

US Christian fundamentalists target Harry Potter books

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J.K. Rowling's series of *Harry Potter* children's books has not only stormed the best-seller lists, with sales currently at over 30 million, mostly in the United States. Ironically it has also hit number one in the American Library Association's list of the books most commonly challenged in school districts and public libraries in the US. The list was released in time for Banned Books Week, which is held every September. Last year there were 26 challenges to remove *Harry Potter*, mounted in 16 states.

Rowling, an English author, has run up against a phenomenon that is almost an occupational hazard for children's writers in America. This year the *Harry Potter* books join the previous year's most challenged work, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, as well as other staples of children's literature and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in the top 10.

The reason for the challenges to the *Harry Potter* books centre round their focus on wizardry and magic. Fundamentalist Christians claim the series is subversive, because wizardry is incompatible with Christian belief. According to them, it is presenting witchcraft in an attractive light and desensitising young people to its dangers. They are hostile because in their opinion Rowling has a false world view, that is, she does not write from the standpoint of Christian ethics.

Puritanical attacks in which the perceived danger is fantasy fiction such as *Harry Potter* represent a shift by the fundamentalists. Previously, most of the children's book censorship cases targeted realistic works and concerned references to sex, the body or swearing. A sustained offensive has been carried out in school censorship issues by well-organised right fundamentalist organisations such as Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, Focus on the Family, Family Research Council, the American Family

Association and Citizens for Excellence in Education.

Emboldened by the reluctance of school authorities and local politicians to stand up to them, these organisations have achieved a success rate out of all proportion to the support they actually have among parents. Cammie Mannino, a Detroit children's bookseller involved in a campaign against censorship of the novel *Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind* for two years and now in defence of *Harry Potter*, said recently: "People who don't want books censored are the vast majority. It is a small minority making waves. Unfortunately people who support the First Amendment are not very active."

The fundamentalist outfits mount direct mail campaigns in support of challenges designed to exploit this inertia at the local level. Such challenges to *Harry Potter* have occurred in South Carolina, Minnesota, Michigan and California. Elizabeth Mounce from South Carolina said that "The Potter books have a serious tone of death, hate, lack of respect and sheer evil."

Focus on the Family, which conducted radio campaigns urging prosecutions of booksellers Barnes & Noble and encouraging protesters to destroy books by photographer Jock Sturges, has also devoted some attention to *Harry Potter*. John Andrew Murray, a school principal, writes on their web site: "The way these books captured children's imagination, it would have been a no-brainer using them in class." Why Murray loathes the *Harry Potter* books becomes clear when he compares them to C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books, which according to him evinced a proper respect for authority.

It is the spontaneity of the response to *Harry Potter* by young readers which so upsets the fundamentalists. A love of reading cannot be allowed loose, has to be curbed.

Children's author Judy Blume, whose own books have been subject to numerous challenges over the last decade, in an article defending *Harry Potter* written in the *New York Times* intimated as much. "I knew this was coming. The only surprise is that it took so long—as long as it took for the zealots who claim they're protecting children from evil (and evil can be found lurking everywhere these days) to discover that children actually like these books. If children are excited about a book, it must be suspect."

In one censorship bid, at the end of 1999, a school superintendent in Zeeland, Michigan, Gary Feenstra, directed teachers to stop reading *Harry Potter* aloud in class and librarians to remove it from their bookshelves. This ban prompted a web site to be set up specifically in defence of the series: www.mugglesforharrypotter.com. This is sponsored by organisations such as the National Council of the Teachers of English, the Freedom to Read Foundation, the National Coalition against Censorship, PEN American centre, the Children's Book Council and the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression.

In May this year Feenstra backed down and rescinded most of the restrictions he imposed on the books, although he retained the ban on reading them out aloud in elementary grades K to five.

The attempts to censor *Harry Potter* indicate a fear by the fundamentalists that they are in danger of being sidelined in an area where they have been able to create a clamor under the guise of protecting minors. As Focus on the Family's Youth Culture Analyst Lindy Beam in an article "What shall we do with Harry?" poses the question: "Why are we missing out on the opportunity afforded by such a far-reaching phenomenon?"

If the fundamentalists are in danger of being unable to jump on the bandwagon, Hollywood is not. Warner Bros. has purchased film rights and is said to be spending \$45 million for special effects alone to produce a movie by 2001.

While author Rowling insisted that the *Harry Potter* film have English actors and be made in England, and not be an animated movie, this is scarcely a guarantee against the marketing treatment that Warners have in store for it. After Steven Spielberg turned down the offer to direct it, the job was awarded to Christopher Columbus, notorious for *Home Alone*, the consummate

marketing exercise targeting children.

Mattel has won the contract for a Harry Potter doll from five other contenders, and Hasbro will produce talking cards, games and electronic spin-offs. The books, which have touched millions of young readers, will be reduced to a marketable formula, and somewhere in the process their imaginative quality will be eliminated and converted to profits.



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