

## *Introduction*

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Teaching Them to Love  
What They Have Loved:  
Harry Potter Goes to College

DALEY KONCHAR FARR AND  
CECILIA KONCHAR FARR

### What We Have Loved: Daley and Cecilia

*D*aley Konchar Farr, Augsburg College, junior English major: The summer I was nine years old, my mom, little brother, and I embarked on the long and familiar drive from our tidy neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota, to the grand, dusty Utah desert. We were going to drive part of the way with my grandparents, then visit old friends we had left behind in Provo five years earlier; the musty orange tent bouncing in the trunk signaled our plans to camp outside Moab while we were there. Throughout the trip, the three of us alternated reading aloud from a new book that my mom's friend had recommended for us—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. My brother Tanner and I bickered over how long each of us got to read before the other's turn; he was only six years old and I was a recent third grade graduate, but we were both eager to practice our blossoming reading skills on the exciting story of a shy English boy and his motley crew of magical friends.

In Moab, we spent hours huddled together in the tiny tent, reading about Harry as a wild desert storm lashed the red dirt

outside. When we turned the last page in the car on the way home, we sped toward the next town to pick up the newly released *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* as quickly as our still-sandy vehicle would take us. Reading Harry Potter with my mom and brother was the first time I ever discussed a book with other people who loved it as much as I did; it was during that road trip that I discovered how much I delight in talking about literature (especially while camping out in southern Utah), something that feels as natural to me now as the red sand felt between my toes.

*Cecilia Konchar Farr, St. Catherine University, parent and professor:* That summer road trip was a milestone for me, too. I didn't know it, but it was the last time I would be with my dad before he succumbed permanently to the dementia that accompanied his advancing Parkinson's disease. When he insisted on taking his turn driving just outside of Chicago, he panicked on the freeway and had to pull off. Embarrassed and frustrated, my dad, the long-haul trucker, operator of heavy construction equipment, unflappable driving teacher to eight children, surrendered the wheel to my mom, who drove most of the way to my brother's house in Denver as I squeezed into the back of my Suzuki Sidekick with Daley and Tanner. As we took turns reading Harry Potter, I was attuned not just to our story but also to every subtle shift in behavior that marked the impending loss of the father I had known. When he grabbed Tanner's wrist too firmly in a McDonald's restaurant and Tanner cried, I cried, too, furtively. I had to protect my six-year-old son from my father—the man who taught me to play chess and rummy, to ride ponies and mini-bikes, to fish, swim, and skate. One winter he attached an old car hood to the back of his tractor like a sled and drove us around and around for hours in our snowy field. Soon the whole neighborhood was grabbing on and flying off, rolling through the snow choking with laughter alongside my brothers and sisters and me. That was the dad I remember, full of fun and playfulness, the kind of parent I wanted to be.

If that trip marked an end to his playful parenting, it was a beginning for mine. The Harry Potter books punctuate my memories of the years Daley and Tanner lived with me. Harry often got them out of bed an hour early so we could read over

hot chocolate at neighborhood coffee shops before school. He got them back and forth through many more road trips to visit both sets of grandparents in Pittsburgh. I remember Daley carrying Harry to Girl Scout camp in her pillowcase and Tanner lounging intently with Harry on the front porch. When I get out the hammock each spring I remember cuddling together reading Harry on sticky Minnesota nights until it got too dark for us to see the pages. And that fierce desert storm is one of my most cherished memories, the amazing smells, sounds, and flashes of lightning (“*Lumos!*”) that amplified the magical world we were lost in inside that little tent. We are all readers now; Daley and I delight in our regular discussions of novels over coffee or on rollerblades, and Tanner’s collection of fantasy novels and manga threatens to annex his room. Because I haven’t driven a tractor in years, Harry served as well as a sled in the field for me and my kids.

When a group of St. Catherine University English majors requested a class on Harry Potter a few years ago, they didn’t have much work to do convincing me it was a good idea. I had spent years loving these books (almost) as much as they do. And my kids never did take much to rummy or chess.

**“I’ve been studying for this class since I was ten years old.”**

*What Others Love: Cecilia*

Inaugurated as the first woman president of the Modern Language Association in 1980, Harvard professor and literary scholar Helen Vendler delivered a now-famous speech entitled “What We Have Loved, Others Will Love.” She referenced these lines from William Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*: “What we have loved / Others will love, and we will teach them how.” She concluded, in a passage often cited by literature teachers, that “We owe it to ourselves to show our students, when they meet us, what we are; we owe their dormant appetites, thwarted for so long in their previous schooling, that deep sustenance that will make them realize that they too, having been taught, love what we love” (40). What we love, in

her essay, includes Keats, Yeats, and Dickinson, Milton, Dostoevsky, and Shakespeare, in addition to Wordsworth. It's a given in the text that these writers will meet with resistance from our college and university students. Our job, she suggests, is to educate them, to draw them in with our passion, to demonstrate irresistibly our love for this literature.

Check, check, and check. As is the case with many professors, more than half of my job is teaching students who aren't English majors, so my work has always been inspiring them to love what I love—*Gatsby* and *Sula*, Cather and Woolf. Sometimes it works. Often, despite my obdurate enthusiasm, it doesn't. I had one English major, Lennon Sundance—creative, sharp, valedictorian of her class—who could not see what people found so charming about Jane Austen. All that privileged aimlessness, the wandering from drawing room to drawing room, the pointless, dishonest politeness. But, seriously, I thought, what intelligent woman doesn't love Jane Austen, with her obvious preference for intelligent women? I knew Jane Austen would work for Lennon if she just read more of her. I was wrong; Lennon never took to Jane.

It took a few smart, perceptive, and resisting readers like Lennon to get me moving in a different direction with my teaching. Though I subscribed to radical *ideas* about teaching—pedagogies like Paulo Freire's that would have us see students as fully formed human beings in conversation with us rather than as empty vessels waiting to be filled with our wisdom—my practices, it seemed, had not caught up. I *did* know best.

Until I taught Harry Potter.

Freire writes about a teacher who "is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is [her]self taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (74). It takes about ten minutes of sharing a classroom space with Harry Potter readers to see the balance of power tip, to realize where knowledge resides. My traditional-age college students know Harry Potter—all seven volumes—the way my children do, the way I know *The Great Gatsby*, chapter by chapter, character by character, intimately and thoroughly—the knowledge of avid book lovers. They *know* these novels from years of reading and rereading them as they awaited the next book or

movie release. They don't need my enthusiasm; they have their own.

This collection of essays springs from the experience of studying Harry Potter at St. Catherine University in Minnesota's Twin Cities. Two outstanding student leaders (Evan Gaydos and Rachel Armstrong) joined me in constructing our course, "Six Degrees of Harry Potter," and then served as my teaching assistants as we taught it three times (see the syllabus, appendix 1). Students from several schools in our consortium (Macalester and Augsburg colleges and Hamline and St. Thomas universities) joined the "Katies" in the class, as you will observe in the section About the Contributors. The course became a study in the power of these novels to affect deeply these American, mainly Midwestern readers—quite a distance physically and culturally from author J. K. Rowling's Anglo-British wizarding world.

Far from Vendler's "thwarted" students with "dormant appetites," the Harry Potter students were engaged, eager, and astute. When I offered them critical tools (six approaches to textual analysis, the "six degrees"), they knew exactly how to use them to deepen and expand their understanding of Rowling's stories. One group read Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, for example, and with each novel traced Harry's hero journey. Another group was charged with examining the texts as children's literature and demonstrated to us (carefully and textually) not only how the characters mature but also how the issues deepen, the morality becomes more nuanced, and the language more complex as the series progresses. We took the issue of Harry being anti-Christian head on, as a third group, using Francis Bridger's *A Charmed Life: The Spirituality of Potterworld*, led us through a serious moral and theological examination of the novels and their place in contemporary culture. Groups also studied the texts as fantasy, as (capital-L) Literature, and as speculative science.

The classroom came alive with their projects, presentations, and papers—and their playfulness. Over those three semesters, we ate chocolate frogs and drank butterbeer, held a Quidditch tournament, and followed clues to the Chamber of Secrets in the basement of Whitby Hall; we watched a hilarious twenty-minute puppet show of all seven novels, attempted to read tea leaves

in a heavily scented, simulated Divination classroom; competed at Harry Potter trivia, Scene-It, and *Jeopardy!*; and MacGyvered our Muggle way through the challenges of the wizarding world with only a cell phone. Though few of the students were English majors, they all knew what it meant to love novels and to draw “deep sustenance” from them. The things we learned together seemed significant enough to pass along.

In this collection, my two teaching assistants and I, along with five student editors, have gathered thoughtful academic essays written by students aged seventeen to twenty-seven from across the country, each examining the Harry Potter books from various perspectives—theological, mythological, psychological, postmodern, postcolonial, genetic, gendered, and literary. We even have a nursing care plan for Tom Riddle. The book has its roots in the course. The first semester we taught it, as we read scholarly essays on Rowling’s work, the students were frustrated with the way the academic critics sometimes mixed up significant details and characters, conflating Professor Severus Snape with Lord Voldemort, for example, or confusing James Potter and Sirius Black. “We could do better than this,” they said. And, in fact, they did. We called for more essays online, and, in several rousing editorial board meetings where the students argued with impressive insight and integrity over which essays to include, we completed our selection.

And as a gesture toward recognizing the diverse ways Harry has walked with them through adolescence and helped them become the people they are, we also decided to include a few vignettes, selections we’re calling “My Harry Potter Story,” where young people who grew up with these novels share narratives and memories.

Our book begins with a foreword by Professor Giselle Liza Anatol, editor of the two excellent scholarly collections of essays on Harry Potter that we found most useful in our studies, both for class and for this book—*Reading Harry Potter* and *Reading Harry Potter Again*. After that, this introduction, coauthored by me, the supervising editor, and my English-major daughter, is the last we hear of the over-thirty generation for the remainder of the collection.

The first part of the collection, “Muggle Studies,” is devoted to how the wizarding world has affected our own. First, Kate Glassman reviews “The Harry Potter Phenomenon,” a statistical tracking of the expansion of the Harry Potter franchise from its obscure beginning as a children’s book in Britain to a worldwide marvel with over 500 million copies in print in English alone. She argues that, over the course of a decade, the rise of Harry Potter has had a profound and enduring effect on the publishing industry, blurring the line between children’s and adult literature and changing the way in which the literate world conceptualizes a bestseller. Kate McManus follows with “Loading the Canon,” an introduction to the prolific world of fanfiction that has burgeoned in response to the (gaps in the) Harry Potter series. McManus familiarizes readers with the genre and its history (which includes *Robin Hood* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*) as well as the language and trends of today’s fanfiction writers, such as “canon” versus “fanon” writing, the tendency toward romantic themes, and the appearance of “Mary Sue” characters. Next, Kyle Bubb examines “The Simulated World of Harry Potter” with a theoretical venture into the postmodern hyperreality of Universal Orlando’s Wizarding World. With similar mastery of contemporary theory, Hannah Lamb deploys postcolonial practices to examine class and race divisions in Harry’s world in her essay, “The Wizard, the Muggle, and the Other,” arguing that the novels, in the end, send decidedly mixed signals. Tréza Rosado closes out this part with her careful cultural examination of why this series, with its finely shaded views of right and wrong and good and evil, has been so meaningful to young people post 9/11.

The second part, “Defense Against the Dark Arts,” tracks the villains and heroes of the series, beginning with three studies of Voldemort’s villainy. Sarah Wentz examines how Nazi ideology, leadership models, and methods of education are repeated by Voldemort and his followers in “The Making of a New World,” and Kalie Caetano investigates “The Nuances of Mastering Death” and the acts of homicide and self-sacrifice in the series. Caetano pays particular attention to Voldemort’s obsessive avoidance of death and deftly contrasts his choices with the

complex compromises of Severus Snape. Sarah Sutor focuses on the state of Voldemort's soul, in all its broken pieces, in "The Wickedest of Magical Inventions," looking at the idea of a "separable soul" in medieval folklore and in Rowling's novels. Callie Knudslie then turns our attention to the novels' hero, with a theological examination of the Christian roots of Harry's morality in "WWHPD: What Would Harry Potter Do?" Considering the opposition to Rowling's portrayal of magic and witchcraft among some Christian communities, Knudslie argues that Harry Potter actually epitomizes Christ-centered values rather than contradicting them. Jenny McDougal concludes this part with a call for a more finely shaded understanding of one of the most beloved characters in the series, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. In "Doubting Dumbledore," McDougal argues that the headmaster is the epitome of Rowling's preference for moral complexity. She analyzes how Dumbledore molds Harry into the wizarding world's sacrificial lamb, releasing and withholding information as it suits his purposes, and builds a case that Dumbledore's utilitarian sense of right and wrong does not always work in Harry's favor.

The book's final part, "Transfiguration," places the Harry Potter novels in various academic contexts to yield unusual textual readings. Courtney Agar and Julia Terk imagine a "Wizard's Gene" in their genetic analysis of Potterworld. Using the family connections Rowling reveals in the novels, along with theories of population genetics, the authors posit that magical ability is a genetically inherited trait that follows the classic rules of Mendelian theory. As they demonstrate cleverly and creatively, these rules account for magical ability appearing in both Muggleborns and half-bloods, such as Hermione Granger and Severus Snape, as well as how two magical parents can produce a Squib, such as Argus Filch. Kiah Bizal approaches Harry Potter and Tom Riddle with the tools of Freudian psychological analysis to understand how two boys from similar circumstances can turn out quite differently in "Give Nature a Wand and It Will Nurture Magic," while Kari Newell imagines a nurse's intervention into young Tom Riddle's burgeoning psychoses with "A Nursing Care Plan for Tom Riddle." Newell's delightful conclusion,



speculating on the results of her intervention, is unlike anything a Muggle school nurse might confront in the course of a regular workday.

The concluding essays, by the student inventors of the Harry Potter course, employ literary approaches. Evan Gaydos takes a formalist look at “Literary Arithmancy” in her study of how the numbers three, four, and seven operate symbolically in the series and across cultures and time, and Rachel Armstrong engages queer theory to examine the “Sexual Geometry of the Golden Trio,” using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s erotic triangle. Putting Hermione at the center of the gendered tensions between Harry and Ron but focusing on this central female character’s refusal of the classic role of feminine foil or beard, Armstrong argues that the novels effectively challenge given gender stereotypes and open possibilities for young women readers.

The book’s afterword retraces our path through Potterworld, as the seven student editors reflect on what it means to study the novels we love.

**“I’ve never been so invested in a class before.”<sup>1</sup>**

*And They Can Teach Us How: Daley and Cecilia*

*Daley:* Not red dirt, not a red train, but a red bus bore me back to Hogwarts, and I learned of my acceptance through an e-mail rather than a letter in green ink. I was twenty-one—ten years late. I cringe a little to put it in those terms; having never quite taken to the Harry Potter movies, few things about being in Oxford annoy me quite so much as the breathless way fellow American students explain to me, “Christ Church’s dining hall is the Great Hall in Harry Potter, did you know that? Did you know Magdalen’s cloisters are where Malfoy got turned into a ferret?” As I write, I am halfway through my junior year abroad here, and in what little time I have, I prefer to enjoy Oxford as Oxford, my real school, with wonders and charms of its own and no need for fictional embellishment. But my eye rolls aren’t entirely honest, either. I think it must feel strange for all of us

who have loved Rowling's books to enter, as adults, something resembling the most cherished fantasy of our childhood. And even though I wouldn't say that my love for Harry Potter drove me to Oxford as a means of realizing my younger self's Ravenclaw aspirations, I do think that I got here because of what I learned from reading those books: falling in love with characters, examining my world through texts, finding the joy in wordplay, and hanging on for the long haul. Perhaps my frenzied reading and rereading of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, my favorite books in the series as well as two of the longest, forecasted my more recent attachments to *Ulysses* and *Moby-Dick*.

No matter how many times I combed my program's website for some bit of information I may have missed, now it seems that I made all of my most significant preparations for my time here through reading novels. I received images and atmosphere from Harry Potter, culture from the occasional Buck Mulligan jest, and a little bit of geography from Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series. I have had other English students here describe to me what they knew of Oxford before arriving in terms of *Brideshead Revisited* or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I know that something of my experience with Harry Potter is always bound up in my time in Oxford; through all of my worldly and literary travels, I carry with me the adventure, the intellectual thrill, and maybe even the magic I felt as I held my flashlight aloft and read those pages as if they contained a spell to keep us safe and dry in the storm ravaging our tent in Utah.

These days, my mom and I argue about the Blooms' as well as Snape's and Dumbledore's moral ambiguity, and coffee-and-book dates with her are one of the things I have missed most during my time away. But it's okay—for now, I have a different café, different texts to read, different people to discuss them with, and a different world to explore. Before I came here, Oxford was shrouded in mystery and a hopeful, hesitant expectation, just as Hogwarts once was. Now, just as it happened with Harry and his friends, I am starting to feel at home.

*Cecilia:* What Daley and I cherish about the Harry Potter novels, what my students cherish, is the way these novels speak

to our imaginations as well as our intellects, to our passions and our minds. It's the way they draw us in and don't disappoint us on the second, third, or seventh reading. In this, the Harry Potter books fit comfortably in the democratic tradition of enthusiastic novel-reading in the United States. Literary historians have remarked on the similarities between the spirited midnight Harry Potter book release parties and the stories of throngs of impatient nineteenth-century Americans waiting dockside for the next installment of a Charles Dickens novel. Americans have, for more than two centuries now, learned from novels, been entertained by them, and used them for social and cultural connection. We dive in and get lost together in alternate worlds, returning better readers and sometimes better scholars and citizens. Most English professors want our students to experience this charmed interchange for the rest of their lives. As a parent, I certainly want that for my children.

Harry Potter reminds us that young people in this generation, like many generations before them, love what pre-internet children like me loved. Despite their more flexible thumbs and frequent sojourns in digital universes, today's college students read with pleasure and draw deep sustenance from long, absorbing novels—a fine fact to remember as we mark Charles Dickens's two hundredth birthday.

When I teach Harry Potter, I more easily bring what I know as a parent with me than I do in my other teaching. I arrive ready to find joy in our reading together, ready to respect my students' preferences, ready to play. But I also bring what I know as a professor. I suggest reading practices and paradigms, theories and critical approaches; I provide good questions and a careful plan for our study. In this situation, with the Harry Potter novels, I have found that Vendler's model of teaching students to love what we love misses the mark. It is too linear, too top-down. While I offer ways to examine more thoroughly and, thus, appreciate more deeply these novels my students love, from there, the transaction is more circular. I honor (and cannot match!) the depth and breadth of their knowledge of the Potterverse, their informed and passionate reading. It is apparent in the essays that follow that Harry Potter readers love, draw deep

sustenance from, and are eager to understand these novels they grew up with. The real magic comes here—in letting them teach us how.

### Notes

The featured quotes on pages 4 and 9 are taken with permission from the end-of-semester evaluation, spring 2010, of Kate McManus (see her essay on fanfiction, “Loading the Canon,” chapter 2 in this volume).

Special thanks to Lennon Sundance—for letting me use her as an example here and for all she taught me while she was my student, and since.

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