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A Possible-World Approach Towards the Internal Structure of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Novels

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ABSTRACT
At the close of the twentieth century, J. K. Rowling published what was about to become an integral part of our popular culture and academic discourses. The phenomenal book series soon transformed into a powerful form of social text, as the British writer's heptalogy undoubtedly contained thought-provoking themes in addition to representations of cultural normalcy. Scholars began to acknowledge that the *Harry Potter* novels were worthy of serious critical attention especially since their infiltration in the readers' lives and imaginations gradually, but firmly, reached an international level. Nevertheless, there is still heated academic debate overthe author's mastery of craft or literary merit and the unprecedented publishing success. Thus, we endeavor to apply a possible-world approach, through which J. K. Rowling's fictional world in the *Harry Potter* books gains a valuable angle of exploration. We attempt to assert the aesthetic potential of the narrative, by investigating the internal structure of the textual universe, the development of the plotand the inter-world conflicts.

Keywords:*Alternate possible worlds; textual universe; internal structure; aesthetic potential; mental representations; the Harry Potter novels.*

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INTRODUCTION

Two decades have passed since J. K. Rowling's first book of a planned seven (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* – 1997[1]) was released and Harry Potter started to appear in all kinds of forms[2] and numerous places around the world. We encounter the famous character (and his "universal" loyal companions) in bookstores, libraries, card shops, local schools, even at software dealers[3]. Hence, it becomes obvious that Harry Potter can no longer count as books we read, movies we see or things that we buy. It is much more than that because it has become "the biggest children's publishing and merchandising phenomenon of modern times" [1].

The moment narrative texts and images grow into such an inescapable part of the cultural environment, people (as social human beings who conform to society's shared values and, consequently, define themselves through culture) make them part of their identity. There is no denying that the text and images of Harry Potter have become part of who we are, because we "consume" and transform their representations in almost every possible way. As Jorge Luis Borges remarked (to a large degree), we are what we read. Heilman pertinently points out "the view that literature and cultural products can simultaneously represent, reproduce, and transform cultural, political, and institutional norms has become an increasingly important perspective in literary theory, cultural studies, curriculum theory, art, and aesthetics" [1].

Thus, we propose to center the following pages on literary theory, and more precisely, on the literary text of Harry Potter and aspects of mental representations that readers create when processing it. The reasons for which we suggest this further research into the *Harry Potter* books as literary text are essentially based on a belief we share with Julia Eccleshare. Without a doubt, we must admit that these novels are literary works with an appeal that is beyond all others. Yet, Eccleshare rightly remarks that "the phenomenon that Harry Potter has become has clouded discussion about what

[1]The British novelist chose this title for her homeland and transformed it into *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to make it more accessible for the American audience. Other alterations such as "jumper" to "sweater" or "mum" to "mom" are part of the translation project that Rowling initially agreed with, though, has now lived to regret it.

[2] Among the myriad items available for sale, the following items are worth mentioning: "the Harry Potter I-POD, leather miniature trunks customized to hold the seven-book collection under lock and key, even a full-sized leather one, movie poster books, movie soundtracks, wall calendars, postcard and sticker books, guidebooks, Harry Potter UNO card games, carrying cases, glow in the dark puzzles, board games, video games, magic sets, books of spells, Hogwarts House Watches, a Golden Snitch puzzle, Harry Potter boxer shorts or action figures, Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, or textbooks which Daniel Radcliffe used in the Harry Potter books and movies." Turner-Vorbeck Tammy. "Pottermania: Good, Clean Fun or Cultural Hegemony?"*Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*,ed.Elizabeth E.Heilman, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 328-341.

[3] There are also spin-off products that surpass toys, such as expensive jewellery, special vacations or tours, tiffany lamps and so on. Fans can even set a Harry Potter ringtone or acquire their very own Harry Potter mobile phone.

the books really are" [2]. Consequently, we truly believe that we must return to the very first form of this phenomenon (the original literary text) and the main targeted audience (the readers, not the consumers) in order to discover why the *Harry Potter* book series has had a greater impact on readers than any other engaging fantasy tale.

Did the reader experience different feelings while enjoying J. K. Rowling's narrative? If that is the case, what kind of emotions did the British novelist trigger? How is it possible that an ostensibly "childish" book with a familiar storyline and a predictable outcome – both of which had already been amazingly developed by illustrious ancestors (J. R. R. Tolkien, Roald Dahl, Enyd Blyton to name a few) – appeal to so many people around the world? Is the story not derivative? Does it not touch on trivial matters? Critics (Ron Charles, Harold Bloom, John Pennington, etc.) have already outlined these negative characteristics and added others to complete the list.

Nevertheless, people of all ages[4] have found meaning and joy in reading this engaging and, at the same time, controversial series. It is a reality that no one can and should ignore. On the contrary, further critical analysis ought to be applied regarding the motifs behind the people's choice. In her collection of critical essays, Giselle Liza Anatol also contended "that it is exactly because the series has become so wildly popular that it is both critically significant and should be taken quite seriously" [3]. Thus, the purpose of our current research is to add another perspective that can assist these novels in being "taken seriously" by the academic world.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We believe that one way to do start doing this is to deepen our understanding of the literary text. Since "the meaning of a literary work can be found in the mind of readers" [4] and "cognitive poetics is all about reading literature" [4], we propose a theoretical approach that focuses on these two important factors (the text and the readers) and the "outcome" of their interaction. Possible worlds theory (as proposed in Ryan, 1991) focuses primarily on the "worlds" of texts and "the mental representations readers create when processing literary texts" [5].

The following pages will focus on Elena Semino's contribution to Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen's *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* (2003), a companion volume to Peter Stockwell's *Cognitive Poetics. An Introduction* (2002). The aforementioned editors state that the recent collection of chapters "aims to demonstrate at a more advanced level what cognitive poetics may look like in actual academic practice." They point out that cognitive poetics (a somewhat more recent manifestation in comparison with cultural studies) relate "the structures of the work of art, including the literary text, to their presumed or observed psychological effect on the recipient, including the reader"[5]. We believe that this approach is useful and appropriate in our endeavor to discover the reason(s) for which J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has had a greater impact on readers than any other text in fantasy literature.

First of all, we would like to express Semino's understanding of what we (as readers) experience in our readerly processes and the elements of the text object. She believes that "an important aspect of the comprehension of texts […] is the cognitive representation of the «world» of the text – the sets of states or affairs, events and relationships that the text refers to." But "this does not simply involve the ability to conceive of a sequence of events that «happen» in the text world, but also the ability to contemplate and make sense of other events that are just imagined, wished for, hypothesized about, and so on[5]". In her opinion, this is a "prerequisite to the reader's ability to (a) draw conclusions about the wider significance of the story (e.g. the futility of human relationships and the effects of war on ordinary people), and (b) relate this story to other stories that deal with similar topics (e.g. fairy tales or romances)[5]. We shall see if the discovery of relationships between various worlds constructed in the *Harry Potter* literary text can assist us in appreciating the meaning and associations that can be extracted.

At this point, we suggest focusing on the "possible worlds" concept as formulated by Ryan, who defines them as "alternate possible worlds" which represent "different versions of the text actual world". These different versions are character-centred in this way: "Knowledge worlds", "Prospective Extensions of Knowledge worlds", "Intention worlds", "Obligation worlds", "Wish worlds" and, last of all, "Fantasy Universes" [5]. Semino offers this classification, but she provides only a few nouns for its description. Therefore, we suggest we turn to Peter Stockwell for a more detailed presentation, because accuracy cannot be overlooked. Before we enumerate the types he describes, we would like to emphasize a change in terminology. Stockwell rejects the "possible worlds" and, instead, speaks of "discourse worlds

[4] Ubiquitous early texts for children and a popular choice for many adults, Rowling's books have sold more than 420 million copies worldwide in some 60 languages (Heilman, 2009:2).

[5] Her text for analysis is Ernest Hemingway's *A Very Short Story*, and "the understanding and appreciation of the story involves […] keeping track of the sequence of events in the world of the text, and relating those events to alternative sequences of events that are contemplated by the characters but never realized. (quoted in Gavins and Steen, 2003:85).

that can be understood as dynamic readerly interactions with possible worlds"[6]. As such, he prefers to think of discourse worlds "as possible worlds with a narratological and cognitive dimension"[4]. We may also observe a minor change for the names attributed to the types of alternativity.

"Epistemic worlds" (knowledge worlds) represent what the characters in the fictional world believe to be true about their world. The second category refers to "speculative extensions" or the things the characters anticipate about their world, or other hypotheses they hold. "Intention worlds" describe what characters plan to do to deliberately change their world. His next category (unlike Ryan's classification) is represented by "wish worlds" in which characters wish or imagine might be different about their world. On the other hand, "obligation worlds" embody different versions of the world filtered through the characters' sense of moral values. Last, but not least, "fantasy worlds" express characters' dreams, visions, imaginations or fictions that they compose themselves[4].

We have previously stated two outcomes a reader can gain if he or she understands and appreciates the events narrated in a story. First of all, the reader can extract a wider meaning of the narrative text and, second of all, he or she can relate the fictional narrative to other ones in terms of themes. Now, we would like to mention how a possible-world approach to a narrative text can be useful to us. To begin with, this method "provides a useful framework for the definition of fiction[7], the description of the internal structure or fictional worlds, and the differentiation between different genres" [4].

The "internal structure" of the textual universe is the main topic that we are going to focus on in the following section, with the *Harry Potter* books as the narrative for analysis. The premise is that the textual universe is seen (through a possible-world approach) "as a dynamic combination of a text actual world on one hand, and different types of alternate possible worlds formulated by characters on the other hand" [4]. For each of the six types of alternativity, an example will be given to illustrate how J. K. Rowling accomplishes this "dynamic combination".

INTERNAL STRUCTURE

The first alternate possible world which is different from the text actual world corresponds to characters' beliefs. The protagonist believes he is a normal boy, without magical powers, and unaware of his wizarding heritage. Nevertheless, Harry Potter, with his misleadingly pedestrian name, turns out to be the unique "Boy Who Lived" (the only person, a child in every sense, ever to survive the Killing Curse and Voldemort's fury) and the remarkable "Chosen One" who will vanquish the wizarding world from the Dark Lord.

The second alternate possible world which is unlike the text actual world is based on characters' expectations. When Dumbledore assigns Harry Potter the difficult task of destroying the Horcruxes after his headmaster's and mentor's (at the same time) death, the protagonist finds himself in a much more difficult position than he had expected. First of all, because he had hoped for Dumbledore to permanently be able to assist him in his journey(s) (educational, spiritual, moral, etc.). Second of all, Harry did not anticipate the task to prove so challenging to accomplish. Potter most certainly did not expect that, in order to destroy Voldemort forever, he must sacrifice his own life.

However, the protagonist never gives up and, together with his most faithful companions (Ron and Hermione), he plans different ways to deliberately change the terrifying atmosphere which governs the magical world. Their wishes and desires are concentrated on this common goal, but the three of them (a magical number) also aspire to numerous other things. We know that Potter's dearest desire of his heart is to have his family by his side. He wishes that they had never been betrayed by their alleged friend, Peter Pettigrew, who gave secret information to Voldemort about their hiding place, all resulting in their lamentable death. On the other hand, Ron Weasley wishes not to let his mother down and follow his older brothers' legacy.

The fifth alternate possible world which is unlike the text actual world is based on characters' moral commitments. The most illuminating, but also sensitive example of a character's sense of moral values is Snape's pledge to look after Harry Potter after his parents' death. The reason for his behaviour and moral obligation stems from his undying love for the Muggle-born witch Lily Evans, Harry's mother.

[6] Stockwell argues that "a possible world" is "a formal logical set" (a philosophical notion, constituted by a set of propositions that describe the state of affairs in which a sentence can exist), not "a cognitive array of knowledge. He explains his choice to change "possible worlds" into "discourse worlds"as a consequence of this observation: "possible worlds theory has little to say about the worlds of literary reading." (Stockwell, 2002:93).

[7] Ryan calls the actual domain of a particular textual universe the "text actual world", while all unrealized worlds become "textual alternative possible worlds". "This provides the basis for a distinction between fictional and non-fictional texts: in non-fiction, the text actual world corresponds to the readers' «actual» world; in fiction, on the other hand, the text actual world is separate and different from the readers' «actual» world." (Semino E. quoted in Gavins and Steen, 2003:86).

The last category corresponds to characters' dreams or fantasies, visions, imaginations or fictions that they compose themselves. The protagonist experiences most of his dreams in the fifth book, where he has visions about the location of the prophecy in the Ministry of Magic. Later on, the reader discovers that Harry did not explore the rooms inside the Ministry of Magic with his own mind in search of the prophecy. It was Voldemort who constantly penetrated his thoughts through Legilimency – the act of magically invading, navigating and influencing a person's mind.

Semino states that a "possible-world approach to fiction focuses on what we may call the «product» of comprehension" [4]: the readers' interpretative understanding of the internal structure. By adopting this kind of approach, the internal structure of J. K. Rowling's fictional world in the *Harry Potter* books gains a valuable angle of exploration. Subsequently, this new angle may help us appreciate that J. K. Rowling does not include just "happenings" in her story, instead, she is also able to control the complex plot and to deliver it with a calculated sense of pace.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

In the following section, we wish to concentrate on another function of a possible-world approach towards a literary text: plot development. Marie-Laure Ryan refers to conflictsbetween some of the worlds that make up a textual universe as being "necessary to get a plot started: if there was no conflict, there would be no need for any action, and therefore no plot"[4]. Therefore, we propose to analyse certain conflicts between the text-actual world and textual alternative possible worlds in J. K. Rowling's story. After exploring this type of conflict, we wish to demonstrate that the British writer's storytelling is not a rudimentary one; her narration also includes changes in the mutual relationships between the character's private worlds.

In the first chapters of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry is literally a child with no knowledge of the world or his special powers. There is, therefore, a conflictbetween the character's "knowledge" world (a normal boy raised by his rather cruel aunt and uncle) and the current state of the actual world (the "Chosen One", who is already famous in the wizard community for having vanquished Voldemort).

As the series develops, Harry becomes aware of his orphan status and accepts his role as the "Chosen One", even if he wished he could save humankind through other ways than by sacrificing himself. Consequently, the circumstances of the text-actual world make it impossible to realise the "wish" world before the protagonist fulfills his "obligation" world of facing his mortality and deliberately embracing it. Harry Potter also has to struggle with the temptation of using the Hallows as part of his "obligation" world in order to achieve the joint Wish world shared by all his friends: killing the Dark Lord and restoring peace and happiness[8].

During their school years, Harry, Hermione and Ron grow and mature, shifting their roles from innocent children concentrated on their magical education to an adult "education of sentiment". Harry Potter notices in his fourth year that Cho Chang, a girl from the Ravenclaw house, makes his stomach feels funny. "Cho was a year older than he was; she was very pretty; she was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular (Rowling, 2000: 339). He also experiences his first kiss with her in the fifth installment of the series, but his plan to be in a relationship with the girl he likes will result in frustration. Thus, a conflict between his "intention" world and his romantic "wish" world can be discovered, because Harry does not know how to respond to Cho's moods and reactions, and their relationship ends.

In the sixth year at Hogwarts, we can distinguish another conflict between Harry's "obligation" world and, again, his "wish" world. He starts experiencing romantic feelings for Ron's little sister, Ginny Weasley, and feels terribly guilty. His moral values create a "fierce battle" with his emotions that "rages inside Harry's brain: *She's Ron's sister*. But she's ditched Dean! *She's still Ron's sister.* I'm his best mate! *That'll make it worse*. If I talked to him first – *He'd hit you*. What if I don't care? *He's your best mate*" [6]. This sequence of sentences vividly illustrates how Harry's mind and heart collide, with Rowling's own merit for vibrantly expressing the inner battle that *Everyman* carries some time in his life.

As the storyline gradually unfolds, Harry expects to succeed in his final quest with the help of his mentor: Dumbledore, the archetype of the *Wise Wizard*, not just to Harry, but to the wizarding world as a whole. Nevertheless, this "prospective extension of knowledge" world, which implies a "wish" world (protection and support from the wise man), becomes incompatible with the future realization of the joint "wish world" (defeating Voldemort). Dumbledore dies in the sixth novel and Harry has to deal with the horrible loss of his most powerful father figure. In fact, Harry has been losing his heroes since the beginning of the fifth volume. His relationships with all his father figures slowly shift and conflicts between his "belief" world (what he thought to be true about them) and the state of the actual text world continually influence his "intention world."

[8] J. R. R. Tolkien phrases the term *eucatastrophe* in his lecture – "On Fairy-Stories" (1938), considered to be the fundamental document of modern fantasy theory – and he identifies it with the need for the happy ending. It is a sudden joyous turn that denies any final defeat and produces *evangelium*, or joy beyond the reach of time. (Kelleghan, 2002:644-645).

By adopting a possible-world approach, we are now able to witness how literary texts often function: they exploit "disjunctions between character knowledge and the wider knowledge offered to the reader, with the reader having to keep track of both systems and compare them"[4]. Plot development is, therefore, a multitude of "changes in the mutual relationships between the worlds contained within a textual universe", while "the study of different types of inter-world conflicts in textual universes can lead to a typology of plots." [5]. On the surface level, the *Harry Potter* novels are characterised by the protagonists' "wish" worlds which are accomplished in the traditional happy ending of fairy tales and romantic novels. But this is not surprising, because "the direct ancestors of today's literary fantasy are traditional folk and fairy tales, which in turn can be traced to the myth-making of the classical oral traditions" [7].

Each book achieves a certain closure which leads to the fulfillment of the original "wish" world. Accordingly, by the end of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the stone is destroyed and Harry is able to see his parents (or at least their photographs or reflections in the Mirror of Erised). At the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Tom Riddle and his diary are vanquished and Harry's place in Gryffindor House rather than among Slytherins, is confirmed. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* concludes with no less than the saving of Sirius Black's (Harry Potter's godfather) and Buckbeak's (the hippogriff who lived with Rubeus Hagrid) lives, along with Harry's finding of a sympathetic guardian (unlike his heartless aunt and uncle).

The ending of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* concludes with Harry once again surviving an attack from Voldemort and draws much stronger lines between the sides of good and evil within the wizarding world than ever before. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* features two confrontations: the battle between the Order of the Phoenix and the Death Eaters, while Dumbledore and Voldemort confront each other at the Ministry of Magic. The penultimate book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, ends with the death of Dumbledore and the fleeing of Severus Snape, but also places Harry into the original strong triangle of friendship with Ron and Hermione.

With *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J. K. Rowling resolves her dangling plots and brings the major conflicts of the series to a satisfying conclusion: all Horcruxes are destroyed, we discover more about Harry's ancestry, and Snape's motivations throughout the series finally become clear. Not only that, but the British writer makes them connect resoundingly with the thematic implications of love raised in the first book and pursued during the series.

AESTHETIC POTENTIAL

Still, as we have mentioned before, this is the surface level of J. K. Rowling's storytelling. Navigating through the series on Harry's shoulder allows us to discover a broad and nuanced social totality. Even "the most powerful wizard" Dumbledore is slogging around trying to figure things out in the sixth installment. Moreover, without Harry's help, Dumbledore cannot manage to go by himself to search for and destroy one of the Horcruxes – the locket. To see that the "greatest" individual among all members of a social order needs to work with others is an important lesson.

Rowling's storytelling is different from that of Tolkien's or Lewis's in terms of evil representations. By assembling the pieces of the puzzle regarding Voldemort's existence (a task in which Rowling wittily and effortlessly engages the reader), we discover that the Dark Lord is not essentially or primordially evil. He just refuses to let go of his hatred for Muggles (non-magical people), because his own Muggle father abandoned him, resulting in his witch mother's death. Voldemort never understands (not even in his final living moments) that his innate abilities, prodigious though they might be, are not enough if he is not capable of experiencing the true and gratifying feeling of love.

When the reader first meets Severus Snape, he is the tyrannical teacher and, most certainly, Voldemort's most faithful follower. He has got few social skills, persecutes Harry during Potions lessons and not only, being skillfully portrayed as a one-dimensional character. By the end of the series, however, Snape's allegiances are discovered and the reasons behind his previous actions are elucidated. He is the character who decides to override his insatiable passion for the Dark Arts and act on his love for Harry's mother. When he does not succeed to save Lily and she is murdered by Voldemort, he wretchedly approaches Dumbledore and makes his moral commitment to support those united against the individual who killed his dearest one. But Rowling does not let the reader discover these details until the final volume, when we begin to see Snape's complicated relationship with Harry and his (apparently) double-agent status (working for both Voldemort and the Order of the Phoenix).

The last part of our discussion focuses on the "tellability" of plots or the aesthetic potential that can be obtained through the creation of complex networks of unrealized possibilities. Ryan asserts the "Principle of Diversification" and her idea to "seek the diversification of possible worlds in the narrative universe" [5]. We wish to highlight that even if the last book of the series offers a satisfying closure to the reader and a predictable ending, Rowling also decides to "sacrifice" some of her "heroes" in the universal fairy tale formula of "the good against the evil." Sirius Black (Harry Potter's disguised godfather and caring guardian), Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody (the skillful Auror), Remus Lupin and Tonks (loyal members of the Order of the Phoenix), Dobby (the faithful house-elf), Fred (George Weasley's twin brother

and Ron's older brother), and last but certainly not least, Dumbledore (the "most powerful wizard" of all times) – they all die in the end.

All these deaths generate confusion, sorrow, guilt and hatred, leading to a path in which the character's alternate possible worlds form "private embedded narratives" that enter intocomplex relationships with each other [5]. Harry's hope of living together with a dear and caring relative (his godfather) is completely shattered when Sirius is killed in the fifth book. His feelings are so vividly narrated by J. K. Rowling that we can almost feel the same despair as the protagonist: "It was unbearable, he would not think about it, he could not stand it…there was a terrible hollow inside him he did not want to feel or examine, a dark hole where Sirius had been, where Sirius had vanished; he did not want to have to be alone with that great, silent space, he could not stand it –" [8]. Thus, we see how the death event in the actual world clashes with the possible world that was contemplated by Harry, but never realised.

Another crucial moment in Rowling's story is Dumbledore's death and the emotional rendering of it through the third-person narrative voice: "And he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that the phoenix had gone, had left Hogwarts for good, just as Dumbledore had left the school, had left the world…had left Harry"[6]. The unfulfilled possible world which corresponded to Harry's wish for Dumbledore to assist him until the very end generates a series of virtual narratives within the fictional universe. They are going to represent the basis for further conflicts between Harry and his friends (Ron and Hermione), who have to comprehend they are now struggling alone and the only way to win is to stick together.

CONCLUSIONS

All in all, a possible-world approach to fiction focuses on what we may call the "product" of comprehension: the structure and characteristics of fictional worlds as the result of complex interpretative processes. Although a possible-world theory addresses the "live" issues in poetics (the definition of fiction, the internal structure of the fictional worlds, etc.), possible worlds theory is by no means a cognitive theory. Semino argues that if we want to "treat fictional worlds as cognitive constructs" and deal with "cognitive processing", mental space theory should be applied to narrative texts. Mental space theory, in comparison with possible worlds theory, is part of cognitive linguistics and "aims to account for the online production and comprehension of language" [5].

The reason for which we introduced this type of theory is that we wanted to reveal that a "systematic consideration of how worlds are constructed in the interaction between the reader's mind and linguistic stimuli" does exist and it focuses on "the role of linguistic choices and patterns in texts"[5]. We also believe that the mechanics of mental space analysis should be left for the time being and applied to J. K. Rowling's narrative or another popular (or classic) novel when another opportunity arises.

The purpose of this study was to explore the "internal structure of the textual universe" in the *Harry Potter* novels which further accounts for "the development of the plot". By depicting various worlds built within this literary text, and the inter-world conflicts in the textual universe, the *Harry Potter* books gain aesthetic potential or "tellability" of plot, which confirm J. K. Rowling's skillful handling of a complex world.

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