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## A Sense of Darker Perspective: How the Marauders Convey Tolkien's "Impression of Depth" in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

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### Abstract

With the full introduction of the Marauders characters (James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew) into the *Harry Potter* series in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, J.K. Rowling shifted away from the storybook tone of the first two volumes to something darker and widened the scope of her story in depth and breadth. This paper examines how Rowling uses these characters to create what J.R.R. Tolkien called the “impression of depth” in her fictional world. While contrasting Rowling’s specific techniques with Tolkien’s, this paper argues that Rowling scales this literary device down to meet her young hero (and implied reader[s]), focusing primarily on character and personal history to create this effect. Specific attention will be paid to the way in which the Marauders are characterized before their proper appearances in the narrative, the function of questions and answers, the craft of exposition, the use of backstory and untold tales, and the role of tragedy. This paper will demonstrate how *Prisoner*, and the Marauders in particular, laid the foundation for the darker and more mature novels later in the series.

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Kathryn McDaniel, host of the Reading, Writing, Rowling podcast, for having me as a guest to discuss the Marauders (Episode 19), providing the impetus for this essay.



SENSE OF DARKER PERSPECTIVE:  
HOW THE MARAUDERS CONVEY  
TOLKIEN'S "IMPRESSION OF DEPTH" IN  
*HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN*

KATHERINE SAS

THE *HARRY POTTER* CHARACTERS KNOWN AS THE MARAUDERS—Harry's father James Potter and his three best friends Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew—have maintained their fan-favorite status ever since their first proper appearance in the third book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999; henceforward *Prisoner*). Why have they, and *Prisoner* more generally, made such an impact on *Harry Potter* readers, and what is their collective importance to the series? This paper proposes that one particular approach toward answering these questions lies in the examination of what J.R.R. Tolkien called the "impression of depth."

There are several ways in which one could approach the question of importance. For the Marauders in particular, it has less to do with their relative prominence within the narrative but rather with the larger effect their presence has within the series, especially early in their arrival. Though clearly secondary in terms of plot importance, nevertheless this group of characters has an indelible influence on the tone, themes, and even style of the series. Subtly foreshadowed in the first two books, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*<sup>1</sup> (1997; *Stone*) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998; *Chamber*), the arrival of James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter<sup>2</sup> into the main action of the story in *Prisoner* signals profound changes for both Harry and the reader. In fact, throughout the course of this paper, one can often read "Harry" as synonymous with "the reader(s)," as Rowling's third-person narration is almost always limited to Harry's point of view. This deliberate withholding of information on the part of the author and narrator contributes to the mystique and allure of these characters, adding, as we will see, an impression of depth to the story. Over the

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<sup>1</sup> First published in the U.K. as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*; I will refer in this paper to the American title for ease of citation and consistency.

<sup>2</sup> These characters are known by an unusually varied set of names at different times and for different reasons, including their first names, last names, or by their Marauder's Map/Animagus avatars (Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs). For consistency's sake and clarity I will refer to their first names except when quoting text from the books.

course of this paper, focusing specifically on *Prisoner*, I will demonstrate that this impression of depth is a primary function of the Marauders as a group of characters.

**“MORE THAN HE WAS TELLING”: TOLKIEN’S IMPRESSION OF DEPTH AND HOW IT COMPARES TO ROWLING’S**

First, it is necessary to clarify what I do and do not mean to imply by the use of the phrase “the impression of depth.” Borrowed from J.R.R. Tolkien’s 1936 essay, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” (“Monsters”), the impression of depth is Tolkien’s description of the *Beowulf* poet’s technique of creating—whether by genuine allusion, artistic craft, or both—a sense of antiquity and historical reality through the referencing of older, untold stories. Tolkien writes of the medieval Old English poem *Beowulf*:

The whole must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet’s contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past [...] that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow. This impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales, mostly darker, more pagan, and desperate than the foreground. (27)

At first glance, such a literary technique might seem incongruous with Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Several Tolkien scholars have demonstrated how Tolkien carefully created the impression of depth within his own fantasy fiction (e.g. Tom Shippey, *Road to Middle-earth*; Michael Drout et al., “Tolkien’s Creation of the Impression of Depth”), largely through the inclusion of his own invented languages and allusions to his own collected body of myths and legends, many of which predated the work in which they are cited. These allusions give Tolkien’s fantasy world a verisimilitude unparalleled in imaginative fiction.

Connections between Rowling’s “world-building” and Tolkien’s have been made: Alan Jacobs’s article “Harry Potter’s Magic” provides an early example that notes Rowling’s kindred sense of “mythopoeia” and flair for detail. However, there are significant differences. Rowling’s use of Latin in her invented spells and her many allusions to folklore and mythology rely on real-world languages and literature rather than those of her own private invention. Likewise, her occasional references to fictional texts within the world do not approach the immense body of lore which Tolkien had been creating for decades before even starting to write *The Hobbit* (1937) or *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). Most notably, the four “factors” of Tolkien’s impression of depth as identified by Drout et al. largely rely on overlapping layers of textual history and frame narrative, giving the reader the impression that *The Lord of the Rings* has been

compiled by editors and translators from a series of historical manuscripts. Rowling did not attempt to achieve anything like a similar effect.

However, if we broaden our definitions slightly, it can be seen that Rowling creates her own kind of impression of depth, albeit by different means and to slightly different ends. As Shippey writes of the stories that inspired Tolkien: "In all these works there was a sense that the author knew more than he was telling, that behind his immediate story there was a coherent, consistent, deeply fascinating world about which he had no time (then) to speak" (229). Here is where we can begin to see Rowling's approach to this literary device. The hundreds of vivid characters and fantastic creatures, the logic behind the magic, the increasing sense of bureaucracy and corruption at the heart of wizarding culture and institutions, the wonderful and superfluous abundance of types of wizarding candy, and many more layers of detail contrive to convince the reader of a fully realized fantasy world. As Rowling states on her website, "I never set pen to paper without knowing way more than will eventually appear on the page" ("Answers to Questions").

Drawing on his expertise and love of medieval European epics and sagas, Tolkien created his impression of depth through language, frame narratives, hypertextual layering, and references to lost texts and tales. Middle-earth and its history is very much a central character in Tolkien's fiction. For all Rowling's world-building prowess, her story is about a single character who gradually encounters a world, rather than the world itself. In writing a series for young readers, Rowling's approach to the impression of depth is appropriately scaled down to meet her hero. As such, Rowling primarily uses character to create depth in her world. The impression of depth applies, more than anything else, to personal history.

When one encounters that stock fairy tale character—the orphan—in stories such as Cinderella or Snow White, one does not usually expect the old school friends of the orphan's parents to play central roles in the narrative; but that is what we get. When Harry encounters his father's three best friends in *Prisoner*, he and readers are immediately confronted with the reality that while the story does begin and end with Harry, the larger world does not: rather, the circumstances of his birth and life so far are the direct consequence of actions taken by those who came before. Their story mirrors Harry's in its treatment of the fundamental themes of friendship, self-sacrifice, and war. However, it is a cracked mirror: a glimpse into an alternate narrative in which friendship is betrayed, sacrifices are in vain, and the innocent are punished while the guilty escape. Additionally, it provides that tantalizing sense that the "author [knows] more than [she] is telling." Correspondingly, Harry's world widens and deepens in scope. As in *Beowulf*, this older tale is "darker" and more "desperate"

than the primary. As in a painting, contrasting tones lend depth to the landscape.

In place of Drout et al.'s four major "factors" of Tolkien's impression of depth, Rowling's factors are primarily personal and character-based: the use of backstory and allusions to untold stories (though anecdotal rather than textual); overlapping and contradictory versions of recounted events and motivations; psychological complexity; and the inclusion of mythic and tragic elements which contrast the more comic, school-story tone of the primary narrative. Some of these techniques have obvious overlap with Tolkien, others less so. Over the course of this essay I will explore the presentation of the Marauders, focusing on *Prisoner*—the book in which they are first fully introduced—as one of the chief tools Rowling uses to create her own particular version of the impression of depth.

#### **"I DID HEAR A RUMOR": CHARACTERIZATION IN ABSENTIA**

In a work that relies so heavily on foreshadowing and misdirection, it is appropriate that the Marauders are mentioned in passing long before they appear "on stage," and their liminality is key to their role in contributing to the depth of the world. Most of the series' main characters are presented straightforwardly, entering the story as they become relevant. In each case, their appearance is noted as significant by the narrator and Harry is invited to judge their character based on appearance, demeanor, or action/dialogue. In the case of the Marauders, however, their arrival in the narrative is cloaked, and the reader is given information without being signaled to its importance.

Sirius is mentioned in the first chapter of the series as Hagrid dismounts the flying motorbike with the sleeping baby Harry: "'Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sir,' said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorbike as he spoke. 'Young Sirius Black lent it to me'" (*Stone* 14). The attentive reader might infer several things about Sirius from this brief description. He is young. His motorcycle, and even more its ability to fly, suggests a certain rebelliousness or reckless lifestyle. A wizarding James Dean, perhaps? The fact that he willingly lent the bike to Hagrid demonstrates a concern for Harry's safety and his cooperation with Hagrid and Dumbledore, further indicated by Hagrid's confirmation that there were "no problems" picking Harry up (15). None of these character assessments are spelled out: Sirius Black remains a name mentioned in passing, nearly as anonymous as the many background wizards Vernon Dursley spies celebrating Voldemort's downfall in the first chapter.

Hagrid revisits his memory of this night in chapter 10 of *Prisoner*, when it is seemingly revealed to Harry that Sirius (the titular prisoner) was his parents' betrayer and the cause of their deaths. With hindsight, Hagrid second

guesses and even rewrites his own memories and interpretations. Behavior that struck him as generous at the time is now considered highly suspicious:

White an' shakin', he was. [...] I shoulda known there was somethin' fishy goin' on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin' it ter me for? Why wouldn' he need it anymore? Fact was, it was too easy ter trace. [...] *But what if I'd given Harry to him, eh?* I bet he'd've pitched him off the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes' friends' son! But when a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there's nothin' and no one that matters to 'em anymore . . . . (206-207)

Throughout his brief mention in *Stone* and even more so in *Prisoner*, Sirius is characterized in his own absence: He is a figure of reputation, rumor, and hearsay. The very title of the book dehumanizes him, erasing the dubious nature of his arrest and conviction and converting him into the nameless and terrible chief lieutenant of the Dark Lord. Most of what Harry learns about him is overheard or illicit and always speculative. Stan Shunpike says that he "eard he thought 'e'd be second-in-command once You-Know-'Oo 'ad taken over" (*Prisoner* 39); "[T]hey say Sirius Black's mad," Arthur Weasley declares to Molly, unaware that they are being overheard by Harry (65); "Black must have found a way to fight [the Dementors]," speculates Remus (188). The only detailed account Harry hears of Sirius's Hogwarts friendship with his father is again overheard in the *Three Broomsticks*. "I did hear a rumor," Rosmerta says of the recent attack at the school (202), and indeed the whole conversation is largely based on rumor. "I heard," "they say," "he must have": Such turns of phrase in the dialogue emphasize the conjectural nature of what is considered factual common knowledge of Sirius's actions and motivations. Tellingly, the characters' own experiences contradict this common knowledge: They all believed him brave and loyal, and agree that Sirius was the "last" person they would have suspected to turn (203). Thus, the reader experiences multiple layers of cognitive dissonance regarding Sirius's character.

Peter Pettigrew, the actual betrayer of the Potters, also makes an appearance in *Stone*, but his identity is in many ways more hidden than Sirius's, this time by his secret Animagus disguise as Ron's pet rat Scabbers. On subsequent reads, the jokes at Peter's expense jump off the page: Scabbers is "fat" and "useless" and "he hardly ever wakes up" (100). The fact that he was "Percy's old rat" might give one pause ("Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?" Remus will ask in *Prisoner* [363]) but in the context of *Stone* even his advanced age is accepted as yet another of Ron's pitiful hand-me-downs. "He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference" says Ron (104), a line that ironically inverts the truth that Peter has survived, unnoticed, having faked his own death.

Peter is quietly characterized under our noses as Scabbers, and we see hints of the character as revealed in *Prisoner*: lazy and self-interested, seemingly harmless if unattractive, a character who is dangerously easy to dismiss and who will be repeatedly underestimated by his more powerful allies throughout the series. His rat body of course foreshadows his role as the Potters's traitor and reflects his unfortunate destiny in a kind of Ovidian metamorphosis.<sup>3</sup> He is not all bad: Ron feels genuine affection for his pet, and Scabbers does bite Goyle's finger in defense of Ron and Harry (109), just as Peter will occasionally show hints of potential, if sadly underdeveloped, moral courage. Indeed, he will eventually die as a result of his hesitation to kill Harry in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (470-471; *Hallows*). However, when Fred dryly declares Scabbers's attack of Goyle "his finest hour" (*Prisoner* 253), it is unfortunately difficult to disagree.

Presented with the story of Peter's brave and hopeless confrontation of his more talented friend Sirius, which ended with Peter blown to pieces along with a dozen Muggles, Harry's mental image of Peter resembles his bumbling classmate Neville (*Prisoner* 213). Harry must be thinking of Neville's equally fruitless, though less disastrous, confrontation of his friends near the climax of *Stone*. In that case, Neville's courage in standing up to his friends even though outmatched was praised and rewarded by Dumbledore. The reader is invited to think of Peter as a proto-Neville: all the braver for his apparent timidity. It is a deft moment of misdirection. This moral courage is exactly what Peter so fatally lacks: His inability to stand up to anyone, either his friends or his enemies, costs the Wizarding World dearly. As with other foils in the *Potter* series, the superficial resemblance between Peter and Neville masks a more fundamental difference based on choice. While Neville never ascends to the same level as the main trio, he instead forges his own heroic path. Peter, conversely, remained the perpetual fourth wheel of his gang, forever "tagging around after" his friends (*Prisoner* 207), always in their shadow.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In his article "Watching the Defectives," Robb A. McDaniel notes Lupin's intriguing statement that "the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong" and suggests that Peter's defection provides a potential example (303). Rather than a simple correlation between physical form and inner character, does Peter's betrayal indicate that he was corrupted by the process of becoming an Animagus? If so, this might help explain why the other Marauders originally considered him likeable and trustworthy. The other example of a "bad" Animagus—Rita Skeeter—likewise embodies the worst stereotypes of her animal form.

<sup>4</sup> Curiously, in Rowling's *Pottermore* entry for "Number Four, Privet Drive," she explains that, "For no very good reason, I have never been fond of the number four, which has always struck me as a rather hard and unforgiving number." Perhaps being the tagalong



Coming entirely from the subjective experience of different characters, accounts of James are wildly varied and even contradictory: To Petunia Dursley, James and his wife Lily were “strange” and “*abnormal*” (Stone 53), whereas Hagrid calls them “as good a witch an’ wizard as I ever knew,” noting that they ended up Head Boy and Girl, roles given to particularly bright and responsible seventh-year students (55). Ollivander describes James’s mahogany wand as “power[ful] and excellent for transfiguration” (82), indicating James’s magical skill and eventual Animagus ability. Though conspicuously missing from Rowling’s essay on “Wand Woods” on *Pottermore*, mahogany is a particularly handsome and durable wood, conveying the strength Harry looks for in the memories of his deceased father. The wand’s “pliable” quality is a little more ambivalent, meaning either flexible or impressionable depending on context. Quirrell confirms that Snape “hates” Harry because of his father whom he “loathed” (290), and Dumbledore offers the explanation that this is merely because James “saved his life” (300). Dumbledore also hints at James’s mischievous youth when he says that the invisibility cloak was mostly used for “sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food” (299) but leaves out the full extent of this mischief and James’s rivalry with Snape.

None of these portraits of James Potter will turn out to be strictly accurate, though all contain some truth. While Lily’s place on the moral pedestal is never questioned, there is a sense that, with James, it depends on whom you ask. Throughout the series, Harry will increasingly struggle with the inherently contradictory sides of his father, as many children do, his father being both a source of inspiration and at times a burden. Harry is constantly compared to James and yet is unlike him in fundamental ways. Though Harry never meets James in the flesh, their relationship nevertheless evolves along very recognizable lines as Harry matures, with Harry’s idealistic vision of his father shattering as he learns of his father’s human fallibility (most notably in chapter 28 of *The Order of the Phoenix* [2003; *Order*]) before eventually maturing into a more nuanced acceptance of James’s virtues and vices. James was both a hero and a bully, a loyal friend and an “arrogant toerag” (*Hallows* 674). Remus says that James would have considered it “the height of dishonor to mistrust his friends” (81), knowing that James went to his grave betrayed by a friend he thought he knew. Harry’s maturity comes with acceptance of these contradictions in the father he never knew.

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fourth member of another golden trio did Peter no favors and he would have, like Neville, done better to distinguish himself from his overachieving friends.

Remus Lupin<sup>5</sup> is not mentioned in *Stone* or *Chamber* but, in keeping with the rules of first five Defense Against the Dark Arts professors, Remus only first appears or is mentioned in the book in which he teaches that fateful subject. However, he too is characterized before his arrival in the form of the previous two Defense teachers. By the time of Remus's arrival in the third book, the reader has likely started to notice the recurring patterns with the Defense teachers and is primed to make assumptions about the new teacher. Thus, Remus's characterization is partly based in reaction to Quirrell and Lockhart. The similarities and contrasts are equally stark: Like Quirrell, Remus is described as pallid and "young" (*Stone* 70; *Prisoner* 74) and not particularly impressive-looking. Conversely, he is an obvious foil to Lockhart: Remus's "extremely shabby set of wizard's robes" (*Prisoner* 74), ill health, and humility clash strikingly with the descriptions of Lockhart's vibrantly-colored robes, "dazzlingly white teeth" (*Chamber* 59), and vanity. All three professors leave their post after one year, hide dangerous secrets, and are not quite what they seem. By the end of *Prisoner*, the pattern is noticeable to the students: "'Wonder what they'll give us next year?' said Seamus Finnigan gloomily. 'Maybe a vampire,' suggested Dean Thomas hopefully" (429).

Having learned over the previous two books not to judge the Wizarding World by appearances, Remus presents Harry with a much more challenging case. With Quirrell and Lockhart, surface appearances were subverted and reversed: They were both the opposite of what they seemed. Remus also subverts expectations, though not with a simple reversal but a much more complex truth. He is not the opposite of what he seems, but much more. His warmth and integrity will, for once, prove genuine and yet he still, like his predecessors, guards dark and dangerous secrets. On the cusp of young adulthood, Harry must learn that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Rowling quietly feeds the reader information and data about James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter before we encounter them in earnest. While most other major characters are presented in more traditional storybook fashion, arriving in the story *ex nihilo*, Rowling goes out of her way to lay the foundations for these characters long before they become relevant, using hints and clues, red herrings and misdirection, rumors and hearsay, and even working to bias the reader for or against them. We have the sense that we know something about them already, though what we think we know may be mistaken. More

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<sup>5</sup> Rowling's early notes, published in *A History of Magic* (2018, p. 128-129) show that she was thinking about the character early in her planning stages while writing *Stone*. It is unclear whether at this stage Rowling had yet merged the different aspects of Remus's character: he is listed among the D.A.D.A. teachers, and his name indicates that she had decided he would be a werewolf, but whether she had yet included him among James's Hogwarts friends is unclear.

importantly, they seem to exist independently of the main story. When the payoff comes in the climax of *Prisoner*, this creates the convincing and satisfying impression that all along there has been another drama running hidden alongside Harry's own.

**“WHY—?’ HARRY BEGAN”: THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF QUESTIONS AND (NON-)ANSWERS**

In *How Harry Cast His Spell* (2008), John Granger contends that the main themes of *Prisoner* are “revealed secrets” and “escapes” (145), including the escape from misinformation or misconception. The tantalizing presence of these many secrets contributes to *Prisoner's* increased level of depth. Though as much a mystery novel as any other book in the series, this fact is easy to miss because *Prisoner's* primary mysteries are more personal and psychological than plot-driven. While Harry spends *Stone* and *Chamber* actively investigating those books' “whodunnit” mysteries, effectively looking to identify the bad guy, the questions that drive him in *Prisoner* are more abstract: Who is Sirius Black, why did he do what he did, and what is his relationship to Harry? Why do the Dementors have such a strong effect on Harry and how can he defend himself against them?

*Prisoner* is also sneakily a whodunnit—i.e., who *really* betrayed the Potters and why?—though Harry is completely unaware of this fact until the mystery is solved. Everyone thinks they know who the bad guy is, but they are mistaken. Instead of asking what we might call the “right” questions, Harry spends the book distracted by a number of minor mysteries: Why is he seeing the Grim? Who sent him the Firebolt? Why is Crookshanks so hell-bent on catching Scabbers? How can Hermione possibly be taking all these classes at the same time? Of course, all these seemingly minor questions turn out to be imperative to the resolution of the main question, resulting in a particularly interlaced plot structure and satisfying resolution. One might even say that it is a book *about* subplot. It is a story that centers its attention on the marginal: liminal and outcast characters, forgotten history, untold backstory, and seemingly insignificant detail. The fact that it is the only book in which Voldemort does not appear only strengthens the sense that *Prisoner* is a deviation from the norm.

The presence of the marginal is fundamental to the impression of depth. Tolkien writes of one of *Beowulf's* minor characters:

For *Beowulf* was not designed to tell the tale of Hygelac's fall, or for that matter to give the whole biography of Beowulf, still less to write the history of the Geatish kingdom and its downfall. But it used knowledge of these things for its own purpose—to give that sense of perspective [...]

These things are mainly on the outer edges or in the background because they belong there, if they are to function in this way. ("Monsters" 31)

In place of "Beowulf," "Hygelac," "Beowulf," and "Geatish kingdom," we might reasonably substitute "The *Harry Potter* series," "the Marauders," "Harry," and "the Wizarding World." *Prisoner* is as close as the Marauders come to occupying the center stage, but even there they must by definition always remain somewhat peripheral "if they are to function in this way," adding texture and color to the main story by contrast. The narrative elements that create the impression of depth always prompt questions because they are, by necessity, never fully in focus.

No character generates more questions and answers than Professor Remus Lupin. Indeed, one of Remus's main functions is to teach Harry to question his assumptions about people, a skill that will prove indispensable when he confronts Sirius and Peter. Each encounter with Remus in *Prisoner* prompts a new question about him:

- Why is he riding on the Hogwarts Express, and how does he know Harry's name? (86)
- What is the reason for his apparent ill-health and poverty? (74)
- How do he and Snape know each other, and what is the nature of Snape's "grudge"? (93, 287-289)
- Why does Peeves call him "loony, loopy Lupin"? (131)
- How does he know that Neville lives with his grandmother? (135)
- What is his boggart (i.e. his greatest fear)? (138)
- What is in the potion Snape is making for him? (156-157)
- Why does he (like Harry) struggle with the Patronus Charm? (189)
- What was his relationship to James Potter and Sirius Black? (241-243)
- How does he know about the Marauder's Map, and when/how did he "meet" Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs? (287-289)

Some of these questions are left unspoken for the speculation of the reader. Several remain still unanswered at the book's end. Did Dumbledore, for instance, request that Remus ride the train with the kids, knowing that they might have an issue with hungry Dementors, or was Remus simply not up to the task of apparition after a difficult full moon? Some educated guesses can be made, but the lack of answers in-text is partly the point. As Tolkien wrote of his own fiction, "It is better not to state everything [...] the truth has to be discovered or guessed from such evidence as there is" —in other words, such unanswered questions are "more realistic" (*Letters* #268, p.354).

Other questions are openly discussed and speculated upon by the students. "I wonder why Professor Lupin's frightened of crystal balls?" asks

Lavender, misinterpreting Remus's full moon boggart (140). Harry can't stop himself from questioning Remus's wisdom in drinking a potion handed to him by Snape—"Why—?" Harry began" (157)—and Ron follows it up more bluntly with the exasperated, "'Lupin drank it?' he gasped. 'Is he mad?'" (158). Hermione, naturally, works out the secret of Remus's werewolf identity about halfway through the book, although her ongoing quarrel with Ron prevents her sharing this with her friends (236).

Everything about Remus drives the reader and the other characters to ask these questions and crave answers—a rather unfortunate fact for him, considering that he works very hard to avoid such prying. The inevitability of such questions controls his life. Rowling's *Pottermore* essay outlining his biography confirms that Remus's parents "uprooted" the family every time the questions started, and even "The Prince's Tale" in *Hallows* touches on the curiosity of Remus's schoolmates, particularly Snape: "They sneak out at night," Snape says to Lily. "There's something weird about that Lupin. Where does he keep going?" (673) Remus will resign from his job at the end of *Prisoner* after Snape's "outing" of his condition, convinced of his conviction in the court of public opinion. Ironically, the secrets and lies set in motion by authority figures and societal convention breed the mistrust, rumor-mongering, and prejudice that plague him throughout his life. Character shapes and informs plot. The seesawing between question and answer in *Prisoner* creates delightful friction, and Remus's desperation to hide his secrets prolongs this tension.

The overall portrait is of a character constantly holding himself back, both from speaking truths that might prove dangerous or painful but also consequently from human connection, and the effect is equally alluring and poignant. There is a deft moment of characterization in which Remus, hearing Harry's description of his mother's screams, visibly stopping himself from comforting his best friend's son: "Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry's shoulder, but thought better of it" (187-88). The impression of inner life and conflict is unprecedented in the *Potter* series, and paves the way for more complex adult characters. To modify Shippey's quote yet again, Remus "[knows] more than [he] is telling."

Despite his reserve, Remus is equally a source of answers: one of the great teachers of the series and a talented expositor of information. It is he who teaches Harry how to combat boggarts and Dementors, and their corresponding metaphors of fear and depression. Like many mentors, Remus struggles to practice in his own life what he can effectively teach others. His struggles with honesty, trust, and insecurity will constitute his character arc through the remaining four books in the series, but in *Prisoner* they also contribute to the larger purpose of deepening and adding complexity to Harry's world. On the brink of young adulthood himself, Harry is finding that (as J.K. Rowling said of

Remus) “grown-ups, too, are flawed” (qtd. in “Creating the World of *Harry Potter*”). This essential truth will prove vital to Harry for the rest of the story as he encounters the other Marauders, learns more about his father, and eventually delves into the pasts of Voldemort, Dumbledore, and Snape. The constant ebb and flow of questions and not-quite-answers throughout *Prisoner* pushes Harry to delve deeper into this world and its characters.

#### “IF YOU’RE GOING TO TELL THEM THE STORY, GET A MOVE ON”: THE ART OF EXPOSITION

The many questions posed in *Prisoner* culminate in the narrative climax<sup>6</sup> in the Shrieking Shack (Ch. 17-19). This is Harry’s first chance to see the Marauders for who they really are. The inherent danger in extended exposition is that in the course of providing necessary information the “reality” of the world may be broken, exposing the writer’s artifice. Indeed, *Prisoner*’s climax shouldn’t work at all—it bears all the hallmarks of a clichéd “info dump,” pausing the action entirely in favor of conversation and exposition. Necessary answers can often prove boring or disappointing.

Rowling turns this vice into virtue by making the Shrieking Shack confrontation as oblique as every other aspect of *Prisoner*. Indeed, the process of arriving at the truth is positively meandering and, in Rowling’s hands, becomes as interesting as the truth itself. Rather than boring, *Prisoner*’s info dump is riveting because the dialogue is consistently rooted in the revelation of character. Halfway through this episode Harry hesitates, “paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe” (359). The engrossed reader feels the same.

Though Sirius somewhat reluctantly gives Remus permission to “tell [the trio] the story” (352), the story is not told in anything like chronological order, and includes many false-starts, interruptions, and tangents. Indeed, this very exchange itself is illustrative: Sirius instructs Remus to “[t]ell them whatever you like. But make it quick” (350) but Remus does not start telling his story until two full pages later after another irritated prompting from Sirius to “get a move on” (352), having been distracted in the interim by Ron’s angry outburst that Scabbers is not Peter, which leads Harry to point out that there were witnesses to Peter’s death, which causes Sirius to counter that “they didn’t see what they thought they saw” (351), leading to Hermione’s point that Peter is not on the public list of registered Animagi, which brings Remus back to the main subject of his friends’ illegal transformations. Having returned to the topic at hand, and urged along by Sirius’s impatient nudging, Remus finally begins

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<sup>6</sup> The emotional climax comes somewhat later, with Harry’s rescue of himself, Sirius, and Hermione by the lake and the revelation of his stag Patronus (411-412).

the tale, though conceding that he'll need assistance from Sirius: "I only know how it began . . ." (352). The passages above are characteristic of this section of the book, with conversation twisting and turning naturally as the characters anger each other, point out logical flaws, and answers beget entirely new questions. In addition to providing humor and liveliness to what might otherwise be a dry scene, the dialogue and descriptions further establish character, enabling Harry to see the Marauders for who they are rather than as they've been described by others.

Though Remus's loyalties are briefly thrown into question by his apparent alliance with Sirius, he reestablishes trust with Harry and the reader by maintaining the same unflappable and courteous manner which have come to define him:

"But Professor Lupin . . . Scabbers can't be Pettigrew . . . it just can't be true, you know it can't . . ."

"Why can't it be true?" Lupin said calmly, as though they were in class, and Hermione had simply spotted a problem in an experiment with grindylows. (351)

Even in this high-stress situation, with lives at stake, Remus employs the Socratic method as he would in class, knowing that helping Harry, Hermione, and Ron to arrive at the truth on their own will prove more convincing in the end. Remus's likeable character is put to the test and proves genuine. Sirius, in contrast, "jump[s]" when Hermione politely addresses a question to him, unused to being treated with civility (370). Rather than showing Harry that he is the same person he thought he knew, Sirius establishes trust by contradicting everything Harry has been led to believe, showing uncalculated emotion and remorse for his part in the Potters's deaths and barely-controlled rage at Peter.

Peter, when he finally enters the fray, cannot help but betray his own shifty nature in his body language. Though his words to Harry are superficially caring—"Harry . . . Harry . . . you look just like your father . . . just like him . . ." (374)—Harry notices the "ashen color of [his] face and the way his eyes continued to dart toward the windows and the door" (369). Appearances may deceive, but actions speak volumes. Peter tries to manipulate his friends in ways that surely succeeded in the past: stoking their distrust of each other to cover his own treachery, playing up his own weakness for sympathy ("I was never brave like you" [374]), and throwing himself at their mercy, trusting that their virtue will spare him.

The contrast to the previous two books' climaxes could not be more stark. In both *Stone* and *Chamber*, Harry confronts the villain(s) alone or nearly alone, necessitating that the villain explain their villainy in monologue. In *Stone*,

Quirrell gives a Bond villain-esque recap of the plot from his own perspective, correcting Harry's misreading of events:

Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell? [...] No, no, no. *I* tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. [...] You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone. (288-289)

Similarly, *Chamber* culminates with a double revelation. First, of Lockhart's fraudulence, declared to Harry and Ron by Lockhart himself before his memory charm backfires: "My dear boy [...] Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think *I'd* done all those things" (297). And secondly, with the revelation that Tom Riddle is actually the young Voldemort (313-314). In both cases, Harry's understanding depends on explanations from the villains themselves.

*Prisoner*, in contrast, exhibits a leap forward in stylistic sophistication which seems to take for granted the intelligence of the reader. Peter is not a traditional gloating villain. He actively resists every attempt to reveal his motivations. The truth is dragged from him against his will thanks to the history he shares with others. It takes the collective effort of Sirius, Remus, the trio, and even Snape arguing, interrupting, contradicting, and talking over each other over the course of three solid chapters before Harry believes in Sirius's innocence. After a book in which Harry learns to battle fear, depression, and his own feelings of weakness, it is appropriate that he faces a villain who stumbled due to these very things. Peter would never willingly confront Harry and confess his sins: His entrapment in the Shrieking Shack, cornered and exposed by his old friends, is necessary to the story's revelation and stems entirely from character.

In the course of explaining the plot and providing necessary answers, Rowling presents a group of characters who seem to know each other extremely well, who share a deep and complex history to which Harry is not privy. They have knowledge of shared events and each other's personalities, and the fact that these are events the reader has not witnessed lends a sense of past history. In just a few chapters, Rowling establishes a group dynamic as convincing as any other in the series.



**“ACTION ISSUING FROM CHARACTER”: BACKSTORY, TRAGEDY, AND UNTOLD STORIES**

Shifting from the style and form of the exposition to the content, the Marauders’ backstory is one of Rowling’s most effectively heartbreaking. In examining these tragic elements, it is worth first considering tragedy more abstractly. Tolkien pointed to the “darker, more pagan, and desperate” background which contrasts the foreground and gives it “depth.” Darkness and desperation are easy to discern in the story Harry is told. Remus’s account of his childhood, with its loneliness, “painful” transformations, and self-inflicted wounds hints at a level of gore and violence unprecedented in the series thus far (353). The closeness of the bond achieved by the four friends—though a source of joy, mischief, and adventure—is born out of pain, with James, Sirius, and Peter transforming themselves to protect their friend.

The darkness and desperation of the First Wizarding War is vividly evoked. Peter correctly asserts that Voldemort “has weapons you can’t imagine” and that he “was taking over everywhere” (374). Sirius does not deny the peril of their situation, although he asserts that the rest of them were willing to die for each other rather than turn traitor (375). Remus casually deflects Peter’s suggestion that Sirius would have told him of the plan to switch Secret-Keepers with the assumption that Sirius “thought [he] was the spy” (373). The quickness of this reply suggests that, on some level at least, Remus knew that his friends had grown to mistrust him. Sirius will go on to describe the horror of this period eloquently in the next book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000; *Goblet*):

Imagine that Voldemort’s powerful now. You don’t know who his supporters are, you don’t know who’s working for him and who isn’t; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You’re scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. [...] Terror everywhere . . . panic . . . confusion . . . that’s how it used to be.

Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. (526-27)

For all that Harry and his friends have admittedly suffered and survived already, the dystopian world Sirius describes is one of which they have, as yet, no experience. The tone complicates the storybook vibe of the early *Potter* novels, foreshadowing the later, darker volumes.

But what do we make of “pagan” in Tolkien’s description? Writing of *Beowulf*, a medieval text, and creating his own prehistoric fictional world, the relationship between pagan and Christian periods and cultures was especially important to Tolkien, not to mention to his Catholic faith. Rowling’s world does not divide so easily, and the Marauders’ generation is only twenty years

removed from Harry's own. Nevertheless, some of Tolkien's theories of paganism are intrinsically tied to his notion of the impression of depth. The most relevant was his theory of northern courage, which he deemed "the great contribution of early Northern literature" ("Monsters" 20). The Norse gods and their human allies, in contrast with some other mythologies, are doomed to final defeat: "they are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins" (21, Tolkien's emphasis). The courage of these pagan heroes is in continuing to fight the good fight despite almost certain failure. This contrasts with the Christian warrior who, in Tolkien's conception, fights with belief in ultimate victory in Christ, despite whatever lesser defeats may happen along the way on the mortal plane. To borrow Galadriel's phrase from *The Lord of the Rings*, such heroes fight "the long defeat" (II.7.357).

A similar sense of futility pervades the tale told in the Shrieking Shack. The friendship and camaraderie the Marauders found at Hogwarts was undone by mistrust and treachery. The First War had no known Chosen One, no assurance of final victory. Voldemort's defeat was only temporary, and the Marauders themselves ended catastrophically: James killed, Sirius wrongfully imprisoned, Peter in hiding, Remus left alone without friends or truth. Some of this futility even infects Harry's story when, for the first time in the series, the book does not end in complete victory. "It didn't make any difference," Harry will complain to Dumbledore at the book's bittersweet end (425). The courage of the heroes is not, however, lessened by failure. On the contrary, their failure only strengthens the reader's compassion for them.

Rowling's skill with tragedy proves instructive in the structure of this backstory.<sup>7</sup> In his lecture "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy," A.C. Bradley explains that effective tragedy is achieved through a "causal connection" of disparate elements: circumstances, character, deed (or action), catastrophe (or fate), and even a small but important dose of chance (or accident) (31). It is the confluence of these elements, and not any one of them individually, which gives tragedy its satisfying feeling of inevitability.

The Marauders' backstory incorporates all of these elements. The circumstances of the war against Voldemort provide a setting in which fear,

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<sup>7</sup>I do not claim that the Marauders' backstory conforms entirely to Classical, Aristotelian, and/or Shakespearean conceptions of tragedy, which often follow very specific and stringent rules. Likewise, the study of these genres is well-established and ongoing, and a full survey of the many arguments (for example, the contested translations of the Greek word *hamartia*, which has been variously translated "fatal/tragic flaw," "error," "to miss the mark," etc.) is outside the scope of this paper. For the purposes of discussing Rowling's work, we can reasonably assume that she would at the very least be broadly familiar with popular theories concerning tragedy, having studied Classics in university (Rowling, "The Fringe Benefits of Failure").

paranoia, and betrayal are able to fester. The accident of Voldemort choosing Harry as the subject of Trelawney's prophecy, rather than Neville (as explained in Ch. 37 of *Order*), provides the element of chance: If Voldemort had chosen to hunt down the Longbottoms, then presumably the Potters would never have needed a Secret-Keeper in the first place. The choices and actions of others which led to Remus's bite<sup>8</sup> provide the impetus for his friends to become secret Animagi which facilitates both Peter's and Sirius's escape from the law. Fate is also potentially at play: The loss of Harry's parents motivates his role as Voldemort's enemy and ultimate downfall. All of these events are out of the control of the characters and form, like a line of dominoes, the chain of cause and effect which results in James's and Lily's deaths.

The chief element, however, is character, and the actions of the tragic hero[es] all stem from character. As Bradley explains:

We see a number of human beings placed in certain circumstances; and we see, arising from the co-operation of their characters in these circumstances, certain actions. These actions beget others, and these others beget others again, until this series of inter-connected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe. [...] This at least may be said of the principal persons, and, among them, of the hero, who always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes. [...] And these deeds are, for the most part, actions in the full sense of the word; not things done 'tween asleep and wake,' but acts or omissions thoroughly expressive of the doer — characteristic deeds. The centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action. (28-29)

The Marauders are not merely victims of circumstance, fate, and chance but participants in the drama and, as individuals and collectively, contribute to the unfolding of the narrative. The theme of choice is crucial not only to the genre of tragedy but to the *Harry Potter* series, articulated most strongly at the end of *Chamber* in Dumbledore's pronouncement that "it is our choices, Harry, that show us what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (333). While these are spoken as words of comfort to Harry, they may be burdensome to tragic heroes who bear some responsibility for their downfall.

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<sup>8</sup> Remus recognizes this when he says that, "None of this could have happened if I hadn't been bitten . . ." (*Prisoner* 352). In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005; *Prince*), Remus explains that he was not randomly attacked but specifically targeted by the werewolf Fenrir Greyback in retribution for his father's hateful speech about werewolves (335; further elaborated in Rowling's *Pottermore* essay "Remus Lupin").

In the course of this cathartic confession, confronting their own failings honestly for perhaps the first time, Remus and Sirius are open in their self-condemnation. Remus regrets his “foolhardy” choices which “betray[ed] Dumbledore’s trust” and endangered lives (*Prisoner* 352, 355). He contextualizes his “cowardly” choice to hide his knowledge from Dumbledore as an extension of his youthful selfishness and desire for the acceptance and good opinion of others (356). Sirius, known for his brilliance, claims responsibility for the disastrous plan: “‘I as good as killed them,’ he croaked. ‘I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me’” (365). He did so, he explains, in the mistaken belief that Remus had turned. Severely underestimating Peter and Remus, Sirius proved too clever for his own good and was caught in a net of his own making.

An outline of the ironies and misunderstandings emerges, with Remus’s propensity for secretiveness colliding dangerously with Sirius’s ingenious cunning.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Peter’s instinct for self-preservation manifests itself at the moment in which James chooses blind trust, ignoring Dumbledore’s advice and putting the lives of his family into the faulty hands of Sirius (who is mistaken) and Peter (who is false). Most of these are sympathetic motivations: the desire for safety and survival, loyalty and friendship, the fight for good over evil. Unfortunately, good intentions matter little in a tragedy.

The situation, as Sirius explains in *Goblet*, “brings out the worst” in each of them in ways that are characteristic: Remus is reticent when he should be open, Sirius second-guesses and overthinks when he should trust, James trusts blindly when he should be discerning and clear-eyed about his friends, and Peter submits and follows when he should resist and stand up for himself and his friends. In other circumstances, some of these qualities may prove beneficial or even virtuous. James’s belief in his friends is admirable and Remus’s restraint is key to his empathy. Sirius’s remarkable ability to question his own assumptions enabled him to escape the snobbery and prejudice of his upbringing, as detailed in *Order*.<sup>10</sup> However, if there was ever a time for them to

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<sup>9</sup> Dumbledore’s at-times questionable leadership of the Order, with his well-documented inclination for “secrets and lies” (*Hallows* 562) even among allies, may also support the theory that the mistrust stemmed from the Marauders hiding things from each other. Dumbledore’s refusal to engage openly with Harry and Sirius in *Order* contributes to Sirius’s death. In *Prince*, Dumbledore sends Remus to live as a spy and recruiter among the werewolves, resulting in Remus’s near nervous breakdown and rifts with Tonks and Harry in *Hallows*. One imagines Dumbledore making similar mistakes in judgment in the First War.

<sup>10</sup> For the most part. Sirius never entirely escapes his Black upbringing, and his mistreatment of Kreacher contributes to another tragic downfall: his death at the end of *Order* (though there, as here, many different elements and contributors are at play).

resist their natural impulses, this was it. As such, character and action combined to fatal results. In short, they are all—as Remus says of their youthful adventuring—“carried away with [their] own cleverness” (*Prisoner* 355), unable to see the rot at the core of their relationship.

Even after the many revelations in *Prisoner*, there is much that is still not told. The lingering presence of untold stories is another of Tolkien’s essential criteria for the impression of depth. Sirius never explains why he believed Remus the spy: whether because of Sirius’s latent werewolf prejudice, Remus’s furtiveness, Peter’s manipulations, or something else entirely. Other questions suggest further untold tales: How did they discover Remus’s secret? How did they all become involved in the Order of the Phoenix, and what did Dumbledore have them do during the War? What were the circumstances which led to Peter’s treachery? Though a little more will be learned in subsequent books, their family histories also remain largely unexplored.

The intriguing story of the Whomping Willow Prank—in which Sirius told Snape how to get under the Willow so he could view the fully transformed Remus—is likewise left tantalizingly vague. Marauders/Potter fandom finds this untold tale particularly ripe for discussion, and many works of fanfiction and discussion board threads have been devoted to speculating on the characters’ motivations and the specific order and timing of events (Google searches for “Whomping Willow Prank” and “Whomping Willow Incident” produce tens of thousands of results).

The issue is further complicated by multiple accounts told by flawed characters with contradictory versions of the story. How does one justify Sirius’s attempt on a fellow student’s life, not to mention the exposure of his friend, and how could Remus forgive him? Snape’s charge of cold-blooded “murder” (391) may be an overstatement, but Remus’s chosen term of “trick” seems rather flippant (356). Sirius, for his part, considers his actions fair dues for Snape “hoping he could get [them] expelled” (356). Might the fallout from this event have contributed to tension between Sirius and Remus in the First War? What exactly did James know, and when? Snape believes that James knew of the Prank from the beginning and “got cold feet at the last moment” (285) while Remus contends that the Prank was Sirius’s idea alone, and James—“who’d heard what Sirius had done”—immediately ran to stop it (357).

Rowling, like Tolkien, knows that “it is better not to state everything”: She leaves readers wanting more but gives them the tools and clues to construct their own answers to these and other questions. This lack of information can prove stimulating to the imagination. Fans enjoy the work it takes to make the pieces fit logically and consistently. Often, fans are inspired to create their own transformative works in the form of fiction, art, essays, etc. to fill in the gaps or reconcile inconsistencies. This engagement invites and strengthens critical

thinking, as evidence must be sifted and supported by the text. Realism is not achieved by an author providing all the answers, for who has all the answers in life? Once again, the impression of depth creates the illusion that though there is a “true” version of these events, it must be, as Tolkien put it, “discovered or guessed from such evidence as there is” (*Letters* #268, p.354). The creation of backstory—richly suggestive but not overdeveloped—necessitates a delicate balance. Such untold stories, unfolding before and beyond the main narrative, are one of Rowling’s signature techniques for achieving depth and density in the *Potter* series.

#### CONCLUSION: “NEW UNATTAINABLE VISTAS”

*Prisoner* provides the first and clearest example of how the Marauders, as a group, create an impression of depth in the series. Harry starts the series as a lonely orphan who knows nothing of his own past or the Wizarding World to which he belongs. By the end of *Prisoner*, he has living, tangible connections to his own past and the family he lost so young. The climactic revelation of his stag Patronus serves as a symbol of the connection he has made to James through James’s best friends. Moving beyond their initial role as Secret-Keepers of the past, Sirius, Remus, and Peter go on to have dynamic character arcs of their own in the remaining four books.

Further study could be done on how Rowling continues, through these characters and beyond them, to utilize and develop the impression of depth in her world. The subsequent books demonstrate Rowling’s growing command of all the techniques outlined above, and it is no accident that at this point the world gets much bigger and darker: Starting in *Goblet*, Harry meets more diverse groups of witches and wizards, government and social institutions such as the Ministry of Magic and the Daily Prophet play a larger role, and detailed backstories of other major characters like Snape and Dumbledore prove vitally important. Tragedy and major character deaths become standard. Harry and his friends continue to mature and their understanding of the world allows for greater complexity in characterization. This sense of maturity starts in *Prisoner*, and the Marauders play a vital role in achieving it. Though Rowling is far from the first author to create the impression of depth in fiction, her proficiency with the techniques outlined in this paper has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series and the Marauders as fan-favorite characters, as well as introducing this device to those who might not have encountered it before, such as young or mainstream readers.

Tolkien fretted about the delicate balance necessary to sustain the impression of depth in fiction, recognizing it for the artifice it was. In a letter, he told one fan:

I am doubtful myself about the undertaking [of publishing further Middle-earth stories]. Part of the attraction of the [*Lord of the Rings*] is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed. (*Letters* #247, p.333)

More than ten years after the publication of *Hallows*, it may be hard for some fans to remember that there was a time when Rowling appeared to feel the same way. With the recent output of new *Harry Potter* content across many mediums—plays, prequel films, theme parks, *Pottermore* essays, interviews, tweets—some fear that in learning too much, some of the magic may be lost. For both readers and writers, it is useful to remember the beauty of the distant horizon, attainable only through the imagination. Rowling successfully conveyed this impression of depth in her *Harry Potter* novels. Her success in maintaining this depth in her spinoff projects depends on whether new unattainable vistas can be revealed once more.

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