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Theme Section

Reading in the Age of Harry Potter Pottermania and the World of Young People's Reading

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In this issue, Ray Dorion states, "It is often the intangible combination of the writer's enthusiasm, a unique perspective, and an engaging writing style that coalesces around a provocative subject that produces a rare and enduring book that captures everyone's interest." Although he is speaking about information books in his article in this issue, this phrase would also sum up the Harry Potter phenomenon. With millions of readers all over the world, the Potter series claims the attention of teacher-librarians, classroom teachers, and parents who want to know if the subject matter is healthy for their students or children. Some critics have focused on the elements of witchcraft and magic as warranting banning the books, while they overlook the phenomenal eagerness of young people to read each book in the series multiple times.

J.K. Rowling created a series that holds readers of all ages enthralled with the adventures of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, along with all the other assorted characters. The Potter series is provocative because of its use of witchcraft and magic as an environment for the intriguing story line. But Rowling crafts strong characters who are ordinary people. Harry is an ordinary lad, not given to being perfect, saintly, or full of ego, but rather someone who can engage in mischief and childhood pranks to relieve his dreadful life with his guardians. Later on, his quests with his friends at Hogwarts, Ron and Hermione, do not seem unnatural because of his naive reaction to what he must do. He is afraid of failure, but remains steadfast in his beliefs. To plunge into a series of crucial choices, which he makes based on his ethical belief system of right and wrong without knowing the consequences of these decisions, models for the reader the underlying courage that such decision-making takes and the ultimate results of making the right decision.

Where, then, does this leave the teacher-librarian, the classroom teacher, and the parent who wants to know whether to promote or worry about these books? This theme issue on Potter has two articles that directly address the Potter phenomenon: one that considers the Potter books in the theoretical realm of risk, safety, and control in young people's reading, and one that although discussing criteria for strong information book reading opportunities, also relates to the Potter phenomenon through its emphasis on readers'

enthusiasms. In the latter article, Dorion points out that "sheer quantity of reading is a factor in developing reading, and we cannot underestimate the value of having students read many, many books independently."

Margaret Mackey's article addresses the issue of control over reading that permeates our societies. She emphasizes that "real personal control ... is precisely the reader's most important asset.... Real reading is a voluntary activity that involves the power to say yes or no to a book." She states, "Too many adults want children to read, and read with enthusiasm, without conceding to them any vestige of the sense of real control that is one of the social and psychological triumphs of reading." And thus we have the Potter conundrum for adults who object to the magic and witchcraft. Are the books risky and subversive? Mackey has important arguments you will find intriguing.

Rebecca Butler's article on using the Potter phenomenon as popular culture material for a course in an instructional technology graduate degree program gives us many ideas on how to present Potter material to our students. She starts with impressive statistics on Pottermania with humorous images of businessmen hiding the book between the covers of a magazine, fearing to be seen reading a "young people's book." Butler then describes her course objectives, among them using the series in educational settings, deconstructing Potter literature, and intellectual freedom issues in the series. Of major value are the activities her students developed that will give ideas to those of you looking for ways to incorporate Potter in your school settings.

Finally, Nancy Knapp addresses the issues of witchcraft and magic and banning the Potter books. She argues that the series exemplifies the three essential qualities of great children's literature: intensely engaging, significant literary worth, and deep significance for children's social and ethical development. Knapp, a Christian academic, confronts the banning advocates with strong arguments about the value of the strong character role-modeling. Children vicariously experience the results of Harry's and the others' choices when confronting difficult ethical decisions and learn about the consequences.

Enjoy!