

Harry Potter and the American Philosopher's Stone

By Tsvi Blanchard

I went to see the new blockbuster movie *Harry Potter* because of my kids. They had read, or had been read, the first two of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books and wanted to see the movie. "Why *not* take them?" I thought. After all, the movie is kid friendly and fairly PC on gender, race and class. As for seeming to succumb to the marketing hype that surrounds the movie, I could handle it -- in the world of contemporary popular culture that comes with the territory. So I endured the long lines, watched the movie, and became part of the *Harry Potter* phenomena.

I'll admit that I was surprised to find that adults without children far outnumbered those who were there with their kids. And their obvious excitement as they watched the movie made clear that they were thoroughly enjoying it. The sheer size of ticket sales across the country should have tipped me off—*Harry Potter* is not just a movie for kids, it's an important part of contemporary American culture.

What is it about contemporary American popular culture that makes *Harry Potter* fit in so well? First, *Harry Potter* affirms what America has always most believed in. It affirms *our* story, *our* values and *our* truths. Americans have always loved the innocent hero who faces a dangerous challenge with integrity and overcomes it. This is the American story. It is the story that starts with the pilgrims and runs right up to the present war against terrorism. And, as always, it has a happy ending.

Despite its foreign (U.K.) origins, *Harry Potter* once again gives us *our* story. Like the book, it is essentially a fairy tale. Harry is a boy Cinderella, misunderstood and mistreated by the relatives who raise him after the death of his parents. Of course, he is really a special child who, on the threshold of adulthood, discovers who he really is.

Being a contemporary hero, Harry comes equipped with a smart and funny girl as his sidekick, but he is nonetheless a true innocent. He is completely without any of the sexual interests usually found in the protagonists of adolescent coming-of-age movies. Although self-effacing and humble, Harry still follows the fairy tale mythic pattern of becoming an adult by confronting dangerous, malevolent powers and triumphing over them.

The movie also affirms a very important cliché about being human. Harry Potter seems to say: to truly grow up, you need all the classic virtues of a good leader—charisma, courage, perseverance, generosity of spirit and genuine concern for others. If you dare to do what you know you *must* do--in order to become who

you *really* are and to enjoy close, caring relationships with others--you will discover the genuine intensity and excitement of life truly lived. Admittedly, this is only half of the truth. But those of us who know this should remember that a half-truth is still half true.

There is a second feature of *Harry Potter* that helps us understand the movie's appeal at this particular cultural moment, a feature that it shares with *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others*, *The Matrix*, *City of Angels*. Like these movies, and the hit television show "Touched by an Angel," it imaginatively constructs a split-level reality that, on one plane, is the prosaic world with which we are all familiar and, on another plane, includes another dimension of existence that, although *hidden* from most people, is nonetheless *accessible* to special others. For Harry, this alternative reality lies just behind the wall of an otherwise ordinary train station. In *The Matrix*, the hidden world lies just below the surface of this world, and we will see it if we only dare unplug ourselves from the web of illusions and open our eyes to what is really there. In *The Sixth Sense*, the dead who are still with us populate the hidden world and in "Touched by an Angel," angels do. The drama of such stories, fairy tales or myths takes place at the point of intersection between our ordinary world and the hidden-but-accessible alternative world.

The appeal of stories that are situated at the intersection between worlds, of stories that in effect invite us to locate ourselves at that nexus, if only imaginatively, is evident. At these liminal points of intersection between the worlds, our ordinary experience is invested with greater psychic energy. There is a sense of expansive possibilities for good or for ill. Life somehow seems larger than life. Our daily reality suddenly becomes *more* real. We feel more fully alive. The limits of our sometimes too dull and conventional ordinary life are transcended.

Contemporary American culture's search for intense and transformative experience is not limited to popular entertainment. The appeal of drugs and extreme sports is surely related. So, too, is the increasingly widespread interest in experientially oriented forms of spirituality -- from Evangelical Christianity to Kabbalah and Buddhist meditation -- which offer access to, and invite us to live our lives within, alternative worlds (and perspectives) that are not merely different, but profoundly different from the everyday world in which we live.

In *Harry Potter*, however, the alternative world, while very much more exciting than our everyday world, is not so very different when it comes to what really matters. While its physics are quite unlike those that govern our world, its ethical norms are just the same. If there is a transformative message here, it is on behalf of the power of the imagination as a means of inspiring our rather humdrum lives with the relish and flair that J.K. Rowling's imagination brought to the world of *Harry Potter*.

I doubt that the *Harry Potter* movie will transform the life of anyone who sees it. If you are looking to be filled with the power or passion that comes with living your life at the intersection between worlds, two hours spent with *Harry Potter* are unlikely even to point you in the right direction. But for all its limitations as a movie, *Harry Potter* does offer and affirm a distinctly American conception of the moral virtues that render a "life truly lived." Even more, it affirms that a life lived in accordance with these values might also be exciting. Perhaps not as exciting as Harry's life, but exciting nonetheless.