

Things Worth Remembering: The Wisdom of Harry Potter

The series taught a generation that honor matters.



EMMA WATSON AND DANIEL RADCLIFFE STAR IN THE 2001 MOVIE *HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE*. (VIA ALAMY)

By Tiya Miles

Welcome to Things Worth Remembering, in which writers share a poem or a paragraph that all of us should commit to heart. This week, in the run-up to Halloween, Tiya Miles has a series about witches, ghosts, monsters, and magic on her mind. Here she reflects on the tales of Harry Potter—and what they teach kids about power, and those who seek it.



I became a fan of Harry Potter at the same time I became a mother.

Just before Christmas 2003, after a harrowing pregnancy, I gave birth to twins with medical complications. They left the neonatal intensive care unit in January, released in the winter of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Bitter winds, heavy snow, and fears of respiratory syncytial virus, which would have been deadly to the fragile little ones, kept us housebound for months.

My husband discovered the perfect gift for the circumstances: membership at an audio bookstore. He drove to the shop to get audio books for me, and later, as the twins grew stronger, I perused the bright shelves myself. I still remember the first title I picked out: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, read by Jim Dale. I chose it because I wanted a fun story. I knew the babies would hear it too.

Four years later, pregnant with my son, I resumed the tradition of listening to *Harry Potter*, this time on CDs that we owned. My previous pregnancy had entailed endless bed rest, so this time I made the most of my freedom to be active; I planted a weeping cherry tree while seven months pregnant, with Dale describing magical creatures in the background.

When our children were old enough for chapter books at bedtime, they heard their father's voice relaying the same tales. My husband read *Harry Potter* aloud to them before progressing to his favorites from childhood: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Lord of the Rings*. All these stories had in common a consequential contest between the small and the large, the meek and the muscular, the marginalized and the powerful. They were David and Goliath tales retold as bold adventures that encouraged the reader or listener to identify with the underdog.

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Over time, these stories informed an unspoken family creed: It is better to be honorable than to wield all the tainted power in the world. And in the end, goodness can win against evil—with the help of a hidden source of strength. In C.S. Lewis's Narnia, that source is the Deeper Magic. In J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, that source is ancient nobility, together with innocence and light. At J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts, that source is a mother's love, a family's care, and friendship.

As our children grew, we went all in for Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the series' seemingly lighthearted lessons about how to live in darkening times. When the kids were 4, 9, and 9, we took them to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter as part of a family vacation to Florida. The kids and I selected wands from Mr. Ollivander's facsimile shop. I chose Professor McGonagall's wand, which sits by my desk to this day.

But this love affair with a book series was not blind. No story or author is without complications. The kids, in their tweens and teens, criticized the paucity of non-white main characters, pointed out that the goblins who staffed Gringotts Wizarding Bank had suspiciously exaggerated hooknoses, and obsessed over the slavish behavior and callous mistreatment of Dobby, the house elf. They joined many of their age peers in castigating Rowling for her statements about trans people. They turned their backs on the author, but they could not fully let go of Potter. The tales we hear in childhood form an understorey in the mind. These characters, and this magical world, were part of who they had grown up to be.

So I was not completely surprised when our teen announced this summer that he wants to revisit The Wizarding World of Harry Potter (this time in California) to replace his broken wand. Amid the political

havoc and social turmoil that tinged this golden summer red, our young adult kids are reaching again for the familiar stability of Harry Potter.

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And so was I. As summer began to fade, I found myself on a 2,359-mile solo road trip driving cross-country from Montana to Massachusetts in our vintage Volkswagen. For company, during that four-day drive across 10 states, I had a sweet Labrador retriever and a download of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. As I listened to Dale's narration, while watching the landscape change from rugged mountains to rolling prairies to green and gold fields of sunflowers and cornstalks, I was struck again by the charm of book one. There are so many things I had forgotten about it—the quirky detail of Hagrid's broken umbrella; the whimsy of Diagon Alley and Platform 9¾; the majesty of Hogwarts's castle and mystery of the Forbidden Forest; and the shifting lenses between childish pranks and mature matters.

Elements of Rowling's series seem, eerily, like things we see in present-day American life. Chief among these is the narcissist's urge to wield power to the detriment of many and betterment of a chosen few. The *Harry Potter* stories chart a would-be dictator's fall, rise, and attempted takeover of an imperfect, yet free, society. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named terrorizes the wizarding world, demanding servile fealty as followers and foes alike become convinced of his godlike powers. Death Eaters with cloaked faces kidnap people off the streets and lock them behind bars. Ministry of Magic official Dolores Umbridge, in her ultrafeminine pink suits and kitty-loving guise, commandeers control of Hogwarts, a top school of magic, with the intention of imposing Lord Voldemort's dark vision.

In book one, Professor Quirinus Quirrell, who eagerly does the bidding of his “master,” articulates Voldemort’s theory of power: “A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.” A little later Professor Albus Dumbledore, the wise, fatherly figure who oversees Hogwarts, explains the depth of Voldemort’s treachery to Harry: “He shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies.”

At the center of Rowling’s series are two questions. Will the cruel, once-deposed, nearly dead wizard succeed in his quest to cast out minorities, uplift pure-bloods, imprison and kill resistors, and rule over all? Or will a small group of awkward, earnest young people, with their personalities and skills still in development, fight against this darkness while discovering what they are capable of?

These are the stories my children heard, then read, then watched—that hundreds of thousands, even millions, of millennials grew up with. When I feel myself despairing at what the future holds for them, I remind myself that they had a potent training program. They know what authoritarianism looks like, the sorts of bewitching costumes it wears, and the kinds of false promises it whispers into open ears. They have spent ample time in a place where evil threatened peace and freedom. And they have journeyed with fictional friends who discovered a lifesaving secret there: Honor, valor, smarts, love, and a touch of magic can be strong enough to beat the darkness back.

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Things Worth Remembering will be back in your inbox next Sunday. In case you missed it, last week Tara Isabella Burton admitted that every time she rereads T.S. Eliot’s magnificent “Four Quartets,” she feels like a bit of an idiot—but that’s why it’s so meaningful.

