

**Magic Lessons:  
The Influence of Contemporary Theories of Education  
on the Construction of Children's Fantasy Literature**

by

Veronica Lane Alvarado  
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## Prologue

And then, once you had managed to find them, there were the classes themselves. They was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.<sup>1</sup>

In his first few weeks at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, J.K. Rowling's famous boy wizard Harry Potter quickly discovers that magical learning is not nearly as simple as he had originally thought. In fact, learning the lessons needed to become a successful and influential adult is quite a grueling process, and that is arguably the main subject of Rowling's series. Though a tale of magic and adventure, *Harry Potter* is centrally concerned with a child's journey through adolescence and towards adulthood. At the heart of the narrative is a vision of education. Harry's story is one about the right teachers, the best kinds of training, and the fullest opportunities for self-discovery and personal growth. In effect, Rowling's novels offer a vision of the ideal education and place that image in counterpoint to the kinds of schools and teachers that foster or restrict it.

This is a concern that arguably runs through all popular works of children's fantasy literature. Although depicting varying fantastical worlds, espousing vastly different ideologies, and often reaching divergent conclusions, all works of children's fantasy are, first and foremost, written for a child reader, and therefore are narratives of learning and growing. But, more particularly, they are also stories about schooling. Like *Potter*, these tales typically place their characters in implicit, and often explicit, forms of educational institutions. Quite often those schools are used to depict the

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<sup>1</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 133.

theories and practices of education and childhood development that were most prominent when the stories were written. Children's fantasy literature, then, is an index of our changing ideas regarding how children best learn, how they should be educated, and what pedagogical and civic purposes education should serve.

There have been two golden ages of children's fantasy literature within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The first occurred in the years directly following World War II, and was heavily influenced by the liberal social, political, and economic theories that were popular at the time. Some of the best-selling works of children's fantasy published during this era—notably C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain*, and Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time Quartet*—all depict an idealized version of a liberal education that provides their respective child protagonists with the lessons needed in order to succeed in a meritocratic, but nevertheless democratic world. These are works of literature embedded with ideas of public good and with the optimism that so characterized the most influential liberal thinking in the years following the Second World War.

With the first installment published in 1997, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series marked the advent of a second renaissance for children's fantasy. The world that Rowling depicts within her works is one that is heavily influenced by the prevalent neoliberal tenets of the contemporary world and prominently features a market-based society where status and wealth are the foremost markers of success. The series implicitly reinforces the inescapability or value of a hierarchical class-based society, one in which only children who have been predetermined as future

leaders are given access to an elite education. Responding to similar concerns as Rowling, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series and Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimaeus Trilogy* each also depict a decidedly neoliberal world. Riordan, like Rowling implicitly reinforces the need for a class-based hierarchy and demonstrates the benefits of properly educating future influential citizens, while Stroud offers a dissenting view in which many of the tenets of neoliberalism are portrayed as cruel and unjust. In each of these works, however, the child is ideally educated and prepared to for future success. What it means to be educated, however, can look remarkably different depending on who is describing the schooling.

## Chapter One: Liberal Learning

In the decades following World War II, the Western world underwent several intense periods of social and economic change. At the War's end, the income gap between the rich and the poor began to close, and a dominant middle class rapidly started to emerge. During the 1950s, the economy of both the United Kingdom and the United States was booming, and social mobility appeared more attainable than ever before. This age of "Great Compression," as it has been labeled by scholars, was a period of unprecedented political and economic equality. In 1945, the welfare state in Britain was officially born, and for the first time the British government provided all citizens with wage security, health benefits, and access to higher education, effectively insuring that every citizen of the United Kingdom could attain a decent standard of living. In the United States, Americans experienced a similarly enhanced quality of life, for, as economist Paul Krugman aptly puts it, "most people in America lived recognizably similar and remarkably decent material lives."<sup>2</sup> Historian Tony Judt makes a similar remark: "two generations of Americans—the men and women who went through WWII and their children who were to celebrate the '60s—experienced job security and upward mobility on an unprecedented scale."<sup>3</sup> The War had dramatically leveled a heretofore decidedly stratified American society, ushering in an era of unprecedented egalitarianism.

This period of relative equality was accompanied by the increasing influence of the concept of meritocracy—that is, the conviction that those who rise to power

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 51.

and influence do so through their own individual talents, rather than a result of the accidents economic or social status, and that any person, regardless of his or her birth, might gain social, economic, and/or political prominence. Meritocracy then, as journalist Christopher Hayes describes it, was “the perfect name for the American system of testing, schooling, and social differentiation that, in the wake of the social upheaval of the 1960s, would produce a more diverse elite to replace the inbred Eastern WASP establishment.”<sup>4</sup> The relative socioeconomic equality, and the unusual societal mobility, of the era made plausible the idea that a competitive society could be both free and fair, culling future leaders from all backgrounds. But as historian James Patterson importantly notes, the ideal of meritocracy did not create a classless society, but rather crafted a hierarchy that was considered more just. “Americans tolerated open and unapologetic rankings in schools, in the military, in job descriptions...[this social order] was defined by the belief that hard work would enable a person to rise in society.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most importantly, this key principle of meritocracy became the central element of educational policy in both the United Kingdom and the United States during this period.

This attitude of equality and moderation permeated through all aspects of society in both the United Kingdom and the United States, and because it positively enhanced the lives of so many citizens, it prompted a feeling of newfound confidence in liberal government institutions. Judt refers to this collective feeling as “the magic of universalism,” implying that many of the necessities of contemporary life—education, medical treatment, disability benefits, and the like—were now paid for in

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2011), 42.

<sup>5</sup> James Patterson, *Grand Expectations* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1996), 65.



great part by taxes.<sup>6</sup> Citizens increasingly relied on state establishments, which became part of their everyday lives in ways that they had rarely been before the War. With these necessities accounted for, middle-income families had more disposable capital, and were thus able to live more comfortably, purchasing items such as homes, cars, and televisions in masse. This increased quality of life sparked a general feeling of confidence in the state and its sponsored institutions.

One of the most prominent faces of governmental power in this era was public education. A major facet of the United Kingdom's welfare state was the implementation of the eleven-plus exam system, in which eleven-and-twelve-year old schoolchildren across Britain underwent comprehensive exams at the end of their primary school tenure; the results of these tests placed students into different tracks—grammar school, modern school, and vocational school, respectively—which in turn served to guide students towards a career where they were most likely to succeed. Although it tracked students by ability, in comparison to previous eras it was considerably more accessible. This system of schooling enabled wider access to higher education, and therefore students were admitted to institutions of higher learning regardless of economic or social class. Additionally, at this time, the United Kingdom also greatly expanded its public establishments of secondary education. This theoretically was meant to create a better citizenry, where those in power were well equipped to lead an emerging modern Britain.

During this period, the United States also expanded access to education. Directly following the War's end, the GI Bill of 1944 provided over two million returning servicemen with access to university education, a move that, for the first

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<sup>6</sup> Judt, 52.

time in American history, opened higher learning to members of all economic and social classes, engendering what Patterson refers to as a veritable educational boom.<sup>7</sup> Historian of education Diane Ravitch succinctly describes the most significant effect of this bill: “Its great lesson was that college should not be reserved for the well-to-do. The doors were opened for all who wished to come, and those who came helped themselves and added to society’s stock of skilled and productive citizens.”<sup>8</sup> For the first time, Americans whose parents had never dreamed of attaining anything more than a high school diploma could realistically hope to be admitted to the most prestigious universities in the country.

The dramatically increased availability of higher learning in both the U.K. and the U.S. became the impetus for a heightened public discussion about the nature of education itself. Those at the forefront of the field of education asked, what is the best environment in which to educate a child? What subjects would be the most useful for a child to learn so that they can grow to be a well-informed, useful member of society? Should all children be instructed in the same manner? One of the earliest movements that attempted to answer these questions was progressive education, a method of instruction inspired by the ideas of the influential theorist John Dewey, which advocated for a hands-on approach to childhood education. Also emphasized in this model was cooperative planning amongst students and teachers and the instruction of strategies for effective living, which included classes outside of the traditional academic curriculum, such as home economics and etiquette. The tenets of progressive education proposed that if a child learned by doing, then he or she would

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<sup>7</sup> Patterson, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 15.

have the educational foundation needed in order to become an active, productive member of society, and that primary and secondary schools were the foundation of community, and therefore should be viewed as sites of “democracy in action”<sup>9</sup> where children were given a prominent voice in their own learning. Opponents of progressive education criticized the movement’s somewhat nebulous form, arguing that children who were educated progressively lacked discipline, as they were often given too great a liberty in crafting their own education, and that they lacked any coherent foundation in traditional knowledge, having only learned vocational skills.

With the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957, the popularity of progressive education swiftly declined. As historian Andrew Hartman aptly notes, “In the months following Sputnik, the schools were widely cited as the weak link in America’s race against the Soviet Union. Progressive education was singled out.”<sup>10</sup> A more traditional form of schooling was widely embraced by many Americans, one that promoted more conservative, “middle-class values.” These educational priorities were concentrated on promoting the influence of a traditional high school education in preparing future workers for white-collar careers. It was believed that this educational philosophy would produce “well-educated individuals who would become responsible citizens and would improve society by the dint of their intelligence and character.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, popular theories of education began to advocate for an increased emphasis on mathematics and the sciences, and a shift from thinking of childhood education as “inner-directed” and instead emphasizing “other-

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<sup>9</sup> *The Troubled Crusade*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Hartman, 176.

<sup>11</sup> Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 76.

directedness”—implying that instruction of an individual should be employed with the foremost end goal of producing a model American. The National Defense of Education Act (1958), a direct response to the Cold War, aimed at educating students who would grow to rival the Soviets. This landmark legislation, “provided fellowships, grants, and loans to encourage the study of science, mathematics, and foreign languages and funded school construction and equipment.”<sup>12</sup> The premise of the act was the belief that producing students who possessed a strong foundational knowledge in math and science would establish a model citizenship, one that would be able to ensure that the United States remained the most powerful nation in the world.

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Popular works of children’s literature reflected this period’s evolving ideas of childhood, childrearing, and education. Perhaps the most fashionable subset of children’s literature of the time was fantasy novels. The sheer number of classic works of children’s fantasy published in the years after the War speaks to a veritable renaissance of the genre. Many of these novels are now regarded by scholars and critics, as well as popular readers, as seminal works of children’s fantasy literature. Consider the following incomplete, but nonetheless telling, list: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S Lewis (1950), *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton (1952), *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norman Juster (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl (1962), *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L’Engle (1962), *The Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1964), *The Book of Three* by Lloyd Alexander

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<sup>12</sup> *The Troubled Crusade*, 269.

(1964), and *The Dark is Rising* by Susan Cooper (1965). Any contemporary child reader will instantly recognize most, if not all of these titles.

So why was fantasy arguably the richest vein of children's literature during this era? Celebrated literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov provides a broad, yet useful structural definition of fantasy that helps to explain why the genre may be especially suited to children's fantasy and that literature's overarching concern with childhood and education:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters [in a fantasy] as a world of living persons and to hesitate between natural and supernatural explanations of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character... Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations.<sup>13</sup>

A work of fantasy then, harmoniously incorporates natural and supernatural elements into a narrative in such a way that they exist believably with one another and do not contradict each other's actuality. Furthermore, the supernatural elements within a fantasy must be taken seriously in, and of, themselves; that is, they are not intended to be interpreted as symbolic or allegorically.

Expanding upon Todorov's point theorist Brian Attebury explains that in fantasy literature "the fantastic and mimetic modes" coexist<sup>14</sup> Fantasy can then appeal to a reader by providing both an escape from the ordinary world and an imitative representation of it. Paradoxically, fantasy distances the reader from the mundane of the everyday, yet is utterly relevant to a reader's actual life. Works of fantasy have

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<sup>13</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Attebury, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 37.

what Ann Swifen calls, an “inner consistency of reality,”<sup>15</sup> implying that despite its strangeness, fantasy still “feels real,” inasmuch as readers are able to identify, and relate to, elements within the texts that correspond to their own world.

Because fantasy intertwines both the real and the unreal, it may be one of the most ideal genres for providing commentary on current, ethical questions. “Fantasies,” Swifen explains, “are frequently imbued with a moral purpose, and even when set in another historical period, or even more interestingly, another world, display a concern for contemporary problems, and offer a critique of contemporary society.”<sup>16</sup> The genre, then, lends itself to providing subtle responses to current problems through a fantastical lens and is able to craft critiques of contemporary social issues, without appearing to be vehemently polemical. In particular, as it developed after World War II, children’s fantasy literature provided a critical lens through which to reflect on the era’s evolving ideas of education. Nowhere is this more apparent than in some of the most popular and influential examples of the genre in the post-War decades.

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During the London Air Raids of 1940-41, Oxford professor Clive Staples Lewis housed three young girls who were part of a larger government ordered evacuation of the City. While acting as a temporary guardian, Lewis, an already prolific author, conceived of a fantasy novel for children, a tale in which four siblings were transported through a wardrobe to defeat an Evil Witch in a magical world filled

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<sup>15</sup> Ann Swifen, *In Defense of Fantasy* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Swifen, 10.

with creatures known only in tales of mythology and wonder. Thus the series of *The Chronicles of Narnia* was born.

This seven-part saga of high fantasy for children—comprised of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *The Silver Chair*, *The Horse and His Boy*, *The Magician's Nephew*, and *The Last Battle*—was published by British publisher Geoffrey Bles between 1950-1957, at a rate of one novel a year. All of the works revolve around British school children's adventures within the magical realm of Narnia, a world completely separate from our own and which can only be accessed via supernatural means. Narnia, and the 'countries' that surround it, are ruled by the mystical, all-powerful lion Aslan, who serves as the uniting force of the entire series. Under Aslan, Narnia is ruled justly, and it is through Aslan's omnipotent aid alone that the various children (identified in the works as Sons of Adam and Daughter of Eve) are able to access Narnia. These children—siblings Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy in *Lion*, *Caspian* and *Treader*, their cousin Eustace in *Treader* and *Chair*, Eustace's schoolmate Jill in *Chair*, and their predecessors Digory and Polly in *Nephew*—are all magically transported to Narnia when the land is confronted by some force of unspeakable evil. It is only through their aid that the Narnians are able to vanquish internal enemies. Each child is consequently honored in some sort of special capacity by the land's denizens. Whilst on their quests, the children encounter a multitude of fantastical beings—Fauns, Marshwiggles, Talking Animals, Dwarves, Centaurs, and the like—who add to the magical beauty of the place and capture the imagination of readers.

Since the final installment of *The Last Battle* in 1957, *Narnia* has been in continuous publication, making it one of the best selling fantasy sequences of all-time. As a whole, the series has generally received positive reviews, and since its initial release, has been championed by both educators and librarians alike as an ideal example of children's fantasy, a work that dually engages the child reader through its magical elements and instructs him or her through its overarching moral lessons. The virtues promoted throughout the seven works are often aligned with aspects of Christian theology, prompting the series to be classified by literary scholars as specifically Christian works of literature.

Indeed, the Christian allegories within the texts are undeniable—Aslan is a Christ-figure, Edmund is a Judas Iscariot, *Magician* is a story of Creation, and *Battle* is the Apocalypse. But the continuous publication of the series speaks to the universal popularity of *Narnia*, regardless of its religious agenda. Its magic lies in its ability to transport any child reader, irrespective of their familiarity with the tenets of Christianity, into another world—one that mirrors their own enough to be recognizable, yet is magical enough to spark their imagination. For many readers of *Narnia*, its religious concerns are presumably less important than other aspects of the narrative. Among these may be Lewis's central concern with childhood and education. Although the series possibly implicitly narrates a story of Christian providence, it is explicitly telling one of successful and unsuccessful models of education. Those modes are only tangentially, if at all, related to Lewis's religious theology.



Arguably, Lewis's preferred mode of childhood instruction, as evidenced in *Narnia*, is one of liberal education. *Narnia* implies that such an intellectual foundation, when paired with an inspired imagination, imbues a child with the moral and cognitive skills that he or she needs in order to grow to become a productive member of society. These ideals are witnessed at various points in the series where Lewis portrays instances of the 'wrong' ways of educating a child, moments where instruction disregards the very nature of the child and/or the importance of imagination. Examples of the 'right' way of educating a child featured involve an inspired love of learning that is ignited through imagination, which in turn produces a moral, educated individual.

Within the texts themselves, instances of Lewis's definition of 'wrong' forms of education are easily identified. Perhaps the most profound example is that of Eustace and Jill's school, tellingly called as "Experiment House." This rather atrocious institution is described in the opening pages of *The Silver Chair*:

It was 'Co-Educational,' a school for both boys and girls, what used to be called a mixed school; some say that it was not nearly so mixed as the minds of the people who ran it. These people had the idea that boys and girls should be able to do what they liked. And unfortunately what ten or fifteen of the biggest boys and girls like doing best was bullying the others. All sorts of things, horrid things, which if went on at an ordinary school would have been stopped in half a term; but at this school, they weren't; or even if they were, the people who did them were not expelled or punished. The Head said they were interesting psychological cases and sent for them and talked to them for hours. And if you knew the right sort of things to say to the Head, then the main result was that you became rather a favorite than otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

In his description of Experiment House, Lewis's disdain for the then popular philosophy of progressive education is clear. The school contains all the classic characteristics of progressivism—loose academic structure, relative child freedom,

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<sup>17</sup> C.S Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 3-4.

and untraditional disciplinary approaches. This model was one with which Lewis had much familiarity. After his mother's death, Lewis's father enrolled ten-year old Clive and his older brother Warren in Wynyard School, a public boarding institution that emphasized the core tenets of progressive education. The brothers were far from happy at Wynyard—they endured cruel teasing from older pupils, and witnessed the brutal beatings that less wealthy peers of theirs received. And also like Experiment House, Wynyard provided little in the way of intellectual stimulation. In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis recalled, “intellectually, the time I spent at...[Wynyard] was wasted. If the school had not died, it probably would have sealed my fate as a scholar for good.”<sup>18</sup> Like Lewis's own Alma Mater, Experiment House teaches its students only unruliness, selfishness, and ignorance, creating veritable monsters of children, whose proficiency at manipulation and bullying is alarming and bodes ill for the type of adult citizen that they may grow to be.

The lack of proper of educational standards within Experiment House is even further outlined in a brief description of its curriculum. Although they are chased by some of the school's more violent bullies, Lewis informs the reader of Eustace and Jill's incredible dexterity at escaping. “Owing to the curious brands of teaching at Experiment House, one did not learn much French or Math or Latin or things of that sort; but one did learn a lot about getting away quickly.”<sup>19</sup> Experiment House lacks any sort of traditional academic structure, instead subscribing to the progressive principles of alternative education, instructing a child in the areas in only which he or she expressed the most interest. The actions of Experiment House's pupils clearly

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<sup>18</sup> Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 24-25.

<sup>19</sup> *Silver Chair*, 10.

demonstrate the dangers of that mode of education. Without a proper, liberal scholarly background, the children who bully Eustace and Jill are both ignorant and immoral. They have not been exposed to mind-opening works of philosophy, history, or literature that inevitably help to cultivate the integrity of a child. Unable to even begin to think critically or to empathize with others, they instead turn into ill-informed, depraved children, who will likely grow to be equally repugnant adults.

As an overarching theme of *Narnia* speaks of redemption of some sort—redemption from stifled creativity, from unruly children, from evil. Keeping with this refrain, Lewis includes within the series scenes of reclamation from the ills of progressive education. As the ultimate sign of the downfall of the corrupt Telemarine rulers and the reinstatement of Narnian High Kings in *Prince Caspian*, Aslan returns to Narnia after years of absence, restoring joy to a long-subjugated land, righting the wrongs that he encounters one by one. During his travels:

The first house he came to was a school: a girls' school, where a lot of Narnian girls, with their hair done very tight and ugly tight collars round their legs, were having a history lesson. The sort of 'History' that was taught in Narnia under Miraz's rule was duller than the truest history you ever read and less true than the most exciting adventure story.<sup>20</sup>

From these stifling circumstances, Aslan frees a young girl named Gwendolyn, who subsequently joins him and a merry cohort of fantastical beings on their journey to restore justice to Narnia. As Aslan is the ultimate emblem of good, his liberation of worthy Gwendolyn from a schoolhouse that stifles her individuality and intellect demonstrates the error of the school's brand of instruction.

The overthrow of bad schools is repeated at the conclusion of *Silver Chair*, when Aslan returns to the awful Experiment House with Eustace and Jill. His

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<sup>20</sup> C.S Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 199.

presence alone is enough to quiet the former tormenters, transforming them instantly into meek, humble children. Their attitudes are so radically altered that concerned parents launch an investigation into the school, which only yields more positive results. “And in the inquiry, all sorts of things about Experiment House came out, and about ten people got expelled. After that, the Head’s friends saw that she was no use as a Head.”<sup>21</sup> With the bullies subdued and the former headmistress gone, Experiment House now has the ability to properly educate its pupils.

But what does this ‘right’ method of education entail? As the examples of Experiment House and Gwendolyn’s school reveal, the proper education of children falls somewhere between utter freedom and excessive discipline, between an open curriculum and a rigid syllabus. Literary scholar Alan Jacobs surmises that for Lewis, the right method of schooling acknowledges that “children are innocent, imaginative, and generous of spirit, and that being socialized into a rigorous system of school discipline corrupts their innocence, silences their imagination, and transforms their generosity into competitive hostility.”<sup>22</sup> It can therefore be additionally inferred that for Lewis, the nature of the learner his-or-herself is just as essential as the subject matter that is taught. The two, when harmonized, will then produce a moral, intellectual child who in turn will grow to become an upstanding adult.

But importantly, Lewis’s version of liberal education ends up resembling a very near relation of the progressive education that it otherwise vehemently critiques. For while *Narnia* emphasizes the importance of moral authority, its story implicitly places equal if not more weight on the idea that children develop curious and

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<sup>21</sup> *Silver Chair*, 243.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, 10.

authentic selves when they creatively explore their potential in goal-oriented tasks and imaginative play. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, like almost all children's fantasy, are, at their core, adventure stories. The child protagonists in these tales do not learn while sitting in a classroom; they instead grow and develop in the midst of fantastical, exciting journeys. The lessons that they acquire through actively doing heightens their imagination, thus inspiring them to explore, to seek additional knowledge of the world around them and their place in it. Children forced to complete rote academic tasks are frequently half-hearted, inept scholars who yearn instead for excitement and play. Digory and Polly, as they are characterized in the opening pages of *Nephew*, are two of these reluctant learners. The pair is given chores to complete before they are allowed to play; one of these odious tasks includes adding the various dimensions of a room to see whether or not a piece of furniture may fit. "When they measured the attic, they had to get a pencil and do a sum. They both got different answers at first, and even when they agreed I'm not sure if they got it right. They were in a hurry to start the exploration."<sup>23</sup> Digory and Polly, unexcited by the calculation at hand, clumsily and unsuccessfully finish it. They instead want to go outside and to discover, rather than 'learn' by simply adding numbers. Consequently, it is when the pair finally does begin their exploration that they are able to access other lands, and mature through the lessons that they absorb in those realms.

The Pevensie siblings, as characterized in *Lion*, are also only able to properly learn when they are intellectually stimulated by the majesty and beauty of Narnia. The quartet's choice to explore their temporary quarters (they had been evacuated to

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<sup>23</sup> C.S Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 11.

the countryside during the Air Raids) on rainy day, rather than quietly read, enables Lucy to discover the magical wardrobe that serves as a portal between our world and Narnia. She is the first of the four to enter Narnia, enjoying a pleasant afternoon with a jolly faun. Upon her return back through the wardrobe, Lucy excitedly tells the others of her fantastical adventure; all three firmly disbelieve her. Peter and Susan, worried by the inconceivability of their sister's story, share their anxiety with Professor Kirke, their temporary guardian. While listening to their concerns, the Professor grows more and more agitated until he bursts:

‘Logic!’ said the professor half to himself. ‘Why don’t they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn’t tell lies, and its obvious she’s not mad. For the moment then, and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is telling the truth.’<sup>24</sup>

The implicit meaning of the Professor's quip is two-fold. First, it demonstrates the inefficiency of modern schooling; although both Peter and Susan have presumably attended school for at least several years, they are unable to apply those lessons to their present reality, thus rendering their instruction useless. Secondly, and perhaps more meaningfully, it emphasizes the pair's lack of imagination. Although Peter and Susan know that their sister has never lied before, and that she is not insane, they cannot properly follow the train of logic that will arrive at the true conclusion: that Lucy has in fact visited a magical realm called Narnia and there has had tea with a mythic creature. They simply cannot expand their imaginations enough to accept this truth. For Professor Kirke, Peter and Susan are woefully mis-educated.

It is the Professor's role then to act as the pair's instructor, to enlighten them, and to instill within them a desire to learn more. The professor expands Peter and

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<sup>24</sup> C.S Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 48.

Susan's intellectual horizon, without forcing knowledge upon them; he is an ideal instructor for Lewis's preferred mode of education. As scholar Dabney Hart notes, "Lewis believed that it is the responsibility of the teacher is to nourish responsive and imaginative faculties."<sup>25</sup> Lewis's ideal teaching method was inextricably tied with imparting within a child inspiration, imagination, and morality. The Professor exemplifies this as he questions Peter and Susan, providing them with the intellectual tools that they need in order to act, but ultimately allowing them to formulate their own conclusions. He does not force knowledge on them in any way, but instead encourages them to discover the knowledge for themselves, and thus learn most effectively.

As soon as they follow Lucy through the wardrobe, Peter and Susan are able to accept her story, thus fully engaging their imagination. Surrounded by creatures of fantasy and witnessing acts of magic, each of their creative intellects is wholly stimulated, and they are thus able to learn and to mature. Witnessing Aslan's self-sacrifice, and subsequently choosing to aid in the defeat of the evil White Witch, all four siblings eventually demonstrate that they are morally educated. Each has accepted the magic around them as real, and has utilized his or her respective imagination to enact the moral values that he or she has learned from shared magical experiences. During their reign as Kings and Queens of Narnia, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy employ the lessons that they learned as children. "They made good laws and kept the peace...and liberated young dwarves and young satyrs from being sent to school and generally stopped busybodies and interferers and encouraged

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<sup>25</sup> Dabney Hart, *Through the Open Door* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 89.

ordinary people who wanted to live and let live.”<sup>26</sup> The four rule morally, justly and benevolently, bringing harmony to their realm. That they free schoolchildren from rigid education demonstrates that they, now as pseudo-instructors themselves, wish to allow children to discover for themselves, preferring learning through play and stimulation, rather than standard lessons. Narnia under the Pevensie siblings is thus the fully idealized world of Lewis’s brand of instruction.

As the Narnia at the conclusion of *Lion* is the realization of good education, the character transformation of Eustace represents the moral cultivation of a pupil within a system of positive learning. When first presented in the opening pages of *Dawn Treader*, Eustace is a truly unpleasant boy. He mercilessly teases his cousins and is generally disliked by all those who meet him. In describing Eustace’s pastimes, Lewis tells the reader that, “Eustace Clarence liked animals, especially beetles, if they were dead and pinned on a card. He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools.”<sup>27</sup> Eustace’s preferred forms of knowledge are dull and dreary, which are in turn reflected in his disagreeable, disinterested demeanor. Constantly engaging in the wrong form of learning, Eustace possesses no imagination, and has no moral character. It is only once Eustace is able to access the magic of Narnia and participate in an adventure in its magical sphere that he is able to cultivate his imagination, to become the moral and brave boy of *The Silver Chair*. In this way, Eustace’s first foray into Narnia epitomizes a “growth away from ones old self”<sup>28</sup> into maturation;

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<sup>26</sup> *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 183.

<sup>27</sup> C.S Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Manlove, 36.



essentially Eustace's time spent in Narnia is the ultimate realization of the journey of education. The fantasy of Narnia provides Eustace with the right kind of instruction—that is, one that opens the imagination and instills creativity, integrity, and virtue within the pupil. It is only with those lessons that he is able to grow. In Eustace, intellectual stimulation engenders moral growth, and he thus becomes the embodiment of the right kind of education.

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While at one level, Lewis's *Narnia* was envisioned to present a particularly Christian model of liberal education, at another level, the stories that it tells could easily be reframed as a justification of the kinds of progressive and civic education that were most influential in the United Kingdom and the United States in the decades following the Second World War. A more direct example of such progressive education can be seen in Lewis's contemporary, Lloyd Alexander. While serving as an Army Intelligence Agent in Wales during the War, Alexander became enamored with the adventure and chivalry of classic Welsh mythology. Several years later, an already mildly successful children's book author in the United States, he began to write a tale of children's fantasy whose setting and characters were both heavily inspired by ancient Welsh lore. His efforts produced the celebrated *Chronicles of Prydain*, a saga of high fantasy that is still popular today.

The *Chronicles of Prydain*—containing *The Book of Three*, *The Black Cauldron*, *The Castle of Llyr*, *Taran Wanderer*, and *The High King*—were published between 1964-1968, at the rate of one novel a year, by American publisher Henry Holt. The protagonist of the series is Taran—an adolescent when the series begins—

who serves as Assistant Pig-Keeper to the oracular hog Hen Wen. Of unknown parentage, Taran has been raised by Coll, a hardworking farmer, and Dallben, one of the most skilled and respected magicians of Prydain. Taran's first foray into adventure occurs when the noble Prince Gwydion appears at Caer Dallben, warning of the return of the evil Arawn Death-Lord and his consort, the sorceress Archen. Taran subsequently leaves home and journeys with Gwydion across Prydain's mystic landscape to combat these villains and along the way encounters many of the land's colorful inhabitants, three of whom become his intimate friends—the spunky Princess Eilonwy, the faithful but dim-witted dwarf-beast Gurgi, and the hopeless bard Fflewddur Fflam. The subsequent volumes of *Prydain* narrate the journeys of Taran and his companions across Prydain and their campaign to fight evil forces. Each novel becomes more serious in tone as Taran and the others characters age, and, in complementary plot development, Prydain is depicted as beginning to lose its magic. The series concludes with the final, yet devastating, destruction of evil forces in Prydain, Taran's marriage to Princess Eilonwy, and the couple's coronation as High King and Queen of the realm.

Alexander depicts Prydain as a feudal, agrarian society, and thus neither Taran nor Eilonwy, the two human children of the series, undergo any sort of formal schooling. Both, when instructed, are taught primarily by tutors or other skilled practitioners. Yet despite this absence of formalized instruction, *The Chronicles of Prydain* is very much concerned with childhood and education, and like Lewis, Alexander projects contemporary models of education into a mythical realm. Prydain, although decidedly medieval in many respects, is, much like post-War America,

committed to meritocracy. It is a land where a man is ultimately judged by his innate talents rather than his lineage. As critic Marek Oziewicz explains, a story in which an “Assistant Pig-Keeper of no station in life [is] made the High King and marr[ies] the princess who has willingly discarded her ancient, magical inheritance” is more modern than medieval.<sup>29</sup> In the character development of Taran—who travels from lowly, naïve Assistant Pig-Keeper to High King of Prydain—Alexander, very much like Lewis, demonstrates that an ideal education should primarily be concerned with helping a child to realize, cultivate, and hone, his or her own unique capabilities, which in turn will implicitly allow a child to grow to become a useful citizen. For Alexander, this process of *bildung* is best achieved when a child is able to learn through discovery, rather than rote learning.

Taran is first educated by his guardians, Coll and Dallben. The former instructs Taran in the traditional tasks of a craftsman. His education here serves a utilitarian purpose, as Taran masters practical tasks such as smelting horseshoes and caring for livestock. These are skills that he will presumably need as an adult. From Dallben however, Taran receives a much more knowledge-based education, taking his main instruction from the pages of the “Book of Three.” This ancient tome contains thousands of strands of ancient lore, and the information within it serves as the foundation of Dallben’s immense magical power. Taran’s first examination of the “Book of Three” completely overwhelms him, showing him how much he has yet to learn. Coll observes Taran after this study session and remarks, “You have been at the ‘Book of Three’... Now you know better. Well that is one of the three foundations of

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<sup>29</sup> Marek Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle, Orson Scott Card* (New York: McFarland, 2008), 168.

learning: see much, study much, suffer much.”<sup>30</sup> This scene is Taran’s first step into adulthood, and thus the beginnings of his true education, as he now realizes that in order to discover his place in Prydain he must observe those wiser than him, and learn from that observation.

Alexander’s own identity as a lover of learning and a rejecter of traditional education is evident here. A life-long voracious reader and eager scholar, Alexander was a champion of learning. That love of education, however, did not transfer to an academic setting. He loathed high school and dropped out of college, as he found that conventional institutions did not provide him with enough intellectual stimulation.<sup>31</sup> He instead believed that instructive, wise teachers (whether an actual person or a great book) were the best sources of inspiration and knowledge for a child. As Lloyd’s biographer Jill May notes, in the process of his education Taran must learn “first, how to hear what others say and pay attention, and second, how to hear well enough to be able to live the transmitted knowledge and hand it to others.”<sup>32</sup> Taran learns most effectively through imbibing the wisdom of others, rather than dully studying in a classroom.

Indeed, Alexander’s belief in the immense power and importance of knowledge is reinforced when the reader learns how Dallben first came to possess the “Book of Three.” The three-personed crone Orddu, whom Taran, Eilonwy, and Gurgi meet on one of their encounters, informs them that as a reward for a heroic deed, Dallben was offered a gift—Prydain’s most musical harp, its strongest sword, or its greatest tome of wisdom. “Had he chosen the harp, he could have been the greatest

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<sup>30</sup> Lloyd Alexander, *The Book of Three* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Jill May, *Lloyd Alexander* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 24-6.

<sup>32</sup> Oziewicz, 158.

bard in the world; the sword and the dear duckling could have ruled all of Prydain.”<sup>33</sup> Yet Dallben opted for the “Book of Three,” demonstrating the great power of knowledge and the potential that it offers to its holder. It is this respect and reverence of knowledge that Taran inherits from Dallben, and that serves as the intellectual framework for his *bildungsroman*-style education.

As in the most prominent models of post-War schooling, this education is above all civic in its orientation. The objective of learning is not only to allow Taran and Eilonwy to discover their talents, but to even further to realize their obligation to enhance the moral good of their kingdom. The end goal of both Taran’s and Eilonwy’s education is intimately concerned with helping them to discover their inner strengths, harness those capacities, and then properly implement those talents as useful members of society. One of the first steps in this journey is recognizing their own inner strengths, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Eilonwy, as a princess of Prydain, is expected to learn certain skills that will be vital to her as a person of noble birth. Yet she balks against this assigned role and the education that is required of a princess. When Taran first encounters her, she has been sent to study with the sorceress Archen, as in keeping with her family’s custom. “My kinsmen sent me here so Archen could teach me to be an enchantress. It’s a family tradition, don’t you see? The boys are war leaders and the girls are enchantresses.”<sup>34</sup> Eilonwy is expected to fulfill the tradition of her lineage, and grow up to become a mistress of magic. But Eilonwy is not inspired by the type of education that is meant to shape her future. On being told that she will be sent to learn more ‘princessly’ arts at the court

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<sup>33</sup> Lloyd Alexander, *The Black Cauldron* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), 136.

<sup>34</sup> *The Book of Three*, 74.

of Queen Telemaria, Eilonwy is disgusted: “What!” she exclaims, “I don’t care about being a princess! And since I’m already a young lady, how else could I behave? That’s like asking a fish to learn how to swim.”<sup>35</sup> Her resistance to the learning that is thrust upon her is two-fold in meaning. First, it undermines the notion that birth is indicative of inner strengths; although a princess, Eilonwy holds no promise of becoming a skilled enchantress. Secondly, it demonstrates that children will be reluctant learners when they are not inspired by their subject matter. Alexander’s characterization of Eilonwy “emphasize[s] that the value of an individual cannot be determined by appearance or birthright alone.”<sup>36</sup> Eilonwy insists on carving her own identity, one that is not linked to her royal blood, and thus formulates her own progressive educational journey.

Taran’s education differs from Eilonwy’s in that it is concerned with first discovering his position in society. Of no known parentage, Taran, when he is initially presented in *The Book of Three*, is inextricably tied with his role as an Assistant Pig-Keeper. Taran spends a great portion of the series resisting the pejorative connotations that are connected with that occupation, looking to prove that his inner worth is more important than his indefinite birth. This is most effectively shown through Taran’s juxtaposition with the Princes Ellidyr and Rhun, who appear in *The Black Cauldron* and *The Castle of Llyr*, respectively. With an air of arrogant entitlement, Ellidyr looks down upon Taran for his lowly status, constantly exploiting Taran’s lack of parentage; yet a constant refrain of the narrative is that Taran is just as talented, if not more, than Ellidyr. Prince Gwydion reaffirms this, telling Taran, “the

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<sup>35</sup> Lloyd Alexander, *The Castle of Llyr* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), 18.

<sup>36</sup> May, 33.

courage of an Assistant Pig-Keeper weighs as much as that of a Prince.”<sup>37</sup> Despite their discrepancies in birth, Gwydion, the greatest prince of Prydain, regards the two young youths as equals, evidencing the meritocratic ideals of the realm. Indeed, the idea that Ellidyr is superior to Taran because of his birth is again undermined when Dallben comments on Ellidyr’s lack of restraint: “Ellidyr has his name and his sword, but I admit he uses both with something less than wisdom.”<sup>38</sup> Regardless of his princely birth, Ellidyr demonstrates little inner worth; all of his presumed princely education has been unsuccessful, as he displays no prudence, and thus serves no greater purpose in bettering Prydain’s society.

Much like Ellidyr, Prince Rhun also demonstrates little industrious wisdom, despite his noble heritage. Throughout most of the narrative, Rhun is clumsy, awkward, and foolish, constantly speaking before he acts. But his time spent with Taran provides Rhun with a productive model of how to act nobly, despite the former’s lowly birth. Rhun tells Taran that, “there’s more to being a prince than I thought. I learned that from an Assistant Pig-Keeper.”<sup>39</sup> Rhun is inspired by Taran’s inner merits, modeling his own actions after them. This progression in Rhun’s character is perhaps most vividly evidenced when Rhun shows that he is willing to sacrifice his life for that of his friends. Taran, Rhun, Gurgi, and Fflewddur Flam find themselves trapped by the selfish and lonely giant Glew, who agrees to let them go only if one of them stays behind to be his life-long companion. Rhun volunteers for this odious task: “I doubt I should ever really be able to measure up to being a true

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<sup>37</sup> *The Black Cauldron*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> *The Black Cauldron*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> *The Castle of Llyr*, 199.

Prince,” he remarks. “Except in this.”<sup>40</sup> Rhun recognizes that in the realm of Prydain, he and his companions, despite their various social classes, are measured foremost by their innate strengths; he hopes to demonstrate his own inner worth by sacrificing himself. Here Alexander’s modern, meritocratic message is clearly demonstrated. “Alexander’s stories show his contemporary reader that though the hero’s fate is shaped by events, his decisions are his own. Thus Alexander suggests that the outcome of events depends on the integrity of the hero.”<sup>41</sup> Despite its medieval-like atmosphere, Prydain is decidedly progressive in its implied message.

This meritocratic ideal is most clearly characterized by the structure of Prydain’s county of the Free Commots. Not coincidentally, this land also serves as the site of Taran’s most significant lessons in his educational journey in *Taran Wanderer*. The Free Commots is a democratic region of complete meritocracy, with elected leaders and communal sharing of goods and labor. As Gwydion aptly explains to Taran, “what matters in the Free Commots is the skill in a man’s hands, not the blood in his veins.”<sup>42</sup> Taran journeys to the Free Commots, and spends several weeks with its inhabitants. Whilst there, he undergoes deep instruction in traditional agrarian tasks—black-smithing, weaving, and clay throwing. Spending a great deal of time and energy in learning these trades, Taran grows to appreciate the value of hard work. He also learns a series of previously unknown skills, succeeding grandly at weaving and black-smithing; he fails miserably, however, at clay throwing, and although discouraged by his failure, the Potter assures him, “much you have learned and no

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<sup>40</sup> *The Castle of Llyr*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> May, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Lloyd Alexander, *Taran Wanderer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 135.



learning is wasted.”<sup>43</sup> Taran here comes to understand that lessons which are productive, and teach one something about oneself self are the ideal form of education; they aid a child in learning his or her own worth, thus ensuring that the child may grow to be a fully responsible adult.

Taran initially journeys into the Free Commots hoping to discover that he is of noble blood, but through observing the denizens of the Free Commots, he finds that innate ability is of more value than lineage, a lesson that the reader has encountered many times in previous volumes of the series, but one that Taran had yet to accept. Telling Coll and Dallben of his time spent in the Free Commots, Taran sagely remarks, “the birthright I once sought, I seek it no longer. The folk of the Free Commots taught me well, that manhood is not given but earned.”<sup>44</sup> Here Taran demonstrates the completeness of his education in the Free Commots. He has first acquired the physical skills necessary to live in an agrarian society and further has come to understand the value that lies in learning those skills. For first time he acknowledges that it is a person’s application of his inner talents, those that are honed through a useful education, that indicate true worth. In this realization, Alexander espouses a decidedly modern educational ideal. May notes, “Taran reflects the concerns of Americans in the 1960s, and his journey must be viewed as the then-popular quest to ‘find oneself.’”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Taran’s educational journey, from engrossing himself in the “Book of Three” to learning practical trades in the Free Commots, reflects modern concerns of learning ones own inner worth, and perfecting inner talents through a self-crafted education. It is only through this process that

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<sup>43</sup> *Taran Wanderer*, 232.

<sup>44</sup> *Taran Wanderer*, 253.

<sup>45</sup> May, 43.

Taran is finally able to meritocratically rise and become High King of Prydain. Though set in a medieval fantasy realm, his story is a distinctively post-War version of the American rags-to-riches fable, of using one's education to realize one's inherent talents, thus becoming the most valuable member of society that one can.

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An equally fantastical dramatization of the foremost tenets of post-War education is exemplified by Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time Quartet*, a collection that not only presents an ideal of progressive education that is comparable to those espoused by Lewis and Alexander, but that even further directly links it to the Cold War context that was so influential in shaping the era's dominant ideologies of schooling. As a direct response to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, American schools during the late 1950s and early 1960s actively promoted a curriculum which stressed mathematics and the sciences; these were the fields of study that American children would need to master if they were to become citizens who could actively compete with the Soviet Union. Learning science was construed as an inherently patriotic task, and this objective was rhetorically incorporated into numerous modes of American media, including children's fantasy. Madeleine L'Engle's *Wrinkle Quartet* is perhaps the most celebrated example of this kind of literature, as the series actively portrays the educational and moral benefits of scientific study, and of allowing apt scientific minds to be on the forefront of defending American values.

Published by Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux in 1962, *A Wrinkle in Time* follows siblings Meg and Charles Wallace Murray, along with their friend Calvin O'Keefe, on an intergalactic quest to save the siblings' beloved father. The Murrays' parents

are celebrated scientific minds, and their extraordinary intelligence has been passed onto Meg and Charles Wallace, although both are woefully ostracized by other children because of it. Their implicit mission throughout *Wrinkle* is to harness their intellectual capabilities in such a way that instills self-confidence, thus allowing them to better aid others. *Wrinkle*'s sequels—*A Wind in the Door*, *Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and *Many Waters*—all continue that theme of dual self-discovery and communal beneficence through learning. In each volume, the Murray siblings journey across time and space on moral missions to defeat evil. *A Wind in the Door* finds Meg and Calvin shrunk to microscopic size and journeying through Charles Wallace's bloodstream in order to save him from a destructive poison. Charles Wallace is at the center of *Swiftly Tilting Planet*, where, with the aid of a unicorn named Gaudior, he undertakes a quest to stop a mad dictator from being born, while twins Sandy and Dennys Murray are the heroes of *Many Waters*, traveling back in time to the construction of Noah's Ark. It is worth noting that two of the works in the *Quartet*—*A Wind in the Door* and *Many Waters*—contain explicitly Christian elements, causing critics of the series to mark them as examples of decidedly Christian literature. But despite the undeniable religiosity of these texts, as with Lewis's *Narnia*, the lasting popularity of the *Wrinkle Quartet* speaks to its appeal beyond Christian audiences. The series' foremost concern is with childhood and growing up, and as such, it can easily be analyzed without focusing on its religious themes.

Much like Lewis and Alexander, L'Engle was both a voracious reader and an outspoken critic of formal schooling, having found the boarding schools that she

attended to be mercilessly rigid and intellectually stifling.<sup>46</sup> Echoes of her personal experiences can easily be seen in the torments that Meg and Charles Wallace receive from their teachers and classmates. Like L'Engle, Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace all learn best outside of the classroom, when they are given sufficient intellectual freedom to strengthen their innate talents and to learn without the hindrance of unfeeling teachers or cruel peers. Indeed their best instructors are their parents and the variety of supernatural beings that guide them in their journeys. Within the series, then, a child is best educated when he or she is inspired by a wise mentor who helps to strengthen their innate gifts. Once properly instructed, a child will be able to grow to be a competent, moral person that is well equipped to combat forces of evil.

From the opening pages of *Wrinkle*, L'Engle describes the public school that Meg attends in strongly negative terms. It is a site of daily misery for Meg, a place where she is constantly reminded of her inadequacies:

School. School was all wrong. She'd been dropped down to the lowest section in her grade. That morning one of her teachers had said crossly, 'Really Meg, I don't understand how a child with parents as brilliant as yours are supposed to be can be such a poor student. If you don't manage to do a little better you'll have to stay back next year.'<sup>47</sup>

This method of teaching is severe at best. Rather than inspire Meg to work harder at her studies, Meg's teacher offers her harsh criticism; these biting remarks only cause Meg to feel stupid and inadequate. She is constantly belittled in the classroom, as tellingly evidenced in a scene where Meg cannot immediately recall the major trade goods of Nicaragua. When she fails to answer, "The teacher was sarcastic, the rest of the class laughed, and she flung herself down in her seat in a flurry. 'Who cares about

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<sup>46</sup> Donald Hettinga, *Presenting Madeleine L'Engle* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 5.

<sup>47</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1962), 7-8.

the imports and exports of Nicaragua anyhow,' she muttered."<sup>48</sup> It is immediately understandable why Meg would loathe this kind of instruction. There is no possibility of Meg ever being able to foster her intellect and mature appropriately in an environment that is so narrow and critical.

Although Calvin does not receive the same sort of harsh treatment that Meg does, he nevertheless is utterly uninspired by his formal education. Unusually bright, Calvin is singled out by the town librarian at a young age. She suggests all of the classics to him and provides him with his own corner of the library in which to read and study. "His span of concentration on these stories was infinite. But he considered most the schoolwork he was given in a bore."<sup>49</sup> Much as it did with L'Engle, school fails to excite Calvin, and he must seek external sources for his intellectual stimulation.

The school administrators featured in the series are just as inept as the instructors. Mr. Jenkins, who serves as Meg and Calvin's principal in *Wrinkle* and Charles Wallace's in *Wind*, is the epitome of an incompetent educator. He is a horrible, small-minded teacher, whose penchant for formulaic, mass education is clearly part of L'Engle's critique of American public schools. He utterly disregards the Murray siblings' distinctiveness, refusing to allow them to undertake intellectual exploration beyond the school's curriculum. As Meg explains to the angel Progonoksis in *Wind*, "he was in my school last year, and I was always getting sent to his office. He never understands anything, and everything I do is automatically

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<sup>48</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wind in the Door* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972), 196-7.

wrong.”<sup>50</sup> Mr. Jenkins further denies Charles Wallace, who is clearly an incredibly gifted six-year old, any sort of special enrichment, despite Charles Wallace’s intense boredom in the classroom. “We cannot make an exception for any one child. Charles Wallace Murray must learn how to manage.”<sup>51</sup> Mr. Jenkins’s narrow-mindedness marks him as a clear characterization of ineffective teaching, as not only is he unable to inspire children, but also discourages them from learning more.

The school’s inability to properly educate their most gifted pupils is even further demonstrated when the reader discovers that rather than being slow, Meg is actually incredibly intellectually gifted. Struggling with his calculus, Calvin asks Mrs. Murray for assistance. She defers, and rather surprisingly advises him to ask Meg for help. He does so, and although Calvin is several grades ahead of her, Meg is able to do his homework with ease. “Again Meg’s pencil was busy. ‘All you have to do is remember every ordinary fraction can be converted into an infinite periodic decimal fraction. See? So  $\frac{3}{7}$  is 0.428571.’”<sup>52</sup> Meg’s mathematical skills are quite prodigious for a student that her school has placed in remedial lessons. Mr. Murray further reassures Meg, and the reader, of her intellectual gifts, telling her, “Oh my darling, you’re not dumb... Your development has to go at its own pace. It just doesn’t happen to be the usual pace.”<sup>53</sup> Meg’s learning style is different from that of her peers, something that her parents, as good educators, recognize. They have given IQ tests to both Meg and Charles Wallace, and each has scored as having intelligence that is well above average. That the siblings’ school cannot recognize this is a testament to their

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<sup>50</sup> *The Wind in the Door* 89.

<sup>51</sup> *The Wind in the Door*, 108.

<sup>52</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time*, 14.

inability to properly educate, for any competent instructor would have easily been able to ascertain the depth of their intellect.

In fact, the most capable and effective teachers in the series are those who instruct the children outside of the classroom. In *Wrinkle*, Mrs. Who, Mrs. What, and Mrs. Which not only transport Meg, Charles Wallace, and Calvin across the galaxy, but they also provide the trio with the intellectual tools that they need in order to eventually defeat IT, the nemesis of the novel. These able instructors remind the children, especially Meg, to follow their instincts, trust their intellect, and when in doubt, to follow the examples of the great “teachers” of the past:

“Leonardo da Vinci?” Calvin suggested tentatively. “And Michelangelo?” ...  
 “And Shakespeare and Bach! And Pasteur and Madame Curie and Einstein!” ... “And Schweitzer and Gandhi and Buddha and Beethoven and Rembrandt and St. Francis!”<sup>54</sup>

These paragons of excellence serve as the ultimate sources of instruction for the children, and the examples they provide also supply the moral and intellectual framework of the children’s education. It is also emphasized that these personages are the utmost models of valor, as “to be a hero in L’Engle’s world is to be willing to risk all to act on the behalf of others, and to do so with humility, conscious that every person has the same heroic burden and potential. To be heroic is to serve.”<sup>55</sup> Meg is ready to risk her life to save her brother from IT and defeat an ultimate evil. In completing this heroic action, she channels the lessons that she learned from the great “teachers,” thus using her education to serve a greater good.

Within the narrative of L’Engle’s series, perhaps even more so than in either *Narnia* or *Prydain*, it is implicitly stressed that a proper education allows a child not

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<sup>54</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time*, 101.

<sup>55</sup> Hettinga, 46.

only to age into a moral adult, but further to become an upstanding and useful member of society. A true lens of its time, the *Quartet* speaks specifically to contemporary issues, namely the apparent threat of communism during the Cold War and the subsequent importance of emphasizing mathematics and science in schools. The Murray parents are both celebrated scientists, and it is in fact while working on scientific experiments for the U.S. government, that Mr. Murray becomes trapped on the planet Camazotz, the home of the evil IT. It is only through scientific principles that the children are able to journey to rescue him. Mrs. Who, Mrs. What, and Mrs. Which make use of a tesseract (a form of space-time compression) to travel with the children across the galaxy, explaining to them the important scientific laws that allow them to do so. As Oziewicz notes, this depiction of technological advances is orientated primarily to demonstrate the humanitarian benefits that scientific progress can provide. “The component [that] dominates the science fiction is L’Engle’s overriding concern with the ethical, moral, and personal implications of science rather than the technical know-how.”<sup>56</sup> Within *Wrinkle*, the end goal of scientific study is to learn as much as possible about our universe in order to advance the good of mankind.

Keeping with Cold War rhetoric, the purpose of scientific training in the series is to fight the spread of totalitarian menace—a danger that represents through the face of IT, an all-controlling brain that has manipulated its subjects so that they take pleasure in the homogeneity of their lives. This echoes the dominant language of the period, which historian Daniel Rodgers notes was saturated with the themes of

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<sup>56</sup> Oziewicz, 185.



“responsibility, justice, morality, and society.”<sup>57</sup> IT’s dominion of Camazotz greatly resembles a communist state whose values are the antithesis of the ideals of liberal democracy. One of the city’s denizens informs the trio that Camazotz is “the most oriented city on the planet. There has been no trouble of any kind for centuries.”<sup>58</sup> The city is ordered so systemically and efficiently that any sort of individuality or creativity is entirely absent; it is a city alarming in its standardization. In an effort to brainwash Meg, IT defends this uniformity, attempting to persuade her that sameness increases the quality of life for Camazotz’s citizens. But “the mechanized sterility and the architectural uniformity of the city on Camazotz serve as constant reminders to Meg of the ramifications of IT’s seductive logic.”<sup>59</sup> Realizing the falseness of IT’s words, Meg begins reciting the opening words of the Declaration of Independence to keep IT from getting hold of her. She chants to herself that, “like and equal are two entirely different things,”<sup>60</sup> and is thus able to resist indoctrination. Because she received the correct brand of education, Meg recognizes that the equality of people espoused under liberal democracy, as opposed to the derogatory uniformity witnessed in totalitarian states, is best suited to promoting the betterment of humanity. Within L’Engle’s series then, as well as Lewis’s *Narnia* and Alexander’s *Prydain*, a child must first be inspired to broaden his or her intellect, and from that source of willing study, he or she will be able to grow to be a beneficial member of the community.

As denizens of an evolving liberal West, it is no surprise that Lewis, Alexander, and L’Engle were all influenced by the dominant theories of their day,

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<sup>57</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (New York: Belknap Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>58</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time*, 121.

<sup>59</sup> Hattinga, 28.

<sup>60</sup> *A Wrinkle in Time*, 177.

and that they in turn incorporated many of these notions into their respective literary works. While narrating the events of vastly different fantastical realms, *Narnia*, *Prydain*, and *Wrinkle* all implicitly espouse a brand of the liberal progressive learning that was in vogue at the time. Further, all three series undoubtedly craft worlds where, much like the post-War U.K. and U.S, it is believed that meritocracy is congruous with an egalitarian society, although that is not always the case. This idealism, while undoubtedly echoed in later popular works of children's fantasy, abandons a liberal progressive model, and implicitly promotes the values of a neoliberal education.

## Chapter Two: Harry, Hogwarts, and Hierarchy

“Greed is good.” This simple statement, made famous by villainous Wall Street banker Gordon Geckko in the cinematic feature *Wall Street* (1987), epitomizes the political and economic climate in the United Kingdom and the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. In this influential period, the bipartisan policies and ideas that had prevailed within the Western world in the decades following World War II were upended. The first signs of that transformation appeared in the 1970s. After two decades of seeming prosperity, both rising inflation and the Middle East Oil Embargo of the decade had produced a prolonged period of recession and stagnated growth, demolishing the political consensus that had characterized the era of the “Great Compression.” This crisis engendered a renewed call for more conservative economic and political policies in both the U.K. and the U.S., and allowed for the rise of two of the most influential world leaders of the time: Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

During their tenures, both Thatcher and Reagan implemented neoliberal economic policies within their respective nations. Used here, the concept of neoliberalism refers to a political and economic theory that posits that national wellbeing is best achieved under a laissez faire government for which free trade, private property rights, and the free market are the highest priorities. As Marxist thinker Daniel Harvey notes, neoliberalism advocates for the freedom of capital and “seeks to bring all human interactions into the domain of the market.”<sup>61</sup> When put into effect then, this ideology advocates for the deregulation and privatization of as

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

many aspects of economic and social spheres as possible. In practice, it thus cedes power to corporate interests and invites the expansion of wealth and influence amongst business elites.

Elected as Prime Minister in 1979, Leader of the Conservative Party Margaret Thatcher revolutionized the social, political, and economic spheres of the United Kingdom. Implementing neoliberal practices, Thatcher brought the high inflation of the 1970s under control and challenged the power of labor unions, policies that were welcomed by business interests. Her leadership, however, saw a period of recession and slow growth, and of rapidly rising poverty and inequality. Thatcher's tenure, while highly fraught with political conflict and fierce opposition from her critics, nonetheless marked the beginnings of a new political order within the United Kingdom.

Elected in 1980, Republican President Ronald Reagan similarly ushered an era of conservative politics into the United States, completely reshaping the dominant civil, cultural, and fiscal attitudes during his two terms in the Oval Office. Much as in the United Kingdom, an unstable economy and widespread inflation during the 1970s stimulated a conservative movement within the U.S. Reagan became the veritable embodiment of this movement, promising, as historian Daniel Rodgers notes, to bring the "future and freedom back to the people."<sup>62</sup> Akin to Thatcher's, Reagan's neoliberal policies focused on lessening the influence of labor, deregulating industry, and bolstering the power of businesses and the free market. His presidential agenda

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<sup>62</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (New York: Belknap Press, 2012), 34.

included budget cuts, tax cuts, and a strong push towards promoting a national rhetoric of patriotism and individualism.

This drastic change was not without costs. Thatcher's and Reagan's rhetoric, with its shared emphasis on individualism, ambition, and personal drive, discounted the values of equality, solidarity, and the public good. Criticizing the idea of public entitlement, Thatcher infamously remarked, "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women . . . It is our duty to look after ourselves."<sup>63</sup> Celebrating "the freedom of . . . the entrepreneur" as a distinct defender of "economic liberties," Reagan similarly claimed that the history of the United States was a "history of individual achievement." Such ideas, amounted, Reagan plausible claimed, to a "revolution" in public attitudes and policies.<sup>64</sup> And indeed, this rhetorical shift was revolutionary. After the tenures of these neoliberal leaders, the laudation of the individual became a veritable cornerstone in Western rhetoric, often to the detriment of more collective terms such as social welfare and the common good.

In keeping with this transformation, both Thatcher and Reagan further particularly altered the language of meritocracy as well, shifting the terms in what always been an uncertain balance. As Christopher Hayes has explained, the meritocratic philosophy that guided Western education policy in the decades after WWII was essentially riven by a central contradiction. Education was designed to guarantee that all students had access to equal opportunities, but it also was meant to

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<sup>63</sup> Margaret Thatcher, interviewed by Douglas Keay, London, UK, September 23, 1987.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks On Signing the Tax Reform Act of 1986" (lecture, South Lawn of the White House, Washington, DC, October 22, 1986), accessed February 13, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/102286a.htm>.

ensure the most talented had ample chances to rise to positions of privilege and authority. During the era of the Great Compression, the ideas of equal opportunity and personal advancement were kept in the unstable balance, joined together especially in the idea of public service, that Judt labeled as the essential “paradox of meritocracy,” indicating that in order to glean the brightest minds and prepare them for future success, some students must be given more opportunities than others. For example, for his landmark manifesto for the postwar university, Clark Kerr claimed that the new post-World War II educational system could be simultaneously both egalitarian and meritocratic:

The partnership of the federal government with higher education . . . over the last two decades has been enormously productive in expanding the pool of scientific ideas and skills. Now we are entering a new phase of widening and deepening relationships. This new phase . . . can enlarge the horizons of equality of opportunity. It can maintain and even increase the margin for excellence. The challenge is to make certain it does all these things.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, leading post-War economist J. K. Galbraith suggested that meritocratic education would create a “new class” of disinterested public servants. These powerful personages would be governed not by pursuit of “pecuniary” interests and personal pleasures, but instead by devotion to enhancing the public good.<sup>66</sup>

During the political transformation of the late twentieth century, this vision of a tense balance between elite privilege and public responsibility was rapidly abandoned. But in comparison to that of Kerr, the rhetoric of Thatcher and Reagan emphasized not the belief in public service, but the conviction that talent and industry should allow the most able to gain as much wealth and influence as they could earn.

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<sup>65</sup> Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (1963. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ Press, 2001), 63.

<sup>66</sup> J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 264.

By the same token, they expected that the talented and ambitious would earn success not in civil service or in professional labor but in the commercial marketplace, and they thus downplayed the idea that elite ability should be in any way limited by public responsibility or democratic concerns. Their ideas would contribute in causing a transformation in the vision of meritocracy and would be consistent with the rapidly expanding economic inequality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>67</sup>

This rampant inequality essentially forms the backbone of the school systems of both the U.K. and the U.S. As an investigative article in *The Economist* reports, the Western “education system is increasingly stratified by social class, and poor children have a double disadvantage. They attend schools with fewer resources than those of their richer contemporaries.”<sup>68</sup> This in turn gives poorer students a considerable handicap when it comes time to apply to university, as they often will have had much less exposure to the educational preparation that is needed to score well on entrance exams. And as the most prestigious institutions of higher learning produce a great percentage of a nation’s most powerful citizens, one’s economic status thus becomes a very likely indicator of one’s ability to succeed as an adult. Meritocracy, then, is all but an illusion in a neoliberal world, as those with the most knowledge and the greatest talents, are often those of a high economic class. Rather than based on a traditional hierarchy of race or gender, the United Kingdom and the United States essentially have become nations stratified by economic class, where individual ability and personal wealth are extoled above all other accomplishments. In the

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<sup>67</sup> Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013), 22.

<sup>68</sup> *The Economist*, “Meritocracy in America: Ever Higher Society, Ever Harder to Ascend,” January 5, 2005, 3.

administrations of both Thatcher's and Reagan's successors, this socio-political atmosphere reigned supreme, effectively solidifying the United Kingdom and the United States as nations of neoliberal individuals.

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As the era of "Great Compression" ended and once prominent theories of liberal progressive education began to slowly lose favor, so to did the intense popularity of children's fantasy literature. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, this genre, while still selling consistently, was nowhere near as profitable as it had been in the previous decades. Publishing novels for children and young adults had once again become a niche field within the industry, garnering sales figures much lower than those of popular adult literature. But in 1997, U.K. publisher Arthur A. Levine released a modest children's fantasy novel by debut author J.K. Rowling, entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. A year later, Scholastic published the work (as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) in the United States. From there, the story of a young boy who discovers that he is a wizard became the bestselling literary phenomenon of all time.

Comprised of seven volumes—*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007)—Rowling's series of novels chronicles the adolescence of orphaned wizard Harry Potter, who, initially unbeknownst to him, is famous for surviving as a baby a killing curse from the evil



Lord Voldemort. Each novel features an academic year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, detailing Harry's various experiences as a student such as buying schoolbooks, attending lessons, making friends and enemies, playing sports, and learning both inside and outside of the classroom. With each successive work, Rowling's narrative becomes tonally darker, as Harry and his classmates age and must face the hardships of growing up.

Harry begins the series unaware of his powers, his fame, and even the existence of the Wizarding world as he has spent the first decade of his life under the care of his non-magical (Muggle) Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon Dursley. Their neglectful treatment of him borders upon abuse, and Harry's earliest years are spent in misery. That all changes when on the eve of Harry's eleventh birthday the half-giant Hagrid visits him and informs him of his fantastical heritage. In his first year at Hogwarts, Harry is introduced to a Wizarding world that exists in tandem to our own. From shopping at the commercial centers of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade—where potions, wands, and countless other magical items are all available for sale—to taking lessons that include Transfiguration, Divination, History of Magic, and Herbology among others—and to meeting the numerous fantastical creatures in the Forbidden Forest, Harry experiences this previously unknown world with every step that he takes. Aiding him constantly in his discovery are his two best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, whose familiarity with Wizarding traditions far eclipse his own. In *Goblet of Fire*, the fourth work of the series, Harry's knowledge of the magical world expands even more, as the momentous, multi-national events of the Quidditch World Cup and the Triwizard Tournament introduce him to fantastical

elements from outside the walls of Hogwarts. *Order of Phoenix*, *Half-Blood Prince*, and *Deathly Hallows* even further enhance the readers' portrait of the Wizarding Universe, featuring expansive episodes within the governmental body of the Ministry of Magic, the health-care facility of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, and the magical communities of Ottery St. Catchpole, Godric's Hollow and Shell Cottage. Over the course of the series, both Harry and the reader are given full access to an elaborately detailed modern and magical Wizarding World.

Although it is impossible to provide a definitive answer, it could very well be that the realism that pervades Harry's universe may be the greatest attraction that it holds for young readers, and that, when coupled with the economic and social atmosphere during the novel's publication, ensured that *Potter* would become the best-selling series of all time. In 1997, the New Labour Party under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair came to power in the United Kingdom looking, among other things, to distance itself from some of the more conservative policies of Thatcher and her successor, John Major. One of Blair's major electoral campaigns was aimed at revitalizing what was seen as a failing school system, and at raising children's interest in learning by reigniting a love of reading in Britain's youth. New Labour enacted this goal in numerous ways, as literary historian Andrew Blake notes, including promoting literacy hours, paying primary schools to hold after school writing lessons, and perhaps most significantly, by "declaring 1999 the year of reading."<sup>69</sup> By pushing to instill fervor for learning within British schoolchildren, Blair's administration sought to ensure the United Kingdom's future success as a

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<sup>69</sup> Andrew Blake, *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter* (New York: Verso, 2002), 29.

nation by populating the kingdom with an intellectual next generation. This policy created the perfect context for the rise of *Harry Potter*.

For, this great political impetus to get children reading may have very well ensured that the first four books of the *Potter* series were given an extra boost to becoming a literary phenomenon. When an otherwise reluctant young reader was obliged to begin a novel, the exciting adventure tale of a seemingly ordinary British boy who discovers the existence of a magical world much like his own, would understandably hold great attraction for its simultaneous pairing of the ordinary and the extraordinary.<sup>70</sup> This appeal, when combined with word of mouth and an intelligent marketing strategy, pushed the popularity of the series beyond the U.K., and ultimately served to craft the most internationally beloved and economically lucrative series of all time.

Labeling the series as such is no exaggeration. Critic Sunman Gupta aptly notes, “the *Harry Potter* books have engendered an economic phenomenon in publishing and related industries that is by all standards extraordinary.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, after Rowling’s first four works continuously garnered the top four slots on *The New York Times* Bestseller’s List, the *Times*’s Editorial Board created a separate Children’s Best-Seller’s List in July 2000. Speaking to the creation of this list, the then President of Scholastic (publisher of the series in the United States), Barbara Marcus, contended that, “nothing has ever been as popular with families, adults,

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<sup>70</sup> This is in fact the thesis of Roni Natov’s essay, “Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary.”

<sup>71</sup> Suman Gupta, *Re-Reading Harry Potter*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 15.

children, in the history of publishing.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the popularity of the series created a veritable literary frenzy with the creation of *Harry Potter* merchandising, midnight book and film releases, and numerous fan websites.

Speaking of pre-release party for *Goblet of Fire* marketing analyst Steven Brown notes, “the scenes of prepublication frenzy, where long lines of wand- and broomstick-wielding Harryheads gathered at midnight for the latest release, speak volumes about the rebirth of reading and book marketing in the aftermath of Rowling’s kiss of life.”<sup>73</sup> Not only was the *Potter* series a success in and of itself, but it also completely revitalized children’s publishing. From 1997 to 2004, the period in which the first five of the seven novels were released, sales in children’s literature rose twenty-four percent, rejuvenating this entire sector of the publishing industry.

The astronomical success of the *Potter* series both within and beyond the literary field—notably in film adaptations, theme parks, websites (both licensed and fan), and merchandise—speaks to the contemporary features of its global appeal—a quality that is echoed in the world that the novels present. Rowling’s characterization of Harry’s universe, much like Lewis’s, Alexander’s, and L’Engle’s depictions of their respective fantasy worlds, reflects the political, social, and economic atmosphere at their time of publication. But the children who Rowling chronicles, in contrast to those of her predecessors, are contemporary individuals, much less preoccupied with concepts of state and citizenship than with their own intimate concerns and welfare. In this way, Rowling crafts, if not the first, then certainly the most popular and

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<sup>72</sup> Rebekah Fitzsimmons, “Testing the Tastemakers: Children’s Literature, Bestseller’s Lists, and the Harry Potter Effect,” *Children’s Literature* 40 (2012): 79.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Brown, “Selling Stories: Harry Potter and the Marketing Plot,” *Psychology and Marketing* 7, no. 26 (June 2010): 5

influential, contemporary fantastical child protagonist, one who is a neoliberal individual, and who inhabits a world populated by twenty-first century concerns.

Departing from many other popular earlier works of fantasy, Rowling's series depicts a decidedly current, yet fantastical, version of Britain that is imbued with political and cultural institutions that have direct parallels to our world. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the Ministry of Magic, the governing body of the Wizarding World. In Harry's visit to the Ministry in *The Order of the Phoenix*, he witnesses a fully functioning government bureaucracy. There are offices for various departments, which have realistic parallels—Games, Transportation, Creature Control, Law Enforcement, International Relations—and a hierarchy of bureaucratic power, complete with a Prime Minister, Junior Ministers, Heads of Departments, and Department Staff. The Ministry of Magic oversees all administrative aspects of Wizarding Britain. As the Muggle Prime Minister is informed one night, “the Ministry took responsibility for the whole Wizarding community and prevented the non-magical population from getting wind of them... everything from regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control.”<sup>74</sup> Rowling's detailed depiction of Wizarding government unmistakably parallels a twenty-first century British Parliamentary system. In drawing a contrast to earlier fantasy novels, Amanda Cockrell aptly notes, “there are no quests for magic rings or dragon feathers. This is contemporary England, and instead we find bankers and government bureaucracy.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Scholastic, 2005), 5.

<sup>75</sup> Amanda Cockrell, “Harry Potter and the Secret Password: Finding Our Way in the Magical Genre,” in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 15.

Characteristic of many neoliberal institutions, power and influence at the Ministry is not solely within the hands of government officials. The affluent and sinister Lucius Malfoy, father of Harry's school nemesis Draco, uses his wealth and societal rank to buy influence within the walls of the Ministry. Arthur Weasley, Ron's father, informs Harry, "Malfoy's been giving generously to all sorts of things for years...Gets him in with the right people...then he can ask for favors...delay laws he doesn't want passed...Oh, he's very well-connected Lucius Malfoy."<sup>76</sup> Malfoy's governmental influence is a firm example of the neoliberal setting of the narrative—one in keeping with Hayes's contention that neoliberalism is marked by "the shift from government (state power on its own) to governance (a broader configuration of state and key elements in civil society)."<sup>77</sup> In a modern, neoliberal state then, persons with wealth and status often have just as much power as civil servants and elected officials.

Malfoy's elite economic status, and the power that it generates, is just one illustration of the social hierarchy that is implicit within Rowling's narrative. As is typical in a Western neoliberal society, the Wizarding world is structured upon an implicit system of "meritocracy," where those with the greatest talent and ability rise to become influential members of society. The majority of these elect few, however, are wealthy, well-educated personages who have had the best upbringing, and thus the best opportunities. This social stratification is best seen in the population of Hogwarts' pupils. Within the walls of this institution, economic class, rather than gender or race, determines a student's status. Hogwarts is populated with a diverse

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<sup>76</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003), 115.

<sup>77</sup> Hayes, 77.

cast of characters who represent various ethnicities—Anglo, African, Indian, and Chinese, among others. But none of these racial categories seem to play any sort of role in the school’s hierarchical ranking; instead, that societal position appears to be determined by economic class. For example, the Indian Patil twins, whose father is a lucratively successful merchant, are left relatively unscathed by the snobbish and sharp tongue of Draco Malfoy. His insults are reserved for the poor Anglo Ron and the equally impoverished Irish Seamus Finnegan, neither of whom are able to afford the designer brooms or pedigree owl that Malfoy and his cronies so proudly display.

In tandem with economic class as a marker of status, wizarding blood also plays a definitive role in determining societal rank (at least in the eyes of the evil Voldemort and his followers). As the percentage of “pure blood” in one’s veins decreases (that occurs when has an ancestor who was a Muggle), so does the societal rank of that person. At the bottom of this pyramid lie magical creatures—from “near-human” centaurs to the lowly, enslaved house-elves—whose lack of wizarding blood marks them as lesser beings. This class system is visually evident in the Statue of Magical Brethren, the centerpiece of the Atrium in the Ministry of Magic:

A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them was a noble looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The last three were all looking up adoringly at the witch and wizard.<sup>78</sup>

Wizards and witches are clearly at the peak of this social schema. Not only are they the creatures possessed with the greatest intelligence, but they also have the most wealth. At the lowest level are house elves, goblin-like creatures whose only purpose in life is to serve a family of Wizarding masters. Rather than rebel from this servile

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<sup>78</sup> *Order of the Phoenix*, 127.

status, the house elves Rowling imagines are enthusiastically happy to serve witches and wizards. Literary critic Farrah Mendelsohn clarifies the impact of this social stratification, observing that, “although this is a magical world, not all magical creatures are equal. In reality we are in a world of apartheid in which magical creatures other than humans are denied wands.”<sup>79</sup> When Muggle-born Hermione revolts against this seeming injustice, other wizards, who contend that house elves are quite content in their slavery, repeatedly rebuke her: why try to change things when everyone is already happy? When Hermione proposes campaigning for the rights of house elves, Ron admonishes, “Hermione—open your ears. They. Like. It. They *like* being enslaved!”<sup>80</sup> Despite Hermione’s fervent attempts to ensure their freedom, the house elves remain glad to serve Wizarding kind throughout the series, an attitude that is epitomized in the house elf Dobby’s martyrdom in the course of rescuing Harry and Ron in *Deathly Hallows*. Despite Rowling’s suggestions (via Hermione’s efforts) that the neoliberal hierarchy may seem unjust to the highly principled, there are no indications that changing that changing this status quo would be achievable, or even favorable.

In fact the series tacitly justifies the need for a social hierarchy, one in which the deserving and gifted occupy the upper echelons of society. Harry and his counterparts are distinctly set apart from other inhabitants of the wizarding world. Two notable examples are Dobby the house-elf, who speaks subserviently and hesitatingly, as befits his occupation, and Hagrid, the Hogwarts’ Gamekeeper, whose Devonshire accent directly identifies his uneducated upbringing. Despite his

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<sup>79</sup> Farrah Mendelsohn, “Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority,” in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 178.

<sup>80</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Scholastic, 2000), 224.



friendship with these two, Harry in his manner and education is notably removed from them. Indeed, “from the beginning,” Mendelsohn notes, “we are told that Harry’s parents were some of the most powerful people of their day, an attribute which, despite all of the evidence, we are expected to believe he has inherited.”<sup>81</sup> By his birth to wealthy, educated parents, Harry is set atop an understood neoliberal social pyramid. Like his mother and father, he too will one day become an influential personage. The justice of this type of hierarchy is never questioned. For Harry, like his mentors (Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Albus Dumbledore, etc.), is poised to become a leader, as his natural merit, and when this is coupled with his generosity of spirit and magnanimous treatment of those less fortunate than him, it marks him as unquestionably deserving of eventual power. As evidenced by his friendship with Dobby and Hagrid, and by his vehement series-long opposition to the blood-based caste system that Voldemort espouses, Harry will be a benevolent leader, one who works towards the welfare of those beneath him in the social strata. Here is a true example of a just, meritocratic, and neoliberal class system.

As befits a post-modern society, descriptions of the Wizarding world display frequent exhibitions of a consumerist culture and a capitalist marketplace. For instance, Harry’s first foray into this universe is to buy school supplies at the shopping center of Diagon Alley. Immediately upon arrival, both Harry and the reader are assaulted by vivid imagery of items for sale: “there were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eel eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of

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<sup>81</sup> Mendelsohn, 163.

parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon.”<sup>82</sup> Harry is invited to be a member of Wizarding society by owning alluring pieces of magical paraphernalia that must be acquired through purchase. When Harry is denied access to the shopping village of Hogsmeade in his third year, he feels somewhat alienated, as he is not able to buy any of the magical goods that his peers exclaim over. Eventually sneaking down to the village, Harry is once again overwhelmed by the sheer amount of enticing goods available in a candy shop called Honeydukes:

There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent-looking sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering pink squares of coconut ice, fat, honey-colored toffees; there was a large barrel of Every-Flavor Beans, and another of Fizzing Whizzbys, the levitating sherbet balls that Ron had mentioned; along yet another wall were “Special Effects” sweets: Drobble’s Best Blowing Gum, the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps, peppermint cream shaped like toads, fragile, sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons.<sup>83</sup>

Rowling’s descriptions of the Wizarding world are made even more real through these inclusions of goods, and for the contemporary child reader, Harry’s need to buy is not so different from their own experiences.

These plentiful descriptions, as well as the in-text advertisements for products ranging from broomsticks to cleaning supplies, translate well into the marketability of the *Potter* series itself. As Gupta notes, “Harry is the capitalist’s dream: someone whose entire sense of the world—the Magic world—is sieved through impressions gathered in the marketplace while having plenty of money in his pocket.”<sup>84</sup> Rowling’s detailed descriptions of magical items are easily reproducible for child readers who want a piece of Harry’s world for themselves. Scholastic, partnering with

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<sup>82</sup> *Sorcerer's Stone*, 72.

<sup>83</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (New York: Scholastic, 1999), 177.

<sup>84</sup> Gupta, 135.

manufacturers Warner Bros, Inc. and Lego Company, has recreated items from the books, allowing a child reader to own a bit of Harry's world. Blake provides an extensive list of these items, from, "chocolate frogs collector's cards, to Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, complete with genuinely unpleasant horseradish flavor, to soft-toy versions of Norbert the baby dragon, to Lego versions of Hogwarts school itself."<sup>85</sup>

The importance of the market is further personified in the likability of Ron's older brothers. Two years ahead of Harry and Ron, twins Fred and George Weasley are the series' jokesters extraordinaire. The pair are among the most popular students at Hogwarts, not only for their disdain of the rules, but also for their joke merchandise venture, Weasley Wizard's Wheezes. Fred and George sell prototypes for these goods while at Hogwarts, and afterwards open their own shop, which generates a lucrative profit margin. The twins' appeal is only out-matched by that of their eldest brother Bill, an employee for Gringott's Bank. When Harry first meets him, rather than facing the staid and boring business man that he had expected, he is surprised as, "Bill was—there was no other word for it—cool."<sup>86</sup> With long hair, a dragon-tooth earring, and a laid-back attitude, Bill's is an attractive image of the Wizarding world's financial industry. In contrast, Percy, the family's third brother, is constantly derided for his devotion to the rules and for his low-level position at the Ministry of Magic. In Rowling's depiction of these brothers then, exciting capitalism triumphs over boring government and an implicit embrace of neoliberalism once again triumphs.

But the market-friendly attitude that is implied within the narrative of the

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<sup>85</sup> Blake, 94.

<sup>86</sup> *Goblet of Fire*, 52.

series is not the only indication of the text's neoliberal atmosphere or its inhabitants. Episodes such as the Quidditch World Cup, and the Death Eaters' attacks on Muggles there, have very contemporary parallels. Before Harry and his companions return to Hogwarts in *Goblet of Fire*, they attend the Quidditch World Cup, the international final of the Wizarding world's most popular sport. The event is easily comparable to the real world Football (Soccer) World Cup, as it brings together numerous different nations in celebration through athletics. One of Ron's older brother's, Charlie Weasley, provides a brief description of the preliminary rounds of the Quidditch World Cup, one which could easily have been muttered by a disgruntled, real-world United Kingdom fan, upset by their nation's loss: "Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten...Shocking performance. And Wales lost to Uganda, and Scotland was slaughtered by Uganda."<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, whilst traveling to the event, readers are informed of the scarcity of tickets, as they are both expensive and difficult to obtain. Having secured the most elite tickets, Harry's group is able to leave the morning of the event, while their acquaintances the Lovegoods' cheaper tickets stipulated that they arrive prior to the event, and the unlucky Fawcetts could not even afford tickets at all. Attending sporting events in the Wizarding universe, much like in ours, is very much an elite pastime. Only those with enough leisure time and capital are able to engage in this amusement.

In scenes of the actual Cup, the Wizarding world truly becomes global, as Harry is for the first time exposed to wizards and wizarding traditions from outside of the United Kingdom, notably the Ministerial Cabinet of Bulgaria, Egyptian carpet riders, and the Salem Witches' Association. He also encounters not only magical

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<sup>87</sup> *Goblet of Fire*, 63.

denizens of other nations, but also fantastical creatures, such as leprechauns, sphinxes, and veelas (siren-like, bewitching beauties), who are not native to Britain. This current-day setting becomes even more solidified in a description of the events that take place the night of the World Cup. Seemingly unable to resist reminiscing and recalling the days of when they were in power, several Death Eaters (followers of Voldemort) terrorize a group of Muggles camping nearby, creating a mass panic among the Cup's attendees. Harry, Ron, and Hermione witness this gruesome spectacle firsthand, observing that above the Death Eaters, "floating in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air."<sup>88</sup> This attack on innocent private citizens for the promotion of a political agenda recalls recent acts of terrorism. Fantasy theorist Karin Westman bolsters this contention remarking, "the events Harry witnesses reinforce the existing link between the magical world in the series and contemporary British culture's involvement with international politics and global terrorism."<sup>89</sup> Critic Michiko Kakutani echoes this, noting that, "the terrible things that Ms. Rowling describes being abroad in the green and pleasant land of England read like a grim echo of events that happened in our post 9/11 world."<sup>90</sup> The scenes of the Quidditch World Cup are reminiscent of recent modern-day events, firmly solidifying the Wizarding universe as decidedly

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<sup>88</sup> *Goblet of Fire*, 119.

<sup>89</sup> Karin Westman, "Specters of Thatcherism: Contemporary British Culture in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series," in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 339.

<sup>90</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Harry Potter Works His Magic Again in a Far Darker Tale," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2005.

contemporary and Harry as an inhabitant of that world.

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In an era of political division in both the United Kingdom and United States, the continued importance of education is perhaps the only political issue that has maintained a consistent bipartisan consensus. No matter how divided they stand on other issues, since the 1980s, members of the British Conservative and Labour Parties, and American Republicans and Democrats have all agreed that educating a nation's children is of foremost importance to insuring the future welfare of the nation, and that the state provided system of universal schooling is in need of market-based reform. Indeed, it seems that Western neoliberal policymakers during this period frequently used educational initiatives as a method of addressing larger social issues such as poverty and inequality. The theory implicit in their rhetoric and policy is that problems of social justice can eventually be remedied if all children have access to equal educational opportunities from a young age. The further implication is that where inequalities continue to persist, they will be the result not of systemic injustice, but of failings in individual character or family nurture.

This bipartisan backing of education and educational reform is vividly demonstrated in the almost universal support that accompanied New Labour's intense promotion of educational improvement, and the massive governmental expenditure that that party used to enact it. Between 1997 and 2005, average spending per student in British public schools doubled as a direct result of the governmental implantation of a myriad of programs that aimed to combat failing grammar schools. In regards to secondary education, curriculum reform was targeted towards better preparing

students for GCSEs and A-Level exams, the results of which would determine whether an adolescent could matriculate at an institution of higher learning. Indeed the importance of priming students for these exams became one of the foremost goals of secondary education across the United Kingdom.

Enhancing the quality of schools as a means of ensuring future prosperity was an almost universal refrain in the agendas of many of the most powerful neoliberal leaders of the West during the decades surrounding the turn into the twenty-first century. Ravitch notes that when Bill Clinton took office in 1993, his primary goals for education were an eradication of lax standards and a standardization of curriculum. These policies were a direct effort to assuage the alarmingly steady achievement gap that had plagued America's classrooms for several decades. "Clinton's first major education legislation, called Goals 2000, was enacted in 1994. The program provided funds for states to develop standards and assessments, and it authorized a new federal board to certify state and national standards."<sup>91</sup> Goals 2000 aimed to formulate some sort of national consensus as to what children were learning, hoping that a standardized curriculum would ensure that schools taught grade-appropriate information from a diverse array of disciplines to their pupils. In his first term in office, George W. Bush made education an even greater priority than did his predecessor. The first major piece of legislation passed in Bush's presidency was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Aimed at finally closing the achievement gap, NCLB emphasized yearly testing in grades three through eight, with the premise that this annual check-up, so to speak, would ensure that every American child was

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<sup>91</sup> Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 433.

meeting a minimum level of proficiency in both Mathematics and English Language. As Ravitch explains “states were required to monitor every school to see if every child was on track to increase proficiency. Any school that persistently failed to meet its annual target would be labeled as in need of improvement.”<sup>92</sup> With these nationwide standards in place, NCLB hoped to ensure that all America’s children, regardless of economic class, would receive a quality education, and thus would have a greater chance at future success.

Both sides of the Congressional aisle initially lauded NCLB. But as the Act was implemented and its early effects became more evident, NCLB began to face growing criticism from education officials, teachers, and parents. Although this will be discussed in much greater detail in following chapter, these educators saw NCLB (and subsequent government policies that built upon it) as a failure. Their reasoning was essentially two-fold. Rather than consulting experienced teachers, the Act essentially made government officials, a majority of whom had had no classroom experience, the determiners of school curriculum and standards. These bureaucrats in turn posited that the best method of ensuring educational equality was the implementation of annual standardized tests. Schools with failing pupils would be subject to punitive measures such as probation, and if scores did not improve, could face eventual closure. Understandably frightened by this approach, many teachers and school administrators therefore made these annual tests the focus of their classroom time. Subsequent studies demonstrated that students taught by these instructors were well prepared to answer multiple choice questions quickly and correctly, but were

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<sup>92</sup> Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 11.



more often than not at a loss as how best to construct an argument, or craft an original interpretation of evidence. In short, a strong liberal arts education was oftentimes disregarded in favor of lessons that focused on correctly being able to fill in testing bubbles. Ravitch contends that under NCLB and other policies like it, children were taught how to take exams, rather than the essential cognitive and non-cognitive skills that they would need to succeed as adults. In this way, Western schools were producing a generation of children who were woefully educated.

Not only were a great majority of children poorly instructed, but furthermore the results of NCLB effectively demonstrated that the post-War insistence on education as a means to combat inequality had drawn its last proverbial breaths. As noted earlier, the social theory of an “aristocracy of talent” that would arise through educational reform, proved to be all but a dream in the neoliberal West. Adolescents who eventually attained admittance to elite universities, and thus became successful, influential adults, were those who had the financial means to do so. Their families were wealthy enough to ensure that not only did they attend primary and secondary schools with the best teachers and resources, but also that they had ample amounts of time to study and engage in extracurricular activities. Poorer children, who were the supposed beneficiaries of failed acts like Goals 2000 and NCLB, were unable to compete with their wealthier counterparts. Recognizing this unavoidable truth, many neoliberal thinkers asserted that inequality was a natural, if unfortunate, part of our modern society. Walter Benn Michaels bluntly indicts the presence this false meritocracy, noting that, “The entire U.S. school system, from pre-K up, is structured at the very start to enable the rich to outcompete the poor, which is to say, the race is

fixed.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, equality through means of education in the West is an illusion, for as long as there is financial inequality, social and racial inequality will be present. This notion is embedded within the narrative of the *Potter* series, as Harry’s education at Hogwarts essentially prepares him to assume his natural position as a social leader through his elite access to the best instruction.

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While every novel in the *Potter* series includes scenes in the Wizarding and Muggle worlds, a vast majority of the narrative takes place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Comprised of approximately one hundred and fifty pupils from ages eleven to seventeen, Hogwarts is modeled after a traditional English public school, where students not only attend classes, but also live for the entirety of the school year. The building itself is an ancient turreted castle, surrounded by acres of a rugged British countryside that include a large lake and forest. Mysteriously located somewhere in the wild of northern Britain, Hogwarts is set apart from the rest of society, and this isolation allows the school to become a cosmos of its own—a place where adolescent magical learning, both inside and outside of the classroom, becomes the foremost center of action. The *Potter* series is therefore, above all, a school story, and is intimately engaged in representing how Harry and his classmates learn and grow.

Hogwarts very much mimics a traditional English public school, where only those offered admission are allowed to attend. Its student body represents the upper tier of Wizarding society, and they receive an education that befits their societal

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<sup>93</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Holt, 2007), 10.

status. Hogwarts is the very essence of a classic English boarding school for the upper classes, complete with a prefectorial system and an intense obsession with school sporting events. In this sense, Harry's time at Hogwarts follows the traditional pattern set forth in the quintessential British school story, *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) by Thomas Hughes. Both works, like others of the school story genre, chronicle the adolescence of a young man who is destined to belong to the national elite. Literary critic David K. Steege writes extensively on the parallels between *Harry Potter* and *Tom Brown*, but helpfully places *Potter* within its present-day context and hints at possible evidence for its astronomical popularity, despite its elitist tendencies: "What Rowling's novels do to the public school story is to preserve those elements of the school story that are comprehensible to any Western reader, while deleting the distasteful and more culturally specific."<sup>94</sup> The *Potter* series therefore represents a modernized version of the British school story—one where the hero is a child of the neoliberal world, but is nonetheless educated to become an elite member of his society. It is a perfect amalgamation of the classic British class system and the contemporary world.

During their first two years at Hogwarts, students study a core set of magical disciplines—namely, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Herbology, Astronomy, and History of Magic. These seven essential branches of wizarding academia parallel the medieval practice of studying the Seven Liberal Arts, as these core subjects provide students with a solid foundation of knowledge, one whose mastery is essential to their success as adult wizards and

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<sup>94</sup> David K Steege, "Harry Potter, Tom Brown, and the British School Story," in *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 155.

witches. The school's goal in educating adolescents in these areas is usefully, and humorously, summarized by the Hogwarts School Song:

Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,  
 Teach us something please.  
 Whether we be old and bald,  
 Or young with scabby knees,  
 Our heads could do with filling  
 With some interesting stuff,  
 For now they're bare and full of air,  
 Dead flies, and bits of fluff.  
 So teach us things worth knowing,  
 Bring back what we've forgot,  
 Just do your best, we'll do the rest,  
 And learn until our brains all rot.<sup>95</sup>

Critic Lisa Hopkins recognizes the importance of Hogwarts's dedication, and notes that, "it is clear from the first book onwards that at Hogwarts, despite all its eccentricities, the philosophy of the school is unmistakably centered on discovery, teaching, and the slow, steady accumulation of knowledge."<sup>96</sup> Within the walls of Hogwarts, all pupils are provided with the knowledge and training that they need in order to become successful witches and wizards.

In the beginning of their third year, students choose several additional magical specialties to study, from areas as diverse as the physically intensive Care of Magical Creatures, to the mystical Divination, to the sociological Muggle Studies. In addition, pupils are also encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities, such as Quidditch, Wizard's Chess Club, and Dueling Club. With this wide array of academic disciplines available for study, Hogwarts provides its students with a well-rounded, liberal arts education, exemplifying Ravitch's definition of a good school, as it has

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<sup>95</sup> *Sorcerer's Stone*, 128.

<sup>96</sup> Lisa Hopkins, "Harry Potter and the Acquisition of Knowledge," in *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Antapol (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 28.

“small classes, experienced teachers, ample resources, a rich curriculum, well-maintained facilities, many opportunities to engage in the arts, and daily physical education.”<sup>97</sup> Clearly, Hogwarts provides a model for an ideal modern educational institution.

Keeping with the contemporary setting of the series, several of Hogwarts’s educational practices parallel current-day ones. The most significant of these is the strong emphasis that is placed on testing. Beginning in their first year, students are repeatedly reminded of the importance of end of the year cumulative exams, as they are the foremost way to demonstrate the depth of their learning. The exams featured in the series are both written and practical in nature, aimed to comprehensively test the complete range of a student’s ability and are ultimately practice for the two cumulative standardized tests that students take in their fifth and seventh years—Ordinary Wizarding Levels (O.W.Ls) and Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Exams (N.E.W.Ts). Wizarding versions of real-world standardized tests like the British A-Levels and the American S.A.Ts, the results of these assessments directly affect a student’s future. Doing well opens the door to influential jobs, while scoring poorly severely limits one’s opportunities. Teachers repeatedly emphasize the importance of these results, and classroom preparation for them is intense. As Professor McGonagall pointedly informs her fifth-year class:

What you must remember is that these examinations may influence your futures for many years to come! If you have not already given serious thoughts to your careers, now is the time to do so. And in the meantime, I’m afraid, we shall be working harder than ever to ensure that you all do yourselves justice!<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Reign of Error*, 312.

<sup>98</sup> *Order of the Phoenix*, 256.

As with children attending a school today, the future of Hogwarts's students, including their career paths, (and thus their future income levels), is greatly influenced by their results on standardized tests.

But while the young pupils of Hogwarts are repeatedly reminded of the supreme importance of their test results, the population of the student body is comprised of varying levels of industrious scholars. That is to say, much like real-world children, these adolescents exert varying levels of effort on their studies. There are over-achievers, like the bookworm Hermione, or the pompous Ernie Macmillan, who, several months before the O.W.Ls, “developed an irritating habit of interrogating people about their study habits.”<sup>99</sup> Harry, Ron, and many of the rest of their classmates are considerably less devoted to their academic pursuits. While they exert enough effort needed to do well on exams, they are much more interested in their extra-curricular pursuits. When he receives his coveted Nimbus 2000 broomstick, “Harry had a hard of time keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory where his new broomstick was lying underneath his bed.”<sup>100</sup> Just like many contemporary children, Harry would presumably much prefer to spend his time in much more interesting pursuits, like Quidditch.

When presiding over a classroom of variously engaged students, the best professors at Hogwarts, like those in the actual Western world, craft their lessons to cope with these differing levels of interest. The most effective teachers transmit knowledge to their students through a method of vigorous, hands-on instruction that dually provides facts directly, and allows a student to discover some things on his or

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<sup>99</sup> *Order of the Phoenix*, 706.

<sup>100</sup> *Sorcerer's Stone*, 166.

her own. The sternest of these good teachers is Professor McGonagall; she manages her classes with a firm hand, but is nonetheless an exemplary educator. Students find her classes to be rigorous and demanding, with lessons that are often brutally challenging: “Professor McGonagall’s classes were always hard work, but today was especially difficult. Harry was supposed to be turning a beetle into a button, but all he had managed to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as it scuttled over the desktop avoiding his wand.”<sup>101</sup> While this lesson is taxing, it is essential to a magical education, as every successful adult wizard or witch presumably should be able to transfigure objects. Professor McGonagall’s stern, but fair, method of instruction provides students with the disciplined atmosphere that is necessary to learning this important skill.

Although employing a considerably different style, Professor Dumbledore’s private lessons to Harry are exceptional instances of good teaching, as they simultaneously engage and instruct. In Harry’s sixth year, Dumbledore show him scenes from Voldemort’s past, ascribing to the theory that the best way to defeat your enemy is to thoroughly understand him. These lessons are hands-on encounters, where Dumbledore first provides Harry with all the known facts about these events, and then allows him to make his own interpretations and form his own conclusions, all the while gently guiding Harry’s thoughts. Educational theorist Shira Wolosky acknowledges the effectiveness of Dumbledore’s teaching, and observes, “Instead of delivering lectures or information, Dumbledore accompanies Harry through memories of crucial scenes, which they share and witness together. Dumbledore then

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<sup>101</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), 94.

invites Harry to review what he has seen and to ask questions.”<sup>102</sup> This allows Harry to learn more effectively, and to acquire confidence in his abilities; in turn, this prepares him to more successfully achieve his individual goals. In these lessons, then, Harry is admirably well instructed.

Although it contains several exemplary instructors, like most real-world schools, Hogwarts holds its share of poor teachers. A prime example is Professor Binns, the only ghost instructor at Hogwarts, whose History of Magic lectures are so dull that they often cast a soporific trance over students to which even the incredibly diligent Hermione is not always immune. A description of one of these lessons follows: “Professor Binns opened his notes and began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in class was in a deep stupor, occasionally coming to long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again.”<sup>103</sup> Educational scholar Margaret Zoller Booth succinctly summarizes this teaching style, noting, “Binns exemplifies the direct, but counterproductive instructor.”<sup>104</sup> Utterly failing to engage his students, and thus failing to meet his primary objective as a teacher, Professor Binns is an apt illustration of a poor instructor.

Although teaching with a different method, Professor Dolores Umbridge is equally, if not more, inefficient than Binns. Directly appointed by the Ministry of Magic to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts in Harry’s fifth year, Umbridge is much more concerned with promoting a governmental agenda within Hogwarts than she is with providing her students with adequate knowledge in the discipline. She is a

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<sup>102</sup> Shira Wolosky, “Foucault at School: Discipline, Agency, and Education in *Harry Potter*,” *Children's Literature in Education* 45 (2014): 294.

<sup>103</sup> *Chamber of Secrets*, 148.

<sup>104</sup> Margaret Zoller Booth, “What American Schools Can Learn from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 85, no. 4 (November 2004): 314.



true petty, neoliberal government official, as infuriating and unlikable as Percy Weasley. Literary critic Laura Miller craftily describes Umbridge's realistic personality: "Umbridge is a bureaucrat, a petty tyrant and semi-closeted sadist allowed to run amok in a wizarding world gone wrong. We've all met people just like her, even if they don't come equipped with enchanted torture pens."<sup>105</sup> She is an apt caricature of a classically inept, power-hungry, and close-minded government administrator turned educator.

The lessons that Umbridge teaches are specifically designed to limit student exposure to defensive spells, and instead teach a carefully censored, Ministry-designed curriculum. As Wolosky comments, "her textbook is a 'Ministry approved' set of rules that remain purely theoretical, eliminating all application or initiative. What her methods of instruction essentially teach is that the Ministry alone will dictate what is taught."<sup>106</sup> Aiming to solidify their power, the Ministry of Magic desires to directly dictate what the next generation of wizards and witches are taught. During an impromptu speech, Umbridge tells the student body, "the treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those we have called to the noble profession of teaching."<sup>107</sup> Although her words are deliberately vague, Hermione knowingly informs Harry and Ron (as well as the reader), that these statements confirm that, "the Ministry is interfering at Hogwarts."<sup>108</sup> This governmental intrusion not only fails to adequately instruct students; it inspires all-out rebellion amongst members of the student body. This

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<sup>105</sup> Laura Miller, "Goodbye Harry Potter," Salon.com, July 20, 2007, accessed February 7, 2015, <http://www.salon.com/2007/07/20/harry/>.

<sup>106</sup> Wolosky, 290.

<sup>107</sup> *Order of the Phoenix*, 212.

<sup>108</sup> *Order of the Phoenix*, 214.

dictation of curriculum by the government is eerily reminiscent of government policies like NCLB that construct curriculum. Further, much like the crafters of NCLB, the Ministry's attempts at educating leave much to be desired.

But despite the interference of the Ministry, and the rather useless lessons of dull instructors like Binns, Harry's education at Hogwarts still very much prepares him to succeed in his future endeavors. His time while at school ensures that he is well equipped to assume his position in the upper tiers of a neoliberal society. From his birth, to his admittance at Hogwarts, to his special lessons with Dumbledore, Harry is repeatedly marked as a deserved future leader. It is here that Harry fully becomes a decided departure from the children of classic, postwar fantasy. Although Lewis's Pevensie siblings, Alexander's Taran, and L'Engle's Meg Murray do all eventually gain sort of prominent position within their respective societies, none of them are destined from the beginnings of their narratives to attain power. Instead, they all meritocratically achieve their final social status, and it is their respective educational experiences that allow them to do so. In this difference, the neoliberal nature of Rowling's entire narrative, including its portrayal of education, is key. It is what designates the *Potter* series as a true reflection of the twenty-first century neoliberal education experience.

From its beginning, *Potter* constructs a social caste system that is never subverted, or even more than tangentially balked against. This creates a distinct parallel to a modern British and American school system, where a disproportionately large number of influential members of society are those who have attended the most competitive educational institutions. It is an almost direct contrast to the children of

the previously discussed post-war fantasy literature who have not attended elite schools and instead have received an education that arguably any Western child of the time had access to. In the same manner, the neoliberal elitism of the education that Harry and his schoolmates receive conforms very much to the educational atmosphere engendered by policies passed during the time of the series' publication.

Furthermore, while Harry's education greatly resembles the ideal that Ravitch and numerous other educational theorists propose, Rowling's narrative departs from those models in the access of that education. Superb education in *Potter* is only made accessible to those who had previously been marked as special, a precise illustration of the essential paradox of meritocracy. Here then, *Potter* marks a decisive neoliberalization of children's fantasy novels. Because of the unprecedented success of *Potter*, fantasy that was published in the years following are unavoidably influenced by it, and therefore also presumably seeks to address the issue of educating a child in the neoliberal Western world.

### Chapter Three: To Cool For Ordinary School(ing)

Under the leadership of Tony Blair and George W. Bush, respectively, the United Kingdom and the United States entered into the new millennium as powerful neoliberal nations. Early in their terms both Blair and Bush implemented various domestic policies whose stated goals were to ensure that their respective nations maintained strength and influence in a rapidly evolving world. Central to this objective were reforms aimed at improving the quality of education. As discussed in the previous chapter, Blair's foremost aims in regards to British education were to revitalize failing schools systems and to ignite fervor for reading within the minds of students. These reforms sought to ensure that the United Kingdom's next generation would be well equipped to succeed in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

While geared towards addressing the same concerns, George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Policy (2002) took an even stronger stance on combatting failing school systems and closing the persistent achievement gap. One of Bush's major campaign platforms was the promise of an overhaul of American education, one that would be directly overseen by the federal government. While running for office, Bush proclaimed, "the role of the federal government is to foster excellence and challenge failure."<sup>109</sup> In order to achieve this rather ambitious ideal, school districts were asked to implement baseline achievement requirements, participate in yearly national testing, and to standardize the curricula in math and English in their elementary and middle schools. The plan to impose annual standardized tests and to make use of punitive measures for schools that were unable to meet criteria was initially praised

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<sup>109</sup> George W. Bush, "Governor George W. Bush's Plans for Education," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 82, no. 2 (October 2000): 126.

on both sides of the Congressional aisle. As Ravitch remarks, NCLB was “applauded by Democrats and Republicans alike...[It] was characterized by accountability, high-stakes testing, data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay, and competition.”<sup>110</sup> But after several years on the books, it became apparent that the goals that NCLB proposed had not been achieved. In fact, many critics argued that rather than raise the standard of national education, NCLB essentially lowered it.

Perhaps the foremost long-term objective of NCLB was to lessen the performance gap amongst students of disparate income levels. By establishing national standards and enforcing punitive measures on school districts that failed to meet them, crafters of NCLB looked to ensure that all American school children were provided with a quality education. Yet, as critics of the Act note, NCLB’s timelines and standards did not take into account that school districts in areas serving low-income and minority students very often did not have the adequate resources necessary to ensure that their pupils could meet national standards. Furthermore, NCLB failed to acknowledge that students residing in these districts were hindered substantially by their upbringing. As Ravitch stresses, “achievement gaps begin long before children start kindergarten.”<sup>111</sup> NCLB thus ignored a central cause of achievement gaps—large disparities in family income—making the legislation’s hopes of creating equality through a reliance on standards and testing alone hopelessly misguided.

Additionally, the application of NCLB’s reforms, rather than enhancing the

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<sup>110</sup> *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 21.

<sup>111</sup> *Reign of Error*, 59.

overall quality of the American school system, significantly narrowed curricula and thus neglected many vital fields of study that are valuable to the education of a well-rounded person. Essential skills like critical thinking, socialization and writing, not to mention the natural sciences, creative arts, and physical fitness, were frequently ignored or pushed out of the curricula in struggling school districts. Lance Fusarelli speaks to the serious repercussions of these developments, noting that in the enforcement of standardized testing, “we risk robbing our students and our communities of the essence of education— the cultivation of the [habits of] mind and soul necessary to fulfill our human capacity and live in a democratic society.”<sup>112</sup> As Fusarelli suggests, NCLB fostered an educational environment that produced pupils who were experts at answering multiple-choice questions, but who were unable to solve complex problems, write coherently, or work together on projects. These rather gaping holes in a child’s instruction would presumably severely hinder his or her ability to succeed as an adult.

But the failures of NCLB did not prevent the Bush administration’s policy from inspiring other Western leaders to undertake the quest to reform education. Succeeding Tony Blair as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 2007, Gordon Brown sought to enact his own overhaul of British education, one that seems directly inspired by both Blair’s and Bush’s policies. In an effort to ensure that the U.K. remain a prominent global power, Gordon contended that British youth must be provided not only with exemplary education, but that a parent must also play a substantial role in a child’s instruction, and must have access to the adequate

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<sup>112</sup> Lance D. Fusarelli, “The Potential Impact of the No Child Left Behind Act On Equity and Diversity in American Education,” *Educational Policy* 18, no. 1 (March 2004): 87.

resources that are needed to do so. One of his first acts in office was the creation of the Department for Children, Schools, and Families, a branch of the British government that specifically dealt with all issues pertaining to citizens under the age of nineteen. Further centralizing childhood instruction, Brown's Education and Skills Act of 2008 (ESA) emphasized the importance of testing and enacted punitive measures on schools that produced poor results.<sup>113</sup> The combination of testing and penalties, although not as severe, are distinctly reminiscent of NCLB.

Although running on a political platform that sought to negate many of the policies of his predecessor, Barack Obama's educational reforms largely extended NCLB's approach to education. With the popular end goal of reforming education, Obama proposed the Race to the Top Initiative (RTTT) in 2009. Looking to improve the lackluster quality of the U.S. school system, RTTT began a 'race,' so to speak, amongst the states for additional government funding for education. In order to qualify for this grant, states had to agree to adopt Common Core national standards, annually evaluate teacher effectiveness (mainly through student test scores), expand the number of charter schools, and promise to turn around failing schools. The states that enacted these goals in the shortest period of time would then receive this most federal aid.<sup>114</sup>

Rather unsurprisingly, RTTT's effort to enhance American education proved to be as minimal in its impact on student performance as NCLB. In order to receive much needed government support, schools with lower-income students frequently

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<sup>113</sup> Polly Curtis, "Brown Has Turned Education Landscape Inside-Out," *Guardian*, June 23, 2008, accessed February 28, 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/jun/23/gordonbrown.education>.

<sup>114</sup> Elaine Weiss, "Mismatches in Race to the Top Limit Education Improvement," *Education Digest* (January 2014): 60-65.

made unrealistic promises in regards to student improvement. Furthermore, as with NCLB, RTTT's mandates for yearly testing in math and reading meant that many important academic disciplines were given less and less time in the classroom, and students were frequently weak in the demonstration of higher cognitive skills that could not be evaluated through these exams. Like many other critics of the initiative, Daniel Tanner notes that the type of instruction that RTTT engenders is almost antithetical to the understood purpose of education:

These standardized tests are focused largely on what may be termed established-convergent learning as measured by the student's capability of making perfectly predictable choices of answers. But really thoughtful learning in school and life is emergent, not established convergent. Thoughtful learning is generative and requires hypothetical thinking and problem solving.<sup>115</sup>

The “thoughtful learning” that Tanner describes is unquantifiable, meaning that it cannot be measured via means of exams that simply ask straightforward questions. In using standardized testing as the foundation of classroom instruction, RTTT, and policies similar to it, effectively teach children how to correctly answer routine questions, but prepare them to succeed in little else. In these types of modern policies, the proverbial ability to “think outside the box,” has been severely neglected. As Megan Erickson observes, “Under the influence of these reformers, the American education system has become less about curriculum and critical thinking, and more like *Oprah*: a program of self-mastery framed as a moral imperative.”<sup>116</sup> Under the current Western school system, a child can ostensibly have little hope of succeeding

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<sup>115</sup> Daniel Tanner, “Race to the Top and Leave Students Behind,” *Journal of Higher Education* 45, no. 1 (February 2013): 4-15.

<sup>116</sup> Megan Erickson, “A Nation of Little Lebowski Urban Achievers,” *The Jacobin*, December 2011, 1, accessed March 24, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/12/a-nation-of-little-lebowski-urban-achievers/>.



in a twenty-first century neoliberal society.

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Although fantasy has consistently been a popular subset of children's literature, the unprecedented commercial success and international popularity of the *Harry Potter* series incited a veritable renaissance of the genre in the decade following its publication. Not since the years following World War II had children's fantasy held such ubiquitous popularity. In the first decade of the new millennium, children's publishers rapidly marketed series that featured wizards and witches, unicorns and dragons, magic and adventure. Quite often, these works were touted as "for fans of *Harry Potter*," or "in the tradition of *Harry Potter*." Unsurprisingly, many of these series became bestsellers, presumably devoured by Potter-heads who craved anything that somehow recalled Rowling's bewitching tale. Some of the most successful fantasy works published during this period include: Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* (2003), Kate DiCamillo's *The Tale of Desperaux* (2003), Tony DiTerlizzi's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2003), Garth Nix's *Abhorsen* (2003), Angie Sage's *Magyk* (2005), Jonathan Stroud's *The Amulet of Samarkand* (2005), Suzanne Collin's *Gregor the Overlander* (2005), Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* (2007), Michael Scott's *The Alchemyst* (2007), and Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008). Like Rowling, the authors of most of these texts situate their tales very much within a contemporary setting, featuring child protagonists who, like Harry, are educated to succeed in a neoliberal world.

Although many children's fantasy authors of the early twenty-first century espouse a Rowling-esque view of neoliberal education, Jonathan Stroud, author *The*

*Bartimaeus Trilogy*, offers a rare dissenting voice. After he graduated from university in the mid-1990s, Stroud spent a little over a decade working as an assistant editor for a children's publishing house in London. After several years of editing fantastical stories and gaining substantial knowledge about popular trends in children's fiction, Stroud began to write his own stories full-time. The result of his first successful effort was the *Amulet of Samarkand* (2003), a tale of fantasy and adventure about twelve-year old Nathaniel, a gifted apprentice magician who from a young age seems destined for greatness. This tale has attracted readers across the globe, selling over six million copies, and has been translated into over thirty different languages.

While including many of the same themes as *Potter*, Stroud's series presents a radically different interpretation of magical hegemony. Released simultaneously in the U.K. and the U.S, *The Amulet of Samarkand* (2003), *The Golem's Eye* (2004), and *Ptolemy's Gate* (2005)—collectively known as the *Bartimaeus Trilogy*—follow young Nathaniel's rise to power in an alternative present-day London. Stroud's world is an imperial Britain, one that is still the most powerful nation on the map, having never lost any of Her colonies abroad. Governing Britain is an elite class of magicians, whose education has given them the knowledge needed to bind powerful beings—known collectively as djinn, or demons—to their will. This learned ability places them in the upper tiers of society. Commoners, who are employed in exclusively non-magical trades, occupy the vastly populated lower levels of the social hierarchy. When the series opens, Nathaniel is apprenticed to Arthur Underwood, a pompous mid-level magician, who stifles Nathaniel's creativity at every turn. Weary of being belittled by Underwood and angered at the humiliation that he has received

from the sinister and formidable Simon Lovelace, a prominent magician, Nathaniel summons the powerful demon Bartimaeus, a magical act that some magicians three times his age would have difficulty completing. Through a series of narrative episodes and surprising plot twists, Nathaniel, greatly aided by Bartimaeus, thwarts Lovelace's attempted coup d'état and thus earns himself a rare esteemed apprenticeship to the upper echelons of the magical ruling class. In this position, he is promised an opportunity to fully exercise his talents and to eventually rise to great power.

But in *Amulet's* sequel, Stroud soon complicates this seeming tale of meritocratic success, expressly warning of the dangers of imperial power and class privilege. *Golem's Eye* takes place two years after *Amulet*, and introduces commoner Kitty Jones, whose intense intelligence and fierce idealism mark her as unusual within her societal position. Fourteen year-old Kitty is a prominent member of the Resistance, a minor terrorist group of commoners who are fighting to overturn the tyrannical power of magicians. Nathaniel, currently a rising junior member in Parliament and growing increasingly elitist, has been put in charge of eliminating the Resistance. To aid him in the execution of an important governmental task, he once again recalls Bartimaeus. Both Kitty and Nathaniel are deterred from their respective missions, however, when a mysterious potent force begins to wreak havoc on London. Though they come together with great reluctance, Nathaniel, Bartimaeus, and Kitty eventually become allies, and are able to temporarily save London by unmasking several governmental traitors.

*Golem's Eye* unequivocally demonstrates Nathaniel's rejection of his previous idealism in order to climb the proverbial ladder of success and power. In the final volume of his trilogy, Stroud once again builds on this theme, depicting a world that is thrown into chaos and destruction by injustice, and eventually allows his hero to discover the evils of systemic inequality. Opening two years after the conclusion of the previous work, *Ptolemy's Gate* features Britain facing revolution on all fronts: its colonies abroad are revolting, the Resistance is growing stronger daily, and the remaining members of the government conspiracies featured in *Amulet* and *Golem* have joined forces, determined to finally seize power. Nathaniel is now a senior member in Parliament, endowed with all the power and snobbery that suits his rank. Meanwhile, a determined Kitty has secretly taught herself enough magic to summon Bartimaeus in an effort to help her free both demons and commoners alike from the magical class's tyranny. For various reasons, Nathaniel eventually realizes the injustice of Britain's social hierarchy, and is persuaded to join Kitty and Bartimaeus in their quest, acknowledging that it is the only avenue that ensures complete peace for all denizens of Britain. Through an elaborate series of events, both Kitty's wish for universal equality and Nathaniel's for national peace eventually come true: demons are freed from their perpetual enslavement, the conspiracies are ended, and magicians and commoners rule jointly. To ensure this resolution Nathaniel heroically sacrifices himself in the final pages of the trilogy in order to save Kitty, Bartimaeus, and his country.

Imbued with magical adventure, comical interludes, and multi-dimensional characters, the narrative elements of *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* understandably attract

an audience similar to that of *Potter*. Indeed, Stroud constructs the society of his series very much in the manner that Rowling does. He clearly divides the two human species into those who can perform magical acts and those who cannot. The oligarchical population of magicians forms the entire body of Parliament—positions to which they are unelected and instead assume only through government power plays. These magicians are responsible for establishing all of Britain’s domestic and international policies. Furthermore, this magician class believes that they are entitled to wield their substantial power because of their ability to summon and control demons. As one of Nathaniel’s tutors remarks, “if the Empire is to be kept whole, a strong government must be kept in place, and strong means magicians. Imagine a country without them! It would be unthinkable: commoners would be in charge.”<sup>117</sup>

The justification behind this society’s class system is its seeming ability to ensure that Britain remains the world’s foremost imperial power. It is a notion that is, on the surface, meritocratic. The magicians are entitled to their power because they have demonstrated immense intellectual abilities. When examined closely, however, it is evident that this notion is in fact analogous to contemporary Western perversions of meritocracy; those with the abilities needed to rise to power are only able to do so because they have the social and economic means.

In this manner then, *Bartimaeus*’s London recalls Harry’s London, where the Ministry of Magic reigns supreme. But Stroud takes a rather dramatic departure from Rowling in the way that he characterizes his magical upper class. Whereas Rowling implicitly lauds an aristocratic leadership class, Stroud condemns his magicians as petty, power-hungry elitists who use both commoners and demons alike for self-

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<sup>117</sup> Jonathan Stroud, *The Amulet of Samarkand* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2004), 59.

serving ends, and who, rhetoric aside, are very much unconcerned with the welfare of their nation. As Mr. Pennyfeather, the initial leader of the Resistance explains to

Kitty:

It was impossible to resist magicians or their rule. They did exactly as they pleased, as the company had discovered to their cost. They ran everything important: the government, the civil service, the biggest businesses, and even the newspapers. Even the plays put on and the newspapers had to be officially sanctioned in case they contained subversive messages. And while the magicians enjoyed the luxuries of their rule, everyone else got on with providing the essential services that the magicians required. They worked in factories, ran the restaurants, fought in the army...if it involved real work, the commoners did it.<sup>118</sup>

The political allegory implicit with *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* is undoubtedly deliberate. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Stroud speaks to his depiction of the ruling elite: “What I'm satirizing in the book is the kind of political class that feeds off itself and is detached...Ordinary people feel disenfranchised and detached from it, and certainly don't have any great love for their politicians.”<sup>119</sup> Stroud’s magical aristocrats are modern, neoliberal leaders who wield power merely to serve their own ends. They are indeed quite a departure from the good-hearted Harry and the wise Dumbledore, Rowling’s benevolent elite.

In an effort to overthrow this unjust hierarchy, a small band of commoners form the Resistance, a domestic terrorist group whose ultimate goal is the destruction of the magician’s authoritarian rule. Beginning as a small renegade community committing petty crimes against magicians, the Resistance eventually expands into an intricate network of allies responsible for well-organized attacks against their nation’s

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<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Stroud, *The Golem's Eye* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2005), 228.

<sup>119</sup> Michelle Pauli, “A Kind of Magic,” [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), October 7, 2005, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/oct/07/booksforchildrenandteenagers.michellepauli?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>.

unjust hierarchy, including a bombing of Parliament while a session is being conducted. The Resistance eventually threatens the magician's rule to such a great extent that Nathaniel is placed in charge of eradicating its leaders. These domestic attacks, and the government's tyrannical response, situate the narrative within the contemporary world and amid its currently prominent fears of terrorism and policies of state oppression to control it. As critic Rebecca Do Rozario notes, the series "rewrites, and renders resolutely British, America's 'War on Terror' rhetoric."<sup>120</sup> Although the comparison appears extreme, it is nonetheless apt. *Bartimaeus's* magician class ruthlessly seeks to solidify their power, utterly subjugating both the commoners that serve them and the djinn that they summon. Any act by a member of these two lower classes that threatens the current hierarchy is treated as treasonous, and is punished through extreme means including life-long imprisonment and torture. Furthermore, when Britain goes to war with the Czech Republic in *Ptolemy's Gate*, the imperial government's illicit phone-tapping and "defensive" attacks against countries harboring Czech terrorists are eerily reminiscent of the Bush administration's global policies in the years after September 11, 2001.

The injustice of the magician's regime is additionally emphasized in its treatment of djinn, the magical demon-like creatures that magicians summon, and subsequently enslave, to do their bidding. Like their human counterparts, the djinni culture operates according to a hierarchy of power, with the djinn who are most powerful (marids) occupying the highest echelons, and those with only magic enough to enact the smallest spells (lowly spirits) occupying the lowest tier. The type of djinn

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<sup>120</sup> Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, *Animals Who Talk, Djinn Who Mock: Re-Writing Britain's Political Past* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholar's Publishing, 2007), 144.

that a magician can raise evidences his or her innate ability, and thus his or her place within the elite oligarchical sphere of Parliament. But no matter the strength of the magician, it is almost universally characteristic of this class that they are brutal and ruthless to the creature that they enslave. An aside that Bartimaeus makes in regards to his opinion of magicians humorously demonstrates the sinister nature of the class as a whole:

Magicians are the most conniving, jealous, duplicitous group of people on earth even including lawyers and academics. They worship power and the wielding thereof, and seek every chance they can to undercut their rivals. At a rough guess about eighty percent of all summons have to do with carrying out some skullduggery against a fellow magician, or defense against the same.<sup>121</sup>

In short, Stroud's series allegorically depicts the privileged world of the western liberal democracies as an imperial and class-bound society.

But the world of *Bartimaeus*, like the *Potter* universe, is both a neoliberal and an imperial society. Akin to Rowling's, Stroud's London is not only the heart of national leadership, but also a principal site of thriving market transactions, where the type of goods that one purchases are a direct indication of one's wealth. It is a thriving commercial hub, with elaborate marketplaces and ornate displays of commodities for sale. Like *Potter*, *Bartimaeus* includes many exhaustive lists of material possessions that are catalogued in elaborate detail, and features many scenes in street-corner markets and busy shops. Here too, Stroud departs from Rowling's model in that rather than simply using descriptions of consumerism as another layer in the construction of his vivid setting, he satirically links commercialism with gaudiness and ostentatiousness, often hinting that the greater one's obsession with material goods, the weaker one's moral character. For example, when Bartimaeus

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<sup>121</sup> *The Amulet of Samarkand*, 85.



sneaks into Simon Lovelace's house to steal the Amulet of Samarkand, he is met with a room brimming with expensive goods:

Oh it was all impressive enough if you were a nonmagician. Let me see, there were crystal orbs, scrying glasses, skulls from tombs, saints' knucklebones, spirit sticks that had been looted from Siberian shamans, bottles filled with the blood of doubtful provenance, witch-doctor masks, stuffed crocodiles, novelty wands, racks of capes for different occasions, and many, many weighty books on magic that looked as if they had been bound from human skin in the beginning of time, but had probably been mass-produced at a factory in Catford. Magicians love this kind of thing. They love the hocus-pocus mystery of it all and they adore the awe-inspiring effect that it has on outsiders.<sup>122</sup>

A wealthy magician, Simon Lovelace exudes all of the negative characteristics of his class; he is conniving, treacherous, self-indulging, and narcissistic. Although these goods do demonstrate Lovelace's wealth, the negative connotations of that wealth are evident in the passage's satirical final two sentences. First, the reader is informed that despite the seemingly ancient quality that many of these goods have, they are more likely than not mass-produced in a factory, immediately pointing to Lovelace's duplicity. Furthermore, the passage clearly denotes the conceited, snobbish nature that categorizes magicians as a group; not only do they gaudily display their wealth to impress their peers, but they also do so simply to inspire awe in commoners. Clearly, the neoliberal consumerism that is featured *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* is not a positive attribute by any means. Like the falsely meritocratic class structure, it marks the immorality of a decadent imperial society.

Although *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* does offer many critiques of our current age, like the other works of children's literature featured in this thesis, it is a series written primarily for children and adolescents, and as such is prominently concerned

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<sup>122</sup> *The Amulet of Samarkand*, 18.

with education. The narrative spans six years—beginning at the time that the child protagonists are twelve years-old and ending when they are seventeen—and both Kitty’s and Nathaniel’s formal education is heavily featured throughout the series. Their respective educations are rather clear responses to contemporary trends in school reform.

Because Nathaniel is raised as an elite member of British society, a child who will one day help to govern the world’s foremost imperial power, he is educated with the upmost care, instructed in a rigorous liberal arts curriculum and exposed to a wide variety of disciplines. He is first given a strong background in mathematics, geography, history, modern languages, and politics from a private tutor. After his eighth birthday, Nathaniel’s superb intellect is recognized, and his courses of study expand even further: “He began to study chemistry and physics on the one hand, and history and religion on the other. He also began several other key languages, including Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew... The other two activities were music and drawing.”<sup>123</sup> Nathaniel’s education is clearly well-rounded; his ample background in diverse subjects areas not only provide him with necessary facts, but allow him to develop the critical thinking skills that he will most assuredly need in order to ensure success in a future position in Parliament. It is almost exactly the type of education that Ravitch idealizes—a “balanced curriculum that includes not only reading, writing, and mathematics, but sciences, history, literature, geography, civics, and foreign languages.”<sup>124</sup> In short, it is an education that works, as it eventually produces

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<sup>123</sup> *The Amulet of Samarkand*, 60.

<sup>124</sup> *Reign of Error*, 7.

a well-rounded, intelligent adult. It is the type of education that many children do not receive under educational policies like NCLB, ESA, and RTTT.

As a commoner, Kitty is raised with the belief that she will never achieve a high-ranking or influential position in society. Thus, she is given none of the exemplary instruction that Nathaniel receives, and instead gets a standard, classroom-based education that is meant to prepare her for a future blue-collar career:

They sat together in the same classroom for several years, learning what they could from the mixed bag of disciplines offered to common children. Crafts were encouraged, since their futures lay in the factories and workshops of the city; they learned pottery, wood-cutting, metalwork, and simple mathematics. They were also taught, for those like Kitty who enjoyed words, reading and writing, with the proviso that one day this skill would be properly employed, perhaps in a secretarial career.<sup>125</sup>

Kitty's formal education rather unfortunately parallels that of lower-middle class and poor children, who, as students of less affluent school districts, more often than not receive a rather lackluster education. As sociologist Annette Lareau has observed, the class in which a child is raised is a reliable predictor of the child's future affluence: "Many studies demonstrate the crucial role of educational success in determining occupational success. Parents' social class position predicts children's school success, and thus their ultimate life chances."<sup>126</sup> In her studies, Lareau draws attention to the increasingly divergent education that middle and working-class children receive in a highly competitive, neoliberal world—with middle-class children receiving courses of curricular and extracurricular enrichment that are denied to working-class and poor children. Stroud's fiction makes a similar point, as Kitty is educated to her class position as a commoner.

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<sup>125</sup> *The Golem's Eye*, 52-3.

<sup>126</sup> Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 29.

It is not until Kitty, because of her determination to fight the tyrannical power of the magicians and begins a course in self-instruction that she starts to develop her knowledge and ability. It is the information that she gathers through study of magical books that allow her to perform an act seemingly unthinkable: she is able to summon Bartimaeus. After escaping arrest, Kitty apprentices herself to a renegade magician, Mr. Button, who, in exchange for working in his bookshop, gives her free access to all of its books and permits her to ask him questions about those texts. “Kitty was asking a lot of questions about some of the works that she was asked to locate. Sometimes Mr. Button gave succinct and breezy answers, but more often than not, he suggested she look up the solution herself.”<sup>127</sup> By having Kitty discover correct answers on her own, Mr. Button inadvertently ensures that she will not only learn magical facts, but will also acquire the higher thinking skills needed to quickly and accurately ascertain in which of thousands of magical tomes a particular fact may be located. After two years of educating herself in this manner, Kitty eventually gains enough knowledge to enact a magical summons, a task that no other commoner has ever done before. This act is loaded with significance. Primarily, Kitty’s self-education through immersion in texts on various subject areas specifically allows her to rise above her class status. This instruction essentially serves the entire purpose of education; that is, to allow a learner to garner the knowledge needed to cultivate their innate talents fully, and thus ensure future success.

Kitty’s summons essentially further underlines the hypocrisy of the magical neoliberal meritocracy, and silently calls for a reinstatement of earlier eras like the post-War “Great Compression.” Here then, Stroud’s underlying message is clear.

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<sup>127</sup> Jonathan Stroud, *Ptolemy’s Gate* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2006), 89.

Although he utilizes many of the same frameworks that Rowling does, he proposes an end to, not a continuation of, unjust social hierarchies (no matter how benevolent), and asserts that quality and equality of education will be the most effective means to achieving that goal.

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Rowling and Stroud's contemporary, Rick Riordan, responds to much the same socio-economic environment as his peers, and draws some of the same objections to lifeless education. Riordan's moral critique of Western society, however, distinctly follows in the same vein as Rowling's—that is, an almost complete antithesis of Stroud's. His highly successful children's fantasy novels implicitly presents a defense of a neoliberal class hierarchy and further envisions an ideal of education that offers special opportunities for especially gifted students.

Like many middle class fathers in the early 2000s, Rick Riordan read every evening with his two young sons, knowing that this act might help ensure that they would one day will become life-long readers and learners. At a loss for a new story one night, Riordan improvised, and—inspired by the Greek mythology that he taught during the day as a middle-school history teacher—crafted an exciting narrative about a misunderstood preteen who discovers that he is a demigod and is thrust into the exciting realm of Mount Olympus and its immortal denizens. Riordan's sons loved the tale so much that Riordan committed it to paper. A year or so later, this bedtime story was published as the first installment of the internationally best-selling *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. To date, the series stands among the most profitable children's books ever, having been translated into thirty-four different

languages, adapted into a cinematic feature, and inspiring numerous fan-run websites and *Percy Jackson* themed events. Indeed, aside from Rowling, Riordan is easily the most profitable author and recognizable name in children's fantasy today.<sup>128</sup>

Riordan's *Percy Jackson* saga—comprised of *The Lightning Thief* (2005), *Sea of Monsters* (2006), *The Titan's Curse* (2007), *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008), and *The Last Olympian* (2009), respectively—chronicles the adventures of Percy Jackson, who ascertains that, rather than simply being an ordinary, geeky preteen, he is in fact a demigod, the son of the sea god Poseidon. After this rather startling revelation, Percy begins to attend Camp Half-Blood, an instructive summer camp for demigods, where the campers are taught skills such as Ancient Greek, mythology, archery, and combat. While at Camp, he befriends Grover, a nervous young satyr, and Annabeth Chase, the resourceful and determined daughter of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Each installment of the series follows the same conceit in which the reincarnated Oracle of Delphi, the traditional granter of quests to heroes, assigns a task of Herculean proportions to either Percy or one of his companions. These young demigods then travel across the United States fighting fantastic monsters, meeting legendary figures of Greek mythology, and performing heroic acts. The quests are meant not only to prove the strength, intellect, and courage of the demigods, but also to preserve the power and dignity of the ancient gods of mythology, who are still very much active players in the lives of mankind. (Olympus, which, because the gods move with the “heart of civilization,” is now located in New York City, atop the

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<sup>128</sup> Karen Springen, “Rick Riordan's Big Year,” *Publisher's Weekly*, April 1, 2010, 1, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/42664-rick-riordan-s-big-year.html>.

Empire State Building, allowing its inhabitants convenient interaction with their gifted American progeny.) The series ends with an epic battle across Manhattan between the legendary Titans, the mythological forefathers of the Olympians, and the gods and their half-blood children. Percy and Annabeth play a vital role in vanquishing the Titans, thus ensuring victory for the Olympians and peace for humanity.

While Riordan's incorporation of Greek mythology into a current-age United States undeniably marks *Percy Jackson* as distinct from Rowling's *Potter* in terms of both plot and content, the series nonetheless utilizes many of same narrative themes as *Potter* in addressing concerns of contemporary, neoliberal childhood. Like both Rowling and Stroud, Riordan firmly situates his work within the current age, frequently referencing very recent trends such as vacations to Caribbean islands, never-ending cell phone updates, and perpetual traffic jams on the New Jersey Turnpike. Further, Percy and his friends are very much inhabitants of the millennial world, enjoying videogames, shopping at Target, and favoring modern teenage slang in their speech. These children are fully immersed in the tantalizing allure of modern goods, as is demonstrated in countless narrative episodes. For example, in the midst of a quest to find Zeus's lost lightning bolt, Percy, Grover, and Annabeth are temporally detoured in Las Vegas by the flashy Lotus Hotel and Casino, a veritable paradise of pure pleasure, one that is designed to deter demigods on their heroic adventures. In describing his experiences at the Lotus, Percy recounts:

There was an indoor waterslide snaking around the glass elevator, which went straight up at least forty floors. There was a climbing wall on the side of one building, and an indoor-bungee-jumping bridge. There were virtual reality

suits with laser guns. And hundreds of videogames. Basically you name it, the place had it.<sup>129</sup>

The Lotus's attraction is undeniable. But this attraction is dangerous. Like its namesake of the legendary lotus flower, the Hotel is meant to make its guests forget their goals, their concerns, their lives, and eventually their own persons. As critic Lily Glasner observes, "the Lotus Hotel and Casino, which at first sight looks like a dream come true, a paradise on earth, is a capitalistic golden cage, controlled by the American slogan 'more,' where a human soul may be lost forever."<sup>130</sup> Riordan here then subtly warns his child readers of the negative aspects of neoliberal consumerism, demonstrating the danger to one's selfhood and intellect in becoming too entranced with goods.

While the episode at the Lotus is telling in its condemnation of the excesses of consumerism, it holds further significance in the manner through which it displays Percy's character. The Hotel's enchantment is designed to ensnare young demigods, to eternally distract them from their quests. Caught up in the allure, Percy initially does not question the purpose of this false paradise, but soon discovers that one boy has been at the Lotus since 1985, and that another is unaware of the moon landing. These dates are revelatory for Percy, and he forces himself to remember his quest: The other children "didn't really know and didn't really care why they were here. I tried to remember why we were here... We had to find the entrance to the Underworld... I had to stop Hades from causing World War III."<sup>131</sup> This distinction is

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<sup>129</sup> Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2005), 258.

<sup>130</sup> Lily Glasner, "Taking a Zebra to Vegas: Allegorical Reality in the Percy Jackson & the Olympian Series," in *Collision of Realities: Establishing Research On the Fantastic*, ed. Astrid Boeger (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 8.

<sup>131</sup> *The Lightning Thief*, 262.



therefore crucial to Percy's construction as a hero. Percy is able to recognize the danger that he and his companions are in, and recall the important mission that he has undertaken to save humanity. He is a true leader, one who can overcome the alluring temptations that others cannot, and through that ability, can continue to ensure the welfare of those without his unique gifts.

Although Percy alone of the Lotus's occupants is able to escape its trap, he is not the only character in the series who is designated as gifted. While not nearly as overt as that of either *Potter* or *Bartimaeus*, Riordan's saga features a society that is undeniably segregated into two distinct groups: the denizens of Olympus along with their progeny, and unknowing humans who have no idea of the influence that figures of ancient Greek mythology have in their lives. Even in the twenty-first century, gods and goddesses still essentially reign over and very much affect the outcomes of major cultural and political events. Although the gods and goddesses featured in the series are often characterized unfavorably as ill tempered, vengeful, and narcissistic, the justice of their rule is never questioned, and they deserve to remain in power because that is the understood natural order of the universe. Indeed, Dionysius, the god of wine, informs Percy that without the gods, "your entire civilization will dissolve. Perhaps not right away, but mark my words, it will mean the end of Western civilization. Art, law, wine tastings, videogames, silk shirts, black velvet paintings—all the things that make life worth living will disappear."<sup>132</sup> The implicit message is that Olympus, despite its many negative attributes, must remain in power, simply because gods are the most innately powerful beings, and therefore are deserving of their rank.

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<sup>132</sup> Rick Riordan, *The Last Olympian* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2009), 144.

While not as formidable as the Olympians, Percy and his peers are nonetheless, as a result of their parentage, talented people who are destined to become leaders in the modern world. In fact, it is their inherited power that marks them for future success. As Poseidon informs Percy, “You are part god, part human. You are of both worlds. You live in both and can be harmed by both. That’s what makes heroes so special.”<sup>133</sup> Because demigods have inherited talents, they are set apart from the rest of humanity. It is their natural right. Further, prominent figures of a generation ago, including Winston Churchill, the Beatles, and John F. Kennedy are all cited as demigods, and it can be inferred that Percy and his friends, as the leading demigods of this rising generation, will assume comparable power and influence. Therefore Percy, like Harry, although unquestionably benevolent and talented, nonetheless will rise to a prominent position in society simply because of his birth. He and his companions are essentially member of what social geographer Danny Dorling mockingly refers to as “the lucky sperm club.”<sup>134</sup> Because they are fortunate enough to be the descendants of esteemed and influential personages, both Harry and Percy have been elevated above their less fortunate peer since their conception. They have inherited their rank—and all the prestige and power that accompanies it—rather than meritocratically assuming it such as Lewis’s and Alexander’s post-war protagonists do. The *Percy Jackson* series then, while satirizing the capitalistic aspects of modern society, implicitly supports an undoubtedly contemporary neoliberal hierarchy.

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<sup>133</sup> Rick Riordan, *Sea of Monsters* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2006), 252.

<sup>134</sup> Danny Dorling, “The Return to Elitism in Education,” *Eurozine*, April 13, 2010, 1, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-04-13-dorling-en.html>.

Although the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series does contain prime examples of modern neoliberal theories regarding society, the crux of the series is focused on educating both Percy and the young child reader. Indeed, perhaps more than any other of the works examined in this thesis thus far, *Percy Jackson* specifically lends itself to being used as an educational text. The reader, alongside Percy himself, is exposed to dozens of Greek myths, making it possible for a repeat reader to become quite familiar with classic figures.

Scenes of modern education, both inside and outside of the classroom, pervade all five novels of the series. For instance, the opening chapter of *The Lightning Thief* features an ill-fated school fieldtrip. Percy himself is a quintessential struggling student: he is constantly bullied, disliked by teachers, and is handicapped by dyslexia and ADHD. Narrating in the first person throughout, Percy informs his readers that he cannot sit still in a classroom and has trouble focusing on textual passages or math problems, an attribute that has prompted many of his instructors to suggest that he be proscribed stimulants along the lines of Ritalin and Aderol. It is implied that these instructors want Percy to conform to their ideas of education, rather than inspire him to learn.

Riordan takes a firm stance against this unyielding method of education, for, as soon as Percy exits the traditional classroom and arrives at Camp Half-Blood, he immediately begins to learn. Percy is initially perplexed by his sudden aptitude, and Chiron, the legendary instructor of Hercules who is also the head of the Camp, informs Percy that he had always had the ability to learn, but had simply never had adequate instructors: “Of course your teachers want you medicated. Most of them are

monsters. They don't want you seeing them for what they are."<sup>135</sup> While Chiron is using the word "monsters" here in the literal sense—Percy's fifth grade teacher is in fact one of the mythic Furies in disguise—the quote can also be read symbolically. It is implied that instructors who do not acknowledge each one of their pupil's individuality, and thus his or her unique learning style, fail as educators. Children like Percy fail not because of their own inabilities but because inadequate schooling practices fails to stimulate their intellect.

The ineptitude of Western schooling to properly educate children is a constant refrain throughout *Percy Jackson*. But Riordan's previously veiled critique becomes almost a full-frontal attack in his fourth work, *The Battle of the Labyrinth*. In one particularly memorable episode, Percy, Grover, and Annabeth, while attempting to find a path through Daedalus's mythical labyrinth, encounter the ancient Sphinx. Traditionally, when a hero encounters the Sphinx, he must correctly answer her riddle, or die by her razor-sharp talons. It is a task that is meant to indicate that a hero not only has strength and courage, but that he also possesses a superior intellect. But this modern American Sphinx has implemented a startling update in her challenge; she now asks straightforward trivia questions to those who desire to cross her path. These queries seem to leap straight from a middle-school social studies test, as they ask for the correct responses as to which American president issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and what the capital of Bolivia is. Furthermore, the Sphinx, rather than respond orally, asks Percy and his companions to indicate their answers on a Scantron-type paper: "Make sure you bubble each answer clearly and stay inside the circle. If you have to erase, erase completely or the machine will not be able to read

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<sup>135</sup> *The Lightning Thief*, 88.

your answers.”<sup>136</sup> That the Sphinx, the ancient tester of intellect, has forsaken her traditional method of inquiry is clearly an indication of the deficiency of modern testing.

It is almost impossible not to read the Sphinx scene as a pointed critique of the neoliberal emphasis on testing that is fostered by policies such as NCLB and RTTT. In her polemical assault on current testing, Ravitch predicts the consequences for students in a high-stakes testing regime: “They had mastered the art of filling in bubbles on multiple-choice tests, but they could not express themselves, particularly when a question required them to think about and explain what they had just read.”<sup>137</sup> But in his narration of the scene with the Sphinx, Riordan not only offers a critique of modern education, but he also mocks the type of instructors that policies such as NCLB and RTTT create. As has been previously discussed, the punitive measures that are attached to NCLB often prompt educators to ‘teach to the test,’ so to speak, knowing that test scores have been designated as important indicators of classroom efficiency and student progress. The Sphinx appears to have adopted this obsession. When Percy and Grover destroy her makeshift Scantron grader, she panics: “My grading machine! I can’t be an exemplary teacher without my test scores!”<sup>138</sup> Although the scene itself is comic, its implications of real-world practices are sobering. As Glasner observes, this scene simply furthers Riordan’s critique of education as it demonstrates that, “instead of being the birthplace of thinking and creativity, the contemporary classroom has become a place of mediocrity and

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<sup>136</sup> Rick Riordan, *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2008), 183.

<sup>137</sup> *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 108.

<sup>138</sup> *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, 85.

terror.”<sup>139</sup> Present-day education, by focusing on testing, neglects true learning, thus stifling a child’s intellectual growth and producing a generation of Western youth who will be sorely at a loss to thrive in a competitive global arena.

Although Percy Jackson indicates the problems within the current American educational system, it is ambiguous as to whether more or less neoliberal reform is needed to resolve these issues. Like other writers of children’s fantasy, Riordan seemingly proposes a solution to improper education by narrating methods through which his child protagonists effectively learn. Once Percy enters Camp Half-Blood, not only does he demonstrate academic aptitude, but he also receives an education that prepares him for future success. The camp’s curriculum is designed to teach its demigod attendees both the essential skills that they need to defeat the legendary monsters that they will no doubt encounter, and to understand their ancient origins. All of these lessons have the specific goal of preparing the half-bloods for future success. Annabeth explains this to Percy: “At camp you train and train. That’s cool and all, but the real world is where the monsters are. That’s where you discover whether you’re any good or not.”<sup>140</sup> The tutorials at Camp Half-Blood serve the true purpose of education; that is, to prepare a pupil for his or her future. Percy, Annabeth, and the other campers all use their training numerous times to defeat the monsters that they face on their quests. Camp Half-Blood, like Hogwarts, therefore ascribes to some of Ravitch’s ideal characteristics of exemplary schooling; it is a “place for mental, physical, and ethical development. Character is taught and learned in many settings: in the classroom, in the hallways, in the lunchroom, and on the sports

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<sup>139</sup> Glasner, 13.

<sup>140</sup> *The Lightning Thief*, 170.

field.”<sup>141</sup> The demigod’s studies in all corners of the Camp give them the intellectual tools needed to succeed outside of the camp’s boundaries, rather than merely do well on an exam. They are truly the recipients of an ideal education.

Much like *Potter*, the *Percy Jackson* series subliminally suggests that such schooling should be available specifically to the most gifted students. But to learn effectively, many students additionally require excellent instructors who not only instill knowledge within their pupils but also encourage and inspire them to study. Riordan provides a perfect example of this brand of instructor in Chiron. In order to protect Percy in the years before he discovers his true heritage, Chiron impersonates a human teacher. Although Percy is a poor student, Chiron uses creative measures to help Percy to do his best, and prompt him to learn. Percy tells his audience that Chiron was by no means a traditional teacher and used creative means to engage his students. Percy recalls that Chiron:

challenged us, sword-point against chalk to run the board and name every Greek and Roman person who ever lived and their mother, and what god they worshipped. But Mr. Brunner [Chiron’s human disguise] expected me to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact that I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I had never made above a C- in my life. No—he didn’t expect me to be as good; he expected me to be better.<sup>142</sup>

Despite Percy’s mediocrity within the classroom, Chiron still demonstrates faith in his ability to learn, and pushes Percy to do his best. He does not rely on standard teaching practices, but acknowledges that alternative methods of instruction—ones that may not involve traditional testing—are often the best method to teaching reluctant students. His style of teaching is a perfect example of the ideal that Ravitch proposes her model school system: “teaching would be enhanced if schools of

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<sup>141</sup> *Reign of Error*, 280.

<sup>142</sup> *The Lightning Thief*, 7.

education stopped insisting on pedagogical conformity and recognized that there are many ways to be a successful teacher.”<sup>143</sup> The methodology that Chiron espouses is unorthodox and is antithetical to modern neoliberal practices, yet nonetheless is effective.

But although Chiron’s style is liberal in its application, his choice of star pupil is chillingly classist. Percy acknowledges that Chiron expects him not to be the equal of his peers but to surpass them intellectually. As a predestined hero, and thus future leader of society, it is understood that he should receive different treatment than the other pupils. Percy is singled out not because he demonstrates his implied superiority, but because his rank in an understood hierarchy has already determined his future position within society. Like Dumbledore with Harry, Chiron’s choice of preference of Percy, while seemingly meritocratic, implicitly promotes an understood class system. Harry’s and Percy’s is an education that is not meant to level the intellectual playing field, as Kitty’s does, but instead to preserve an existing hierarchy. It is an education that is decidedly neoliberal, and is quite a far cry from the meritocratic ideals of post-War children’s education.

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<sup>143</sup> *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 191.



## Epilogue

“Books! And cleverness!” said Hermione, “There are more important things.”<sup>144</sup>

The protagonists of works of popular children’s fantasy are all inherently special individuals. They are children who have essentially been chosen—whether by the lion Aslan or by the legacy of their talented parents—for future greatness. These children are each distinctive enough to achieve some sort of acclaim within their own respective universes and from that, to acquire power and influence. Yet each one of these characters—from Lucy Pevensie, to Harry Potter, to Percy Jackson—is highly attractive to a real-world child reader, often to the point of emulation and adoration. The authors of works of children’s fantasy presumably acknowledge that bond between child reader and character, and craft their narrative not only to portray a compelling world, but further to convey a vision of childhood that will dually appeal to their readers and suggest an ideal image of education and child development.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been two renaissances of children’s fantasy—the first in the two decades following World War II, and the second in the years surrounding the millennium. The ideals that are implicitly espoused within these novels published during these eras are reflective of ages’ popular theories of childhood and education. For instance, the post-War vogue of progressive education is featured within C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. An idealized depiction of meritocracy underlies the entirety of Lloyd Alexander’s *The Chronicles of Prydain*, and a promise that scientific and humanistic education could

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<sup>144</sup> *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 287.

be combined to nurture free, autonomous, and benevolent children runs through Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time Quartet*. Each of these examples of classic fantasy reflects the popular liberal theories of post-War child rearing and education and each implicitly reflects a conviction that an ideal pedagogy could balance meritocratic and egalitarian ideals by making opportunity open to all and by nurturing talented children to be aware of their responsibilities to the promotion of the common good. These works echo the optimism of the era, and perhaps are still popular today because of that idealistic tone.

Several decades later, a second golden age of children's fantasy arose around the publication of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Rowling's works, one of the best-selling series of all-time, depict a decidedly contemporary world, one where the tenets of the neoliberalism greatly shape the social and economic environment. It is a world where markets are prominent and the status goods of consumerism capitalism are featured and where competition and individual achievement are highly valued. It is also often a darker world than that portrayed in an earlier generation of literature—where there is not only the presence of an evil force that occurs throughout fantasy literature, but where there are portents of mass chaos, cruelty, and deaths and crushing losses that go unredeemed. Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the most recent era of children's fantasy literature has largely given up on the idea that a liberal society could simultaneously foster a meritocratic and egalitarian mode of education. Like earlier child protagonists, Harry Potter is utterly special, but he differs from post-War fantasy protagonists in the fact that his distinctiveness is inherited. He receives an education

that suits his social class, and that education enables his success and confirms his right to rule. However benevolent and kind-hearted, Harry is undeniably elite, and has been so since the moment of his birth.

The implicit promotion of a class hierarchy is echoed in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series. Like Harry, Percy is given access to a superior education because he has inherited a superior rank within his society, and it is this ideal schooling that will allow him to have future power and success. The educational atmosphere that each of these boys is engaged in is not only ideal but further is responsive to contemporary theories of schooling. Theirs are lessons that are appealingly different from the test-driven model of narrowing schooling children receive under legislation like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Indeed, because they are the preselected leaders of the next generation, Harry and Percy receive the opportunities for liberal learning and creative self-realization that critics like Diane Ravitch complain are disappearing for all but the most privileged segments of American and British society. In effect, Rowling and Riordan both acknowledge the force of critiques made by those like Ravitch. A genuine education, they suggest, is for the fortunate and gifted.

This is the vision to which Jonathan Stroud offers a minority dissent in his *Bartimaeus Trilogy*. Stroud's novels harken back to earlier works of fantasy literature and to the egalitarian and even social democratic norms that were more prevalent in the United Kingdom and the United States during the post-War era. Stroud's narrative dramatizes the utter injustice that underlies a neoliberal hierarchy, and through the example of Kitty, demonstrates the falsity of contemporary meritocracy. In Stroud's world, those who rise to power are very often not the best equipped, but only the

lucky few who acquired influence through fortune of birth. The contrast that the *Bartimaeus Trilogy* presents to both *Potter* and *Percy Jackson* reveals just how prevalent the values of neoliberalism have become in our world.

Regardless of the conclusions that they each reach, a unifying feature of all children's fantasy is its idealized presentation of education. The schooling that the child protagonists of these works receive is undoubtedly shaped by popular theories of the day, and displays exemplary forms of instruction for undoubtedly special children. It is how that specialness—which is never the result of the “books” or “cleverness” that Hermione references—is understood that belies whether or not a work complies with or balks against liberal or neoliberal concepts of education.

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