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Harry Potter and Proust's Magic Key

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It was the fall after we graduated law school when my friend Liz introduced me to Harry Potter. I had passed the bar exam and was about to begin my first grown-up litigation job. Then came J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, like a parchment Hogwarts' envelope holding an invitation to escape my suddenly cramped existence into a playful, magical world.

When I first read *The Philosopher's Stone*, it inflamed my nostalgia in the starkly divided sense of the word's etymology—'nosta' meaning home or return, 'algia' meaning pain. First came fleeting sensations of warmth for the stories I read in my childhood, whose well-worn tropes form the pastiche of Rowling's novels. There was also pain, like a wound, at thoughts of their irretrievability and of the complicated response I had to my parents' elitist reading values. My relationship with *Harry Potter* was less with the story than with these tentative memories. I assumed we would remain, at most, casual pals. In fact, and to my amazement, *Harry Potter* has changed my life.

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Marcel Proust alluringly observes that books do not provide us with answers, but rather leave us with 'provocations' (27). Almost teasingly, he explores how a novel may inspire even our laziest of minds to awaken our inner selves. A book does more than place us in a 'dialogue' with its author, it may also serve as a 'psychotherapist' or, more befitting my situation, as a 'magic key' that opens 'the door deep inside us to the dwelling places we would not otherwise have known how to reach' (27). Seeking to unwind some of the ideas inherent in Proust's metaphor using the tools of recent, innovative scholarship, I planned to write this as an academic piece that would critically address the adult's idiosyncratic mutability in the hands of children's books. As my ideas coalesced, however, I found myself compelled to begin with one of my own stories, the one that follows, and to close with a brief, critical analysis. It was, after all, through my reflections on the abstraction of the interior garden that I was able to recognise nuances of this interior, adult experience. I hope in this way to better demonstrate how meaning may be made, and even how our identities may be altered, when we engage with the outsides of books, with our internalised cultural discourses, our sensory experience, and our witness of the meanings that others take from the books' insides.[1]

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When my son was born, a friend gifted us hundreds of his own childhood books. And so, it began. Almost as soon as he understood words, Sage was drawn to the piles in the corners of each room. Some days he would imprison me on the sofa for hours. If I would shift, he would wave a hand and chant, "Don't worry, Mamma, just read, read. Don't worry, Mamma, just read". When one cover closed, another magical object immediately took its place.

Readers often have a sensory relationship with their books as much as they do with the story inside – cherishing the feel of the dimples in a hard cover, the smell of the pages of an old, family favourite, the colourful chaos of crowded shelves. For more than a decade of my adulthood mine were with my children's books. Snuggling under a blanket, touching lines of pictures, reading aloud or back and forth, wrapping stories and phrases into our family experiences, these interactions outside the stories worked in tandem with my shifting understand-

1 The author's children have given their permission for their names, words and ideas to appear in this piece.

ing of the books through my varied physical interactions and my children's responses.

I also 'read', somewhat, my children's pleasure. My perceptions filtered through my underlying aspirations for their future reading habits and public reading selves. By the time my son was seven and introduced himself independently to *Harry Potter*, I had judged the series and found it wanting and childish. Of course, the fact that my son started to read the series when he was just seven should have mitigated a judgment of childishness. Yet, I had essentialised the link between children and stories, seeing (and preferring) a relationship of indoctrination rather than of independent inner growth.

I do not believe I was alone in looking at my children as something like passive receptacles—and at myself as having the power to determine what to fill them with. Countless newspaper articles pound home studies suggesting parents should read aloud, display books prominently at home, and themselves read as often and openly as possible, all so that their children will come to enjoy reading and reap its seeming cultural and academic benefits. The books we read to our children are often full of bookish characters such as Arrietty, Matilda and, of course, Hermione, heroes who reinforce this cultural message, convincing us of our righteousness. Indeed, the research of almost countless children's literature theorists including M.O. Grenby, Peter Hollindale, Jaqueline Rose, and John Stephens demonstrates that the children's literature industry is fundamentally structured to position the adult as a gatekeeper and ideological enforcer as they write, publish, and share books with (or impose them upon) young people.

Even though mine and my children's most intimate connection extended from our shared embeddedness in narrative, my myopic perception of *Harry Potter* left me uninterested in reading the series aloud. I wanted to avoid the idea that it is a hero's heredity and birth—rather than hard work—that leads to success, a message that flew in the face of values I hoped he would internalise. Worse still, in my mind, were themes of (dis)obedience and rule-breaking, which were the subject of an extraordinary level of public debate.

In short, I did not approve of my son's new crush. I hate remembering this now, so in brief: he asked me, daily, to read the stories to him. I told him, honestly, that he was a good enough reader to read them on his own. He did. Our shared reading time decreased.

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The next year we went on a cross-country trip in a motorhome. I bought my son a Kindle, which allowed him to leave his stacks of novels behind. But it also freed him to feed his seemingly insatiable appetite for other novels about magic, further whetted by the endless supply of these he found through a Kindle Unlimited subscription. He totes an e-reader along with him even today, at 16, and always has at least two books going at a time.

The more broadly he read, the better he became at explaining what he liked about *Harry Potter*. He started with: "I like magic, Mamma. It's fun."

"Harry and his friends don't ever try to follow the rules, though," I would respond, "even when it might stop the bad guys sooner."

"But the grown-ups can't always be trusted, Mama. They should know what's going on. But it's left up to Harry."

Somehow, my adult values had buried memories of my own childhood excitement at the mutinies and guile of characters I loved. I overlooked that the testing of my values I still experience when I read fantasy was the relationship I truly wanted my children to experience through their books. This realization recalled for me one of my own childhood favourites, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and I recognised myself as Sauron when Frodo claims the One Ring:

> [T]he magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. Then his wrath blazed in a consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him. For he knew his deadly peril and the thread upon which his doom now hung (981).

Sage is getting something from these books, I realised. More painful still, as he observed of the adults in the Rowling's series: *I didn't see what's going on. I'd left it up to him.*

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I signed up for a course in Twentieth Century English Literature when we returned home. My goal was to justify my opinions about *Harry Potter* or – and this seemed unlikely – find a place of peace with my son's enjoyment of them. One assignment was to conduct a literature review and build a thesis. The professor said *Harry Potter* was a fine choice.

I started with searches such as 'morality in *Harry Potter*', 'child obedience in *Harry Potter*', expecting to find my thesis there. But they called up a more diverse range of ideological, historical, and psychological criticisms than I imagined could exist. The 2001 'postscript' to Margaret and Michael Rustin's *Narratives of Love and Loss*, in particular, remains with me: "Harry can be lazy, mean-spirited, and jealous as well as brave, generous, capable of huge effort, loyal, and so on. This is the point: Harry Potter is Everyman…" (287). To find an 'everyman' in a story, aligned with the reader and with whom he can identify, is a doorway into story and self. My son had a reason to find himself in Harry and, perhaps, find hope that he might, too, lead a meaningful life. This realization cast my project adrift, as it now seemed both naïve and dismissive of my son's experience.

I was, at that time, still an attorney, and I was intrigued to now recognise that, some degree, Rowling's stories are about the law. As one critic of law and literature argued: "Harry's world is governed by a detailed and deeply flawed legal regime. Laws, laws, and legal structures appear in nearly every chapter" (Schwabach 310). My thesis ultimately was borne of my son's love for the Imperius Curse, and I proposed to investigate how wizards use spells to protect their lives or defend their property and how these ethics aligned, or not, with theories of self-defense in moral philosophy and human rights law. I was hooked, and I began in earnest to research routes to further studies in children's literature.

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My daughter was never made a victim of my *Harry Potter* prejudices. Like so many parents, I came around to reading the *Harry Potter* series straight through and, at each ending, reading it again. Soon, it was part of her and my own interior, daily life.

The week of 18 October four years ago, I was reading *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* aloud. At that time, my enchanting, nonagenarian grandmother lived in a nursing home thousands of miles from us, distant from me also due to dementia. Just after midnight her nurse called. "You may want to come, Rachel. I don't think she will last the day." I took the first morning flight and arrived in late afternoon. It was a lovely fall day, a kind we do not have in San Diego. I remember sitting beside my grandmother, looking out at deciduous trees with their orange and brown leaves, and holding her fragile, crooked fingers. She did not know I was there. Late that evening, the nurse came to tell me she thought I should go get a few hours of rest. My grandmother would not go quite yet.

So, after a snack and a crucial, quick shower at the hotel, I sat on the floor beside the bed and called my family. *The Goblet of Fire* had accompanied me to Missouri so I might continue to read over the phone. I was put on speaker, and I made my way through a chapter or two. It comforted me and, maybe, all of us. Eventually, I closed the book, ready to snatch an hour of sleep. The phone rang. While I was reading, my grandmother had died. "I am so sorry, Rachel, I never would have told you to leave if I thought..."

I rushed back and placed a last kiss on her rose-petal, cooling cheek. My husband says she died when I was gone because she didn't want me to see, and I prefer to imagine that is true.

It is all too common for an experience with literature to transport us not only into memories but also into even the tiniest sensations we knew—the sight of colours, the smells, the touch on our skin, and the sounds—and their conjoined emotions. This has been referred to this as the 'Proust effect', derived from Proust's anecdote of how the taste of a madeleine cake recalled his childhood sensations (Van Campen 2). The knowledge that I was reading *The Goblet of Fire* while my grandmother died has imprinted that day's sense memories deep within me. It is rare that I see one of the hardback novels without recalling the interplay of the shadows in my hotel room with the shadowy cover art, or without feeling the dry, ruffle-edged pages on my fingertips, so much more rough, thick, and durable than my grandmother's soft, tissue-paper skin.

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I don't remember when we stopped reading *Harry Potter* aloud. But this meant the shared reading time with my daughter, too, was now spent separately, and the loss of the joy and embodied pleasure in the experience was a physical ache. I can still call up the how I once had to nudge my daughter a few inches to the side as we cuddled up in her bed, giving me space to turn the page. And the tickling feeling, high in my chest, as I slid into the voices of Aunt Petunia, and Fred and George Weasley. Of my popping eyes as I trilled "Pus, Finnigan, pus!" as Pomona Sprout while reading *Goblet of Fire*. The physical meanings made for me when I read aloud "became a part of the body" (Klinkenborg np.) resulting in an experience entirely different than that when I read silently to myself. Not only would my choice of cadence and emphasis require me to interact with the books as a unified whole, but the words I would read were no longer "mere words. They are the breath and mind, perhaps even the soul, of the person who is reading"

(Klinkenborg np.). When my children moved on, my body and, so to speak, my soul were diminished.

My son had discovered Chinese fantasy, Wu Xia and Xian Xia, which still hold him, transfixed, on his Kindle. My ever-in-motion daughter had been gifted *Harry Potter*'s audiobook versions and she, too, was off. For months, every day, she would wander with headphones on while bouncing rubber balls, drawing with chalk on sidewalks, mixing food colouring, and smushing and squeezing putty into nonsensical shapes.

As she replaced the warm, side-by-side acoustics of reading together, she heard a different story than I knew, wrapped in her own somatic, mutable, very private space. It was as if my daughter sliced and squeezed the novels she had read to fit her liminal self and beliefs. As she listened to her audiobooks, she would fast-forward past sections she did not like. "If a character I care about doesn't get enough attention" she said, "I skip until I get to their part." So, Angelina Johnson and Fred and George Weasley became heroes in a story of her own creation. She was a literary editor, crafting a "customized edition" (Littau 34) of Rowlings' creations.

It is no surprise, then, that she next turned to its fan fiction, which allowed her to choose the genres and plots for the characters that befitted her shifting values. At some point, Adelaide's ever-decreasing affection for Harry Potter as written overlapped with her increasing interest in political commentary she encountered on the internet, creations that "draw upon the same literary and analytical tools and techniques the pros employ" (Markey-Butler 132). She followed a "citizen critic" (Markey-Butler 132) who engaged in predominantly intersectional and queer criticisms of popular culture. This woman dismantled racist and sexist tropes in a range of stories, including Harry Potter. She seemed to encourage Adelaide to search out her own positions on our cultural assumptions and ideologies, including those that interrogate how an author's personal positions influence her personal enjoyment. In contrast to my daughter, my son remains devoted to the series because of the nostalgia he feels and the reading life the series inspired, he says. So, thanks in large part to Harry, debates about the importance of the creator's personal values, and of shifting cultural, ideological understandings to the personal experiences of art remain fiery in our home.

All of Sage and Adelaide's experiences with *Harry Potter* existed outside of my own reading world and within a world that was inaccessible from mine. At risk of confusing my point with layered metaphors, I nonetheless cannot avoid the words of Ernesto Sabato's *El Túnel*, whose power has remained with me for

decades. In reflecting on my relational experience with my children and their books, I felt I was walking in a tunnel, "one tunnel, dark and lonely, mine, the tunnel in which I had spent my childhood, my youth, my whole life" (Sabato 220). Like his protagonist, I was at best able to peer out of my mental isolation "[a]nd in one of those transparent lengths of the stone wall I had seen this girl and had gullibly believed that she was travelling another tunnel parallel to mine, when in reality she belonged to the broad world…" (Sabato 220). What inner worlds was Adelaide's sensory integration of the *Harry Potter* audiobooks opening for my daughter? Was she releasing in staccato the tension wound up by the story? Developing spells? Concocting potions for Snape's class? Or simply creating a physical distance from a story that had started to disappoint her? I have my own relationship with audiobooks, but hers and her subsequent editing of the series was distinctly tied to her kinetic and liminal, private self.

My children had been given their own magic keys and made uniquely mutable through the act and meaning of reading these books. At most, as I mention above, I have been able to 'read' their experience. For me, as for other readers and at unexpected points in time it makes "no difference what we read" (Hesse 105), rather we may find that "the design in a rug or the arrangement of the stones in a wall would be of exactly as great a value...as the most beautiful page full of the best-arranged letters" (Hesse 105). I have integrated what I read of my children's physical and creative uses of *Harry Potter* into my understandings of the stories, my identity, and literary criticism or theory. Their story has been like a Proustian provocation, leading me to questions about the reading experience much more than to answers about myself or the stories themselves, and to my current research interests.

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My children have loved, hated, read, argued about, rewritten, touched, listened to, and spun throughout the world with *Harry Potter*. In turn, I have witnessed, held, embodied, wept, remembered, learned, and irrevocably changed as they did so. I find something of my relational experience and my project within these lovely words of Proust:

> Intending to speak about reading, I have spoken of everything but books, because it is not of books that reading has spoken to me. But maybe the memories it has given back to me, one after the other, will have awakened

> in the reader, with all these delays on flowered and winding paths, to recreate in his own mind – the original psychological act called Reading, and has done so with enough force to enable him now to follow, as though within himself, the various reflections which remain for him... (18)

Many of us recognise the experiential potency of recalled words we love, much as in my case here. Yet, I found on my "flowered and winding path" that the inside of a book is only part of that story. Certainly, memories of words we have encountered in our lives emerge in our present experiences, creating meanings far removed from their literary contexts. As much as this, reading is relational. Thus, it changes us through its place in our lives, in juxtaposition with past reading, and as we perform the reading act in dialogue with the cultural discourses that we frame ourselves within. And this relational book use is itself a magic key leading us to our mutable places within us.

CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

As I write in the first paragraphs of this piece, my original plan was to frame this as an academic article that sits amid current scholarship about readers and meaning, and to interrogate ways that adult readers may be changed through their exposure to children's books as adults. Of course, this methodology was flawed from the start. As I attempt to illustrate, reading is not a purely intellectual act whereby we assess the ideologies in a text, coldly accept or reject an author's ideas, or find and appreciate beauty as an abstraction assessed by the mind only. Proust makes this point elegantly in the expansive notes that precede his translation of John Ruskin, upon which I centre my current piece. Ruskin, Proust writes, considered reading to be an intellectual act by which the reader might engage in a mental dialogue with lofty thinkers from time immemorial (20). Proust himself, on the other hand, views reading as a highly personal and interior process that cannot be divorced from our emotions and experiences (23-27).

Proust's ideas, as I suggest above, have come home with force in recent literary scholarship. In a study tracing the place of the reader's body in the reading experience, Karin Littau powerfully captured this idea, arguing that broad swaths of academia have erred in employing a vertical hierarchy of analysis, viewing the mind as eclipsing the body. She proposes instead a horizontal spectrum, with waypoints of mind and body sitting in the fluid space along it, as a more apt

model (154-155). Innovative scholarship that investigates groups of regular readers using cultural studies methodologies and oral histories echo this idea, opening the door for my process. This scholarship, which lies at the intersection of literary criticism, cultural studies, memory work, and, in some cases, children's literature studies, reveals that there is seemingly no end to the strands of meaning we can take, as readers and as academics, from a living, breathing, experiential reading life.

Some of these studies have revealed how our memories (and forgetting) of childhood reading leave traces that make meaning when they collide with new experiences and with adult re-readings (Waller 189-190). The act of reading in our daily lives reveals something of the cultural discourses we value, as these are wound in, and inextricable from, our understanding of the role of our culturally defined identities in how, what, and where we read (Trower et al. 555-559). In fact, the circumstances of reading books as a young person, our interactions with the physical book, and elements of the text may all entwine with these cultural messages and play a role in our adult self-narrative (Pyke 245-247). As we read and re-read, we vacillate among our hermeneutic uses of the text and our various interior selves. Thus we uncover the mutability within, between, and among our personal ideologies and visceral pleasures, our memories and lived experiences, and our emotions and intellects (Pearce 3-30). In short, no two readers—adult or child—respond to texts in the same ways or for the same reasons (Felski 21), and our engagement with other people and linked book experiences complicate and entice our understandings of these responses.

Such projects imply that to directly address the mutability of self as we adults encounter children's books – as readers ourselves rather than as teachers of literacy—we must dig into our personal experience. Thus, my project inevitably mutated. After all, it was my memories and my narrative that helped me to understand how the existing theory is wrapped up with Proust's. I decided to lean toward the innovative work of Francis Spufford who, in The Child that Books Built—essentially a critical autoethnography—describes his highly personal, childhood reading landscape in conjunction with literary, cultural, and psychological scholarship. My argument here likewise demands a blended approach, and also an inverted one, linking my story with the words of theorists and beloved writers that have helped me to follow the path of my understanding whilst moving the pure theory to the side. This styling likewise demonstrates how a personal tale can reveal the tangled exterior experience of books and reading is wrapped with sticky threads of cultural influences, personal understand-

ings, and embodied experience. My own PhD thesis seeks to extend this methodology to readers other than myself through an oral history, where I attempt to trace individual readers' personal narratives of books and reading as they reflect, augment, and shift the broad areas of scholarship with which they may connect.

It has been said that "[e]very object touched by [a] loved being's body becomes part of that body, and the subject eagerly attaches himself to it" (Barthes 173). In this fashion, I find myself attached to *Harry Potter*, a series I do not particularly like, due to the ways that my children experienced the stories in their various mediations. Their interactions were, at best, visible to me on the surface. Thus, my meaning-making was less through the words and stories themselves, but was filtered through my memories of reading and the other writers' words that have been important to me, my physical experience, the cultural discourses of motherhood, and, most crucially, my 'reading' of my children. In this way, Rowling's books became a surprising magic key as it was wielded and turned primarily by the hands of others. In this way, I can sincerely say, adopting and pluralizing the phrase: 'These books changed me'.

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