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## The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in Discworld and Potterworld

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### Abstract

Explores the depiction of gender in education, and how gender issues in education relate to power and agency, in two current young adult fantasy series featuring feisty heroines determined to learn all that they can: Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, and Tiffany Aching, main character of three Discworld novels by Terry Pratchett. Includes a brief appendix on cross-dressing in children’s literature.

### Additional Keywords

Cross-dressing; Education; Gender and education; Pratchett, Terry—Characters—Tiffany Aching; Pratchett, Terry. Discworld series; Rowling, J.K.—Characters—Hermione Granger; Rowling, J.K. Harry Potter novels; Witches



THE EDUCATION OF A WITCH:  
TIFFANY ACHING, HERMIONE  
GRANGER, AND GENDERED MAGIC  
IN DISCWORLD AND POTTERWORLD

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

CONTEMPORARY FANTASY OFTEN REFLECTS SOCIAL ANXIETIES about issues such as education and gender and the responsible use of power. The training of a young person in how to use his or her budding talents wisely is a common trope in children's and young adult fantasy, echoing a primary concern of its audience. Tied up with the depiction of education are broader social issues of gender inequality and access to power; in keeping with this, some fantasy novels depict societies where education in women's magic and men's magic is entirely separate and reflects deeper social divisions, while others show more inclusive societies where both sexes are educated together to use more generic powers and expected to participate in society in a more equal fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The defining characteristic of the heroines of two recent YA fantasy series is a similar overwhelming determination to learn how to use their magical powers against any odds. Both the Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling and the Tiffany Aching sub-series of Terry Pratchett's Discworld books feature a young heroine whose thirst for knowledge overcomes all obstacles. However, the environments and societies in which they work towards their goals are very different, and reflect two important ways of thinking about gender in education, work, and power. The system in Harry Potter's world is one of co-education, where all humans who have magical potential theoretically have equal access to the same education and to positions of power in any field after graduation; in contrast, on Discworld, witches and wizards occupy totally different niches, are

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<sup>1</sup> Many fantasies also deal with girls disguising themselves as boys to get an education denied them as females; for examples, see Patricia Wrede's *Mairelon the Magician*, Tamora Pierce's *Alanna: The First Adventure*, or Esther Friesner's *Nobody's Princess*. The opposite situation—boys disguised as girls to learn women's secrets—is practically nonexistent in Western children's literature, though male-to-female cross-dressing is fairly common in Japanese manga and anime and may sometimes occur for this purpose. Possible Western examples of men seeking out the secrets of women's magic include the Norse god Loki changing into a mare, or the blind seer Tiresias in Greek myth who spent many years as a woman. See the appendix at the end of this article for additional resources.

trained separately according to traditional concepts of gender-related strengths and weaknesses, and tend to value and excel in different types of work. Both heroines face obstacles from the very start: Tiffany is from the sheep-farming, magic-distrusting Chalk Downs country, and it is common knowledge (among witches, at least) that you can't grow witches on chalk (*Wee Free Men* 7), while Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts from a pure Muggle family with no history of magical talent. Responding to a calling in the blood, Tiffany and Hermione both recognize that the opportunity to gain knowledge is the opportunity to gain power—power to control their environments, to chart their own courses in the world, and to protect those they care for.

Both series start with the premise that magic is ethically neutral and equally accessible to both genders, though some individuals have more innate power than others. Beyond that, it is personal ethics that marks the good or evil practitioner of magic. However, one key difference is that in Potterworld, there seems to be an inexhaustible supply of magic, and how much you use has no effect on you physically or morally and does not affect any sort of balance in the world (Pinsent 31). On Discworld the situation is entirely different. Though wizards seem more willing to use magic day-to-day than witches, both know that magic is subject to specific physical rules; that using too much attracts unwanted attention from the monsters of the Dungeon Dimensions; and that relying too much on magic can scour away one's ethical sense. On Discworld, the truly great witches pride themselves on rarely actually using magic.<sup>2</sup>

What is the significance of co-educational versus single-sex education to issues of gender and power? At heart, the question is: should girls and boys be educated in exactly the same way? Which leads to a number of related questions: Does educating boys and girls separately and differently lead to inequities of access and reinforce biases and anxieties about expectations, power, and achievements? Does coeducation deny unique gender-related strengths and prevent any allowance for different learning styles that might help children learn better? Can single-sex education allow each group to reach its potential by supporting their strengths and removing gender-related distractions? Is education attuned to women's learning styles and in "women's skills" more likely to be devalued simply because they are practiced by women?

The idea of the single-sex classroom or institution goes through regular phases of popularity. In the 1960's and 1970's, for example, "[s]ingle-sex education was increasingly viewed as a barrier to successful adolescent socialization" (Lee 679), but current research in the way the brain works shows

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<sup>2</sup> In Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* books, in contrast, the magical balance of the world is supposedly more carefully maintained by men than women, at least according to the male-centric first three books (Rawls 141-142).

distinct gender differences in learning styles that might be best served by different educational approaches. Recent studies show that single-sex schools and classrooms often produce better academic results (Lee 685; Gurian and Henley 203), and books like Diana Meehan's *Learning Like a Girl* conclude that "Girls' schools are good for girls [...] their values, community, and connection are honored [and] their ways of knowing are respected" (Meehan xvi). Additionally: "For girls, the arguments primarily point to educational equity: improving overall academic achievement; developing interest and competency in math, science, and technology; enhancing self-esteem; opening access to non-traditional careers; providing leadership opportunities. [...] decreasing the rate of drug abuse, violence, dropping out, and teen pregnancy [...] [For boys] separation better accommodates the slower maturational rate, shorter attention span, and higher energy level especially evident among young boys" (Salomone 188-89).

In our primary world, some theorists are calling for a more flexible, nuanced approach to gender in education, combining elements of both separate and coeducational experiences. For example, Michael Gurian and Patricia Henley, who base their work on research in brain differences in learning, in their *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* call for the development of co-educational classrooms which are designed to support multiple learning styles, but also suggest that middle school is a good time to provide single-sex classroom options to avert the particular learning and discipline problems of this age group (Gurian and Henley 203-12).

### **Discworld**

Pratchett's Discworld is a funhouse mirror of our world rather than a direct commentary on contemporary society. A wide variety of cultures in many stages of development rub shoulders. The ones we are primarily concerned with are the fast-changing urban environment of Ankh-Morpork and the highly traditional rural areas of the Ramtop Mountains and the Chalk Downs; in conjunction, they face problems similar to those that faced rural and urban England during the Industrial Revolution, including issues of making education accessible to a broader cross-section of society ("A Collegiate Casting-out"). Magic is mistrusted and hidden on the Downs, but in Ankh-Morpork and the Ramtops, boys with magical talent generally go to the great Unseen University in Ankh-Morpork for training, while girls are apprenticed to village witches.<sup>3</sup> Both rural cultures adhere to a relatively strict traditional balance of labor between the sexes, but with a corresponding appreciation that the contributions of both men and women are essential. Opposing this is the city, where there are of course

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<sup>3</sup> This also, of course, sets up a home school/classroom dichotomy as well as a gendered education dichotomy.

some occupations that are traditionally female, but where at wealthier levels (especially among the *nouveau riches*) women are more decorative than useful and their lack of occupation is a status symbol for their male relatives. Ankh-Morpork's culture is also changing as the city becomes more multi-cultural and must find ways to accommodate an influx of dwarves, trolls, vampires, and other non-human creatures. Paralleling this wave of immigration is the less visible infiltration of women (incognito or not) into both venerably male institutions like the City Watch and the military, and new fields like the newspaper and clacks (Discworld's equivalent of the telegraph) businesses. Even Death himself has a female apprentice—his granddaughter, Susan Sto Helit, who takes on this role in *Soul Music* and continues in *Hogfather* and *Thief of Time*.

Things are rarely black and white on Discworld, however, and I would be remiss not to mention a few of many exceptions to what can sound like a fairly rigid system of gender division. *Equal Rites*, the third book in the series, written while Pratchett was still in the early stages of figuring out how the Discworld worked, tells the story of a girl named Esk who was born with the talents of a wizard and gained admission to Unseen University. However, at the time of this writing she has never appeared in any other Discworld book, and the *Discworld Companion* lists her as "Current whereabouts unknown" (Pratchett and Briggs 165; Pratchett, *Equal Rites*). The rural society of Borogravia in *Monstrous Regiment* practices a similar division of labor to that in the Ramtops, but women's work gets far less respect and it is considered illegal for a woman to own property, inherit a business, etc. As far as the urban/rural gender association, there seem to be very few rural wizards as such (blacksmiths sometimes serving a similar purpose), but there are city witches who serve many of the same functions as their country sisters, though perhaps less openly. And there are some variations of magical talent that refuse to fit comfortably into this gender model. Mr. Brooks, for example, Royal Beekeeper to the castle at Lancre, is "as near to being a witch as you can be while wearing trousers" (Pratchett and Briggs 73), and Fairy Godmothers use their wands to focus their magic in the same way as wizards use their staffs (193). Hedge wizards are both horticulturally inclined and outside the official educational system (208), and research witches (the type who wonder "eye of what kind of toad?") are a bit too close to book-learning for traditionalists like Granny Weatherwax (338).

The early history of Discworld was one of wars between *sourcerers*, incredibly powerful wizards who were born the eighth sons of eighth sons, which left many parts of the Disc scarred with deposits of dangerous residual magic. Unseen University was founded some 2000 years before the events of the Discworld series in part to "force some sort of regulation on wizardry" and put young men with magical power where their elders could keep an eye on them (Pratchett and Briggs 401-02)—perhaps in recognition of the benefits of single-sex

classrooms in preventing certain behavioral distractions among young men of this age. It also served to discourage the birth of any more sourcerers by requiring celibacy (274). Wizards don't seem to do much practical magic, and indeed the main function of the University is really to keep them from messing about with things. Unseen U. is usually viewed through eyes of its professors, who are for the most part very set in their ways and quite uncomfortable around women—except perhaps the ones who cook their meals and scrub the floors and do the laundry, but they hardly count since no one notices them, after all. They are very nearly like Rowling's house-elves.<sup>4</sup>

Granny Weatherwax, the most skilled witch on Discworld, insists that wizard magic is "the wrong kind of magic for women [...] it's all books and stars and jommetry. [...] Witches is a different thing altogether. [...] It's magic out of the ground, not out of the sky, and men never could get the hang of it" (*Equal Rites* 8). There are foolish young witches who think that written-down spells and "real wands, not bits of grubby stick" would gain witches more respect, and that only wizards do "real magic" (*Hat Full of Sky* 109-10), but Granny dismisses that kind of thinking as "wizard magic with a dress on" (*Wintersmith* 94). Witching is passed on one to one. The cottage is the basic continuous unit of witchcraft, and a proper witch's cottage will be inhabited by a long line of similarly talented witches passing their skills on to their successors (Pratchett and Briggs 445). Witches are highly respected in the mountains, and practice the traditional domestic mysteries: brewing and distilling, butter and cheese-making, animal husbandry, herb gardening, fortune-telling, medicine and potions, birth control and midwifery, sitting with the dying and laying out the dead, and settling local disputes. Witch magic deals in essence with "filling what's empty and emptying what's full" (*Hat Full of Sky* 79).

Pratchett's young heroine Tiffany Aching has an incredible thirst for knowledge—asking awkward questions, memorizing the five books on her grandmother's bookshelf, and paying an egg or a carrot for a lesson when the wandering teachers come to the village (*Wee Free Men* 14). She comes from a sheep-farming family on the Downs, and her grandmother, though it was never publicly acknowledged, had strong magical powers. Tiffany's name is significant—in the old tongue of the Nac Mac Feegle it means *Land Under Wave* and links her to the living power she draws from the fossilized sea creatures forming the chalk downs. The witch who first notices her power drops hints that lead her to believe there is a school very much like Rowling's Hogwarts for young witches, where she will learn "broomstick riding, and how to sharpen

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<sup>4</sup> There is also the unspoken fear among the faculty that women might prove to be "embarrassingly good" at magic should they be given the opportunity; additionally, of course, there is the plumbing question (Pratchett and Briggs 402).

your hat to a point" (43). By the end of the first book, however, having vanquished the wicked Queen of the Elves on her own with no formal training, Tiffany has worked out that the world itself is her school (250). Granny Weatherwax agrees that witchcraft is "not like school at all. *First* you get the test, and then afterward you spend years findin' out how you passed it. It's a bit like life in that respect" (253).<sup>5</sup> During her first apprenticeship, Tiffany learns that being apprenticed to a witch is mostly "endless chores" (*Hat Full of Sky* 64) and that what witches really did was "very similar to work. Dull work" (92). But what she is doing is learning what's already in her bones (269). Eventually she comes to understand that being a witch is all about doing for those who can't and speaking for those who have no voices, and that hard work was what "grounded you, taught you what was real" (*Wintersmith* 277) while your mind worked out what needed to be done.

Pratchett admits that "Discworld society" does not "[offer] much in the way of opportunity and careers to women," except perhaps for those of "keen intelligence and flexible morality" (Pratchett and Briggs 440). But if the unexpected number of disguised women in the Borogravian army (and hints of at least one in the Ankh-Morpork army as well) in *Monstrous Regiment* is any indication, women could already be more common at Unseen University than the wizards would like to think (*Monstrous Regiment* 323)! Will the increasing presence of women in professions in Ankh-Morpork start having an influence on separate education in witchcraft and wizardry, or are gender-related powers too much a part of how magic actually works on Discworld? <sup>6</sup>

### Potterworld

The Harry Potter series is a "wainscot" fantasy, one that takes place parallel to our own primary world and interacts with it directly (Le Lievre). As such, its institutions mostly mirror our own, and in Harry Potter's magical England, the education of most young witches and wizards takes place in the somewhat familiar environment of a co-educational boarding school.

Hermione Granger comes from a non-magical Muggle family, but like all magically talented children in J.K. Rowling's world, she receives her invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on her eleventh birthday. While her parents would rather she grew up to be a dentist like them, they are strongly supportive of her choice, and quite likely helped her develop her disciplined approach to education from early childhood. Rowling admits that

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<sup>5</sup> In other words, you can't grow witches on *blackboard* chalk, either (as was pointed out to me by David Emerson when this paper was read at Mythcon 39).

<sup>6</sup> Pratchett's next Discworld book is tentatively titled *Unseen Academicals* [Wikipedia], and while it purportedly satirizes college football, it will also deal with the other unseen, and mostly female, world below-stairs.



Hermione is a “caricature” of herself as a schoolgirl (qt. in Dresang 212). Her name is a feminine form of Hermes, recalling Hermes Trismegistus, the purported author of a body of works on alchemy, astrology, and philosophy which inspired Renaissance magicians (Yates 1-3). Within moments of first meeting Hermione, we learn that she is immensely pleased to be going to the “very best school of witchcraft there is” and has already memorized her schoolbooks and begun practicing elementary spells (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* [Stone] 105-06). She hopes to be in Gryffindor but will settle for Ravenclaw, the house most known for intellectual achievement, and indeed the Sorting Hat shows no hesitation in placing her in Gryffindor (Stone 120)—foreshadowing that her challenges will require not just theoretical mastery of magic but heroic use of it as well. The most powerful illustration of her quest for useful knowledge is her unyielding opposition to Dolores Umbridge’s purely theoretical method of teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts in *Order of the Phoenix* (Phoenix 241-42), though her disdain for the false knowledge of divination taught in Professor Trelawney’s class in *Prisoner of Azkaban* says a good deal about her as well (Prisoner 111, 298). She is eager and willing to make use of the Time Turner to fit in even more classes (Prisoner 244). When Harry, Ron, and Hermione prepare to hunt for Voldemort’s Horcruxes in the final book, it is Hermione who understands the value of packing a “mobile library” (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* [Hallows] 95), including some books she magicked out of Dumbledore’s study after his death (101-102). As Jennifer Flaherty points out, “[d]espite her inherent respect for authority, Hermione is one of the most rebellious students in the school when the freedom of knowledge is challenged. [...] [She has] a deep love of information and appreciation for its power. [...] [Her] intellectual curiosity cannot be stifled” (Flaherty 96).

Hogwarts was founded by two witches and two wizards. There is some gender stereotyping in their characteristics: Salazar Slytherin was interested in power and purity of bloodline, Godric Gryffindor in bravery and strength, while Rowena Ravenclaw valued wisdom and cleverness, and Helga Hufflepuff emphasized loyalty and inclusiveness and was known for her food-related charms. Hogwarts appears to have been co-educational from its misty beginnings approximately 1000 years ago. At Hogwarts, all the houses are co-ed, the classes are co-ed, and even Quidditch is completely co-ed. Heads of houses are not necessarily the same gender as the house founders, and both headmasters and headmistresses are depicted in the historical portraits in Albus Dumbledore’s office. There seems to be no expectation that girls will excel at some classes and not at others, or that they will demonstrate any less athletic talent than their Quidditch teammates (though some critics, particularly those writing during the earlier years of the series, *do* see traditional gender divisions in the contrast between Ron and Hermione’s approaches to education, the

system itself is not set up with unequal expectations [Elster 208, Heilman 224]). We don't have a long enough history to see if women gravitate towards teaching certain classes, like Charms or Divination, but Defense against the Dark Arts is taught by a woman at one point in the series, and the Quidditch coach is female. As one writer points out, in reference to Rowling's critique of social class, she shows "a general preference for nurture rather than nature," and this is borne out as well by this emphasis on gender-blind education (Hopkins 30). It is important to recall that Hogwarts does not represent the state of education in the entire wizarding world. However, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are also co-educational and send mixed teams to the Tri-Wizard Tournament (though the movie *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* depicted only single-sex teams). Also, attendance at Hogwarts is not compulsory—some children are educated at home, in other schools, or abroad (*Hallows* 210).

At the time of the events covered in the books we see only male Ministers of Magic, though women do and have in the past filled high positions in the Ministry and other wizarding organizations. For example, Elfrida Clagg was head of the Wizards Council in 1300s (*Quidditch Through the Ages* [Quidditch] 14), and the Minister of Magic before Cornelius Fudge was Millicent Bagnold (*Phoenix* 93). This reflects contemporary British society fairly directly and is not commented upon—though it's important to remember that we see this world almost entirely through the eyes of an adolescent boy who is not a particularly keen observer of social issues. As we see in the final book, the teenage boys Ron and Harry seem to expect Hermione to know and take responsibility for healing (*Hallows* e.g. 269) and protective enchantments (272), and find and prepare food (293) when they are on the run. Ron especially, brought up in a very conventional household where the father works and the mother stays home, exhibits some traditionalist attitudes highly annoying to Hermione.

But let's consider Quidditch, which both Harry and Ron *do* observe very keenly, as representing the wizarding world in microcosm. We learn in *Quidditch Through the Ages* that two of the first players of proto-Quidditch were female (8-9), that there have been women referees at least since the fourteenth century (18, 30-31), that women have always been involved in the development of the technology and strategy of the game (21, 48, 53), that the 1750 rules explicitly included women players (27), and that women are celebrated members of a number of professional teams, at least in Great Britain and Russia (35, 36, 37, 53). But all of these references are passed over with no comment indicating that any of this participation is in any way unusual. The only emphasized references to gender in the book are to the fact that the position of Beater requires a "good deal of physical strength" and is "more than any other" likely to be taken by wizards (25), and to the Holyhead Harpies, a unique professional team composed only of women (34-35), later including Ginny Weasley. No all-male teams are mentioned

as contrast to the Harpies. As Ximena Gallardo-C. and C. Jason Smith point out, “[t]he series acknowledges gender differences (real boys and girls often play differently) but does not advocate gender cleavage (same-sex groups)” (Gallardo-C. and Smith 199).

This is fairly typical of the way Rowling depicts gender in wizarding society. In the Muggle world, technology is a gender-equalizing influence—it requires no great physical strength to do many tasks that once took brute force—and magic serves much the same function in the wizarding world, so perhaps the diminishment of physical strength as a justification for male dominance (and the necessary resolution of accompanying anxieties about gender roles) came quicker there than in the mundane world. It would be entirely understandable if this long-standing equalization of power led to an equally long-standing tradition of co-education.

Potterworld appears on the surface to perfectly content with its one-size-fits-all education. There seems to be no difference in which subjects boys and girls are expected to excel, no difference in teaching methods, no difference in expectations of students’ academic or athletic achievement. Issues of gender and power seem easily reconciled; though for example the current head of Hogwarts is male, there is no reason future heads must be. Even the ranks of the Death-eaters include many women. All paths are equally available to boys and girls.

At least—to human boys and girls. But anxieties about gender and power are not entirely absent. Kathryn McDaniel, in a provocative article titled “The Elfin Mystique,” suggests that issues of gender and work in Potterworld are displaced onto the house-elves. Noting how anachronistic the depiction of house-elves as “happy slaves” is compared to the generally liberal values of Rowling’s books (McDaniel 184; see also Carey), McDaniel suggests that the house-elves make far more sense when “read” as unliberated house-wives, “constrained within [their] domestic role,” rather than as slaves who “embrace their subjugation” (185). Seen through the lens of second-stage feminism, it becomes clear that

Many house-elves, like many twentieth-century house-wives, derive enjoyment, a sense of purpose, the very core of their identity from their service to home and family, and so have no wish to be “liberated.” [...] [Liberation] is not unequivocally desired, [and] can be devastating [...] [M]any in fact derive satisfaction from their status as “helpmeet,” subordinate though it may be. (186)

In fact, Ron jokes that helping his mother prepare for wedding guests is “like being a house-elf” but “without the job satisfaction” (*Hallows* 106; see also

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [Goblet] 223). Even goblins find house-elf duties and attitudes beneath them (296). As McDaniel goes on to say,

A proper home is the only context for a house-elf, service to a family is a house-elf's chief duty, and the domestic work of the house-elf does not warrant a salary. Each of these beliefs parallels ideas about women that gained force in the nineteenth century and remained powerful throughout the twentieth century. (190-191)

Building on this, the house-elves can be seen to represent issues of gender and access to knowledge (and therefore power). Like the housewives McDaniel suggests they represent, their (surprisingly great) powers are strictly confined to the domestic sphere, and hedged about with regulation, secrecy, indifference, or dismissal on the part of the larger magical community. Their work is seen as necessary but unimportant—essential but not really of any tangible or monetary value, just like domestic work in the Muggle world. House-elves who are freed expect to be relocated to another family and keep doing the same work. In sharp contrast to the value placed on women's skills and work in Discworld, the same women's magic so respected in the Ramtops and on the Downs—cleaning, cooking, laundry and sewing, caring for children and the sick, keeping the house—is devalued and sent underground, where neither witches nor wizards need think about it.

There is pressure from both the subgroup and from society at large to conform—to allow their dangerous powers to be checked and controlled by the group in power, not to attempt to become fully participating members of society, and to resist any reform efforts like Hermione's Society for the Protection of Elfish Welfare that might change the status quo. While we do not see Hermione's S.P.E.W. Manifesto in whole, she points out that their "enslavement goes back centuries" (Goblet 224) and they are kept "uneducated and brainwashed" (239, emphasis added). Significantly, like other magical creatures, house-elves are not allowed to have wands (Hallows 488). Winky's example reinforces the lesson that though a piece of clothing can technically free a house-elf, it takes more to empower them than a sock—it takes both a desire for freedom and education in how to live as a self-respecting free being. Hermione, as Rowling indicated in an interview shortly after *Deathly Hallows* was published, will devote her professional career to ensuring equal treatment for all magical creatures (Rowling Web Chat), presumably including access to education.

McDaniel's article was written before the publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, but we can see that these issues of power, liberation, education, and the denial of the value of a repressed class of beings, are extremely significant in the final defeat of Voldemort.

Kreacher, the house-elf Harry inherited from the Black family, is transformed under kind and respectful treatment (*Hallows* 225)—to the point where even Ron admits a certain fondness for him (236). Voldemort’s disdain for the power of house-elves—the fact, as Hermione points out and Dumbledore reiterates, that “[i]t never would have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn’t”—proves a factor in his downfall, since it was Kreacher’s help that allowed Regulus Black to steal one of his Horcruxes (194-96). In the names of his two best masters, Regulus Black and Harry Potter, Kreacher leads the charge of the Hogwarts house-elves (including Winky, according to an interview with Rowling [Rowling Web Chat]) and helps turn the tide of the final battle against Voldemort’s forces (734-35).<sup>7</sup>

Dobby, the house-elf that Harry freed from the Malfoy family in *Chamber of Secrets*, dies saving Harry and friends, killed by Bellatrix Lestrange (*Hallows* 467-75). Like Voldemort, the Death-eaters were unaware of house-elf abilities and took no precautions against a house-elf entering their dungeons. It would never have entered their minds that a house-elf might have the ability to choose to perform such a heroic act. Harry digs Dobby’s grave by hand and carves the tombstone with the words “Here lies Dobby, a Free Elf.” He and his friends symbolically dress the elf’s body with items of their own clothing, honoring his sacrifice and acknowledging his freedom of choice (478-81). An elf who has willingly embraced freedom shows the value of enabling all sentient beings to grow to their potential through access to knowledge and self-agency.

As one critic observes, an important characteristic weakness of Rowling’s villains is that they “do not learn and tend to be dismissive of the modes and ideology of knowledge acquisition” (Hopkins 30), a weakness which time and again determines their fate.

## Conclusion

Looking more closely at these two subcreated worlds, we can see that what at first look like polar opposite approaches to education actually allow for some intriguing subtleties and conflicts. In Discworld, there are various practitioners of magic who don’t fit neatly into pre-existing categories, and an increasing participation of women in traditionally male occupations. In Potterworld, the subtext of magical creatures denied full participation in society creates a tension just below the tidy surface, which comes to a head in later books but is not explicitly resolved within the story.

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<sup>7</sup> Even earlier in the series, a plot point hinges on the fact that Voldemort thinks only he and his followers know the secret of the Room of Requirement, never suspecting that house-elves have used it for years (*Phoenix* 386).

As these ambiguities emphasize, one of the most important functions of literature is not to give us pat answers, but to make us think. Fantasy and science fiction in particular encourage the exploration of issues that may be so deeply engrained in our daily lives as to be nearly invisible. We can learn from stories where issues of gender, education, and power are out in the open, as in Discworld, as well as from stories where the same issues are more deeply hidden or displaced, as in Potterworld. And in stories where girls disguise themselves as boys to get an education, we can see young people taking the initiative to tailor their education to their own needs, attempting with various degrees of success to bypass gender/education/power issues altogether. These stories make us ask ourselves if it is better to celebrate and privilege differences in ability and innate skills through education tailored to these perceived differences, or to deny any such differences and give the same education to all.

As in our Muggle world, there are no clear answers—both educational approaches have advantages and disadvantages. In any case, both of these series provide excellent role models—girls who will not be held back from education, no matter what obstacles may stand in their way—and show that the truly determined will find a way to thrive under any system.

#### APPENDIX: GIRLS DISGUISED AS BOYS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

An intriguing and broad-ranging discussion of cross-dressing in both directions in children's literature is available at the blog of Roger Sutton, editor of *The Horn Book*: <http://www.hbook.com/blog/2007/03/childrens-literatures-defining-phrase.html>.

The theme is explored in a variety of genres—TV, movies, animation, folklore, literature, and so on—at the TV Tropes website: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SweetPollyOliver>. The site includes links to variants of the theme, including the boys-dressed-as-girls trope, which is very common in Japanese manga and anime.

Finally, annainca provides three exhaustive lists of girls dressed as boys in children's and young adult literature at [http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Will-Be-Boys-Gender-Pretenders-for-Young-Readers/lm/R11S282EZTZG3G/ref=cm\\_lm\\_byauthor\\_title\\_full](http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Will-Be-Boys-Gender-Pretenders-for-Young-Readers/lm/R11S282EZTZG3G/ref=cm_lm_byauthor_title_full); [http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Will-Be-Boys-More-Gender-Pretenders-for-Young-Readers/lm/R25P84GP1S6YMI/ref=cm\\_lm\\_byauthor\\_title\\_full](http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Will-Be-Boys-More-Gender-Pretenders-for-Young-Readers/lm/R25P84GP1S6YMI/ref=cm_lm_byauthor_title_full); [http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Will-Be-Boys-Even-More-Gender-Pretenders-for-Young-Readers/lm/RYP7D97E75NWW/ref=cm\\_lm\\_byauthor\\_title\\_full](http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Will-Be-Boys-Even-More-Gender-Pretenders-for-Young-Readers/lm/RYP7D97E75NWW/ref=cm_lm_byauthor_title_full). These lists cover a wide range of genres—fantasy, historical fiction and non-fiction, contemporary drama and humor, pirate stories, war stories, sports stories, and so on.

## NOTE

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