

## CHASING HARRY POTTER

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The Gwinnett County School Board is unaccountably still garnering attention for its ongoing controversy regarding the presence of the Harry Potter novels in its school libraries.

That the complaint filed by parent Laura Mallory of Loganville has been taken seriously is distressing. Equally distressing—and ignored by all coverage of the dispute (and similar disputes in Pennsylvania and Arkansas)—is the defense of the novels by those who want to keep them in the libraries.

According to Mallory, the Potter novels are pernicious because they portray witchcraft as something positive, even desirable. Her primary basis for objecting to the books is Biblical. She claims that God has branded witchcraft an abomination, and therefore, any positive presentation of it should be anathema.

Her viewpoint is wrongheaded on several counts.

First, her use of Scripture is misguided. Witchcraft is listed as an abomination only in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 18:10; 2 Chronicles 33:6), where also rebellion is considered to be the moral equivalent of witchcraft (1 Samuel 15:23). If we were to use that as our secular standard, we would have to banish from our cultural armoire the TV series *Bewitched*, *The Wizard of Oz* (for Glinda the good witch), and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to name but a few. But we would also have to banish all books that present the American Rebellion, which we call the Revolutionary War or the War of Independence, as a positive event. This would put Mallory in an awkward position when she says, "It's good we live in a country where you can stand up for what you believe in." (AP report, 5/12/2006)

In addition, as a Christian, Mallory should know that witchcraft is mentioned only once in the New Testament (Galatians 5:20), and there it is considered, not as an abomination, but less severely as one of "the works of the flesh," along with hatred, wrath, strife, and drunkenness, among others. If we eliminated from our libraries all books concerned with such works of the flesh, our libraries would be empty shells (from which even the Bible itself would have to be excluded).

Furthermore, as a citizen of the United States, Mallory should know that the establishment and free exercise clauses of the first article of the Bill of Rights are meant to prohibit all church-state cross-pollination. As Jefferson said in his January 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, "Believing with you . . . that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

Mallory herself admits that she has not read even one of the novels through to the end. I doubt that she would give credence to someone who wanted to ban the Bible after reading only the first few chapters.

Finally, Mallory's position suggests that she believes that children who are capable of reading the rather lengthy Potter novels are incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality. She herself seems incapable of making the same distinction. If this is so, we are in a sorry state indeed.

This, in brief, is what is wrong with the view of Mallory and others like her.

The defense of school board members like Mary Kay Murphy, a former English teacher, is no more worthy of assent. According to Murphy, the Potter books are productive of the critical-thinking skills that students need for success in higher education and in their adult lives.

This viewpoint is also wrongheaded. It is based on a hyperbolic overestimation of the quality of the Potter books.

The Potter books are not—and here I realize that to their devotees I might be guilty of heresy (one of Galatians' works of the flesh)—great literature. At best, they are the apex of that genre of books known as young adult literature, even though such books are neither adult nor literature. It is surely no accident that the success and proliferation of 'young adult literature' over the last three and a half decades coincides with the period of the most precipitous decline in the quality of our educational system in its history. Although this is causally a chicken-egg situation, the correlation is undeniable.

So, although it is somewhat embarrassing even to feel compelled to spill ink on what should be a frivolous blip on our society's radar screen, let me ask and answer the central question in the controversy.

Should the Potter books be banned from our school libraries? No, on religious grounds. But let us temper enthusiasm for them with the realization that they are no more than harmless and compelling escapist literature, and let us at least try to steer our young people to the challenging literature that informed previous generations.

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