

Welcome back to Potter Pundits, the internet home for Harry Potter experts, super-fans, and the serious readers who want to learn all they can about the artistry and meaning of J. K. Rowling's work. Welcome, all you Potter Pundits!

Today I want to continue a series of talks we started last week when I talked about 'Harry Potter as Children's Literature.' The purpose of this series is to take a long look at the unexamined ideas about Harry Potter that shape our thinking beneath our conscious mind, ideas that are true in large part but which, because we accept them as completely true, obscure other truths as important as the original idea. This week's elephant in the room is the notion that *Harry Potter* is a seven novel series.

What I mean by "seven novel series" is the idea that there are seven autonomous, by which I mean is 'self-supporting' or 'stand-alone' individual books, which told in sequence make up a larger story. My contention today is that this is an almost universally accepted idea -- and that it is also problematic, that it obscures more truth now than it reveals.

There are good reasons for thinking of Harry's adventures as stand-alone adventures.

- We have a precedent of six-book series in schoolgirl fiction (Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* and *St Clare's* series) and the seven book *Chronicles of Narnia*; each of these series are stand-alone books that make up a series with a continuous setting and cast of characters that come to a natural (or supernatural) ending in the last book.
- Those of us who were able to read the books as they were published experienced the story one installment at a time and were unable to read the series straight through. The film releases had the same effect – watch and wait.
- There is the children's book misconception that I talked about last week, too. It's hard to think of a children's book or story checking in at 1,084,170 words when *War and Peace* is 561,000 words long.
- And there is the satisfaction and sense of completeness or story-integrity in the first three books – *Stone*, *Chamber*, and *Azkaban* – each of which introduced a mystery or problem and resolved it within its two covers with the larger story kept relatively in the background. Volde War II does not

begin in earnest until the re-appearance of the Dark Lord in the *Goblet of Fire* climax in the Little Hangleton Graveyard, so it was easy to think of the series as stand-alone books with a larger issue not quite a story arc until then.

Unfortunately, as the books themselves offer as a moral again and again in the forehead slapping big twist at the finale, how we first think about something may be, often really is a woefully incomplete or just flat out wrong picture of what's really happened.

The reason we need to re-visit the idea of the Hogwarts Saga as a series of seven adventures is that this segmented conception of the set obscures the integrity and unity of the whole.

The Presence Herself, J. K. Rowling, has said more than once that she planned the seven books as a single story told in seven parts and that she thinks of it as a single story. We are not prisoners of her understanding or verdict, of course, but the texts themselves support the million word single story idea the author asserts.

The seven stand-alone segments idea obscures the unity of the over-arching story. If we thought of the series less as the seven distinct Harry Potter novels and more as the Hogwarts Saga, or, better, 'The Chosen One Prophecy' or 'The Return of the Dark Lord' we'd focus on the over-arching story of which the individual books are only chapters.

And the great accomplishment of the series is in *Deathly Hallows*, the series finale. In the Saga finish, unlike the *Narniad* curtain closer, *The Last Battle*, in which many, even most of the other six books' characters make a curtain call, or the Blyton six book series in which the characters graduate, we get a story which is *the whole point* of the previous six books' story-telling.

The seven-stand-alone books idea also makes it very hard to grasp the structural integrity of the series, that is, the ring structure of the whole story with respect to its parts. Real briefly, a ring composition story has four characteristics:

- The beginning and end are the opening and closing of the story circle; the questions asked at first are answered in the last for a satisfying story-latch.

- There is a story-turn at the approximate center of the tale which has characters, plot points, and settings that reflect the story beginning and end.
- The story parts that we experience on our way from the beginning to this turn will be revisited in reverse order on our way back to the ending, what Dumbledore might call a “reverse echo effect.” The circle, the turn, the story axis connecting beginning, middle, and end, and these internal echoes give the ring story its signature ‘turtle-back’ shape.
- Last, there should be rings inside of rings.

Rowling planned the series as a whole and its seven parts before she finished writing *Philosopher’s Stone*. Structure is incredibly important to her. She reports that her favorite English teacher, Miss Shepherd “was very hot on structure” and “Even though I read a great deal, it was very good to be shown exactly what gave writing structure” (Conversations, 19). Her first husband, who read Rowling’s first notes and outline of the stories, reports that even at the earliest stages of her writing “that Joanne had decided even then on the structure for all seven books” (Smith, p 108). When she is asked the secret of writing success, she says that young writers that want to be the best must read everything they can and *plan*.

And she clearly planned the seven books as an integer, a single story whose parts work in relation to one another and the whole.

Taking the four qualities of a ring one at a time, then:

- Beginning-End ‘Latch:’ Absolutely. I counted them out at one point and came up with 37 direct dialogue, plot-point, and character echoes or references between *Philosopher’s Stone* and *Deathly Hallows*. From Hagrid carrying Harry out of the Godric Hollow ruins to his carrying the Boy Who Died out of the Forbidden Forest, the two trips into the Forest to meet the serpentine Dark Lord (‘Into the Forest Again’), the wild rides in Gringotts with Griphook, the “Are you witch/wizard or what?” and the return of Dumbledore’s deluminator among many, many others (rescue a dragon, anyone?) give us the latch.
- *Goblet* echoes *Stone* and points to *Hallows* in having folks we don’t see anywhere but in these three books (Ollivander and Harry’s animate parents), Dumbledore and a mirror, having its story turn after midnight and

out of bounds, in having two wizard tasks that are set pieces and one that is a gauntlet – and the gauntlets in all three books feature a plant, broomstick flight not in Quidditch, mythological creatures, a logic test, and Harry being saved by friends. Did I mention that we get the strong message about sacred blood and a cursed life in *Stone*, *Goblet*, and *Hallows*? I wrote about this story axis in 2010 and this year's *Literary Allusion in Harry Potter* by Oxford Research Lecturer Beatrice Groves takes the relationship of these three books in directions I never imagined. Check out her three posts this month at HogwartsProfessor.com, each of which explains a new aspect of the axis joining Books 1, 4, and 7.

- And there is a turtleback structure in the Saga parts, too. Books 2 and 6 are largely the stories of Thomas Riddle; we meet him live, sort of, in the Chamber of Secrets and throughout *Half-Blood Prince* through the Dumbledore memories and those he's collected in his Pensieve. Books three and five are Sirius Black's big books; he is the Prisoner of Azkaban, of course, and we learn the truth about who betrayed Lily and James in the Shrieking Shack, and in *Phoenix*, alas, just as Harry saved him from an almost certain death from the Dementors in *Prisoner*, so Sirius saves Harry from the Death Eaters at the cost of his own life.

There is much more to this, enough to talk for hours, believe me, I've done it. Chiasmus experts like Brett Kendall, the first to break the chiasmus code at MuggleMatters in 2005, Joyce Odell, the Red Hen, who detailed 50 connections between *Chamber* and *Half-Blood Prince* as well as 25 points of correspondence between *Stone* and *Phoenix*, the Rev Joe Thacker, William Sprague, and Steve Lee among others have made important contributions to figuring this out.

My point? If we think about the books as separate stand-alone novels loosely connected by shared setting and characters with a big finish instead of one story, it is very hard to get the artistry of Rowling's structural detail between the books.

Perhaps as important, is the way the seven-book idea obscures what is perhaps Rowling's signature gold medal writing characteristic, one that no other author I have read comes close to matching. She has said that when she first drafted *Philosopher's Stone* she realized that she'd given away almost the whole epic in

the opening chapter and re-wrote the book so it had just a few important clues to the larger story.

And this delay in revelation, what I call 'Slow Narrative Release,' has turned out to be one of the greatest things about *Harry Potter* and her Cormoran Strike novels, namely, her ability to tell satisfying stories that can be sold as individual books which each serve as significant advances in an over-arching and at first all-but-invisible tale. All of us have experienced the excitement and thrill of recognition on re-reading the books when we discover something embedded in any earlier work that only was revealed much later for what it really was. Think of the Prophecy; we don't hear it until the end of *Phoenix* but it informs everything in the four books before that, unknown to us but hinted at throughout.

Again, the idea that the *Harry Potter* series is a collection of seven stand-alone adventures is not wrong. They can be, in a way they *have to be read* that way; we don't have a one-volume Hogwarts Saga (yet) the way we do with *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Narniad*.

But! I think Rowling is right in saying it is much better to think of them as a seven chapter single story of 1,084,170 words. If we don't, the unity of the series, the ring composition structural masterwork, and Rowling's signature narrative release are obscured to the point of being invisible, even incredible.

Light is not a particle or a wave but both simultaneously. Best to think of *Harry Potter* this way, too. Rowling's accomplishment is in creating an epic tale that, like the toy which with a turn takes on an entirely new appearance has to be appreciated in turn as both a seven novel set and one heroic coming-of-age story. Not one, not the other, but both.

Thank you for joining us again at PotterPundits for the weekly VLOG. Next week we'll talk about the idea that *Harry Potter* is an English schoolboy novel. True, it is, but, again, it's not the whole truth and obscures some really important things about Rowling's decision to write schoolboy fiction and how she chooses to do it.

And we're only a week or two away from the Potter Pundit Summer School, four in depth classes on the artistry and meaning of *Harry Potter* right here – classes to turn your thinking right side up, affordable, accessible, even alchemical.

Let me know what you think in the comment boxes below, download the pdf of the Top Twelve Rowling Story Sources every Potter Pundit needs to read and the transcript to this talk, and like us on FaceBook. Please tell your friends about what we're doing here, what you're learning here, and about the Summer School classes coming right up.

See you next week!

Interview by Borders Online 1999

A Conversation With J.K. Rowling

<http://go.borders.com/features/emr99063.xcv>

Did you always plan to write Harry's story in more than one book? If so, how many?

JKR: I always conceived it as a seven-book series because I decided that it would take seven years — from the ages of 11-17, inclusive — to train as a wizard, and each of the books would deal with a year of Harry's life at Hogwarts.