

Harry Potter and the Catholic Divide



The Mystery of Harry Potter: A Catholic Family Guide (catalog.OSV.com)

A few weeks ago, I reached out to Nancy Brown, author of “The Mystery of Harry Potter: A Catholic Family Guide” for a story I was doing to coincide with the release of “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I” in theaters.

That book came out in 2007 and sought to address the concerns of families when it came to the Harry Potter series. Some Catholics, and Christians, have steered clear of the books and movies because of the witchcraft and wizardry in the series, most commonly referred to as the occult.

Unfortunately, we weren’t able to connect... until now.

Below is a question and answer session, via e-mail, I had with Brown about the Harry Potter series, the themes of Christianity and Catholicism that exist there and the criticisms the books and movies have received.

Brown, an Antioch, IL native, has written four other books: “A Study Guide for Chesterton’s St. Francis of Assisi (2006),” “The Blue Cross Study Edition,” “The Father Brown Reader: Stories from Chesterton” and “The Father Brown Reader 2: More Stories from Chesterton.

She wears many hats beyond being an author. She is a wife and mother, artist’s assistant, nurse, write and speaker. She has a blog for the American Chesterston Society and enjoys gardening, cooking and, she said, “dare I admit, video games?”

As you’ll read below, Brown is a big fan of English writer G.K. Chesterton, a Catholic convert who died in 1936, but clearly influences her work. Brown offers some interesting insight into Harry Potter, author J.K. Rowling and Catholics split about the series in our conversation below. Some major spoilers about “Deathly Hallows” are included in the conversation so be warned before reading.

Matt Palmer: What is your own Catholic background?

Nancy Brown: I’m a cradle Catholic who, like many, reached adulthood without really knowing my faith. I got challenged by going to an ecumenical Bible Study to answer questions about why Catholics do certain things (infant baptism, need for

priesthood, etc.) and began to learn from converts like Steve Ray, Mark Shea, Scott Hahn and Jeff Cavins. I learned my faith as an adult. At one point in my early years, I felt shaky about my faith. I prayed very simply for more faith, and God answered my prayers wonderfully.

Matt Palmer: What was your inspiration for writing *The Mystery of Harry Potter: A Catholic Family Guide*?

Nancy Brown: When the first Harry Potter books came out, my children were very little. A trusted friend asked if I'd heard of the series, and I said No, and she said, "Well then, avoid them like the plague—they'll bring New Age thinking and witchcraft into your home."

"Well," I thought, "who wants that?"

It was hard to avoid the books as every librarian and book store made it seem as if you couldn't go on living without reading them.

A few years of avoiding them later, another trusted friend and I were talking, and she happened to mention that her kids were reading Harry Potter. I'm sure I showed shock on my face, and I had this immediate desire to make sure our kids never played together again. Then she explained how she had come to read the books first, then read them to her kids, and discovered good story telling and Catholic and Christian themes. She insisted they were actually GOOD books to read together as a family.

Well, Chesterton, my hero, has this line where he's criticizing people who criticize Christians, and he says whenever people say someone is too tall and then again too short, if something is too heavy and at the same time others say it's too light, if something is too this, but someone else criticizes it and says it's too that, that perhaps that something is just the right size.

I began to wonder about Harry Potter. How could one Catholic friend insist it was the product of the devil and yet another one insist it could lead you to investigate Christianity? So I read them for myself. And then I decided to read them out loud to my children. And then I decided that every family should be able to make that kind of decision for themselves, and so I wrote the book all about how a family could go about doing that-together.

Matt Palmer: What was your initial exposure to the Potter series and reaction? How has your view progressed and why?

Nancy Brown: As you can see, my first exposure was "Avoid it like the plague!" and I trusted that friend, so we did avoid the books for years. My view changed when an equally trusted friend shocked me because her view was so opposite of my other friend's, and so I had a dilemma in my mind, and a situation I had to resolve in my own home. Were the books good or bad? Would they hurt my children or not? How

could I possibly find out? There was only one way: read Harry Potter myself. Do a little investigation into author J.K. Rowling's intent. My view progressed because I did what I could to educate myself about the subject.

Matt Palmer: It seems like the Potter series has splintered Catholics. Some are on board with it as an arresting story, while others are rejecting it because of the overwhelming witchcraft elements. Was your book aiming for one of the audiences in particular or both? Why?

Nancy Brown: The fact that Harry Potter is splintering Catholics echoes my own inner experience, so I completely understand that. I believe that today, those who reject the books are a small minority who have unfortunately had some sort of brush with the occult. My own family, and I suspect most families, don't have any direct experience with any kinds of exorcist type events in their lives. In every case where someone is adamantly and vociferously against the Potter series, I've found someone who has had direct family experience with the occult. Those people, and those that listen to them, are quite sure Harry Potter will lead one down the path to ruin.

But my experience, and I believe most Catholic Christian family's experience, is that the occult is out there, yes. But I've got God. We've got Jesus. Our family is built on faith and our home is centered on Christ. We spend more time praying and working on virtue and thinking about Christ than we do thinking about the occult and the devil. And for that kind of family, I believe we can read Harry Potter and see the goodness in the story, and recognize the good vs. evil, how love ultimately saves the day, how self-sacrifice is called for and the good characters rise up to defeat the bad. Chesterton says every story has a Princess, a St. George, and a dragon. I believe the people who are against Harry Potter would have liked to see the book without the dragon. But you must have a dragon to defeat, in order to have a story. Those that are adamantly against Harry Potter believe that the dragon is so attractive in the story, it will snare the children and take them away. I don't believe anyone who has read the stories becomes enamored with Voldemort and his minions. You hate him, you want him defeated. He killed Harry's parents for heaven's sake. What's to like about that? But if you haven't read the books for what they are, works of fiction in the Christian tradition, you won't see that. I know of one anti-Potter author who finally decided to read the books. But he read them looking for the occult. He read them searching out the New Age stuff, and of course he found it. But what is the context? It's there, yes, but as the dragon to be defeated. If you don't see that, you don't "get" Harry Potter. And most families and most children reading Harry "get" it. Harry is St. George. Voldemort is the dragon. Their world, love, honor, moral

courage, their families, their homes- are the Princess worth fighting for.

Matt Palmer: What do you tell the people who are opposed to the series because of witchcraft?

Nancy Brown: I do believe there is an attraction to witchcraft in our times. Because, as Chesterton says, those who won't believe in God will believe in anything. People want to believe in something, so they turn to whatever is the rebellious thing of the day. I really believe that author J.K. Rowling has done a clever job of taking a thing that is attractive to young people today, and turning it into a Christian story. It seems to me that if you wanted to teach young people about faith, about Christ, and you were called to write a work of fiction, there could be no greater way to hide a Christian story for today's youth than to bury it in a moral tale about witches and wizards.

Matt Palmer: Can a person be opposed to the witchcraft and still enjoy the series?

Nancy Brown: I am firmly and vociferously against witchcraft, as are most good people. I believe most Catholic families teach their children about the evils of the occult and of witchcraft. And yes, one can have those opinions and still enjoy the series because, again, it is a story about good and evil.

I also need to reiterate to anyone who has seen the movies but not read the books: Hollywood has naturally done it's own thing with the movies. The movies ARE NOT the books. The movies are to be viewed with caution and only at the appropriate age. It's even hard for me to recommend the movies, they are such poor renditions of what the books are. I saw Deathly Hallows part One over the weekend, and I wrote up 10 ways it differed from the book. So, books and movies? Apples and oranges to me. It is the books I like. The movies are poor substitutes.

Matt Palmer: The series borrows elements from Lord of the Rings, Chronicles of Narnia, Star Wars and many other fantasies. You see the hero's journey throughout those series, but also some Christ allegories and Christian themes. How does the Potter series stack up to them in terms of Christian themes?

Nancy Brown: They are all there. Author J.K. Rowling is well read, and borrows from many of her beloved authors. In that sense, she's written a Christian story, but my belief is that in order to reach more people, you don't want to call it a Christian story. As soon as you have that label, fewer people are going to read it. And the purpose of more people reading isn't so Rowling can get rich, although she certainly

has done that-and given away millions, too- it's to evangelize. There is much evidence if one chooses to look, that Rowling's faith is an important element in her life, her conversion at age 11 and the death of her mother are probably the biggest influences on her for why she wrote the series the way she did. She needed to work out in her own mind how her new Christian faith helped her deal with her mother's death. Is life truly eternal? What does being immortal mean? Could one try to avoid death? Why would one want to and how would one go about it? These are things she wrestled with and works out on the pages of Harry Potter.

It's hard to know now how Harry Potter will stand up over time, but judging by the fact that the book series has been complete for 3 years and interest should have technically died down, and then movie 7 opens with the strongest opening of any previous Harry Potter movie, I would guess the series might stand the test of time.

Matt Palmer: One thing that has struck me throughout the series are the continual references to godparents, Christmas and Easter, but Jesus is never mentioned. Their Christianity is just sort of taken for granted in a world where magic rules and they're in the middle of a fight for earth's future. Is Christianity just a backdrop for these characters or is there more there that's just not spoken?

Nancy Brown: Christianity is taken for granted and is there for those with eyes to see. When Harry cries out "Help!" he is really praying. Like most works of fiction that will grab today's reader's attention, a book of overt Christianity will not sell. Of course anti-Christianity sells, as we see with His Dark Materials and even Dan Brown. But in order to sneak Christianity positively into fiction today, the author needs to be very subtle. But because of Rowling's own faith, Christianity is surely there in the books as a backdrop for every decision and every plot twist that goes on.

Matt Palmer: I heard an interview you did that J.K. Rowling's own Christianity comes across throughout. What did you come to understand about her faith in the series?

Nancy Brown: J.K. Rowling is a very interesting person. Her family was not overtly any religion, although they did tend towards Christianity. But when she was eleven years old, she had a job cleaning the church next door. She had become interested in the Christian symbolism she saw in the church, and eventually asked to be baptized there. Her faith saw her through her mother's illness and eventual death, too young, from MS. Being a huge Chestertonian myself, once I discovered that J. K. Rowling

had been on the membership rolls of the U.K. Chesterton society, I began investigating her other Christian ties. Her favorite painting is Supper at Emmaus by Carravaggio. Jesus is sitting with the two disciples just as they realize who He is. That's a huge clue as to who Rowling is. Her favorite book as a child is "The Little White Horse" by Elizabeth Goudge.

I read it out of curiosity, and it's a great example of a very subtly Christian book disguised as an very action-packed little novel. Rowling now professes to belong to the Church of Scotland, which is where she lives. It's sort of like being Anglican in England, it's the Christian official church of the country. She's had all of her children baptized as infants. Those are clues as to who she is.

Starting from the very beginning of Harry Potter, there were symbols and symbolism. Right from the start, I thought Harry's scar was a symbol and his blood, the love flowing in his blood that he got from his parent's self-sacrifice of love for him. His blood protects him. It all seemed very Christian, very symbolic. I saw baptism, I saw communion, I saw the Christian inner struggle to fight sin and gain virtue. I saw so many thing in the books before I even knew a thing about Rowling. But I suspected then that she was Christian, and then I discovered that she was.

Matt Palmer: "The Deathly Hallows" is a firmly more adult story, but the divide between good and evil is so pronounced as well. What Catholic elements emerged for you in the final entry?

Nancy Brown: There is more Christianity in the seventh book by far, than all the rest. They bury Mad-Eye's eye and mark the spot with a cross. They carry out a beautiful and touching funeral ceremony for Dobby. It's Christmas Eve when they hear carols coming from the Church and there's bible verses on the graves of Harry's parents and Dumbledore's sister. Since Rowling isn't Catholic, I won't say there are Catholic elements, but there are certainly Christian elements: (There is) the whole soul splitting with murder idea-the fact that a little part of you died if you murdered someone. (There is) the symbolism that the closest thing to Voldemort is a snake, the silver hand that was a gift from the evil one that eventually kills you, the forgiveness and reconciliations that happen, starting at the beginning where Harry and Dudley reconcile. The fact that Bill and Fleur get married, have a child-Remus and Tonks get married, have a child-Harry and Ginny get married, have children-Ron and Hermione get married, have children, etc.

“Deathly Hallows” is definitely an older teen book. I’ve often felt that although you could be younger to start the series, you need to be older to end it. And if your child is like most children, he or she will not be satisfied when you tell them they must wait to read book 7 until they are 15. So my advice is to wait to let them start reading the Potter series until they are about 14. Then they’ll be old enough to read through the whole series, if they want to. But better yet, read the stories together as a family when everyone is old enough to hear.

Matt Palmer: Tell us a little bit about your involvement in the Chesterton Society.

Nancy Brown: As soon as I read Chesterton, I wanted to know more about him. I googled his name, and back then—about eleven years ago—there really wasn’t much about him on the internet. There was this one site, The American Chesterton Society, and they had a button, “Who is this guy, and why haven’t I heard of him?” and I clicked on it and started learning everything I could about this fascinating man called Chesterton. Dale Ahlquist is the President, and I started asking him why he didn’t have materials for children. Finally, he suggested that I write something, so I did. When one of the Gilbert columnists retired, he asked me to start my own column, which I did. I had started my own blog, and once Dale found that out, he asked me to start a blog for the American Chesterton Society, which I did. Pretty much whatever Dale asks me to do, I do. I started a Facebook fan page and a Twitter, too. And last year, since we didn’t have our own podcast, I started that up too, it’s on iTunes called Uncommon Sense. So somehow over the last ten years, I’ve done a lot of stuff, all because I began to love a man dead over 70 years named Gilbert Chesterton, and all because he loved a man dead 2000 years named Jesus.

Matt Palmer: Would you ever revisit the series for a book update or is there another popular series you have your eye on for a similar book?

Nancy Brown: I did update the Mystery of Harry Potter book which is up on the Our Sunday Visitor page (Editor’s Note: Click on Last Chapter for a free pdf download). I can’t think of another series like Harry Potter that I would defend right now. I have read many good books since Harry Potter, but none that came with the accompanying controversy like that series did and still does. Even within my book on Harry Potter, you’ll see I injected Chesterton into every chapter. I love Chesterton and this summer, after much research, I presented a paper to the American Chesterton society Annual Conference on Frances Chesterton, Gilbert’s loving and faithful wife. Afterwards, there was a groundswell of interest in a biography of

Frances, so I'm beginning to work on that now.

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For information The Mystery of Harry Potter: A Catholic Family Guide, visit www.osv.com/BooksNav/TheMysteryofHarryPotter/AuthorBiography/tabid/3882/Default.aspx

For more information on Nancy Brown, visit:

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