
Making Connections: Books for Harry Potter Fans

Faith H. Wallace

Epic fantasies are not new. Look at the popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Even the idea of a boy wizard going to wizarding school appeared in Ursula Le Guin's epic *Earthsea*. The *Harry Potter* phenomenon, though, has so invigorated the genre of fantasy for young adults that new titles are being produced too quickly to follow. While each story has its own unique twist or quest, these stories sometimes share similar themes or characteristics (e.g. themes of choices and good versus evil, the inclusion of magical or mythical creatures and the ability to speak to various creatures), fostering strategic reading. That is, "*strategic reading* refers to thinking about reading in ways that enhance learning and understanding" such as when readers make connections, draw inferences, and pose questions (Harvey & Goudvis 16).

Encouraging students to read widely in the young adult fantasy genre (while many are still riveted by the *Harry Potter* series) may be a way to encourage students to read strategically, specifically enhancing their ability to make connections within and across texts. Readers make connections between what they already know and what they learn (Braunger & Lewis 30). As they read "to better understand their reading", they may compare story events, lessons, themes, or perspectives (Harvey & Goudvis 80). Reading widely within the young adult fantasy

literature can also provide readers with background knowledge about the genre including style, format, themes, and characteristics that will support strategic reading. In this essay, I illustrate two connections among new young adult fantasy, particularly with regard to the magical and mythical creatures of the *Harry Potter* series and the role of family members as villains. I also show how these connections can foster strategic reading.

I. Making Connections: Magical and Mythical Creatures

We meet strange and interesting magical and mythical creatures within all of the *Harry Potter* books including house elves, dragons, trolls, goblins, hippogriffs, and centaurs to name just a few. In fact, J.K. Rowling published *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* as a compendium of the creatures Potter and his friends encounter. What is interesting, though, is that Rowling gives each species a distinct personality and plight in the wizarding world. Take, for example, dragons. These creatures are seen as dangerous and forbidden, yet Harry must steal the dragon egg from a dragon during the TriWizard Tournament in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, where the dragons are used in sport.

This portrayal of dragons is similar to the way dragons are described and used within Lene Kaaberbol's young adult novel *The Shamer's Daughter*, the first novel in a series about a young girl, Dina, who has inherited a special gift – the ability to read a person's soul, see the truth, and make the person feel shame for his or her misdeeds. It is this gift that puts Dina in a precarious position. Dina's mother (with the same gift) must declare an innocent boy, Nico, guilty of terrible crimes. When she refuses to do so, she is locked away and declared a witch. Dina is faced with the same choice, but even being hunted as a witch doesn't stop her from trying to find and free her mother, escape the teeth of venomous dragons, and find a way to save Nico. The dragons in the Dragon Pit are described more as overgrown, poisonous lizards than magical, mythical creatures. The dragons are enslaved and used as a form of law enforcement that Dina and her mother must escape. While not as sophisticated as the *Harry Potter* novels, this young adult series is imagi-

native and has a strong female protagonist with a unique gift.

On the other hand, the dragons in *Eragon*, by Christopher Paolini, are companions and confidants possessing great wisdom and knowledge. When Eragon discovers a stunning blue stone in the middle of a forest, his life quickly begins to change. Instead of living his quiet life as a poor farm-boy, he becomes a Dragon Rider (the last one), learns the ancient language of magic, and saves an elf from torture – all while trying to find the murderous Ra'zac who destroyed his home and took his uncle's life. Eragon's journey is filled with amazing magic, strange creatures, and unforgettable characters; readers will be treated to an imaginative world as they too learn the new language of magic. Paolini, a teen himself, plans Eragon's story as part one of the *Inheritance* trilogy. Comparing and contrasting how dragons are portrayed and utilized across various texts will foster strategic reading in that readers must consider themes and purpose for particular characters within each book. Since dragons are a popular topic in epic fantasies, there is no shortage of texts to explore. For example, *Dragon Rider* deals with similar themes as *Eragon*, and because of the popularity of dragons as characters in fantasy, there are also nonfiction informational texts to provide a historical perspective, deepening a reader's background knowledge, on the dragon character such as *Dr. Ernest Drake's Dragonology: The Complete Book of Dragons* by Duguld Steer and *Dragons: A Natural History* by Karl Shuker.

Fairies are also popular creatures within epic fantasies. Like dragons, fairies are portrayed and utilized in a variety of ways across texts. The enslaved house elves of *Harry Potter* would sound familiar to characters in various texts where fairies are considered a race of magical creatures that are bound to certain "houses" doing the bidding of the owners of the house. In some cases, the fairies rebel as in the sophisticated young adult novel *The Blue Girl* by Charles de Lint and the light-hearted, uncomplicated series *The Spiderwick Chronicles* by Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi, but the house elves of the *Harry Potter* series have yet to fight their enslavement.

Some modern fantasies take "twists" on traditional fairy

folklore. Artemis, the boy genius of Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* series, believes he can do anything – including something that no one else has done: steal gold from the Leprechauns. The only problem is that Leprechauns are not actually small green men. Leprechauns are, in fact, members of L.E.P. Recon: Lower Elements Police, Reconnaissance Unit. In stealing this gold, Artemis has to outsmart fairy technology, fairy magic, and one tough fairy, Holly Short. Colfer incorporates taken-for-granted myths and legends and adds flair and a lot of laughter to them. The adventures of Artemis and Holly continue in *Artemis Fowl: The Artic Incident* where the team must stop The Lower Elements from being taken over by a gang of Goblins. Then, in *Artemis Fowl: The Eternity Code*, Artemis uses fairy technology to make money on the stock market, but the plan backfires and the entire Lower Elements may be at risk. Artemis Fowl fans may also enjoy the companion text *The Artemis Fowl Files* containing interviews and short stories. While these books seem more like fun and games, Colfer uses the humor to make statements about society. For example, Holly Short is the first female fairy allowed on the L.E.P. Recon. This is a running theme throughout the texts, making Holly a target for harsh criticism by her superiors. Her involvement with Fowl only makes things worse for her.

Discrimination and mistreatment of others, either masked within humor in *Artemis Fowl* or tackled head on in *Harry Potter*, is a common theme in these young adult fantasies. Readers are challenged by authors to think about tough issues in a way that makes them more accessible when they make connections across texts. How are these magical creatures similar in various storylines and how are these creatures used to make a statement about society and the treatment of others? What other magical creatures suffer mistreatment in young adult fantasies and why? These questions can be explored when students make connections across texts.

II. Making Connections: The Villain in the Family

Making connections across texts can also provide an opportunity for readers to make predictions. We have quite a

bit of information still to learn about Lord Voldemort, the death-eaters, and the prophecy, but perhaps we can use our background knowledge (or our connections) about other young adult fantasies to narrow down the possible outcomes for remaining *Harry Potter* books. For example, in many young adult fantasies, a major “bad guy” often turns out to be a relative of our heroes. This happens in *Pure Dead Magic*, *The Children of the Red King* series, *The Shamer’s Daughter*, *Eragon*, *His Dark Material* series, and *The Old Kingdom* series among others.

In *Pure Dead Magic* by Debi Gliori, the first of three in this hysterical series, there doesn’t seem like anything else could go wrong at the Strega-Borgia home. First, Signor Luciano has disappeared. This means Signora Baci must hire a nanny for her three children (Titus, Pandora, and Damp) since she is busy studying advanced witchcraft. In the meantime, Pandora, ten years old, accidentally shrinks her baby sister, Damp, using a disposable wand she stole from her mother. Then, Titus, twelve years old, uploads Damp onto the Internet. While they try to save their baby sister, a group of villains with a terrible mission breaks into the house. This evil-doing was orchestrated by Signor Luciano’s brother Lucifer who is greedy for a large inheritance. With a little magical intervention from the nanny and some help from Tock the crocodile, the Strega-Borgia clan survives the ordeal and hopes never to hear from Lucifer again. The series continues with *Pure Dead Wicked* where the Strega-Borgias must deal with the ramifications of the children’s science experiment in cloning, a magical Scottish army, and a pregnant dragon while trying to save their castle from ruin. *Pure Dead Brilliant* is the third installment and is the most complex, engaging, and laugh-out-loud adventure. All of the Strega-Borgias are back – including evil Uncle Lucifer hungry for revenge. But, a long-standing pact with a demon just might interrupt Uncle Lucifer’s plan.

The *Children of the Red King* series by Jenny Nimmo follows Charlie Bone as he learns that he, like Harry Potter, has a unique ability: he can hear what people are saying in photographs. This unique ability labels him as endowed and starts a chain of events that might lead to his death. He discovers that he

is actually a descendant of the Red King who had enormous power. But the descendants are all at war, and Charlie must choose sides. The evil Bloors, including Charlie's three aunts, use their gifts to force events to unfold in their favor and destroy those who stand in their way, including killing Charlie's father and keeping a young girl away from her family for over a decade. If Charlie sides with the Bloors, life could be easy, but Charlie and his friends stand up to the Bloors and face the consequences together. By the second installment, the children of the Red King are still divided between good and evil, and it becomes more difficult for Charlie and his friends to remain on the side of the good. Charlie's aunts seem to stop at nothing to have their own way – including attempted murder. This series is a quick but satisfying read for young adults with realistic characters that ground the fantasy.

Sabriel by Garth Nix begins a three-part fantastic and complicated adventure also known as *The Old Kingdom* series. Sabriel's father has a dangerous job, a job that Sabriel inherits too soon for her liking. Sabriel and her father are necromancers. They ensure that the souls of the dead arrive and stay where they belong. With the disappearance of her father, though, the balance of the living and the dead has become unstable, and creatures powerful and long since dead are walking in the world of the living. Sabriel and Touchstone try to sort out what is going on in the old country and learn that the prince, cousin to Touchstone, is behind the rise of the dead. Kerrigor has been gaining power in the land of the dead and plans to take over the living. The sequel to *Sabriel*, *Lirael*, takes place when Sabriel is Queen of the old country and a full-fledged Abhorsen. In a strange twist of fate, Lirael must assist Prince Sameth, Sabriel's son, in finding out why so many free-magical beings are wreaking havoc across the country. The conclusion to this saga is told in a third installment entitled *Abhorsen*.

With so many family members turning to the dark side, what does this suggest for Harry Potter? Could he and Lord Voldemort be related? Perhaps that would explain Harry's green eyes. When readers make connections

across texts, these connections may help students think more deeply about events within the reading (particularly within the Potter series), which, in turn, can lead to making predictions about what is to come in the last parts of the series.

Concluding Thoughts

Many of our students are captivated with the Potter tale and are reading the books over and over again. Rereading has much value, especially for our young readers. But, we can expand their horizons by providing them with other young adult fantasies with similar themes and characteristics to push all students, regardless of ability, to the next level of strategic reading. Due to wide publishing of these adolescent fantasies, we can support our struggling readers and push advanced readers. For instance, *The Spiderwick Chronicles* follow the adventures of the Grace children as they learn about fairies and magic. Each adventure is separated into a different book so that the books are more like short stories with limited main characters and settings to prevent struggling readers from becoming overwhelmed. On the other hand, a more sophisticated reader will be challenged reading Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, which includes a complex storyline in each of the three books with a number of different species of characters, a new language, and connections to both science and magic. Further, as readers of a good series tend to devour the series until it is complete, our students may read more widely than ever before while they patiently wait for the next and last installment of *Harry Potter* (Tunnell & Jacobs 228). For example, *Artemis Fowl* fans have four books to entertain them and *Eragon* is one book in a trilogy as is *Lionboy* by Zizou Corder. By providing students with the opportunity to explore similar themes and characters we push them toward strategic reading in making connections within and across texts.

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