

A Beautiful and Terrible Thing

By Jae Pujols

If a complete stranger walked into my home today (or at least at the time I'm writing this), they would see a bit of a disaster still unfolding. They would see stacks of unpacked boxes and piles of paper that once protected my most delicate possessions. As they turned toward the living room, they would also see a wall of bare bookcases, even missing their adjustable shelves that all sit in a corner somewhere, hiding behind the stacks of boxes. Then, in the middle of all this madness, they would see a little over twenty printer paper boxes, all collected from the various departments I am connected to on campus, and they would all be labeled in black Sharpie with the same five letters, the same simple word: BOOKS.

Upon seeing this and realizing the magnitude of this discovery, a reasonable human being would assume that I love to read and always have. Especially if they heard of the numerous boxes of books I have donated over the years to my mother's classroom library or of the many plastic bins in storage full of children's stories from my childhood. However, this incredibly logical assumption would be half wrong. In fact, I hated reading up until sixth grade. Every year my elementary school would hold a parade for all the kids who read a certain number of books over the summer, and while I was always in it, the path to me getting there was always torture. My mother sending me to my room to read felt like punishment (to my dramatic elementary school brain, it was pure agony).

So, what happened in sixth grade? How did we get to the point where stacks of boxes of books, waiting to be unpacked, are congesting this space that marks my new beginning? Well, the simple answer is that *Harry Potter* happened. Now, most of my friends and peers read the series well before me. My mom read each of the books within months of their release, devouring

them before my eyes. And she even tried to get me to read them, but I couldn't make it past the first chapter of *The Sorcerer's Stone*: I just hated it so much (I know, blasphemy) although I don't really remember why. But the second time around, the outcome was much different. I remember reading the series in my mother's classroom after school and all but shouting at her to leave me alone because I was reading (and getting in trouble for raising my voice at my mother). I remember getting in trouble in literature class for not-so-stealthily reading the series instead of listening to my teacher. I remember devouring *The Order of the Phoenix* in the car during the hour-long car ride to my grandma's house, weeping in the back of the Jeep as Sirius left Harry forever. I remember the countless other series and stories that I have devoured in the years since (and I still get just as grumpy when I'm interrupted). I can't imagine where I would be if my mom hadn't all but shoved *The Sorcerer's Stone* down my throat like a bezoar. I can't imagine what my life (or my apartment) would look like if I had never discovered how much I love to read and how much I love being transported to worlds so very different from my own (and I can't imagine how much easier moving would be, but you win some and you lose some).

I remember my mom and I going to the library so she could return *The Deathly Hallows*. It was some time the same year it came out. I was sitting in the front seat, clutching the book as she drove, and I remember reading the epilogue. I hadn't yet read any of the other books and didn't know anything about the story, but I remember Harry talking to Dumbledore. That's all I remember. So, as I began reading the books I continued to think of that scene. Then, a few months into seventh grade, I reached *The Half-Blood Prince* and my mom warned me that someone was going to die at the end. Thinking back I realize that she did this because the summer before seventh grade started, my grandfather died. I remember going back and forth with her asking who it was, but I was adamant about the one person I knew it couldn't be. I

remembered Harry talking to Dumbledore in the epilogue of the seventh book, so I at least knew the head wizard was safe. Imagine my heartbreak and despair when I reached that scene. You know the one. I was absolutely unprepared for Dumbledore to die. Let's just say I cried a lot. But nevertheless, I finished the series shortly after and (angrily) reread the epilogue and realized the mistake I made in recalling that discussion. Overall, I was pleased with the ending, although still raw from all of the characters we lost along the way. I was very grateful that my mom finally pushed me to go on this particular adventure.

Like Harry in the epilogue, I'm grateful for where I am, and I can't imagine not having gone on this adventure with him and the other inhabitants of Hogwarts, but I'm full of bittersweet feelings about the series and especially the author. I would like to say that my love for Harry Potter remains true and untainted, always and unwavering, but that just isn't the case. I have begun to question my feelings towards both the series and its creator. In recent years, I have begun to question both my identity and how I fit into the world around me, and I have become painfully aware of how some feel about "people like me." I have recently realized that I am trans, and this realization happened around the time that J. K. Rowling broke Twitter as she tweeted in fervent support of a transphobic person. The trans community (and the queer community as a whole) had known for a long time how she felt, but it had always been subtle and more convenient to ignore than confront.

Like many people in the queer community, my identity is very personal to me and a huge part of who I am. Coming to terms with it has been a very long and difficult process. There is so much fear and internalized shame involved in the process that sometimes it feels like it would be easier to ignore it all. Watching Rowling's words explode all over Twitter was like getting stabbed in the heart, and it felt like my childhood was being ripped away from me like the chill

of a dementor's kiss ripping away my soul. The magic and excitement of reading the books and discovering this whole new world I never could have dreamed carried me through some of the toughest experiences in my life, and I can't imagine where I would have been without that escape.

Harry Potter played a significant role in shaping the person I have become and it shapes the person I will continue to grow to be. I'd like to think another series would have come along and catapulted me into the world of books, but I just don't know—no one can know. When does something like a book series become its own entity that you can separate from its creator? Where is that line between enjoying and celebrating something you love and supporting a person who doesn't even agree with your right to exist and live your truth? Once someone releases their creation (whether that is art, a book, a song, or any other creative piece) into the world, it becomes just as much about the people who read and enjoy it as it is about the person who created it. However, the creator and the created can never truly be separated; especially as long as the creator is profiting off of their work.

I can't really say that I have any satisfying answers. I still don't yet know how I feel or where I stand in this whole really complicated mess of a story. But I do know that I still and always will love what this series gave me: the escape and the adventure when I needed it most, the love for reading that I will never let go. We all change as we age and grow, our experiences lead us in directions that are unpredictable and take years of self-reflection to unravel. Holding onto things as they once were is something I have learned is entirely impossible, but one thing that seems to never change is that feeling of flying when a story sweeps you away. That is a constant in life, and one that I am very grateful for—always.

Epilogue

The words above were going to be the last paragraph—meant to be a conclusion that held a sense of wonderment instead of answers. However, recent events have led me to rethink this nostalgia-twined ending. While sometimes escapism is needed, it is detrimental right now. Change won't happen when bigotry and hate are casually swept under the rug, piling up in plain sight. Since I started writing this, J.K. Rowling has slowly lifted the veil on her transphobia and bigotry—exposing herself to the rest of the world. Her newest tirade against the trans community came, not only in the middle of a global pandemic, but at a moment in history where every week we receive news that at least one of our Black trans siblings has been brutally murdered with no justice in sight. Her remarks have resulted in outrage from our community's allies: Daniel Radcliff released a public statement in support of the trans community, and fellow authors left her agency when the agency refused to stand in solidarity with, and in support of, the trans community. These are only two of the many things that have happened as a result—but this isn't enough. Bigotry in the form of racism, transphobia, homophobia, and ableism in this country and abroad are at an all-time high, and it is costing people their lives.

I'm saying all this because if you aren't trans, or aren't from a community where society as a whole debates your humanity and right to live, I need you to know what it has felt like for us to watch our childhood hero, the person who was the author of our escape and a world that filled our dreams, spew this hatred and ignorance across the internet. Harry Potter is more than a fictional character and more than 7 children's books. *Harry Potter* is what has comforted us through losing family members and being bullied by our peers and being told we aren't enough and we don't deserve to be happy. *Harry Potter* taught us that we belong, and if the world is

unjust then we have the power, no, the obligation, to fight back. So this is me fighting back. Not because I want to convince you to burn your copies of the books and turn your back on the wizarding world, but because I want you to take the important lessons to heart. To fight for your friends and to fight against the Dolores Umbridges of the world. ⁱ

ⁱ While writing this I found two different takes on the same issue (creator versus created) and I have linked them below if you are interested. I think they communicate a lot of the feelings I have on the subject and are able to go more in depth than the above narrative allowed.

<https://accio-comedy.tumblr.com/post/615394155935531009/hey-do-you-think-you-could-expand-a-bit-on>

<http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/Gustafson/FILM%20162.W10/readings/barthes.death.pdf>