Delightful and Fulfilling:
Reading the *Harry Potter* Series, a Unique Generational Experience

Sara Martín Alegre
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística
Sara.Martin@uab.cat
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This article derives from essays written by the students in my fourth-year elective course, 'Cultural Studies (in English): The *Harry Potter* Case', for the 'Grado' in English Studies (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spring 2014). My main findings are, in order of importance: first, the experience of the original readers of the series, born between 1988 and 1993, is unique as they had necessarily to adapt their consumption to the slow pace Rowling and the film adapters followed. Second, this experience is of singular cultural importance in the process of identity formation of this generation and cannot be repeated for later generations. Third, although the study of fandom has shattered barriers in the study of fiction marginalized by traditional Literary Studies, an exclusive focus on fans neglects the reading experience of readers outside fandom. Fourth, students can contribute a unique expertise to the classroom based on their consumption of recent popular fictions, receiving in exchange the academic tools necessary to make sense of their own reception strategies.

Keywords: J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter*, reception, students, reading experience.

Este artículo es fruto de los ensayos escritos por los estudiantes de mi optativa de cuarto año, 'Estudios Culturales (en Inglés): el caso *Harry Potter*', del Grado en Estudios Ingleses (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, primavera 2014). Mis principales conclusiones son, en orden de importancia: en primer lugar, la experiencia de los lectores originales de la serie, nacidos entre 1988 y 1993, es única, ya que necesariamente tuvieron que adaptar su consumo al ritmo lento seguido por Rowling y las adaptaciones al cine. En segundo lugar, esta experiencia es de singular importancia cultural en la formación de la identidad de esta generación y no puede repetirse en generaciones posteriores. En tercer lugar, aunque el análisis del 'fandom' ha roto barreras en el estudio de la ficción marginada por los Estudios Literarios tradicionales, un enfoque exclusivo en torno a los 'fans' puede descuidar la experiencia de los lectores ajenos al 'fandom'. En cuarto lugar, los estudiantes pueden aportar al aula conocimientos valiosos derivados de su consumo de las ficciones populares recientes, recibiendo a cambio las herramientas académicas necesarias para racionalizar sus propias estrategias de recepción.

Palabras clave: J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter*, recepción, estudiantes, experiencia lectora

1. Introduction: Approaching the Students' Reception of *Harry Potter*

As Paul B. Armstrong worries, despite the renewed interest in actual reading of recent scholarship, a concern with the phenomenology of reception "is still widely regarded as old-fashioned and passé," even "discredited" (2011, 87). Nonetheless, the impression that this type of research leads to universalist, ahistorical dogma must be disputed, for, as he stresses, "the history of reception is an integral part of a text's history" (94). Curious about the reception of J.K. Rowling's saga, I asked the students enrolled in the elective course I taught in the Winter/Spring semester of 2014, 'Cultural Studies in English: The *Harry Potter* Case,' to write a short essay (1,000 words) describing their experience of reading J.K. Rowling's heptalogy as children or teenagers.

Ranjana Das presents similar research in her article "'To be number one in someone's eyes…': Children's introspections about close relationships in reading *Harry Potter*" (2013). I share with Das an interest in audience aesthetics, and reader response to popular genres. My methodology and intention, however, could not be more different. She, a Media and Communication specialist, chose to interview 20 children aged 11 to 18, all Greater London residents as they read the series, whereas I, a scholar with a background in English and Cultural Studies, invited *adult* university students to write about their experience of reading *Harry Potter* in the (recent) past. Das's focus was how "the relationships portrayed in the series offer interpretive pathways for children to project their own relationships onto the text and explore their introspections about the nature of personal, intimate relationships" (2013, 455). Mine was, rather, to find out what remained of that emotional engagement in adulthood, and also how the consumption and socialising patterns attached to their personal approach to the series worked.

I did not aim to produce a formal study on reception, much less one of a sociological or ethnographic nature–I simply wished to learn about the students' motivations to take my course. I believed that a questionnaire would not fulfil my purpose, since it would impose a narrow frame on the narration of their own experience, which should be as unrestricted as possible. I only instructed them to be specific regarding dates connected with each book and film. When finally reading their candid essays I found them so attractive that I published them as an online volume called, borrowing from a student's essay, *Addictive and Wonderful: The Experience of Reading the Harry Potter Series*.[1] The following article recaps the abundant details offered by the 56 informants.[2]

As Mann observes, students are "social beings with a biography and aspirations that contextualise and make particularly significant any instances of academic reading (…)" (2000, 315). I stressed to my own students that, far from being irrelevant to their

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[1] This is available from the UAB's repository: https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118225. At the time I write (February 2015), the volume has gone past 600 (international) downloads.
[2] The group consisted of 42 women, including myself, and 14 men. 40 students were formally enrolled in the course. The remaining 16 informants are undergrad and MA students who attended as auditors, and guests contributors to the volume (other MA students, BA students from another university, guest lecturers, myself).

studies, their private reading experience is actually a core experience not only in biographical terms but also regarding their historical and socio-political positioning. Also that as a teacher I could hardly make sense of the importance of Rowling's world-famous saga without understanding who her original readers are, at least the sample in my classroom. My experience of teaching *Harry Potter* was totally at odds with the one described by Daniel Allington when testing a more democratic style in the classroom: "Interpretations were challenged by reference to private experiences rather than to formal features, politically regressive (and even offensive) statements were made, and nothing resembling a critical interpretation was produced (…)" (2012, 223). In contrast, and apologizing for my smugness, students were keen to shape their personal experience into formal criticism; far from questioning my authority, this was reinforced because, although older than them by more than 20 years, I fully respected and valued their own personal experience of *Harry Potter*. Indeed, I learned very much from it.

I had no working hypothesis previous to asking my students to write their essays. My main findings, however, are, in order of importance: first, that the experience of the original readers of the series, those born between 1988 and 1993, is unique, as they had necessarily to adapt their consumption to the slow pace Rowling and the film adapters followed. Second, this experience is of singular cultural importance in the process of identity formation of this generation in a way which cannot be repeated for later generations. Third, although the study of fandom has shattered many barriers in the study of fiction marginalized by traditional Literary Studies, by focusing mainly on fans we may neglect the reading experience of many readers outside fandom. Fourth: the task of opening up the university classroom to welcome popular culture should be shared by teachers and students in a freer pedagogical style. Students can contribute a unique expertise in the consumption of recent popular fictions to be given in exchange the academic tools necessary to make sense of their own reception strategies.

I see no need to vindicate once again the importance of popular fiction. As my students show, contemporary academic specialists can only ignore popular culture at the risk of being totally disconnected from the actual experience of the younger generations we teach. The staggering amount of academic publications generated by Rowling's saga is in itself sufficient evidence of its importance. I find much more relevant the matter of the directions taken by the discussion of the *Harry Potter* series beyond the abundant textual analysis of aspects such as the politics of gender, race and ethnicity, class, power and politics, even history and philosophy (Anatol 2003; Hallett & Huey 2012).

Arguably, the main factor limiting the empirical investigation of the reception of *Harry Potter* is not its belonging to the fantasy genre, as it is often assumed, but its being children's literature. Fantasy, though still not fully respectable academically speaking, is somewhat less problematic to research than children's fiction. In this genre the interpretive community, in the sense meant originally by Stanley Fish (1980), is composed of young individuals engaged in the process of their own education and, thus, prevented by their still limited degree of literacy from expressing a fully articulated view of their reading experience. They may be interviewed by specialists but this is by no means the same as bringing their own insight into the experience of dealing with texts.

The scant reception research produced on Rowling's saga depends fundamentally on two approaches: education (in a wide sense of the word) and fandom studies. *Harry Potter* has often been regarded as a useful tool to teach children. Frank and McBee close their article about the educational uses of *Harry Potter* claiming that "With guidance, students can apply the lessons learned by Harry and his friends to their lives" (2003, 37). Rebecca P. Butler, on her side, taught the course "The Literature Continuum: The *Harry Potter* Phenomenon" (2001) as "a viable graduate-level course in instructional technology" (2003, 66) aimed at teaching future teachers how to apply Rowling to American K-12 education. Rowling's saga has also been considered useful for counselling within a school context (Gibson 2007). More extreme is the proposal forwarded by the volume *The Children who Lived: Using Harry Potter and Other Fictional Characters to Help Grieving Children and Adolescents* (Markell & Markell 2008).

Fandom studies, now a fully consolidated area, can be safely dated back to Janice Radway's pioneering work in the field of romance (1984). In the following decade, the collective volume edited by Lisa A. Lewis *Adoring Audiences: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992) and Henry Jenkins' seminal *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (also 1992), consolidated the new field. Ryan and Johanningsmeir, guest editors of a recent monographic volume on fandom of the journal *Reception* (2013), highlight the main reason why fandom should be researched: "many scholars who have studied fans' writing have used these long-neglected sources to argue that they represent rich evidence that differs from, and often works against, the emphases and conclusions of scholars, the supposed 'experts'" (2013, 3). The traditional reception research based on ethnography, with the expert observing fans from the outside is, however, collapsing. As Howe (2013) explains, many younger scholars have embraced a hybrid academic position, feeling increasingly less embarrassed when declaring themselves fans of the texts they teach or write about. Howe, a *Twilight* saga fan, describes herself a "'fan-scholar,' which is similar to Tanya Cochran's 'scholar-fan' or Henry Jenkins's 'acafan,' though I prefer to place the 'fan' identification first to illustrate that being a fan is, for me, a position as important and critical as being a scholar" (2013, 65).[3]

Harry Potter has inspired plenty of fandom studies, particularly around identity formation issues since, as the case of my own students manifests, Rowling's saga has often played a major role in the lives of its readers. Work by Borah (2002) and Kidd (2007) has looked into how *Harry Potter* fandom circles work, while Schmid and Klimmt have approached the phenomenon cross-culturally. Their comparison of the experiences of young German and Mexican fans reveals more similarities than differences in "the development of worldwide fan communities, with all members holding strong parasocial relationships with the protagonist. Our study suggests that characters who are complying with social expectations of different cultures are important for the formation of transnational entertainment audiences" (2011, 265). Others have considered more specific aspects, such as the effect on fandom of Rowling's controversial outing of Dumbledore as gay once the series was over (Tosenberg 2008). A topic worth attention, too, is the fans' strategies to dispute

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[3] My own position is that of the 'acafan,' as I do not belong to fandom circles.

Rowling's authority over the text, mainly through fan fiction (Jenkins 2006, Ingleton 2012).

In my view, however, the current popularity of fandom studies presents a potential problem for the study of popular fiction, since, ultimately, fans are not the majority consumers. The students who joined my *Harry Potter* course were by no means all of them fans. Even among the minority openly calling themselves Potterheads the degree of participation in fan culture was enormously varied. When I asked for volunteers to run the two sessions on fandom, fan fiction and fan art, only eight out of more than forty students responded. A few others declaring themselves active Potterheads explained they just participated in online groups, producing no fan fiction or fan art. Others limited their fan's passion to re-reading the text, to social occasions such as outings to film premieres, and to the occasional purchasing of merchandising items (a scarf, a wand). It is simply not true, then, that there is a complete overlap between fandom and the audience for popular fiction, as often fandom studies seem to implicitly suggest.

I have also serious doubts that an approach based on genre works well in the case of *Harry Potter*, whether we focus on children's literature (aren't the last three books actually young adult fiction?) or fantasy. As it was to be expected, after reading *Harry Potter* many students became readers of fantasy as teenagers. However, not all did. Actually, not even the students who describe themselves as avid readers of fantasy class *Harry Potter* with the other fantasy texts they enjoy. Rowling is, besides, an author not really classifiable into just one genre–she has written a series for children but she is not really a children's writer, and this series may be fantasy but she has written so far no more in this genre. My impression is that the *Harry Potter* series constitutes a unique cultural phenomenon which cannot be pinned down to a preference for a particular genre, though I simultaneously believe that Rowling's proficient mixture of well-known literary genres in *Harry Potter* is one of the keys to its success.

The findings presented here intend, then, to call the reader's attention to a serious methodological and theoretical gap both in Literary Studies and in Cultural Studies. The study of audiences is growing little by little in the field of Media Studies but as regards Literature (or plain print 'narrative' if you wish to downplay Rowling's achievements as Harold Bloom did in a famous review (2000)), we know little. Wolfgang Iser's pioneering work on reader response (1978) is, roughly, 15 years older than the paradigm shift that allowed Jenkins and others to foreground the interpretive communities constituted within fandom. This was, ironically, done by 'acafans' reading Iser's main critic, Stanley Fish, against the grain. Famously, Fish declared in 1981, at the time when Literary Theory was beginning to displace textual analysis inspired by New Criticism, that since Iser was not solid enough as a theorist, nobody should be afraid of him. Reception Theory, was for Fish, not "a theory at all, but a piece of literature that satisfies Iser's own criteria for an 'aesthetic object': it is full of gaps and the reader is invited to fill them in his own way. (...)" (1981, 13).

Still, Iser's argumentative blanks do not make the role of the reader less prominent in actual practice. Fandom and genre studies have, thus, gone back to the reader (or viewer) though not quite for the aesthetic experience Iser wanted to research in Literature. James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein's edited volume *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (2001), which focuses on the impact of

Hans-Robert Jauss rather than Iser, vindicated reception on the basis of how it allowed the historicising of text consumption, including non-Literary texts. Yet, as I read *Harry Potter* with my class, I came to the conclusion that a theory developed for reading Literature fits in the end poorly the reception of a text denied the high cultural status of the literary work. Nor can fandom studies provides a sufficiently thorough methodology.

The point I am arguing here, in short, is that a phenomenon like *Harry Potter* reveals that the theoretical paradigm we use now in Literary and Cultural studies is confused and confusing: after all, it is not even clear whether Rowling's series is Literature, and we have no theory to account for the very deep emotional investment of readers on the series beyond what little fandom studies provides regarding affect. And not all readers, I insist, are fans. The series has even blurred the distinction between children's and adult literature, making it even harder to understand what kind of reception we are exploring and by whom.

I'll turn now to my students' own words, hoping to find in them new directions to explore.

2. Growing up with Harry: A Unique Generational Experience

As far as I know, there are no studies following *Harry Potter* readers along the years; only, as I have noted, studies of children reading the series at a particular point in time. I have, almost by sheer luck,[4] come across a group of the original readers at the right time for them to describe as college-trained adults an experience that they were not equipped to understand as children. This is, I believe, unique.

The experience of these original readers of the series, those born between 1988 and 1993 (mostly 1992 and 1993), is exceptional, as they had necessarily to adapt their consumption to the slow pace Rowling and the film adapters followed. *Philosopher's Stone*[5] was published in 1997, the Catalan and Spanish translations most students read were released in 1999; the first film premiered internationally in 2001.[6] Since *Deathly Hallows* came out in 2007, and the second part of the eponymous film in 2011, this means that many students went through a 10 to 12-year process of familiarisation with the series, growing in the meantime from elementary school children to college-age students. Second, this experience is of singular cultural importance in the process of identity formation of this generation in a way which cannot be repeated for later generations. The experience of consuming the series seems to have been quite homogeneous for readers around the world of the same generation. Perhaps this is a far-fetched claim to make on the basis of a little more than 50 informants, but I must clarify that these include 3 British students, 2 from the United States, 2 from China, 1 from Canada. The student born in Bulgaria (a boy

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[4] I set up the course in response to students' demand, in its turn originating in a post I published in my own blog in December 2012. See http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2012/12/31/back-to-harry-potter-and-why-the-films-are-so-disappointing/

[5] *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the USA. I'll refer henceforward to the books mainly by a shortened title.

[6] For the role played by dubbing in the reception of the *Harry Potter* films, see my own essay, "Major Films and Minor Languages: Catalan Speakers and the War over Dubbing Hollywood Films" (2005).

currently studying in Holland) and the student born in Romania (a girl migrated to Spain as a child), gave a slightly different picture, as seemingly the *Harry Potter* phenomenon was smaller in the post-Communist countries (ironically, it was and it still is gigantic in China).

Among these similarities one stood out: far from being victims of wicked marketing strategies, when they started reading the series the students engaged as children in a deeply meaningful experience as readers. In many cases, they did become readers thanks to the series; in all, they developed a passion for reading, which led to even further reading. This experience of reading *Harry Potter* had nothing to do with shallow page-turning, then, but with literally discovering the 'magic' of reading (after all, most of my informants are taking a degree in language and Literature). Beyond this passion for reading, they had a clear perception that they had grown up with Harry, particularly in the case of those who first met Harry aged 11–the same age he is in the first book. Due to the prolonged time it took Rowling to write the books (1997-2007), many of my students spent 10 years or longer keeping Harry company, growing up with him. They particularly value how Rowling managed to make the language of her novels mature together with their protagonist. This process of growing up, which also entailed the passage from childhood to adulthood through the first teenage years, often concluded at age 18, when the informants finished secondary school (something Harry could not do because of his confrontation with Voldemort). For many readers, the end of the series meant the end of their own childhood. No wonder many tears were shed as the last page was turned.

From First Contact to Commitment

Students agreed that the first 3 volumes, particularly volume 1 (*Philosopher's Stone*) and volume 2 (*Chamber of Secrets*) can seem too childish if read at an age above 12; in contrast, volumes 6 (*Half-Blood Prince*) and 7 (*Deathly Hallows*) may seem far too complex and even scary for children under 12. The only student who asked for the whole series as a Christmas present was already a teenager (aged 14) when she did so.

From my informants' declarations we can infer with certainty that 6 is the earliest age at which they approached the *Harry Potter* series; 16 the upper limit. The 43 students who recalled at what exact age they first came across Rowling's novels (or, often, the films based on them) claimed that they were then 6 (3 students), 7 (7), 8 (8), 9 (5), 10 (9), 11 (7), 12 (1), 14 (2). Only 1 student had read the series already in her twenties, for my course. Ideally, the 7 novels should be read at the same age Harry is in each: starting at 11, and reading a volume per year until 18. However, as we see, about 50% started at a younger age–some even before they were literate, aided by parents or siblings who would read to them with great gusto. One recalled the whole family of 4 involved in a collective reading experience. As Sara writes: "I loved the fact that my mother was reading the books as well, since I could comment with her everything that was taking place and that was surprising me."

Only a minority were aware of the foreign *Harry Potter* hype when they accessed the first book, though some knew about the budding local schoolyard hype (3 claim to have started it themselves). 1 recalls her attention being caught by a report on

a Catalan TV magazine for children, another by the colourful book cover in his hometown street market, a third by the same cover in a book-club magazine. They nagged their parents for the first volume but most received it unexpectedly as a present for their birthdays, Christmas or, quite frequently, for summer reading; Catalan Sant Jordi's book day was only named twice. The adults giving Rowling's books as presents were the parents, mainly the mothers, in varied circumstances: they had taken their child to see the movie, knew about the books from the media, a relative or a bookseller had recommended them. Aunts[7] were frequently mentioned, also as readers sharing with the child the passion for Rowling's series. Quite often books were bought or lent by siblings, cousins and classmates, with shared reading featuring as an important bond. Next came teachers, recalled as organising school trips to see a *Harry Potter* film or recommending the books to both avid and reluctant little readers to enjoy after school.

This first contact with *Harry Potter* was not always successful. Some child readers were simply too young to read long volumes, preferring the movies. Others simply did not like the books. Some even resisted reading them as they mistrusted the schoolyard hype, would not please the person who'd forced the books on them, or wanted to distance themselves from the fan's passions of siblings and cousins. *Philosopher's Stone* might be found too childish, *Chamber of Secrets*–the least enjoyed by most readers–put them off reading the rest. Second contact usually happened after a 2 or 3-year interval, in which the child matured as a reader, got curious about what schoolmates were reading, or just could not wait for a new *Harry Potter* film. A birthday present or a school friend might trigger a second bout of interest, resulting in the deep commitment all informants describe. Laia finally fell in love with the series thanks to the fourth volume, *Goblet of Fire* (her first ever in English). She wondered then "'How is it that I have not known about this magic reading process until now and how come I hated the book when I first got it?' Well, I think I was not ready for it yet." Only when she made the free choice to read the volume did the whole series click for her.

While some students were back in their early childhood already avid readers, not all my informants enjoyed reading. In their essays there appear parents relieved to see that *Harry Potter* is finally turning their kids into readers. Dídac stresses that, though not at all a reader, and surrounded by non-reading adults, he loved stories: "I loved watching them in movies, I loved creating them even more for my drawings or role-playing with my best friend. But I had never had a book in my hands that told a story that I liked enough." Rowling seemingly filled in that gap for many non-readers fond of storytelling. To the avid little readers, already familiar with basic books for children (like Catalan 'Vaixell de Vapor' series) or with favourites like Blyton or Dahl, Rowling provided the challenge of a very long, complex story published in increasingly thicker volumes. The pride in being able to manage long texts turns out to be a key factor even as early as 7. Álvaro recalls thus *Philosopher's Stone*: "According to the taste of my 7-year-old self, it was the best book I had ever read. Moreover, it was my first 'big' book. I was 'bigger' now and I was finally allowed to read 'this kind' of books." Iris, a compulsive precocious reader, recalls how Rowling's saga helped her

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[7] See my vindication of aunts in my blog post of 12 May 2014, http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2014/05/12/a-vindication-of-aunts-reading-the-harry-potter-series/

realize that "it was not a matter of quantity but a matter of quality and that the choices I made in my reading would determine who I was and who I'd be." Sandra, an indifferent reader at 7, suddenly realised that "I not only enjoyed reading *Harry Potter*, I also started enjoying reading in general, even the books that are compulsory reading in school (which have the reputation of not being liked by children, at least in my school). My mother was very pleased (…)."

Patterns of Consumption

Iris writes in quite a radical fashion that "If I ever had the chance to erase a memory from my mind in order to live it with the same intensity as I did the first time, I would choose without any doubt my reading of the *Harry Potter* series." My informants often used the word 'hooked' to describe their infatuation with Rowling's universe. Typically, they went through a first bout of very fast reading, mostly involving the first 3 volumes, followed by a long wait of up to 3 years for volume 4. This was followed by more waiting for the last 3 volumes. The long wait between volumes was habitually filled in by constant re-readings either of a particular volume or of all already read; also by other fantasy fiction for children and young adults. Ironically, parents who may have been initially concerned by their children's disinterest in reading often ended up telling them off for reading… too much.

Students keep clear memories of their reading binges even today. Fran wrote that "I remember spending almost a whole weekend–1 day, 2 hours and 23 minutes, exactly–reading *Order of Phoenix*, only getting out of my bed to eat and go back reading again." Another recalls reading the same thick volume in two straight days, in the garden. A 4-hour flight was enough for a third young man to read the first book as a child. The series taught young readers endurance, spectacularly prolonging their attention span. Andrew remembers himself, aged 6: "My patience for reading was good for a boy of my age but usually didn't last more than 10 or 15 minutes. However, when *Harry Potter* was involved it tripled and I couldn't get enough. I was a parched child in the centre of the desert to see what happened next and the only oasis that could quench my thirst was the next chapter." Paradoxically, the last book, *Deathly Hallows*, often mentioned as a favourite, frequently had an anti-binge effect. As Laia B. observes, "I had a contradictory feeling, because I wanted to read more and at the same time I didn't want the story to end."

These reading binges were, naturally, tied to leisure time: weekends and, above all, summer. Rowling's novels, after all, always begin in late July as Harry, on holiday from school, faces his birthday alone with the unfriendly Dursleys, his foster family. Students recall how during boring summers, particularly those in the insipid company of family, the *Harry Potter* books became a very welcome refuge. Sara, then a friendless, shy 12-year-old recalls how "my best friend that summer was that fifth *Harry Potter* book. I went everywhere with the book (beach, swimming pool…) (…)". The family pictures are often endearing. Here's 6-year-old Josh on holiday in Hawaii: "We were in the hotel room after a long day of swimming and playing on the beach and I was exhausted but my father insisted I stay up and read one chapter of a new book he had purchased for me. From that first chapter I knew I had discovered something special." Lottie had the whole family "up at dawn, queuing outside

WHSmith for hours" to get *Goblet of Fire*, released just the previous day, before embarking on their holiday. Teen Marvin accepted reluctantly Harry's company during a family holiday for which he felt too old, only to find as a lonely 19-year-old working abroad (in Spain) that Rowling's books provided much welcome company.

Volume 3, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and 4, *Goblet of Fire*, made many young readers fully functional autonomous readers. As they grew up, my informants started asking the adults around them for the books, if necessary using merciless nagging. They also learned to overcome obstacles like lack of money (by borrowing) or lack of availability (by ordering and booking copies in advance). Next, they learned to organise their socialising so that it included attending events such as book launches or film premieres initially with family, later with friends. A peculiarity of this learning process is that they also learned the meaning of authorship. Carmen writes that after reading as fast as possible books 1 to 3, she asked for the next one only to be "surprised by the fact that there was someone writing a fourth book, that the series wasn't complete. It was when I discovered that some people called authors wrote books, and this became my ideal profession: being an author."

Once the series was completed, most of these young readers re-read in one go the 7 books (even backwards in one case!). Later they developed the habit of re-reading the whole series regularly. Laura even claims that "I've lost track of how many times I've reread the books." This constant revisiting of Harry's world also extends to the films. At least 3 students mention film marathons as an occasion to meet friends. Marta started aged 14 her "tradition" of reading the whole series twice a year (Christmas and summer) and enjoying once a year a non-stop *Harry Potter* marathon. Many praise the series for its ability to submerge you instantly in its world, no matter how often you've visited. The effect of this constant re-visiting can be quite paradoxical for, of course, as they age readers notice the text's defects (of which later). This seems to lead, however, to the sort of intimacy one shares with old friends, in which affection is all that counts.

The obsession for the *Harry Potter* series also had an impact of the informants' acquisition of English as teenagers. Only a few informants acknowledged a direct connection between their reading of *Harry Potter* and wanting to take a BA in English Studies. Yet, clearly the need to know what came next gave them the greatest motivation to learn English, after reading originally the Catalan and Spanish translations. Many forced themselves to read volumes as thick as *Goblet of Fire* by no means commanding the level of English this required, around age 13. This, however, far from frustrating them gave them a boost to try again with the following books. Very few joined my course having read the whole series only in translation.

Socialising: From the Schoolyard to Online Fandom

The *Harry Potter* series was rarely enjoyed in complete isolation; it was, rather, a good excuse for socializing with peers. Many children would cosplay for midnight book launches and film releases. Kyle, from Canada, recalls:

> I read and re-read each copy, attended midnight book launches and movie premieres, re-enacted scenes at public library readings, volunteered to do voices in primary school readings, and painted a lightning scar on my forehead on more

than one occasion, whispering spells in my bedroom. My sister and cousins and most of my friends all knew the books and movies. Not everyone was obsessed to the same degree, but nearly all my peers knew where to put the accent on *Wingardium leviosa* and the meaning of the word Muggle.

A thorny question is whether the experience of reading *Harry Potter* was more constricted for boys than for girls. Marvin, from Austria, claimed in class that Harry was actually considered a "douchebag" by most of his male school mates. Bulgarian Hristo wrote that his 11-year-old self was split between Harry's magical world, which his school friends pointedly ignored, and "the world of spacecrafts, secret missions and football" he shared with them. For Andrew, an American, there was no incompatibility: "Now I am a big sports fan but growing up my favourite games were never basketball or football or video games, but going outside with my friends and creating imaginary worlds. We would alternate between *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and things that we completely made up on our own (…)". Jaime, from Madrid, speaks of increasing "schoolyard scorn" poured on him and his outcast teen friends for reading a childish story. That, however, "did nothing but add another layer of excitement to our reading of *Harry Potter*. We really were a step nearer to our heroes, having to keep in secret that we read magic, so we did not feel the scorn that word elicited in public." Fran, a Catalan, found in the Marauder's gang (excluding Wormtail) "an exact reference to what I knew as the perfect friendship: people one would trust with his life, brothers that would be by your side until the end." Yao, from China, shared with the class a hilarious memory of his joining a Quidditch club, aged 18.

Internet entered everyday life in the mid-1990s. Introduced in 1994 in Spain, the first boom happened around 1996. Local monopoly company Telefónica and its services 'Infovía' (1996-9) and 'Infovía Plus' (1998-9) were slow and expensive. ADSL, first legislated in 1999, only took off in 2000; the first flat-rate service became available as late as 2002. Discussion of the *Harry Potter* series moved then onto the internet, yet students remember joining fans' forums relatively late, spending the first years with the series in face-to-face contact with their peers. Sara seems to be a typical case: she joined the very popular web in Spanish *Harry Latino* (founded 1999, re-founded 2001) in 2003, aged 12 and after 2 years as a *Harry Potter* fan.

The *Harry Potter* websites brought many new friends to teen Potterheads but also something of great significance to them: fan-fiction. The 8 bright young women who accepted my invitation to lecture the class on this provided us with a fascinating panorama. Basically, the internet provided a space for young readers to by-pass Rowling (much to her dismay) and fill in the many gaps in the series. The girls who did the presentations were themselves fan writers, and even aspiring writers on their own. The internet also brought other perks: Camila, an American, feels much proud of having become a beta tester of Rowling's own *Pottermore*, the website designed to prolonged her audience's interest in the series.

As students started earning their own money, they invested some of it on merchandising items (two thirds have wands,[8] for instance), and in coveted travelling to *Harry Potter*-related places: King's Cross platform 9 ¾, Warner Studios at Leavesden,

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[8] For the beautiful story of how I got my own wand, see my blog post, "The Wand Chooses the Witch: A Story for Potterheads", of 1 April 2014, http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2014/04/01/the-wand-chooses-the-witch-a-story-for-potterheads/.

UK (the *Harry Potter* tour opened there in 2012), even 'The Wizarding World of Harry Potter' in Orlando (Florida), a theme park opened in 2010. Laura B., then aged 18, writes that "Being there, surrounded by people who were as excited as I was, made me feel at home. My younger siblings never understood why that place made me so happy, but my parents did in some way. They had watched me grow up with Harry Potter and, those days, they could see the 8-year-old girl that I once was." Déborah, the perfect Potterhead, enjoyed there profound happiness. The illusion worked: what they knew to be just a studio prop, was for them 'real.' Though completely aware of being manipulated by greedy Warner Bros. executives, their experiences, they claimed, were absolutely worthwhile. And authentic.

Forming Strong Ties with the Characters and the Story

Literary Theory lacks, as I have noted, the tools to make sense of the deep and long-lasting emotional investment into the *Harry Potter* series. The students' essays reveal not only that they have not outgrown their childhood and teenage passion for the books and films but also that they firmly refuse to do so. Many even refer to the characters as 'friends.' The very strong emotional reactions elicited by Rowling and the film directors have stayed with them as treasured memories; logically, the many re-readings respond to a candid wish to re-live these memories.

The informants' essays are also useful to question the assumption that readers' attachment to literary characters is based on identification: sympathy plays a much more relevant role. Some students do mention personal circumstances mirroring the series, such as attending an English boarding school (though, as Chris writes, "my school experience wasn't quite able to live up to that of Harry's"), or a nuns' school full of mysterious (for a child) spaces. Álvaro J. describes a sad childhood spent with two sets of unsympathetic Dursleys ("I would dare to say that we did not live in the cupboard under the stairs because there wasn't one in the house"). Dídac claims that *Harry Potter* helped him to cope with the depression caused by his parents' divorce. Cristina, an only child surrounded by adults expecting much from her, explains she felt a kinship with Harry. "Of course, she writes, "it is a bit dramatic, comparing my life to Harry's, but it is just how it felt back in those days."

Obviously, identification *is* the basis of the students' preference for Hermione. Only 14 of my 56 informants were men, and the 41 girls did name Hermione, one way or another, as a favourite character, often followed by her opposite: the eccentric Luna Lovegood. Hermione, the bookworm who shows enormous intelligence, resourcefulness and bravery, while still being attractive, could not fail to attract young girl readers: "I wanted to be more confident," Laura M. writes, "and she gave me strength to carry on". Many girls even questioned Rowling's choice of Harry as the hero, a choice also questioned by the boys. They found whiny Harry hard to identify with–Hristo recalled feeling jealous of Harry not out of admiration but because he actually did very little but was nonetheless praised. Nobody named Harry as their favourite character.[9]

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[9] This includes our guest lecturer, Masumi Mutsuda, the actor who dubbed Harry into Catalan. I asked him to choose a favourite scene to comment on in class, and he chose Ron's confrontation with

Still today, students keep all their sympathy for the star secondary characters in this order of preference: Sirius Black, Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Remus Lupin, and Fred Weasley, followed at a distance by Luna Lovegood, Nymphadora Tonks, and further away by Ron. This sympathy has much to do with the high cost that being loyal to Harry entails for these characters, including death for most of them. Cedric Diggory's cruel, sudden murder by Wormtail following Voldemort's orders in *Goblet of Fire* shocked all young readers into the realization that characters could and would be killed–often unfairly. Even Harry's owl Hedwig was named as deserving sympathy for her untimely death.

Students were most deeply shocked by the deaths in order of importance of Sirius, Snape and Dumbledore. Dumbledore's demise, though shocking, elicited a certain fatalistic attitude, perhaps what Rowling sought in preparation for the final volume. Snape's brutal murder by Voldemort was received with ambiguity, as he appeared to be then the Dumbledore's killer (the pair actually arrange this death as the old wizard was anyway dying). Students were divided as to whether the subsequent revelations about Snape's unwavering loyalty to the great love of his life, Harry's mother, Lily, transformed him into the secret (or even the real) hero of the series; some argued that Snape's glaring faults, above all his psychological abuse of his students, were unfairly overlooked.

Sirius, described by Iulia as "the uncle I always wanted," is the first of Harry's helpers dispatched by Rowling beyond life. I say 'beyond life' because Rowling's unwise decision to have Bellatrix's curse push Sirius into a mysterious veiled gate left many young readers hoping he had not really died. Sirius, initially the scary 'prisoner of Azkaban' of book 3 turns out to be Harry's most loyal protector, even bordering on obsession. A student, Rubén, clarified for me that possibly my informants appreciate the fact that Sirius offers Harry unconditional help even though he has no real obligation, not being family (just James Potter's best friend). Since Sirius is Harry's godfather, he is really under some sort of obligation. Yet, my point is that Rowling created a very attractive figure for her child readers without being fully aware of the impact his death would have. Laia M., then 12, offers a different angle to consider: "I had never cried so much with a book as when Sirius died. I was heartbroken. I was the lucky type of girl who had never experienced the loss of a beloved family member or friend, so I was absolutely shocked."

Rowling did not realise that Sirius's mismanaged death would turn many readers into her most resolute critics. They may have loved the triangular friendship between Harry, Ron and Hermione, Hogwarts, the magic, the epic battle of good and evil, the romantic truth about Snape, even Neville's rise. Yet, Sirius's loss, which caught many around 14 or 15, also turned them into rebellious questioners of her authority. The sad seventh book led to an openly critical approach, particularly against the mawkish epilogue and Rowling's decision to prevent Harry from killing Voldemort: "I wanted Harry to take his revenge. I found [the end] to be somehow unnecessarily softened," Álvaro D. writes. Suddenly, the re-readings revealed other flaws: Dumbledore's questionable decision to leave Harry with the abusive Dursleys (unchecked by the social services, too), the provincial treatment of foreigners in the

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Hermione and Harry in *Deathly Hallows*. When questioned why he had chosen a scene in which Ron, and not Harry, shows his strength, he criticized Harry as not particularly interesting!

saga, the whiteness of all the main characters. In the absence of true racial and ethnic variety, as Kyle writes, the most pressing issues arise between species:

> (…) between humans and non-humans such as centaurs, goblins and elves, incomprehensible Others who can never truly integrate into a human society. Rowling, though positioning the protagonists and readers against Voldemort's discriminatory ideology, fails to fully critique or address the reactionary society of the Wizarding world that is so resistant to change and open to fascism.

The gender choices also seemed questionable. There were no gays or lesbians at Hogwarts, and Rowling's outing of Dumbledore once the saga was over felt dishonest and contrived. Few girl readers, if any, were completely happy with the treatment of women in the series. In Kate's view "(…) less importance is awarded to the merits, trials, trauma and nobility of the actions of female than the male characters." Hermione's romantic attachment to Ron puzzled many. Rowling's recent acknowledgement that she may have taken the wrong authorial in this regard (Press Association 2014) further undermined her authority.

Beyond J.K. Rowling: Wavering Loyalties

Those in full rebellion against the author often declared they only admired *Harry Potter*, not Rowling. "For me," Queralt writes, "she doesn't know how to write. Her world is wonderful, her success is just sheer luck." Actually, Rowling's posterior *oeuvre* elicits little interest among my informants. Since she has abandoned fantasy for political comedy (*A Casual Vacancy*, 2012) and detective fiction (the Cormoran Strike series including so far *The Cuckoo's Calling*, 2013, and *The Silkworm*, 2014, written as Robert Galbraith), *Harry Potter* readers, mostly keen on fantasy, have lost interest. In a few cases Rowling's other books have been purchased but remain unread; if read at all, they produce little enjoyment, or are even abandoned mid-way. Some feel that these other books amount to, as Marta writes, "something similar to a betrayal to my childhood memories." Students claim they might eventually give the other books a chance, but fear disappointed. Alicia V. has abandoned *A Casual Vacancy* three times in a panic, "because I don't want to hate the book."

Whereas *Harry Potter*, then, has not generated reader loyalty for Rowling, the series has turned many young readers, as I have noted, into consumers of fantasy (secondarily of science fiction). The few students who do not read fantasy claim this is because *Harry Potter* is unique. The fantasy books most often mentioned by informants were often discovered during the long wait for new *Harry Potter* volumes: Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, diverse works by Roald Dahl, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* and in Spanish Laura García Gallego's popular *Crónicas de Idhún*. Occassionally they mention Patrick Rothfuss's *Kingkiller Chronicle*, Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* and *Momo*, *The Barthimaeus Trilogy* by Jonathan Stroud, *Forgotten Realms* by R.A. Salvatore, García Gallegos' *Las Crónicas de la Torre* and *La Emperatriz de los Etéreos*, Paolini's *The Inheritance Cycle*. *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the *Twilight* tetralogy are mentioned by just 3 students. Most students are now obsessing

over *A song of Ice and Fire* (1991-) by George R.R. Martin, once more repeating in their twenties the long process of waiting for an ongoing saga to be over.

3. Conclusions: A Singular Experience

My informants expressed frustration on two accounts: no Hogwarts letter of invitation had ever reached them ("I miss a school I never attended," Rubén declared). Second, convincing younger siblings and cousins to read *Harry Potter* was never a downright success, even among children familiar with the movies. Those who did read the series did not express the same degree of enthusiasm. The informants' perception is that what made the 'boom' of Rowling's series so crucial was the long waiting for the end. My students are, however, still very keen on teaching others–their own future students and children–to love *Harry Potter*.

The phrase 'growing up with Harry' was repeated very many times in the written and oral accounts they gave of their experience of reading Rowling's series. Particularly, by those who started the series at 11, Harry's initial age. As Cristina writes, "I had no trouble adapting my mind to Harry's mind, since both his and mine were developing somehow at the same pace." Students appreciate very much Rowling's ability to 'darken' the series as it advanced and to represent with precision the teen angst of her protagonist (though she's much criticised for her inability to depict realistically teenage sexuality). Students consider *Harry Potter* a very important part of their *whole* life–"something that brings magic and hope to my child and adult self" in Laura C.'s words–not just something relevant to their childhood or teenage years. The series shaped them as readers and as persons, helping them go "through my darkest times during my childhood and adolescence," as Silvia writes.

As she adds, "*Harry Potter* has become a complete and utter literary classic not only for me, but for a whole new generation of readers." Kyle offers quite a radical appreciation by claiming that "If there were two things that defined our generation, they were 9/11 and *Harry Potter*. The Wizarding world, if not in our blood, was embedded in our collective consciousness." As Laura L. points out, "We, Potterheads or not, cannot conceive the idea of someone our age being out of this movement because it was–and still is–a very important part of our lives."

This fierce generational loyalty to the series has by no means been diminished by my course, often intensely critical of Rowling. Many declare to have now a much better understanding of why they love the series; in Laia G.'s words:

> I like the sense of wonder and amazement that is slowly sobered up as Harry grows up and realises the many dark things that happen in his new world. I love the many secondary characters that grow under your skin and who make this series so special, like Sirius, Luna or Neville. I find the way in which Rowling manages to make this series home for so many people and to feel that Hogwarts will always welcome the reader back one of the best things about the novels and probably one of its elements for success.

For Jaime O., the series worked because it "brought some magic to the 1990s. Up to then, every tale I read in which there was magic was set in a distant times, and the fact that I could associate places from the book to places from reality was brilliant." For

Jaime G., *Harry Potter* is "nothing 'literary'" but the memories it is associated with, particularly the (paradoxically literary) desire "to know more, to read a further page." Begoña adds that grew deeply attached because "7 books are many pages, many stories and many experiences but also, because I grew up with *Harry Potter* and reading this series I experienced things that I never did before. I didn't know reading was so magical…"

To conclude, I'll return to the list of my four main findings. I hope the reader is by now convinced that the experience of the original readers of the *Harry Potter* series is unique both because of the slow rhythm of consumption they had to adapt themselves to, and because of the extremely rich cultural and personal experience which Rowling's series provided them with during the crucial years of their childhood and adolescence. In the third place, we need a radically new approach to the reception of popular fiction that goes beyond Fandom Studies and beyond Literary Theory (or that combines both), and that is capable of accounting for emotion. Finally, my own teaching experience proves that a freer, more democratic pedagogical style only brings benefits. As I have claimed, the students' singular expertise in the consumption of recent popular fictions is enriching for the classroom; we, teachers, gain much by welcoming it. Likewise, my own experience also shows that providing students with the academic tools necessary to make sense of their own reception strategies results in a much more heightened perception of their own experience and indeed in better academic work.[10]

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[10] See the papers on *Harry Potter* produced by the students in the online volume *Charming and Bewitching: Considering the Harry Potter Series*, which I edited. Available from: http://ddd.uab.cat/record/122987

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