

Some Christian readers bewitched by Potter, wild about Harry

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DALLAS (ABP)—J.K. Rowling isn't likely to repeat John Lennon's mistake. She probably won't compare the record-setting popularity of her Harry Potter books to that of Jesus Christ, but the global reach of the title character's adventures is undeniable.

The last book in the series by British author Rowling is currently the best-selling book in the world. The seven-book series has sold an amazing 325 million copies worldwide since 1997, making it the biggest children's book series ever.

As with other icons of pop culture, the Harry Potter series has spawned no shortage of Christian critics, imitators and evangelistic entrepreneurs—including the Church of England—who are capitalizing on the success of the Potter franchise by using the stories to spread the gospel.

The Church of England recently published a guidebook, called [*Mixing it Up With Harry Potter*](#), to show people biblical lessons within the Harry Potter series. Harry Potter is a “hugely moral series of stories about good, evil, love, friends and everything else,” Owen Smith, the guidebook’s author, told the *London Times*.

The guidebook likely will anger some Christians—including the pope and psychologist James Dobson—who see the Harry Potter franchise as an endorsement of witchcraft.

Dobson has consistently opposed the Potter books. And when the *Washington Post* mistakenly said otherwise in a recent article, Dobson quickly countered the claims on his Focus on the Family website.

“Given the trend toward witchcraft and New Age ideology in the larger culture,” Dobson said, “it’s difficult to ignore the effects such stories (albeit imaginary) might have on young, impressionable minds.”

Other Christians see it differently—including Rowling herself. Shortly before the second Potter film was released, Rowling told the *Vancouver Sun* that she is a Christian—something many of her critics were surprised to learn.

Rowling told the *Sun* why she hasn’t made her faith more widely known: “If I talk too freely about that, I think the intelligent reader, whether 10 or 60, will be able to guess what’s coming in the books.”

Connie Neal, a fellow author, said Rowling’s comments to the *Sun* only increased Neal’s belief in Harry Potter’s Christian connection. The Christian symbolism in Rowling’s latest and final book, [*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*](#), is so overt that the Christian connection should be apparent to everyone, Neal said.

Neal has written three books countering claims of Harry Potter’s pagan

glorification. There are “unmistakably Christian themes” in the book, including “a clear picture of the gospel in symbolic form,” she said.

Identifying Christian allusions in popular books and movies is a common practice. *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and [Lord of the Rings](#) are enormously popular stories that all contain the Christ-like elements of self-sacrifice, death and renewal.

But Harry’s wand seems to create more controversy with Christians than Luke’s light saber or Frodo’s sword.

Neal started reading the Potter books as a “concerned Christian parent,” but her concerns were quickly alleviated after she realized the magic described in the first book was similar the kind used in fairy tales.

“The witchcraft described in the Potter books is no worse than the magical elements of classic books like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cinderella*, and [The Chronicles of Narnia](#),” Neal said.

Alan Jacobs, professor of English at Wheaton College, told *Faith Today* magazine the magical skills of Rowling’s wizards are similar to the futuristic and very improbable technology that science fiction shows like *Star Trek* rely on.

Neal said she felt called by God “to help the Christian community really discuss (the controversy) in a kind and Christian way.” And long before the Church of England printed its guidebook, she had used the connection between Harry Potter and the gospel for her own evangelical pursuits.

“I led a guy to Christ using Harry Potter,” Neal said.

Of the 32 books Neal has written, [The Gospel According to Harry Potter](#) has more Scripture in it than anything else. Unfortunately for her, the topic was so controversial that Christian bookstores wouldn’t carry it.

Still, Neal said, the Christian backlash against Harry Potter isn't as strong as it once was.

"I only get calls screaming at me that I'm leading people to the devil maybe once every three months now instead of once a week," she said.

The lapse of time is another thing Neal uses as evidence that the Potter series isn't harmful.

"It's been 10 years since the first book was released," Neal said. "If the book really did cause a mass of kids to join the occult, we would have noticed it by now."

But some critics persist, no matter how much time has passed.

"Harry Potter may have some themes that relate to Christian messages," Woodley Auguste, senior publicist of Strang Communications, said. "But when you factor in the evil associated with witchcraft, I think the bad aspects of the novel outweigh the good."

Strang, an Orlando-based Christian publishing company, offers a line of Christian fantasy books as so-called safe alternatives to Harry Potter.

It's not the first company to do so. Certain authors have produced successful [Christian fantasy titles](#) like *Shadowmancer* and *Fablehaven*, but none have come close to reaching the enormous success of Harry Potter.

Michael Covington, information and education director for the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, said he has noticed more Christian fantasy titles recently than in years past, although he noted there isn't a lot of data available to measure the success of specific book genres.

On the other hand, Zondervan, one of the most successful Christian publishers, stopped publishing fantasy titles three years ago after noticing declining profits in the genre.

Eric Grogg, sales director at NavPress, said Christian fiction and fantasy genres have been successful for its company. NavPress has been selective in publishing those genres because they have to match the ministry side of Nav's business, which Grogg said is the strength of the company.

"Our goal is to change people's lives, so if those types of books don't fit that criterion, we're not going to publish them," Grogg said. As for the future of fantasy, Grogg has developed a "wait and see" attitude.

Instead of waiting, Neal said Christians should embrace secular titles with positive messages like Harry Potter. She said most Christian fantasy authors don't write on the same level as Rowling.

"I seen a lot of books claiming to be the Christian Harry Potter, and some of them have sold like crazy," Neal said. "But when I read one of them, I thought there were more theological problems in that book than in Harry Potter. And the quality of it wasn't even half as good."

Time will tell whether Harry Potter can be used to promote Christianity, but the record 8.3 million U.S. copies the series' final installment sold on its first day indicate that the Potter market will continue for a number of years.

It's the "greatest evangelistic opportunity the church ever missed," Neal said.

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