

Book Reviews

LITERARY ALLUSION IN HARRY POTTER. By Beatrice Groves. London, UK: Routledge, 2017. 196 p.

Books allude to—that is, clarify, complete, compete with, glorify, plagiarize, misread, reinvent, and transmogrify—other books. Books which relentlessly allude to other books include James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). When we see the imprints of earlier books in books that we read, we imagine books existing in relationship to one another as part of a given order. This order changes, especially when books travel from one country or continent to another—one kind of reading culture to another—due to the work of traders, travellers, warriors, colonizers, etc. The spirit of books referring to other books is not always one of 'congenial ancestry,' as Pound called it, though it need not necessarily be burdened by what Bloom once called 'anxiety of influence'.

J K Rowling's comments on what she owes to books are well-documented, though one need not always accept her own mapping of her intent in relation to specific allusions. Beatrice Groves, in her *Literary Allusion in Harry Potter* (2017), offers a fascinating interpretation of the cultural logic of allusion. She tries to show why books are by nature filial, bound in a genealogy that can only be confirmed on scrutiny. Groves shows a clear mapping of the borrowings, though each cluster of borrowings has a different interpretive or cultural logic.

How straightforward is a book's relation to a culture or a reader? We know that children's literature is not for children alone. If anybody was looking for an instance to show the ambiguous relationship of children's literature to children, one need not go farther than this quixotic disclaimer in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, decidedly one of the great books for children: "NOTICE: Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR PER G.G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE" (2).

Interestingly, Twain's novel—presented to children the world over as a classic children's text—is also read, marketed and taught as a great American classic, presumably to and by adults. This is an issue that relates to the general perception—suspicion may be a better word here—that parents read more *Harry Potter* than children. There is a sly and subtle hint behind this suggestion that children 'watch' or 'play' rather than 'read' their books, *Harry Potter* included. This also relates to common perceptions on why books are written or read. Socially inclined literary critics suggest that writers, especially writers like Rowling, are keen on transforming and transferring the energy of great literature to young adults and their parents. It is clear, however, that Rowling does so in a form that is seemingly friendlier and less invasive in 'an age of mechanical production'—this with due apologies to Walter Benjamin—and digital re-production.

As I read this fine book by Groves—which, I believe, will please more literary critics and teachers of literary-cultural production than diehard *Harry Potter* fans—I am also persuaded to ask a few questions.

If children see things ‘differently,’ do they see it independently as well? Do children’s novels disguise, and then push, narratives of the nation, as novels are supposed to, if Bhabha is to be believed? What do children get to read first, and how? Do children’s books teach children to invest in books that can get increasingly complex, both in pattern and rhythm? What do classics mean to a child? How are classics received in different homes, levels, classes? Is the adult reception of classics an overarching factor in what children get to read first as children’s literature and later as literature? How does a child see Homer, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, ghost and fantasy novels, and the great European classics, in this case gift-wrapped by Rowling?

What we call ‘different’ in the cognitive universe of children stems from the presumption that a good deal of what children think and do remains potentially unaffected by the action and thought of elders. This is where what children think and read is filtered in different ways by the choices made for them by the adult world. This is also where books come in—the stories that children read or get to hear from playgroups and classmates—as ideologically refracted categories.

So J K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books not only tell beautiful and dark stories of good and evil wizards but also of social and cultural expectations—Terry Eagleton once called this exercise ‘the ideology of the aesthetic’—through direct and indirect allusions to fables and folktales, epics, romances, novels, plays and poems. Groves says that ‘Allusion comes naturally to Rowling’ (xii); that it is a ‘companionable idiom’ (xiv). The key is linking the past to the present. Homer, Ovid, Plato, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Walpole, Austen, Dickens, Tennyson—and the Bible—form part of a family storehouse from which she borrows. Harry and his parents, Dumbledore, the Malfoys, Hagrid, Voldemort, Longbottom, Lupin, the Blacks, the Weasleys, Hermione, Snape—to name the most famous characters in what is Rowling’s Potteriad—have been named after some of the most fascinating characters seen across the Western Canon. While Groves is mostly right and thorough on the tricks that Rowling lovingly performs to hide—and show—what she has taken from the great ancestry, the more remarkable feat relates to the transformation of the borrowed material.

For example, when names come from Homer, they also come with a certain narrative structure that depends on repetition and flash-back. When ‘doubles’ come from Shakespeare and Boccaccio, they come with the additional contrastive reminders of differences between names and qualities. Harry Bolingbroke (Prince Hal) and Harry Percy (Hotspur) carry similar names—in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*—but stand for two different kinds of manhood. Harry Potter does not have the desperate valour of Hotspur and yet has a humane side that makes him a more acceptable hero.

Harry carries a scar like Odysseus’ scar that not only reminds us of his heroic lineage but also gives him a pre-assured fictional destiny. As Grover argues, instances of cratylic naming in *Harry Potter* show Rowling’s ‘interest in the mechanics of society’ (27). So Hagrid and Lupin suffer because of their otherness. Merope Gaunt, married to an outsider, dies in misery, much the same way as Ovid’s Merope fades in the sky. Narcissa Malfoy, named after Narcissus, is beautiful but her ‘beauty is marred by her disdain of others’ (30). Harry and Ron are linked through reflections that lead them through Erised (desire reversed), but each has a different understanding of the images they see.

Harry's forbears, friends, adversaries and mentors owe a lot to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and to Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*. These medieval texts not only give Rowling the ideas with which to mould Good and Evil, but also fashion for her a model battlefield where they can fight. Whether *The Philosopher's Stone* or *The Chamber of Secrets* or *The Deathly Hallows*, these books show why it is important for a human being—more so for Harry, the contemporary teenager's Everyman—to accept mortality. Rowling's allusions to Milton and the mystery plays reiterate the long shadow of Christianity but insist on the power of kindness. Although human beings cannot immediately see the meaning of God's design, Rowling says that 'the darkness has no power over light' (79).

The presence in Rowling's novels of Shakespeare and Jane Austen is clearly the strongest. Shakespeare shows how love and forgiveness help one transcend worldly worries and transform ordinary mortals to heroes. The magic of words in Shakespeare's comic and tragic-comic art resonates in Harry, Hermione, Ron, Dumbledore, the Blacks and the Weasleys, in that they see how all interpretations are at once meaningful and inconclusive. Jane Austen—but mostly Emma—gives Rowling the model for a narratorial authority that is at once intelligent, ironical, sly and all-knowing. Even then the author finds for herself a corner where she can look at and laugh at her creations and turn them into better human beings. Much of the education of the younger characters of *Harry Potter* is like that of Emma Woodhouse. So, more than wealth, what the good characters finally get is wisdom.

If wisdom is the key to happy conclusions, grief has its moment in Rowling's work. But this note of grief comes with a disclaimer. Grief is not to be seen as that which follows death or separation, but that which serves as a reminder of something valuable. The words of a poet can immortalize the love of a mother, the touch of a friend, the softness of a child's feet. In Shakespeare's sonnets and in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, there is a guaranteed cyclicity of love's end and resurrection. To this extent, art is seen by Rowling—as it was by Shakespeare and Dickens—as therapeutic and mnemonic. All memory of the dead is like the memory of Morrison's Beloved. It provides an occasion to re-member the dead through words, through images, but most importantly through resurrection by allusion.

So the dead in *Harry Potter*, the writer tells us, cannot die. It is instructive to see how Groves discusses Harry's discovery of his mother's letter in *Deathly Hallows* (see Groves 146-48). Harry does not immediately get to the message in the letter. Rather, he looks at his mother's handwriting: 'a friendly little wave glimpsed from behind a veil' (Groves 146). But Harry does not despair for long. He connects to 'voices behind the veil' and feels his mother's love returning to him by way of his empathy for Luna. In Tennyson, grief is a great binder that holds the poem together. In Rowling, grief is a passage to companionship. It holds the key to the power of allusions.

In her *Guide to the Harry Potter Novels* (2002), Julia Eccleshare mentions two general perceptions about children that govern the production and indeed the consumption of children's literature. There is a feeling that today's children are 'brattish, selfish, consumerist, uncaring and greedy' (109). There is also a feeling that the world where children were supposed to be creative, free and safe—though the creativity, freedom and safety of the children were as much subject to ideological apparatuses as that of their parents—is dead. This has made children 'bewildered and unhappy while parental fears for safety [have] restricted independent activity' (109). Eccleshare examines the social formations surrounding children's fiction both as condition and consequence. Groves never says anything explicitly regarding how and where children get their ideas regarding

great books, great countries and great heroes before they start reading—and how and where they get their reading and what they read as they move on—but she insists on the role played by books in the lives of parents and children.

Rowling's *Harry Potter* is a great vehicle for transmitting narratives of imagined communities and national cultures. The Potter project is as much about national concerns as about the consumption culture of children. That, of course, brings us to the life-world of children, the world that they inherit, the world that they inhabit, and the world that they leave behind as they grow out of their childhood. These novels, therefore, can be said to play out the cultural logic of a world where, one would assume, children are more interested in watching films or playing digital games—not discounting the fact that the participation of children in digital productions has an air of malevolence about it—rather than reading books.

While any kind of conclusion pertaining to what children like—or do not—requires more evidence than literary criticism tends to offer or use, I see what kind of role parents and parenting plays in such a scenario. Books play the role of surrogate parents. The fact that Rowling has repeatedly mentioned the huge role played by books in her formative years sometimes occludes the fact that she is a voracious reader of books, and that she is drawn to books of all kinds as if by instinct. Yet, to think of her encounter with books as fortuitous happenings—as a series of happy accidents in the life of a successful writer—would be to ignore the essence of Rowling's basic understanding of a writer's calling.

To Rowling, the writer reads—and reads more than every other—so she can write, entertain and instruct. I cannot decide on a pecking order for Rowling's preferences for the ideal artist, if one were hard-pressed to choose between artists of pleasure and of persuasion. But whatever path the writer chooses, the presence of books—and that is where allusions become conditions and consequences of reading—is a fundamental principle in their expressive universe. So we are back to where we began: there are other books in the books we read. We needed Beatrice Groves to say *that* with such beauty and clarity. This is a rare book of literary criticism that one is happy to read, and recommend to other people, including Harry Potter readers.

BIJAY K. DANTA
Tezpur University, India

LITTÉRATURE ET POLITIQUE EN OCÉANIE. (Literature and Politics in Oceania). Special Volume of New Zealand Journal of French Studies. Eds. Andréas Pfersmann and Titaua Porcher. Wellington, NZ: Victoria University of Wellington, 2019. 266 p.

Most books, and this is especially true of academic research, are meant to be consumed by like-minded readers living in the time and place of their writing. Yet it occurred to me while reading *Littérature et politique en Océanie*, edited by Andréas Pfersmann and Titaua Porcher, that putting as wide a historical distance between ourselves and the volume could enhance our understanding—that to contemplate from afar what exercised the Western academic mind circa 2020 might allow the impartial curiosity needed when, as the title informs us, politics is at play.