Breaking the Magic Spell

contrast the narrative techniques that a few of these authors use to deliver their radical and moral messages. The reason why I want to place so much emphasis on the radical morality of fairy-tale and fantasy literature is because it is key to understanding the essence of all storytelling. As the brilliant psychologist Jerome Bruner states in his book, Acts of Meaning, "Dramatism, in Burke's sense, focuses on derivations from the canonical that have moral consequences—derivations related to legitimacy, moral commitment, values. Stories must necessarily, then, relate to what is morally valued, morally appropriate, or morally uncertain. The very notion of Trouble presupposes that Actions should fit Goals appropriately, Scenes be suited to Instruments, and so on. Stories, carried to completion, are explorations in the limits of legitimacy, as Hayden White has pointed out. They come out 'lifelike,' with a Trouble morally explicated if not redressed. And if imbalances hang ambiguously, as they often do in postmodern fiction, it is because narrators seek to subvert the conventional means through which stories take a moral stand. To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances."

My purpose is to question the social and moral value of such works like the Harry Potter books, to raise the problematic nature of what fairy-tale and fantasy writing for young readers may mean, and to introduce some writers whose works, though not without faults, demand more attention than the Harry Potter books and other conventional literature for young readers. I do this as an unabashed adult critic who is not ashamed to say that children's literature should be subjected to the same high aesthetic and moral standards that we set for the very best of our contemporary writers who write for adults. At the same time, my critique of children's literature, especially fairy tales, is a call for more radical change commensurate with the radical changes that we have witnessed in the social and political systems in all countries over the past four centuries. The inventions in the fields of cultural production have demanded a response from writers and artists, for the new technologies have altered the manner in which we mediate stories of all kinds and form the basis for the effectiveness of the culture industry. It is, of course, too easy to condemn the culture industry for homogenizing stories and culture and compromising morality without opening up a discussion of possible alternatives to

The Radical Morality of Rats, Fairies, Wizards and Ogres

the deleterious trends in contemporary society. We live in an age of wonder thanks to the new technologies. In her book, Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age, Eliza Dresang remarks:

Literature for youth has traditionally been linear (that is, written to be read in a step-by-step, "one way only" progression). It has been sequential (that is, what comes next is clearly related to what came before). But digital-age books are designed in a different way. Digital-age children are able to gain information from "bits and bytes," from text fragments which are not necessarily organized in a straight line from beginning to end, or from the left to right. This is nonlinear text. It also may be nonsequential. Sometimes young readers must seek their own path, creating their own sequence. Readers must "point and click" with their eyes to find what is needed. This two-dimensional digital phenomenon is referred to in this book as handheld hypertext. Hypertext refers to text that branches and allows choices to the reader; it is usually associated with the computer, but it is used in this book to describe a hypertext-like experience in the handheld book.

Dresang is particularly enthusiastic about the internet and technological advances in the mass media because they allow for greater activity and exchange of ideas on the part of the young and radical experimentation in children's literature. Writers and artists have responded to the new technologies and demands by using graphics in new formats, creating new levels of synergy with words and pictures, providing multiple layers of meaning in nonlinear and nonsequential organization of texts, allowing for more interactive possibilities for the reader/viewer through works that have multiple perspectives, and dealing with subjects, characters, and settings that have been previously forbidden in plots that have open endings. Dresang argues that it is not necessary for youth to have direct access to the Internet to encounter the hot topics of the digital world; they appear in the daily news and on TV, in conversations in the playground and at the mall. The position some adults are taking (and which is taken in this book) is that it is far better instead of restricting
access, to arm young people with the information and skills they need to recognize and deal with situations that threaten the respect they and others deserve. Children have always read books written for adults, even while their own body of literature has grown. Why even have a separate juvenile literature if children are exposed to the adult world daily? Because children can and do benefit from a literature that meets their interests and the context of their lives. What they do not benefit from is literature that is "dumbed down" on the assumption that they cannot handle complexities.5

To a certain extent, Dresser is somewhat uncritical of what she calls the digital world, for it is not as though everything has now become open and accessible though the Internet and the new technologies. Numerous critics have questioned the "globalization" of the world and pointed to the American domination of culture that occurs through the very same Internet that Dresser believes is opening up discourse. For instance Zygmunt Bauman argues:

The widely eulogized "interactivity" of the new media is a gross exaggeration; one should rather speak of "an interactive one-way medium." Contrary to what academics, themselves members of the new global elite, tend to believe, the Internet and Web are not for anyone and unlikely ever to become open to universal use. Even those who get access are allowed to make their choices within the frame set by the suppliers, who invite them "to spend time and money choosing between and in the numerous packages they offer." As for the rest, left with the network of satellite or cable television with not as much as a pretension to symmetry between the two sides of the screen—pure and alloyed watching is their lot. And what is it that they watch?

They watch the few. The few who are watched are the celebrities.7

So, globalization of the media is not an unquestionable positive change. Moreover, Dresser does not sufficiently investigate the problems of attention deficit and distraction caused by "sound bytes" and "frag-

mented images" so popular and conventional, not radical, to which children are exposed. How are cognitive processes affected by exposure to flashing images, words, and sounds and multi-dimensional texts? Are there physical and neurotic effects? Are the young being configured in radical ways so that they will become plugged in and more radical consumers? There are no definitive answers at this point, but it is clear that moral stances are taken by the narrative strategies and artistic compositions developed by writers and artists in their products and stories, whether they have open or closed endings. Radical changes are, indeed, being made in book production and design and on screens. Whether they are all positive is still a matter for debate, but Dresser's argument for such change in books for children in a digital age is important because she stresses the need to respect and challenge the young while providing them with connections that enable them to recognize what causes the social problems they are facing and how to identify the "evils" that cause the problems and the "evils" that result—largely from adult actions.

Speaking about evil, it is now time to turn to some examples of conventional and radical fairy tales and fantasy produced primarily for young people and to assess how they depict and contextualize evil. Since I have already written extensively about the conventionality of the Harry Potter novels in my study, Sticks and Stones, I should like to summarize my critique of Rowling's work and then discuss more innovative experiments by Pullman, Block, Napoli, and Steig and evaluate the radical nature of their unique experiments with fantasy and their moral implications.

While there is no doubt that the Harry Potter books are cleverly written and provide a sense of hope and empowerment for young readers, they are also very conventional, predictable, and ideologically conservative with a strong investment in the restitution of male hegemony. Now, I know I may sound somewhat politically correct by issuing such seemingly severe pronouncements. But I am not condemning the books nor do I want them censored or banned. Let me restate that, at first glance, the novels appear to deliver a positive message: a young small gifted orphan, stalked by an evil character named Voldemort, manages to outwit and overcome his foe and exhibit great prowess and unusual imaginative gifts in his struggle to overcome adversity. This is the storyline of hope in all four Harry