train, Like a flying car..because, like, no one expected that. They just thought, like, what's, like, a car on the the second floor? It's just,*

*it's just, leaves you hanging.*

Leonard, 13

And being left hanging is not quite what draws young people to the text. Previously Leonard had reminded me of how the friendships in the series remind him of friendships in real life, where, not unlike Harry's harrowing experiences against dark magic, his friends too, rally for each other, for instance when one of them was in an accident. And this precisely what Abigail finds of worth when discerning between what is 'real' and what is wand-waving. For her, the reality comes from the fact that the text seems to mirror or sometimes even shape lessons learnt in real life.

> Abigail: The whole magic, obviously that's not realistic but the friendships and the hurdles theyhave to jump to getting into what they want to do and the missions. Obviously, in life, in real life, you have to go, you have to jump hurdles to get what you want and accomplish. It's exactly the same in Harry Potter. Even though the wand-waving isn't real, it shows us that there is friendships and there are ups and downs and you have to overcome that, yeah.

Abigail, 17

In a previous section I had pointed out how Ostry (2003) had compared the text to the fairy tale genre and had outlined ways in which she finds the fairy tale constraining for the Potter text. But note Karl, 15, who distinguishes between the two and what comes across in Karl's positioning of the text, is that same echo of

something somewhere being very real. Finding family, valuing family, not always getting what one wants, are elements that bring Karl close to reality in reading the text.

Karl: *If it was a fairytale, um, kind of, everything would go well, which it doesn't, obviously, because people die and there's loss and things like that. And then, um, yes, so yes, I guess it's another way of making it more real because then you, kind of, you can see, like, the injustice in some of the characters. The kind of, big message in each one individually, as we said at the beginning, like, the love versus evil and the love and the importance of family and things like that.*

Karl, 15

For all the young people I spoke to, the text was a lesson in growing up – not in the world of magic, which, really, is what the text is about, but growing up in the normal, workaday world of school, teachers, friends, parents, hobbies and coming of age. Note Evelyn, who makes a generational observation in this context.

Evelyn: *It gave, it gave our generation something to be proud of. You know, in this age where, you know, teenagers are depicted as being smoking, pregnant, drunk…abusive delinquents , delinquents, you know, juvenile and immature, it gave our generation something to look back on and go, I was part of that. I'm proud. I'm part of this."*

Evelyn, 17

This speaks of a sense of belonging – to a group of unknown others, with whom she feels solidarity and bonding, to an entire generation. Evelyn's references –to both Star Wars or Doctor Who and social texts takes us close to Jauss's concept of the horizon of expectations (1982) which states precisely this – that a text is contextualised in reading, in its contemporary socio-historical location, it exists in comparison to other texts – and texts not only of literature but texts of contemporary justice and injustice, love and hate, war and peace, or as Evelyn points out, of social solidarity. Karl extends this point to make the text really a coming of age story, where values, turmoil and struggle co-exist with excitement.

Karl: *Yes, and courage and also, like, growing up as well. Because he's, um, that's a thing that spans across all of them. In each book you see him grow up more and take on more responsibility and, um, because at the beginning he's just, kind of, really innocent and how Voldemort doesn't kill him is just, kind of, a bit flukey, really.*

Karl, 15

The filling of gaps in the text (Iser, 1978) is doubtless enjoyable. Indeed, the text is order to become the 'realised' work, needs the filling of gaps. For most young people I spoke to, this came in the form of making this fantastic, elusive, flighty world of magic a part of their own world, where buses, colours, pubs, school houses all contributed to spaces where young people filled in regular,

everyday lives to make it seem real. Rose reasons –

> Rose: *I think it, um... if it was entirely set in a different world, I think people would, kind of, find it a bit harder to take seriously, if you know what I mean. Um, ah, the links to the world that we think of as our world is... I think it just adds a bit more credibility to the films and the books.*

> Rose, 13

For Karl, this 'credibility' comes in the form of school houses –

> Karl: *we don't play Quidditch, but there's, like, sports events and things like that and, um, yes, it is, because, um, at the end of the year there's a house cup and everything so all the points get added together from, like, ah, like, conduct points and things like that, so if you've done something good then you get some points. Um, and then all the sporting, um, achievements, like, ah, there's inter-form events, and then there's a music competition and loads of things like this and, yes, everything's added together and there's a house cup at the end of the ear. And obviously that's very similar to Harry Potter because that's a really big part of the books."*

> Karl, 15

Ken makes a similar point about 'contact' in the text with the world the reader

inhabits. "*A fairytale wouldn't be happening in Tottenham Court Road, and, um, it would be happening in a forest or something like that; whereas Harry Potter's always… it's kind of… it's bringing, like, London, Big Ben and stuff like that into the movie.*" Emma echoes Leonard that "*It isn't just summoning fire*". Again, notice the distilling of the fantastic and the real and the near waving-away of the wand waving to extract just the aspects which resonate with the real, lived world. "*It's not like another part of the world. It's like… it's in the same world, but it's like they're on the same streets and stuff, but they just hide it away… still live in London and still live on earth. [..]I just think that they… oh, it's so hard to explain.*"

Attebery's reminder that one needs some point of contact in fantasy is precisely this, and Ellen sums it up in her reading of why the Kings Cross station, the Tottenham Court Road locations, the red buses and so on are crucial elements that keeps the text in London, in England, and on this planet – without which is would never be 'real' enough to enjoy. She says "*I suppose it's the fact that you see London there, and it's… you know, I've walked this street,   or this could have in an ultimate have happened here.*"

Evelyn, who made the generational point previously, again locates this reality in its contemporary cultural contexts. For her, this is what makes the text enjoyable, and not quite the wand-waving in it.

Evelyn: *it's beautiful to be a part of, you know, and it's, it's a, it's now a part of our culture as British people, you know. Um, they even say that in Love Actually, you know, we're a country of Harry Potter and… I think it was*

*the magic, it was the fantasy of it. But I think the thing that really hooked*

*me, was how familiar it all was. You know, the houses, Scotland, the*

*trains, you know.*

Evelyn, 17

And thus the fantastic text of Harry Potter is discussed repeatedly with references to the real. Mimesis seems closer to the reader's reading strategy than an enchantment with the world of enchantments the text brings. It is this mirroring of the real that young people return to when they respond to sub-texts in the text – of difference and Othering.

## "It's very Hitlerian, it's very World War II": Reading reality in difference and politics

As textual analysis of gender, race, ethnicity and class based themes in the Potter text have revealed – there are strong reminders in the text of difference. Muggles (non-magic people), half-bloods (half-magic people), squibs (magical people who are intellectually challenged and therefore incapable of performing much magic) – tell accounts of difference throughout the series. In the latter parts, such people are registered to be punished, a theme bearing close resemblance to racial purity and discrimination on the basis of it. Note Abigail, who comes from a Black family, with a single mother raising three young people in a crowded colony, raising the issue of difference when speaking of pure-bloods and half-bloods in the world of magic -

Abigail:     *Also, you know like the pure-blood and then, obviously…*
*like…you get racism. It's like just like racism in real life, even though*
*we're, it's in 2011 and there's such a more diverse country, you still*
*get the minority who are really racist and it's just like… You think that*
*you've left this in the past but, obviously, it's strange how, um, Rowling*
*has incorporated that into her books, in not like a such strong way but*
*a subtle way.*

Abigail, 17

Not everyone thinks of it this way, though. Anne, 17, seems oblivious of these connections, but when invited to reflect she suddenly comes up with the parallel of the Holocaust when speaking of the registration and punishment of non-magic people.

Anne: *It's all the social quality of it isn't it?*

Interviewer:   *Yeah.*

Anne:   *If you're pure it's like you're the best. But if you're not… it's sort of like*
*making it look bad so that children that grow up thinking oh that's*
*not right, which is the way it should be. Because it's horrible….not*
*treating everybody equally.  I haven't thought about it but now …it*
*yeah. Holocausty.*

Anne, 16

Abigail's reflections are absent from Anne's analysis of the sub-text of difference. But Karl, on the other hand, connects the sub-text of difference to his history lessons at school. Later, I will return to a particularly thoughtful account from Evelyn, who echoes Karl and contextualises the text within the history of the world. But notice the doubt, in both Karl and Anne's discourses – a recognition of the parallels persists amidst an uneasy unwillingness to admit that this might really be the case.

Karl: *If you relate it to what's going... real life, you can see the levels of, ah, power and status and see that, kind of... because the people at the... you'd say, like, the pure bloods are, kind of, at the top because they see themselves to have the most power*

Interviewer: *Oh, that's interesting.*

Karl: *Yes, and like, just, kind of, you could say racism, really. I guess, I don't know, really. But thinking about it, it definitely could be. But I've, kind of, never, I've never, like, seen it spoken about or anything so I'm not sure, to be honest.*

Karl, 15

Rose, like Anne, recognises these sub-texts but shifts the focus to what she finds relevant, coming from a past of financial struggles. She has already told me how she feels sympathy for Ron's family – the honest, warm, hard-working, financially troubled family of many. Rose seems to ignore racial undertones in the

text and shift the focus to socio-economic differences, based on the portrayal of

deprivation in the text (note also the analysis from Park 2003 on socio-economic

themes, cited earlier)


Rose: *Um, I think, if the books had been written at a time where there was a*

*lot of racial, you know, arguments, I think that that would have been the*

*parallel, but now I'm not so sure. [..]. Definitely not so much any more*

*because there is a lot less of that sort of thing now, but, um, I think*

*there is still the, sort of, class thing, you know, the upper class middle*

*class, working class type thing.  I think there is a kind... because of that*

*in, in the book, in the books.*


Rose, 13


Evelyn joins these connections with lessons from history and society. She

speaks of the fall of dictators, the rise of domination and subjugation in times before

her and in the contemporary world and connects the fantasy of Harry Potter to the

real, lived struggles of many around the world, across time. Speaking of house-elves

(and connecting it to slavery) or of half-bloods and muggles (and connecting it to

racism) Evelyn's referential linkages span a wide range in time.


Evelyn:          *You know, racism and fascism and, um, government,*

*democracy. They're all elements that come up in Harry Potter, which*

*obviously makes it a world instead of just being a place; it's a world.*

*Ah, yeah, I mean, you could, you could obviously compare the house*

*elves, ah, subjugation as, you know, black people…… their*

*subjugation in the, in the Americas, in the West Indies as well, and*

*how they were torn from their own lives. You could compare, um, the*

*Death Eaters' tirade on muggles as the Ku Klux Klan. Um. In a sense,*

*you know, they do – not sure if this is a word – they do racify models,*

*ah, muggles; they make them into a race…… like rats. Like they did*

*the Jews. Um, a huge, a huge part of the, ah, the war between the*

*wizards and Voldemort…… is very Hitlerian..*

Evelyn, 17

Many female teens spoke of the lead character Hermione as an inspiration, comparing her often to another fictional teenager – Bella, in the vampire romance series Twilight. Emma says –

Emma: *I literally loved  Hermione for her like strong female role, you know,*

*you don't get much of them these days.  You've got Twilight it stars with…It*

*was very sexist, um, but now like you see Hermione and I think she was the*

*first strong female role I saw as a child.  And it was really brilliant, you*

*know, seeing as she's a girl, she's not a princess, she can be really smart*

*and is not attractive.  Even though she is a model now, but then back then*

*she wasn't, she wasn't supposed to be.  But, no, it's brilliant, it's really*

*inspirational.*

Emma, 14

But, later, when she mentions that the text does not really speak of the disabled, she ignores the existence of squibs (perhaps the equivalent of calling someone a rude and discriminatory name based on their intellectual abilities)

Emma: *She doesn't write about anybody with any sort of learning disability, but in my college I meet a lot of learning disabilities, even in the area of work I do, it's a creative kind.  I know a few autistic people, and sometimes they will lash out and be really angry, but you know it's just… learning disability and dyslexia, sometimes anything, I'm not too sure of them but I know autistic people, Aspergers, mainly family problems, that you know that they've got problems, and anyone can, you know, be angry.  But they're always nice inside.*

Emma, 14

**"Some solid ground to stand on, some point of contact"**

This brings to relief how young people use the text within the contexts of their lives, as they negotiate real, lived issues of difference and commonality, struggle and peace. One way of making sense of this kind of a role played by fantasy in their lives is to read their interpretations as what Burke terms "equipment for living" (Burke, 1973). Approaching literature from a sociological standpoint, following Burke we can begin to unpack the Potter text, or for that matter, any literary texts as a literary answer to a social situation. The text itself becomes equipment, as we found, in the

hands of these children to interpret, negotiate and make sense of real, lived relationships and reality, as such. For many of the children in this project, the role played by the characters and their relationships was almost healing and therapeutic in their lives. Following Burke, the ways in which Potter was read by these children as something beyond dragons and goblins, something very tangibly linked to their everyday lives, tells the sociological nature of both text and reader where "stimuli do not possess an *absolute* meaning" (Burke, 1954, 35). So then, these accounts highlight the importance of what for Iser, is the 'convergence of text and reader' which brings the work (the realised, interpreted meaning) into existence. We saw when contrasting textual analysis of fantasy, with readers perceptions of realism in reading fantasy, the work is neither to be identified with the text nor with the individual disposition of the reader. Doubtless, the text does offer a range of perspectives and patterns – note the spaces left by filling in details such as red London buses, or an impoverished family in England. These are set in motion in the act of reading where realism makes fantasy come alive. Note that these patterns do indeed exist, and presumably shape what is set in motion. Thus, following reception theory, the work represents a multiplicity of connections which are absent in the text but are formed in reading. As Iser notes, in even the simplest story there are unavoidable omissions, twists and turns, and thus, 'whenever the flow in interrupted (in the text) and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself' (p. 280).

Beginning form this hermeneutic standpoint, I reported from a project where I listened to young people's talk about the Potter texts, away from their immediate

moment of reception. The point was not to prove limitless polysemy of the texts or endless interpretive diversity (note the discussion on polysemy and polyvalence, in Johnson et al, 2010) but to show how young people contemplate about the narrative, plots, characters, relationships and their experiences of growing up with the texts, as it fits into their own lives, long after the film version of the series had ended, and of course the books as well. In conversation they reflected on elements from the text that fitted into their personal worlds – in terms of relationships, interpersonal equations, emotions and experiences, but also in terms of socio-cultural references that helped them locate the text in the worlds they inhabit in real life. And thus, in this project,     perceptions of reality was never conceptualised as a moderator of influence, rather, it was conceptualised as a meaning-making device through which young people accepted the texts into their everyday lives. Crucially, young people were never asked what they felt was real about the text. Instead they were invited to compare and contrast the text with their lives, and those in their lives, and very often they came up with these comparisons, unaided and unprovoked.

This paper contributes to the growing interest in treating the fantasy text as stimulus or escape or questions of effect or influence, towards focusing instead on the way fantasy finds meaning in the lives of young people precisely because they spot reality within it. Notwithstanding the abundance of magical hexes, curses, witches, wizards and wand-waving that characterise the series, young people's talk about the subject matter was found to veer heavily towards emotional matters, relationships, real-life elements and events. This propensity to extract touches of reality out of the world of fantasy worked by drawing out of the world

of fantasy, elements of everyday life, complete with its characters, bonds, rapports, attachments and socio-cultural references. It is in connecting with the real and the everyday when reading fantasy that young people found a sense of location, rooting and grounding in reading emotions, relationships, difference and politics.

Acknowledgements

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    Ohio State University Press.

**Tables and figures**

Table 1

| Name | Age | Household occupation of lead-earner parent |
|------|-----|--------------------------------------------|
| Ken | 13 | IT Manager |
| Leonard | 13 | Yacht broker |
| Meg | 16 | IT consultant |
| Sophia | 16 | Teacher |
| Sheea | 15 | Trader |
| Mark | 18 | Automotive supervisor |
| Henry | 15 | Administration |
| Rose | 13 | Charity manager |
| Emma | 14 | Traffic network coordinator |
| Kathy | 16 | Teacher |
| Karl | 15 | Accountant |
| Josh | 11 | Football coach |
| Evelyn | 17 | Property developer |
| Bob | 13 | Parts manager |
| Anne | 16 | University lecturer |
| Abigail | 17 | Teaching assistant |
| Ellen | 17 | Administration |
| Alice | 17 | Hairdresser |
| Lena | 14 | Teacher |
| Valerie | 18 | Black cab driver |

[i] Retrieved from henryjenkins.org. See here http://henryjenkins.org/

[ii] In all, my fieldwork comprised visits to 20 families across Greater London - at

Hampton, Tooting, Coulsdon,

Cricklewood, Streatham, Walthamstow, Ealing, Chiswick, Northolt, Croydon,

Hampstead, Epsom and Stanmore.

iii All names of young people have been anonymised. Parental consent as well as

young people's consent was sought prior to

the interview with the aid of signed forms. A recruitment agency was used for

recruitment.