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***Harry Potter and the Other; Race, Justice and Difference in the Wizarding World*, edited by Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and *Open at the Close: Literary Essays on Harry Potter*, edited by Cecelia Koncharr Farr**

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Abstract

This is a review of the book *Harry Potter and the Other; Race, Justice and Difference in the Wizarding World* edited by Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas.

of MacDonald's more unorthodox beliefs and how they actually fit into traditional interpretations of Christianity rather than being outlandish or *sui generis*, as is sometimes said about MacDonald's ideas. Moreover, this work demonstrates how MacDonald was both a visionary and also a man of his times, a voice of hope in a world that had gone dark, a reassuring presence in a world that seemed destined for chaos.

—James Hamby



HARRY POTTER AND THE OTHER: RACE, JUSTICE, AND DIFFERENCE IN THE WIZARDING WORLD. Edited by Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. University Press of Mississippi, 2022. 330 pp. **Hardcover:** 9781496840578, \$99.00; **paperback:** 9781496840561, \$25.00

OPEN AT THE CLOSE: LITERARY ESSAYS ON HARRY POTTER. Edited by Cecelia Koncharr Farr. University of Mississippi Press, 2022. 270 pp. **Hardcover:** 9781496839312, \$99.00; **paperback:** 9781496839329, \$25.00.

IN 2022 COMEDIAN ELEANOR DORTON posted an online skit in which she mentioned J.K. Rowling as “that author [who] goes after transgender lassies.” The pointed snub of Rowling’s famed literary efforts demonstrates how her reputation has cratered since 2020. Interestingly, the big reveal in that essay that cost Rowling her reputation is her discussion of personal experience of sexual assault. Had the piece been published three years earlier it might well have been commended by the #MeToo movement. But it was not, and Rowling’s misjudgement of public mood probably prevents her from ever making another public appearance. As actor Sebastian Croft explains that he signed to appear in a Potter video game back when doing so was socially acceptable (qtd. in Tinoco), who on Earth would risk hosting the witch herself?

This need not surprise anybody. Resistance to Harry Potter by a small number of Evangelicals made the story a rallying point for an awful lot of liberal secularists. And to paraphrase journalist Michael Kinsley, where conservatives seek converts, liberals police heresy. Sarah Park Dahlen and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s collection *Harry Potter and the Other* shows the best and worst of this methodology in action.

Anything with the phrase “and the Other” in the title runs the risk of devolving into an airing of grievances. It is to the credit of Dahlen, Thomas and their contributors that large parts of their book transcend this. Things lead off, for example, with Jackie Horne’s parsing of exactly how Harry enacts the anti-racism Rowling did her level best to write. Horne’s use of the distinction

between multicultural and “social justice” (Horne’s quotation marks) anti-racism in analysing Harry’s adventures is illuminating, showing how Harry’s heart is in the right place, but his actions fall short of a desired model of social interaction. There are readings of the Wizarding World beyond straightforward racial allegory, though I accept Lily Anne Welty Tamai and Paul Spickard’s observation in *Harry Potter and the Other* that Rowling seems to encourage the race angle. Given Horne’s critique, Jasmine Wade’s subsequent observation that Harry’s engagement with race is personal rather than institutional holds up. The links between the various chapters are explicit and constitute a significant strength of the book, creating an intriguing chain of closely-argued points. Dahlen and Thomas’s contributors build a strong collective case that Rowling botched her takes on some emotive topics.

As a *pakeha* I lack the *whakapapa* to comment on the gravity of the problems thus revealed. As neo-formalist critic, I can offer some thoughts. The Wizarding World is a Mendlesohnian trans-portal space; everybody there exists for Harry’s consideration; this is evident in nakedly alien names like Bellatrix Lestrange or Xenophilus Lovegood. Many of the problems identified in *Harry Potter and the Other* stem from Rowling’s gradual dismantling of the portal, her recasting of her world as part of the emotive history of our own. Her attempt to plop “Native American magic” into her stew of Halloween-store witchery and cod classicism, discussed at length in Dahlen and Thomas’s introduction, is a case in point. The important thing to note here is that Horne and Wade have moved me not to dismiss their concerns, but rather to employ my expertise to explain the miscalculations that caused them. That is, they have made their points in ways that invite further elaboration. That’s just good work. As a disabled person who took some nasty hits in the anti-fantasy fallout of the Satanic Panic, furthermore, I’ve been called enough names to appreciate Dahlen and Kallie Schell’s observation that the appellation “Cho Chang” recalls slurs levelled at people of East Asian *whakapapa*. Rowling should have worked harder on that one. A lot of this book is genuinely convincing.

Other contributors, however, evince a clear triumph of enthusiasm over technique. Charles D. Wilson’s critique of the undemocratic Ministry of Magic fails to account for the rich British tradition of polemically wonky fictional bureaucracies. An institution where Cornelius Fudge asks Percy Weasley for policy analysis on cauldrons is clearly one such. Decrying it as bad government is akin to sitting John Cleese down and explaining that a Ministry of Silly Walks would waste public money. Various contributors complain about the treatment of house-elves, which is equated with race slavery. The evidence is there. But are these creatures not numinous beings like the centaur Chiron, who also never got paid? Can readers who have met dragons, ghosts and unicorns really not accept brownies, *domovoi*, or other household helpers of

world folklore? The pressing problems with house-elves are surely that the subplot goes nowhere, muddies the charmingly Cockaigne-like feel of early-period Hogwarts where sandwiches grew on plates, and invites carping from those unmindful of Tolkien's point that applicability does not equal allegory. Tolonda Henderson, meanwhile, perceives transphobia in the methodologies of the Muggle-born Registration Commission. If Rowling were expressing such ideas in her work, consciously or otherwise, she would not attach them to a deplorable institution headed by a despicable villain. She would have made one of her evil aristocrats gender-fluid, just as she inveighed on the gutter press by creating Rita Skeeter. Rowling's grasp of queer theory may be iffy, but ignoring diegetic context to score a point highlights not her faults, but rather the critic's desire to find them.

What does such behaviour recall? Evangelicals prattling about Rowling promoting Satanism? Tolkien detractors trolling about the lack of post-war rapprochement with orcs? Dolores Umbridge, joining a witch hunt because "Harry Potter bad actually" articles make even better career capital than they used to? These comparisons all seem inflammatory. One helpful parallel, however, is the *Twilight* hate of the late 2000s. YouTuber Lindsay Ellis analysed that discourse in 2018. She showed how legitimate complaints about Stephanie Meyer's novels degenerated into bullying which revealed less about the faults of a patchy wish-fulfilment story than the willingness of ostensibly sensible, compassionate people to join a mob. The excuse for this behavior—that Meyer's readers would jump off cliffs to court male attention—rang hollow, because teenage girls aren't stupid. Similarly, Harry Potter has, to my knowledge, inspired roughly as many incidents of transphobia as it has black masses. Ellis, herself undone by bad-faith criticism in 2021, ended her excellent video by apologising to Meyer for joining the *Twilight* pile-on. I make no predictions about what Rowling's vivisectors will be saying in 2030, but I look forward to hearing it.

The book also highlights but never addresses what must be the key point in Rowling studies—what did she get right? How did her seemingly straightforward assemblage of tropes and structures come to define the daydreams of a generation? This issue is relevant to the discourse of *Harry Potter and the Other*. A whole section of the book is given over to #BlackHermione, the grassroots meditations on the racial identity of the Golden Trio's bushy-haired distaff component. Racebent Potter art is a fascinating aspect of Rowling fandom and Kathryn Coto's discussion thereof is a high point of this collection. Although Coto mentions that fan art springs partly from a "fannish love of canonical works" (120), she does not account for that love. If Hogwarts offered nothing to readers of color, they would presumably have binned Rowling's books, bought enough *Poppy War* sweaters to make R.F. Kuang a billionaire, and lined up

outside Universal Studios' *Broken Earth* theme park. Instead, as Thomas observes, they "read themselves into" Hogwarts (189), augmenting it with experiences Rowling overlooked. For all Rowling's lapses there is clearly something about this place that transcends demographics. What that might be nobody here says. In a sense, therefore, the volume fails to address the essential query of literary criticism—"What makes this book so great?"—even as it begs the question.

So is this a negative review? No; large parts of this book are strong indeed. Horne's and Coto's chapters may prove central to their topics and would be recommended reading for those charged with making Rowling's lifestyle brand as woke as she clearly wanted her story to be. But other contributions lapse into exactly the sort of indignation for indignation's sake that makes *woke* such a contentious term. And watching Rowling scholars demand specific topical virtues from a story whose core appeal seems to be its transcendence of specificity and topicality is frankly exhausting. Will those scholars be quoting this book in ten years' time? Quite possibly. Will I be among them? That would surprise me.

I SPENT LATE 2021 WRITING A PAIR OF ARTICLES examining the Harry Potter novels. Reviews came back asking that they be revised. One reviewer was especially adamant that my analysis could not be published until it was made "less positive" in light of Rowling's stance on transgenderism.

I struggle with this. I do not wish to defend Rowling's comments, which are unhelpful contributions a sensitive discussion. But I put aside my habit of op-ed punditry because I (eventually) found the "thing bad" commentary it characteristically involves (Rowling's remarks being an apt example) less enjoyable than the "thing good" trend of academia. Which question, really, is more interesting? How an author turned an old-fashioned literary formula into a lush, polysemous narrative of resilience, redemption and *humanitas* which enraptured and edified a generation? Or how an author made some tone-deaf remarks about transgenderism and handled the resulting backlash very badly? The latter is grist for the mill of gender theory, but as a scholar of fantasy I find it a limiting focus. Investigation of the defining literary phenomenon of the last quarter-century is poorly served by contracting the discussion to affronted itemisations of the author's shortcomings as a public intellectual.

As interested parties move forward into the post-2020 era, therefore, the title of Cecilia Konchar Farr's collection *Open at the Close* seems promising. It suggests the field may re-dilate, that new strengths, topics and angles of study remain to be discovered in the wake of an unpleasant watershed in Rowling studies. Farr certainly emphasizes a belief this is possible in her introduction.

The Potter books are “exceptionally good” (xiii), she insists; they are popular “because they *deserve* to be” (xvi). The book does a reasonable job of proving her point, though some contributors seem to be pursuing other, contradictory arguments.

The essays are divided into two sections, one dealing with close-readings and the other with socio-political contextualizations. Both sections contain individual contributions that follow through on the promise with which I have speculatively imputed the title, sometimes in ways that dovetail productively with the introduction. Emily Strand’s essay on Rowling’s prose style is a case in point. She effectively observes that much of the criticism levelled at Rowling’s prose style stems less from sincere criticism than from hand-wringing about the popularity of a work which eludes exclusionary standards of literary merit. It would be interesting to link this up with the discussions on Potter fanfic in Farr’s introduction. Rowling’s fans have been hyperactive in modern fanfic circles; do they imitate her style, and to what effect? There is a book in that, perhaps linking the content of Rowling’s work to its capacity as one of the central texts of online fan culture. Similarly, Beatrice Groves’s observation of commonalities between the presented cultures in Rowling’s work and that of her formative influence Jane Austen seem to open the way for further discussion. The parallels between the two authors’ presentations of gossip, reading culture, and texts-within-texts could be jumping-off points for thoroughly interesting essays, or perhaps a collection thereof. Meanwhile John Granger’s investigation of the applicability of Russian formalism to Rowling’s work (interestingly going beyond the Potter cycle to examine her subsequent whodunnits) is essentially, and potentially, a call for some in-depth application of that methodology. If, as in the sciences, the central purpose of literary research is to spur and support further research, there is plenty here for scholars to get cracking on. And if the mark of a good book is, as one of my colleagues once suggested, is that it will support multiple readings, this content neatly vindicates Farr’s introductory assessment of her subject text.

After an intermediary contribution from Patrick McCauley, the second section begins with Kate Glassman’s reappraisal of Minerva McGonagall’s role at Hogwarts. This may be the high point of the collection. Glassman itemises the depth of McGonagall’s pastoral involvement with Harry and argues compellingly that this relationship outstrips the boy’s much-vaunted involvement with Dumbledore—a robust example of “thing good” criticism. Thereafter, however, the section consists mostly of articles querying issues of representation, politics, and public morality at Hogwarts. Jonathan A Rose, revisiting the link between lycanthropy and homosexuality, extends it by observing the condition’s similarities to other “non-normative or nonconforming” states and questioning wizard society’s marginalisation of

Remus Lupin (164). Keridiana Chez considers cruelty to dragons, gnomes and blast-ended skrewts, observing an apparent authorial endorsement of limits on Harry's "humane performances" (176). Not such a nice lad after all, it seems. Juliana Valadão Lopes applies Marxist theory to the question of whether "all was well" if the series ends with Kreacher bringing Harry a sandwich. Well, about time. And Lauren R. Camacci takes issue with Rowling's application of animal imagery to villains like Peter Pettigrew and Dolores Umbridge. I'm as appalled as anyone. Excuse me while I burn my Ravenclaw scarf.

I do not, jokes aside, mean to dismiss the analyses published in this book. Nor do I wish to give a book a bad review because it ventures into areas not to my aforementioned taste. But Rowling studies is a peculiar discourse, one populated by critics who claim to cherish and revere the subject text and yet are constantly tying themselves in knots over its perceived faults. Tremendous energy goes into "thing bad" approaches to this tale, into looking for lapses in Rowling's creativity and reporting them in remarkably judgemental terms. Consider Camacci's criticism of the way Rowling employs the beauty bias by making her villains animalistic. Indulging tropes is not a crime. Tropes allow readers to understand stories. Literary impact comes from employing tropes, arranging them and adapting them for fresh effect—for example, combining the antiquated *topos* of the British school romp with the hackneyed iconography of dime-store Halloween witchery so that readers, confronted with a walk-in representation of the result, weep for joy (xiv). Camacci nevertheless frames her subject as a dramatic authorial lapse, invoking the dark spectres of phrenology and physiognomy in her indictment of a writer for, essentially, characterising her characters. The Potter cycle, the "enchanting" (xiv) masterpiece in which a generation of critics repeatedly claim to have found their cultural home, is perennially on trial, accused with exhausting regularity of endorsing one dismaying, dank notion after another. Philip Pullman seldom faces such scrutiny. Yet Rowling studies often leaves me feeling like Terry Pratchett's Ridcully as his staff discuss Hogswatch—looking into this field is "like watching someone kick apart a doll's house" (*Hogfather* 190)—and *Open at the Close* continues that trend.

Where does this hyper-vigilance come from? An answer lies, I suspect, in the initial reception of Rowling's work. The ire that some conservative Christian groups expressed towards Harry Potter very quickly assumed undue importance in many people's perceptions of the phenomenon. Where I live there is a widespread perception that these groups somehow succeeded in suppressing the tale. "Harry Potter is banned in America" has long since made the jump from comic hyperbole to broadly serious supposition—voiced, for example, by friends who sought to dissuade me from attending Mythcon 2010. Rowling fandom has thus become a badge of secular liberal credibility, a

redoubt against social or religious conservatism. To some this is central to its appeal. A friend of mine maintains that Rowling's work changed their life by putting them in touch with people who run counter-demonstrations against social conservatives. Another insists he enjoyed the film of *The Goblet of Fire* because it "annoyed the Bible-thumpers." Isn't that Pullman's job? Never mind that most Christians seem to have few problems with Rowling (the conservative parents I mix with made a family project of the Hogwarts-themed birthday party their daughter asked for) and that those who do seldom get their way (in 2010 the Dallas-Fort Worth airport was festooned in advertising for *The Deathly Hallows*). The notion of Christian conservatism as monolithically and successfully opposed to Rowling quickly turned her work into a rallying point, and indeed boot camp, for progressives and secularists.

There are worse fans to have. Any following slows down a discussion, however, if it assumes its focus should embody ideals with which it is associated only via unintended, questionable, extra-textual conceit. To the considerable extent that Harry Potter is a wish-fulfilment story, it fulfils wishes for tapdancing pineapples, evil aristocrats, colourful godparents, slumber-party colloquia about how he totally should have married Luna you guys, and incisively well-structured Tolkienian Recoveries of moral courage in extremis. That's not a bad haul. It seems frankly greedy to also demand impeccable rehearsals of topical social desiderata, especially from a sympathetic caricature of a Victorian boarding school (institutions not noted as bastions of social justice). This is not to say that readers should not observe, for example, Rowling's clumsiness in diversifying the Hogwarts student body. But if we go looking for trouble, denouncing, for example, the Wizarding World's treatment of werewolves as transphobic because Lupin loses self-control once a month (Rose 163), we reveal more about ourselves than our subject—the one great hallmark of poor criticism. Such eisegesis will not support Farr's suggestion that these books deserve their popularity. In *Open at the Close* Tolanda Henderson makes a worthwhile contribution to the discussion of the current rupture between Rowling and her fans. But working to rules a story never intended to express, and to which the author never signed up, will not convert the sceptics that Emily Strand answers in her contribution to the book.

A review must explain four things—what the subject is, where it succeeds, where it fails, and whether it is any good. *Open at the Close* is a book of essays about Harry Potter. It reveals fresh insights into this remarkable phenomenon, and the essays I enjoyed are not the only ones likely to be of considerable use to scholars in the field. But it also indulges the habitual "thing bad" preoccupations that make me wonder if this is the field for me. It is in short a fairly typical book of Rowling criticism, fulfilling its editorial contentions more

in concept—demonstrating by its existence that this topic merits and supports discussion—than in execution which often seems to be arguing against them.

For my part I have a mind to put aside Rowling and move on to a less reviled subject. I'm currently brushing up an essay on H.P. Lovecraft.

—Joseph Rex Young

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THE MEDIEVAL MIND OF C.S. LEWIS: HOW GREAT BOOKS SHAPED A GREAT MIND. Jason M. Baxter. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2022. 167 p. 9781514001646. \$22.00.

FANS OF C. S. LEWIS THE ERUDITE EXPOSITOR of Christian doctrines and weaver of intricate imaginative tales often forget, or simply never knew, that Lewis devoted his professional life to the study and teaching of medieval and renaissance literature. *Mere Christianity* and *Narnia* enjoy far greater popularity than *The Allegory of Love* or *Sixteenth Century Literature: Excluding Drama*. In his new book, *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind*, Jason Baxter contends that Lewis's interest in the medieval world extended well beyond his scholarly vocation, pervading every aspect of his life and output:

Lewis is [a] writer who spent so much time studying medieval tales and arguments, ancient grammar and vocabulary, premodern rhetoric and the rhythmic flow of ancient speech that he could barely formulate an argument, write a letter, offer a word of consolation, or weave a fictional story of his own without opening up the dam and letting all the old ideas and emotions, stored up in his memory by long reading, break forth. (6)

Baxter identifies the medieval thought and practices, and many of the specific medieval authors and texts, just below the surface in Lewis's popular writings and argues that Lewis "was not a successful modernizer of Christianity and writer of fiction despite the fact that he spent so much time studying old, dusty books, but *because of them*" (6).