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## *Teach the Children: Education and Knowledge in Recent Children's Fantasy*

Elisabeth Rose Gruner

This essay is an investigation into how learning is portrayed in children's books. It starts from two premises: first, that at least one origin of children's literature is in didacticism, and that learning and pedagogy continue to be important in much of the literature we provide for children today. Thus, for example, David Rudd claims that most histories of children's literature rely on "the tension between instruction and entertainment," and that the genre as we know it develops within, among other things, "an educational system promoting literacy" (29, 34).<sup>1</sup> Seth Lerer's recent *Children's Literature: A Reader's History* similarly traces the origins of children's literature in didacticism, as does Peter Hunt in his very different *Introduction to Children's Literature*. Hunt writes, for example, that "it is arguably impossible for a children's book (especially one being read by a child) not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism" (3). Even critics who emphasize the subversive or nondidactic nature of literature for children, such as Alison Lurie, must nonetheless implicitly recognize its pedagogic value, noting that it can "appeal to the imaginative, questioning" child—the child who learns, in other words—and "act as a force for change" (xi).

Second, I am presupposing that the business of the child's life is education—which in our culture most often means school, occupying a large percentage of most children's lives. Indeed, one of the ways in which we differentiate children from adults is that we say they are "still learning"; they are in some way incomplete, not finished with a process of education that will mark them as adult. Or, as Hunt puts it: "childhood is the period of life which the immediate culture thinks of as being free of responsibility and susceptible to education" (5).

If children's literature is in some way inherently or implicitly didactic or pedagogical, and if the business of the child's life is school, then we might expect to find overt or covert discussions or depictions of pedagogy within children's literature—how are these (fictional) children spending their days, anyway, and how effectively is that time spent? But serious considerations of how children learn are rare in children's books. Think of all the children's novels that take place during summer

or winter vacation, after school, or in a context—the alternate world of Narnia, for example—in which school is irrelevant or unknown. Narnia seems, in fact, to be quite explicitly an escape from school: see, for example, *The Silver Chair*, which begins as Eustace and Jill escape school bullies; or the end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in which we are told that one of the just laws the new kings and queens make limits how much time young dwarfs spend in school.

Even school stories, that venerable genre that lags just behind the development of children's literature itself, focus primarily on activities outside the classroom: sports and friendships frequently trump classes, making it seem as if the school story is about school in name only.<sup>2</sup> Beverly Lyon Clark has argued that nonetheless the school story is didactic, is indeed itself a kind of school: "School stories lend themselves to didacticism because they are about schooling. They thematize their own textuality—or rather their own moral purpose. Schooling is, in part, a metaphor for the effect that the book is supposed to have, whether it endorses traditional schooling or tries to school us in subversion" (7). I will explore Clark's claims in another genre related to the school story: the fantasy novel focused on the education of a witch or a wizard. These novels, too, are both about school and—in ways I hope to make clear later—are themselves school. Thus it is here, in the confines of Roke or Hogwarts or the Wizard's University, on the boat with Lyra or in the witch's cottage with Tiffany Aching, that we see clearly the conflicting claims our culture makes for education, the confusion we have over what its ends are and how to achieve them. And it is here, as well, that we may, along with the child reader, school ourselves in how to learn.

"Education of a wizard" stories might seem oxymoronic; after all, these children already have a magical ability that might at first seem to preclude the need for further education. One who possesses and can read the alethiometer, for example, not only doesn't need Google; she might seem not to need school at all. Will Stanton, in Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising*, magically takes in the entire contents of *The Book of Gramarye* and needs no further instruction in how to do all manner of magical things, from shape shifting to understanding "the Old Speech."<sup>3</sup> Yet in the majority of these books, ability or even information is merely the beginning of education, not its end. Like children with any other talent, from singing to athletic ability, magical children still need to cultivate theirs, to shape it, to grow. Indeed, it is because magical children already have a gift—a power—that their education becomes especially important.

Education is centrally concerned, after all, with power; educational institutions regulate the ways in which children develop agency in the world. Thus, focusing on magical, already empowered children makes clear the importance of education as an institution of social control; one thing each of these heroes learns in the course of his/her series is when not to use that power. But just as they learn the limits of their power, so, too, do they learn their strengths; by the end of their tales, the children in all three series I discuss in this essay achieve a version of adulthood, of socially-sanctioned agency, through their educational processes. That is, these children are not in school to learn the history of magic (though at Hogwarts they can indeed take such a class) but, in the words of liberal education theorist Lisa Delpit, to become “autonomous[;] to develop fully who they are” (172). The implicit pedagogy is not content based, but a more holistic exploration of what it means to be a (magical) person. Or, to put it another way, the children need to go to school because school is where children go to grow up and, potentially, into themselves. What they learn there, however, may be only tangentially related to their classroom education.

More pessimistic than Lisa Delpit, Jack Zipes is only one of many critics who claim that schools are a place of homogenization and social control, in which “we prep [children] systematically to fit into institutions, teams, clubs, companies, associations, and corporations to succeed according to standards set by these hegemonic groups” (19–20). Certainly, in an era of Pizza Hut–sponsored reading programs, Channel One programming in schools, and a curriculum centered largely on tests with little regard to critical thinking, it’s hard to disagree. School is—for good or ill—a powerful institution of social control. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, some popular fantasy novels for children involve escapes from, subversions of, or a radical disregard for school. In the popular *Maximum Ride* series by James Patterson, “school” is actually an experimental station from which the children are trying to escape (not unlike Pullman’s *Bolvangar*, in some ways), and book two of the series is titled *School’s Out—Forever*.<sup>4</sup> But even in less obvious ways, the “escape from school” theme turns up all over children’s fantasy—even in novels focused on the education of a wizard, such as the *Harry Potter* series.

Now, while I’d hardly argue that Harry, at least in the first six books, is focused on escaping from Hogwarts—it’s the closest thing to a home he knows, after all, and he obviously looks forward to returning to it almost every fall—it is nonetheless the case that leaving Hogwarts also

has a great appeal in all the novels, from excursions into Hogsmeade and the Forbidden Forest to the Weasley twins opening their joke shop in Diagon Alley. In book seven, of course, the plot turns on the necessity of the friends leaving the school, and then on their final reclamation of it. Until then, however, even when they're in school, the central threesome (or at least two of them) spend much of their time skiving off or trying to get by with as little work as possible, being more focused on Quidditch, wizard's chess, and—especially—fighting Lord Voldemort and the forces of evil. Leaving school has an even greater appeal in other novels, such as Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* and *The Subtle Knife*, in which Will's most salient memories of school have to do with bullying; Diane Duane's Young Wizards series, where school is also mostly a site of bullying; and Diana Wynne Jones's *Witch Week*, in which school is a virtual prison.

In this essay I examine three series centrally concerned with the education of a young witch, wizard, or otherwise magically-marked child.<sup>5</sup> In all of them, the children do become educated, acquiring the knowledge and understanding required to fulfill their roles, but they often seem to do so in spite, not because, of any formal schooling. As they learn, they demonstrate a surprising and significant degree of agency, as well as offering a vital critique of the "preparation for the future" model of education so typical in schools.<sup>6</sup>

In these series—J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, the three Tiffany Aching novels by Terry Pratchett, and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*—we see three different models of education: a traditional boarding school, apprenticeship, and what seems at best a benign neglect of education. Each child, in the tradition of hero stories, finds one or more mentors who to some extent help to direct his or her education: for Harry, Professor Dumbledore; for Tiffany, Granny Weatherwax; and for Lyra, a combination of characters from Mrs. Coulter to Lord Asriel, and including John Faa, Mary Malone, and Iorek Byrnison. For all three children, moreover, books—and, along with them, storytelling, story making, and reading—are central to the educational process, though in very different ways. Both Lyra and Harry need to learn their own stories as a central element of their education, though story operates differently for each, while Tiffany needs to take control of the stories that form part of the received wisdom of Discworld—especially those about witches, fairies, and other supernatural creatures. Peers are also a central part of all three children's educations, though again they operate differently in each series. These three central elements—mentors,

books/stories, and peers—are of course part of every child’s education. In this, there is nothing all that special about the magical children of these three fantasy series. But the ways in which we see the three elements deployed reveal distinct differences among the authors’ approaches to education; Rowling’s boarding school setting and emphasis on mentors offers a generally more conservative pedagogy than the critical reading and child-led educations that characterize Pratchett’s and Pullman’s educational worlds. Despite their significant differences, however, all in the end seem to me to suggest that the more children can direct their own education, the more they will learn. They might thus be said to endorse “unschooling.”

“Unschooling” is the name coined by educator John Holt for what is also called “autonomous education”—a home-based education that allows children to follow their interests rather than dictating a curriculum to them. While people unschool for a variety of reasons—rejection of the dominant culture, belief in the innate curiosity of children, preference for community-based learning, efficiency—one key principle of the unschooling movement is children’s agency. As Holt says, “Children do not need to be made to learn, told what to learn, or shown how. If we give them access to enough of the world, including our own lives and work in that world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to us and to others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than we could make for them” (157). The children in the “education of a wizard” novels I consider in this essay exemplify—to a greater or lesser extent—this belief, and by thematizing such an autonomous education help to provide it for their readers as well.

### *Hogwarts*

In the days and weeks after *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* hit the bookstores, the most frequent complaint about the book (other than the epilogue, which was also controversial) seemed to be that in leaving Hogwarts, Rowling had left behind the setting that had made the series for many readers.<sup>7</sup> Although we knew at the end of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* that Harry intended to leave the school—which, after the death of its headmaster, was unlikely to be the haven it had always been for him—still we didn’t quite believe it. And what we got instead—wandering about in the forest, bickering, anxiety, and a magic bag—hardly seemed to compensate. The Hogwarts setting—the educa-

tional setting—of the novels is central to their success. As David Steege has noted, Rowling's depiction of boarding school life at Hogwarts combines the positive traditions of the boarding school story—the friendships, the loyalty, the isolated world of the school, the games—with a notable absence of its few downsides; there's no homesickness, for example, and the food is magically wonderful (147, 153–54).

But in leaving Hogwarts, Rowling did not really leave education at all. In fact, the departure from Hogwarts makes a fitting conclusion to the way she treats education throughout the series. Hogwarts, after all, is hardly the bastion of higher learning one might wish for. Rather, it is home to petty tyrants, boring lecturers, and pedagogic practices that seemed to have changed little, if any, since the school's founding. The surprise, in some ways, is not that the three protagonists left Hogwarts, but that they didn't leave it sooner. *Deathly Hallows* demonstrates that the true education Harry and his friends received at Hogwarts was in spite, not because, of the institution—or at least the curriculum, professors, and pedagogy—over which their beloved headmaster presided.<sup>8</sup>

Here I differ from some earlier critics. For Steege, classes at Hogwarts sound like fun: “[I]nstead of hearing about struggles to learn dull Latin and Greek . . . we are treated to such topics as Defense against the Dark Arts, Charms, Potions, and Transfiguration. Even the most boring class, History of Magic, is taught by a ghost, and the class perhaps most like a literature seminar, Divination, pokes delicious fun at the professor, a gloomy over-interpreter of tea leaves and crystal balls” (153–54). Lisa Hopkins further praises the Hogwarts pedagogy, claiming that “the philosophy of the school is unmistakably centered on discovery, teaching, and the slow, steady, cumulative acquisition of knowledge” (28). Hopkins's optimistic reading of the educational values of Hogwarts, however, seems to me skewed by the pleasures Steege noted.<sup>9</sup> Where she sees “the slow, steady, cumulative acquisition of knowledge,” I find students complaining about, failing at, and even skipping class whenever possible—and with good reason. Snape humiliates his students (even, perhaps especially, good ones like Hermione); Binns bores them with his interminable lectures, uninterrupted even by death; Hagrid terrifies them with dangerous and/or disgusting animals and a book they can't even open safely; and Sybil Trelawney, the “gloomy over-interpreter,” is so easily fooled by ridiculous interpretations of false omens that even Harry and Ron tire of the joke. When the threesome first encounters the centaur Ronan in the forest we get this telling exchange:

“Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?”

“Erm—”

“A bit,” said Hermione timidly. (*Sorcerer’s Stone*, 252–53)

Hermione does seem to learn by reading her textbooks and practicing; Harry and Ron, however, simply rely on her help. One example from early in the series will suffice: “Hermione was checking Harry and Ron’s Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy (‘How will you learn?’), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway” (*Sorcerer’s Stone*, 182). Scenes like this, repeated throughout the series, suggest that “right answers” are more important than actually learning how to get them—despite Hermione’s concerns. Charles Elster suggests that Harry’s cheating is part of his heroism: “In his quest for secret knowledge, Harry learns that rule bending and cheating are expected. . . . Breaking rules is depicted as part of the adventurous hero’s means of acquiring and using knowledge” (218). While certainly Harry’s flouting of the disciplinary rules of Hogwarts has a long and venerable tradition within school stories as well as hero tales, the specifically academic cheating is—to this teacher at least—more troubling.

Elster claims that in the Harry Potter novels, we may seem to be experiencing a “traditionally dichotomous view of learning: school learning, which is stodgy and bookish, and ‘real learning,’ which involves solving the big problems of life,” but goes on to claim that the two are better balanced than this initial impression might seem (204). It is true that the children are better witches and wizards by the end of the series than when they begin—I’m not as convinced as he is, however, that learning is indeed going on in the classrooms.

With the exception of flying and apparition lessons (which are more closely related to Driver’s Ed or PE than to the academic classes familiar to most American students), we rarely in the Harry Potter series see a student without a skill finally acquire it through the patient, hard work of the classroom or out-of-class study, though mention is frequently made of cramming for exams and working in the library. Defense Against the Dark Arts offers, in years three, four, and five, a notable exception: Lupin, Mad-Eye Moody, and especially Harry offer practical instruction and a chance to actually do the work of wizardry rather than—as Umbridge would prefer—simply to learn the theory.<sup>10</sup> By the end of Harry’s year of instruction Neville, among others, does indeed seem to master some spells in this class and becomes an accomplished wizard, when he had clearly not been one before. Similarly,



Luna, Ernie, and Seamus can conjure Patronuses by the end of the series. In all these cases, the education works because it matters in the moment; the less effective teachers, on the other hand, fail in just the way Dewey suggests:

I believe that much of present education fails because it . . . conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparation. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative. (23–24)

Outside of DADA, Hermione can usually master her teachers' lessons the first time; Harry and Ron often can't, except with outside help: either Hermione's, Lupin's, or that of the Half-Blood Prince, who unknowingly coaches Harry through a year of Potions. We thus discover that Harry can indeed learn from Snape, but only when Snape is not actually his teacher. An unschooling advocate like John Holt would say this is to be expected: "[C]hildren can get very frightened, cautious, and defensive when put into a spot where they have to give an answer which may be wrong" (130). In short, in such situations they are unable to learn. The first words we hear from Snape are, after all, "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 137). As if that weren't enough to freeze most children in their tracks, he goes on to humiliate Harry quite deliberately:

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"  
*Powdered root of what to an infusion of what?* Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand had shot into the air.  
 "I don't know, sir," said Harry.  
 Snape's lips curled into a sneer.  
 "Tut, tut—fame clearly isn't everything." (137; emphasis in original)

Snape creates an environment in which Harry is expected to fail—and therefore does. With Snape's written help and Slughorn's more laissez-faire classroom style, however, Harry turns out to be able to

make perfectly fine potions several years later. Harry develops over the course of the series into a model unschooler, learning better on his own than in the classroom.

Of course, there's no discussion of contemporary pedagogical theory, theories of the mind, or a philosophy of learning at Hogwarts. This is, after all, a medieval institution where little seems to have changed for at least the hundred years or so of Dumbledore's time, if not longer. What the Hogwarts experience may actually seem to validate, then, is the very old truism that school is a socializing force, teaching students how to be in the world they inhabit, as much as (or even more than) it is an educational institution.<sup>11</sup> At Hogwarts Harry learns about Quidditch, magical traditions, and the social structure of the magical world. But it is the threat of Voldemort, rather than the curriculum of Hogwarts, that motivates Harry and his friends' intellectual growth—they teach themselves what they need to know in order to defeat their enemy. And, like Fred and George Weasley, they leave school when they have learned enough to do this.

### *Tiffany's Apprenticeship*

While wizard education is at least implicitly at issue in several of the Discworld novels, and *Equal Rites* takes up the differences between witch and wizard training, my focus in this essay is on Tiffany Aching, whose growth into her status as a witch occupies the three novels centered on her: *The Wee Free Men*, *A Hat Full of Sky*, and *Wintersmith*. Witches, unlike wizards, do not attend the Unseen University, and impart their knowledge far differently.<sup>12</sup>

Before Tiffany realizes she is a witch, she is already a seeker after knowledge, reading the dictionary all the way through and finding the itinerant teachers who occasionally visit her small village. Some of these gypsy scholars can barely spell, but they nonetheless sell, according to the narrator, "what everyone needed but often didn't want. They sold the key to the universe to people who didn't even know it was locked" (*Men* 19). Tiffany trades produce for lessons, acquiring a rudimentary knowledge of geography, some basics of zoology, and an insatiable appetite for more. While she might already seem a prime candidate, even an exemplum, for unschooling, one of the things that seems to appeal to her about being a witch is actually the promise of a school for witches. As Tiffany begins to imagine what that might be, she sounds almost as if she's been reading J. K. Rowling:

*But maybe there were magical doors. That's what she'd make, if she had a magical school. There should be secret doorways everywhere, even hundreds of miles away. . . .*

*But the school, now, the school. There would be lessons in broomstick riding and how to sharpen your hat to a point, and magical meals, and lots of new friends. (61; italics in original)*

Like the witches and wizards at Hogwarts, what Tiffany may need most is to be socialized into her new awareness of her abilities. In this first novel about her, however, she receives this not from other children with magical abilities, but from the Nac Mac Feegle—a clan of tiny warriors characterized by their love of fighting, drinking, and stealing. Hardly her peers, the Nac Mac Feegle are nonetheless important to Tiffany in this first book—but it is in the second that she actually meets other witches and has her central educational experience. Like Harry, she is eleven when she leaves home to seek her education. (In the English school system, eleven is the age for moving into secondary school.)

As Miss Level's apprentice witch, in *A Hat Full of Sky* Tiffany actually has a teacher and something like a community of peers in the other local apprentices who make up her coven. But—somewhat like Harry in his lessons with Dumbledore—she at first finds herself frustrated with what she is—and isn't—learning with Miss Level. She expects to be taught, believing (as most schoolchildren do) that "learning relies upon teaching" (Winch and Gingell 60).<sup>13</sup> As deschooling advocates might suggest, however, and as she discovers, learning, like working as a witch, mostly seems to mean keeping her eyes open, knowing the neighbors, and caring for "the edges," as Granny Weatherwax puts it. When she complains that what they are doing doesn't seem like magic, Miss Level responds, "Knowing things is magical, if other people don't know them" (124). Later in the novel, after she has in fact performed some rather spectacular magic (with the help of a "hiver" which has taken up residence in her), Granny Weatherwax tells Tiffany, "Learnin' how not to do things is as hard as learning *how* to do them. Harder, maybe. There'd be a sight more frogs in the world if I didn't know how *not* to turn people into them" (288; emphasis in original).

This is not to say that there's no magic in Tiffany's education—just that it's not quite the magic she expected to be learning:

For example, there was the Raddles' privy. Miss Level had explained carefully to Mr. and Mrs. Raddle several times that it was far too close to the well, and so the drinking water was full of

tiny, tiny creatures that were making their children sick. They'd listened very carefully, every time they heard the lecture, and still they never moved the privy. But Mistress Weatherwax told them it was caused by goblins who were attracted to the smell, and by the time they left that cottage, Mr. Raddle and three of his friends were already digging a new well the other end of the garden. (294)

Mistress Weatherwax explains why her approach has worked where Miss Level's more scientifically correct one has failed:

[W]hat *I* say is you have to tell people a story they can understand. Right now I reckon you'd have to change quite a lot of the world, and maybe bang Mr. Raddle's stupid fat head against the wall a few times, before he'd believe that you can be sickened by drinking tiny invisible beasts. And while you're doing that, those kids of theirs will get sicker. But goblins, now, they make sense *today*. A story gets things done. (295; emphasis in original)

Is Granny's story magical? Only in the sense that all narrative is: it has the capacity to shape our reality, to inspire action. Tiffany needs to learn how to engage with narrative, with story, at the same time as she learns what Granny Weatherwax calls "headology," which might—or might not—be magic.<sup>14</sup>

Tiffany engages books critically throughout the series. For example, in *Wee Free Men* she reflects on *The Goode Childe's Booke of Fairie Tales*:

A lot of the stories were highly suspicious, in her opinion. There was the one that ended when the two good children pushed the wicked witch into her own oven. Tiffany had worried about that after all the trouble with Mrs. Snapperly. Stories like this stopped people thinking properly, she was sure. She'd read that one and thought, Excuse me? *No one* has an oven big enough to get a whole person in, and what made the children think they could just walk around eating people's houses in any case? . . . The stories *weren't real*. But Mrs. Snapperly had died because of the stories. (66–67; emphasis in original)

Tiffany has two equally important insights in this passage. First, she notes that the stories are (unlike "The Tale of the Three Brothers" in *Deathly Hallows*) probably not true. She looks for empirical evidence. When the text does not provide her evidence, she withholds judgment, or compares what she's been told to her own experience. Second, she

realizes that stories are powerful: “Mrs. Snapperly had died because of the stories.”

Pratchett does not, however, provide a simplistic “fiction is dangerous” moral. In *A Hat Full of Sky*, Tiffany learns to respect the power of story. Following Mistress Weatherwax’s example with the Raddles, she tells the hiver a story to release it into death:

“Here is a story to believe,” she said. “Once we were blobs in the sea, and then fishes, and then lizards and rats, and then monkeys, and hundreds of things in between. This hand was once a fin, this hand once had claws! In my human mouth I have the pointy teeth of a wolf and the chisel teeth of a rabbit and the grinding teeth of a cow! Our blood is as salty as the sea we used to live in! When we’re frightened, the hair on our skin stands up, just like it did when we had fur. We *are* history!” (351; emphasis in original)

If we are history, of course, we are also story; Tiffany simultaneously tells the story of evolution and the particular story of the hiver’s development, ultimately giving it a release from the burden of its history.

Whereas in the Harry Potter series, books and stories serve primarily as sources of information, in the Tiffany Aching books they require interpretation and revision. Veronica Schanoes argues that Ron, Hermione, and Harry learn that

they must not rely complacently on the written word—magazine advertisements, comic strips, history books, diaries, or newspaper articles—especially when it purports to tell the truth. The benefits of reading in Rowling’s wizarding world lie in the reader’s ability to understand the machinations of text and author, to understand how writing works. Rowling’s deceptively plain narration and direct plots contain an extensive education in careful reading; her work might even provide a gripping introduction to literary analysis. (143)

But in most, if not all, of the cases Schanoes cites, “analysis” really comes down to fact checking; is the source reliable, or isn’t it? Rita Skeeter’s work is, generally, not reliable, while—perhaps surprisingly—“The Tale of the Three Brothers” is. But deeper considerations of the implications of story, its predictive ability and its world-shaping power, are rare if not nonexistent in Rowling’s series, unlike in *Discworld* and, as we will see, in the universes of *His Dark Materials*. We might say that Rowling’s wizards have learned to read, but Tiffany reads to learn.<sup>15</sup> By critically

engaging the books she reads and the stories she hears, Tiffany can make use of them rather than being bound by them.

Many of the fairy-tale creatures of Discworld—the hiver, the Feegles, the Fairy Queen, the Wintersmith—are bound by their narratives, so much so that they blur the difference between word and deed. They grant wishes once the words are uttered, without concern for the consequences. When story creatures enter Discworld (Pratchett's surrogate, at least in the Tiffany Aching novels, for our world) they wreak havoc. We don't really want stories to be true, Pratchett suggests—rather, we want them to suggest possibilities, to open up alternatives. Tiffany thus learns not to wish for anything significant around the Feegles, who at least appear to be bound by language:

They granted wishes—not the magical fairytale three wishes, the ones that always go wrong in the end, but ordinary, everyday ones. . . . One day, in the dairy, Tiffany had said, “I wish I had a sharper knife to cut this cheese,” and her mother's sharpest knife was quivering on the table beside her almost before she'd got the words out. . . . She had learned to be careful not to wish for anything that might be achievable by some small, determined, strong, fearless, and fast men who were also not above giving someone a good kicking if they needed it. (*Hat* 22–23)

The hiver's magic is more powerful than the Feegles', thus rendering it more dangerous, but it operates in effectively the same way, granting wishes—even unarticulated ones—to its host: “The hiver used what it found—the little secret wishes, the moments of rage, all the things that real humans knew how to ignore” (*Hat* 341). The hiver enables Tiffany to turn a wizard into a pig, to steal Mr. Weavall's gold, and even to kill Miss Level (or at least a part of her). The hiver ultimately forces Tiffany to take responsibility for even her unpleasant wishes, but as she rids herself of it she also realizes that they do not define her. This pattern is repeated in *Wintersmith*, in which Tiffany unwittingly enters the tale of the Wintersmith and then must alter it in order to restore the natural cycle of the seasons. Fairy tales embody our desires, good, bad, and ugly. Leaving them in the realm of story allows us to acknowledge the desires safely and even, at best, reconfigure them, but admitting them unaltered into the world of action—acting on story without critical reflection—is, Pratchett's novel suggests, dangerous. Tiffany's critical engagement with story is central to her education in all three novels.

As with the Harry Potter books, then, the focus of magical education in the Tiffany Aching books seems to be socialization into being magical, not the nuts and bolts of how to do magic. That socialization, however, takes place outside the traditional school setting, without a curriculum or formal lessons, in the context of doing the work of a witch—whether or not that truly involves magic—as is typical of an apprenticeship. While in both cases the children learn by doing, in Pratchett’s novels, unlike in Rowling’s, the structure of the educational system and its content are not at odds.

### *Lyra’s Unschooling*

It may seem perverse to include Lyra Belaqua in this discussion of how magical children learn. She is, after all, not “magical” in the same sense that Tiffany and Harry are, nor does she attend school or even serve as an apprentice. Indeed, we might see the structure of *His Dark Materials* as an escape from, and a circuitous return to, education: Lyra starts out at Oxford but leaves early in the series, returning only at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*; Will pretends to be in school when it is strategically useful, but like Lyra spends the series outside of formal education; even Mary Malone’s story is about leaving an educational institution rather than participating in one. One might suspect Pullman—himself a former teacher—of a bias against formal education. Nonetheless the series, like Pratchett’s and Rowling’s, is in fact essentially concerned with how we learn.

Lyra begins the series in *The Golden Compass* as a “coarse and greedy little savage” (36). She evades and then ignores her first teachers, the scholars who reluctantly tutor her until the age of eleven, when—like the others I’ve discussed—she leaves home to get an education. Both “home” and “education” are even more vexed concepts for Lyra than they are for Harry and Tiffany. She does not have even the dysfunctional family Harry does, and her sense of home is far more tenuous; nor does she attend school—except perhaps briefly at the experimental station at Bolvangar. Her very first appearance in the novel puts her in opposition to the formal educational system that Oxford, her home, represents: portraits of “old Scholars, probably . . . robed, bearded, and gloomy . . . stared out of their frames in solemn disapproval” (4). It’s clear, though, that Jordan College—and perhaps Oxford in general—is not really in the business of educating children:

Lyra's knowledge had great gaps in it, like a map of the world largely eaten by mice, for at Jordan they had taught her in a piecemeal and disconnected way: a junior Scholar would be detailed to catch her and instruct her in such-and-such, and the lessons would continue for a sullen week or so until she "forgot" to turn up, to the Scholar's relief. Or else a Scholar would forget what he was supposed to teach her, and drill her at great length about the subject of his current research, whatever that happened to be. (82)

The Scholars are disconnected both from children and, to some extent, from their own research; when Asriel demonstrates the existence of an alternate world, "There was a stir of excitement among some of the Scholars, as if, having written treatises on the existence of the unicorn without ever having seen one, they'd been presented with a living example newly captured" (23). Unlike Lord Asriel, the Scholars remain in the laboratory and the lecture hall; their studies remain purely theoretical.

Lyra cannot learn much from these men. She does, however, learn quite a bit—both the kinds of things Harry and Tiffany learn, and those that children in our world study—over the course of *His Dark Materials*, especially in *The Golden Compass*. Her education within the course of this novel takes at least two forms: there are the lessons, both explicit and implicit, that Mrs. Coulter imparts during their time together in London; and then there is the socialization that Lyra, like the other two children, undergoes. In Lyra's case, as with Tiffany, this socialization is much less involved with other children than it is for Harry; Lyra learns by watching and living with a variety of adults who are not much like her.<sup>16</sup>

When Lyra first comes to London with Mrs. Coulter, her knowledge is sketchy. She has picked up what interests her about particle physics but doesn't know about the solar system, for example (82). Mrs. Coulter instructs her in geography, mathematics, and survival skills (such as not to eat bear liver), as well as in the subtler arts of femininity (83). As with the other children, Lyra learns well when motivated; desperate to go north and learn about Dust, she eagerly absorbs Mrs. Coulter's lessons. Lyra only spends six weeks with Mrs. Coulter, however, after which she receives no formal instruction for the rest of the series. Nonetheless, it is clear that she learns. Lyra may be the best example for unschooling of the three I've chosen; she teaches herself to read the alethiometer, learns some rudiments of navigation, and proves masterful at understanding people throughout the novel.



Lyra's process of learning also recalls Holt's claim that our typical mode of proceeding in education—in "logical sequence," from easy to difficult—is flawed: "[B]eing always seekers of meaning, children may *first* go to the hard things, which have more meaning—are . . . less dissociated from the world—and later from these hard things learn the 'easy' ones" (155–56; emphasis in original). "Experimental theology," or physics, bores Lyra when her tutors lecture her, but fascinates her when she perceives its impact on her world, so that she is instantly able to make the connection between Dust and other particles after overhearing Lord Asriel's presentation. Similarly, she learns to read the alethiometer in much the way, I think, that children first learn to read. Initially, she is simply entranced by the symbols: "Lyra spent a long time turning the hands to point at one symbol or another (angel, helmet, dolphin; globe, lute, compasses; candle, thunderbolt, horse) and watching the long needle swing on its never-ceasing errant way, and although she understood nothing, she was intrigued and delighted by the complexity and the detail" (79). As she learns to read the alethiometer, she also learns that it is not simply a repository of information. The first time she reads it successfully, "the needle stopped at the thunderbolt, the infant, the serpent, the elephant, and at a creature Lyra couldn't find a name for: a sort of lizard with big eyes and a tail curled around the twig it stood on" (151). The symbols don't signify to her, though, until the spy-fly attacks, at which point she and Farder Coram puzzle out the connections between them, connecting the elephant to Africa, the thunderbolt to anger, the chameleon to air. Lyra and Farder never actually articulate all the connections, either; the reader must puzzle some things out for herself, just as Lyra must. The attitude toward reading in this series is more like that of the Discworld novels than in Harry Potter—gleaning the information is merely the start of the process. Whereas Hermione, Ron, and Harry turn to books for answers, Tiffany and Lyra turn to stories, to the alethiometer, to books and to reading, for questions.<sup>17</sup>

Lyra's education in *His Dark Materials* is also, in large part, about discovering herself—which is to say, the series operates much as the classic bildungsroman does. This process begins with the discovery of her parentage,<sup>18</sup> but while the discovery is surprising, it actually changes little. More important are the lessons she learns—almost by the way—from such disparate characters as the able seaman who talks about dæmons with her, Iorek Byrnison, Lee Scoresby, and Mary Malone. As Rutledge notes, all these function somewhat as surrogate

parents; they might even better be classified as mentors or teachers who direct Lyra and Will toward the knowledge they need (126).<sup>19</sup> Thus the conversation with the able seaman helps her to understand the relationship between self and *dæmon* (*Compass* 167), just as later the longer conversation with Mary Malone about her journey away from the Church helps Lyra understand her own sexuality (*Spyglass* 444). These are hardly the kinds of teaching moments around which one might structure a class, but they are the sort of teaching John Dewey, for example, envisaged when he wrote that “the teacher . . . is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences” (24). Lyra’s many mentors offer her stories, guidance, support, and even resistance along the course of her journey; these constitute her education.

Just as the story of who her parents are solves nothing, then, so Lyra’s ability to read the alethiometer is only the beginning of her education. Indeed, after her adventures through the three volumes of *His Dark Materials*, Lyra embraces the idea of attending school despite her earlier distaste for it. We might say that having learned many hard things through the course of the series, she is ready for the easy ones.<sup>20</sup>

Magical children provide an apt entree into a discussion of education, because they come to us already empowered, already—to some extent—agents in their worlds. We can thus see perhaps more clearly with them than with the protagonists of realistic fiction the ways in which a traditional educational system fails to develop children’s gifts, and the need for alternative pedagogical models. Moreover, reading fantasy novels provides not only an insight into how children learn but a model of it. In all three works, readers enter—like infants—an unfamiliar world. New words (*dæmon*, alethiometer, Muggle, Dementor, hag, Feegle) go undefined; everyone else in the world seems to know more than we do. Confronted with the hard task of making sense of these worlds, readers—like the protagonists—must ask the right questions, persevere through uncertainty, and learn how to navigate both book and world. Ideally, like the protagonists, readers will be mentored by older adults, supported by peers, and crucially invested in the power of the book, of story, making sense of the unfamiliar through the recognition of familiar patterns, through repetition, through experiment. As Perry Nodelman notes in “Text as Teacher,” a children’s book can—and frequently does—teach us how to read it. Like the protagonists, then, we unschool ourselves through narrative, becoming the readers the books need us to be, as they become the people their worlds demand.

## Notes

My thanks to Phil Nel, Naomi Wood, and the anonymous readers for *Children's Literature* for their perceptive readings of earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup>See also Emer O'Sullivan's comment in the same volume that children's literature "is a body of literature which belongs simultaneously to two systems, the literary and the pedagogical" (193).

<sup>2</sup>Sheila Ray's comprehensive essay on school stories in *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* makes no mention of pedagogy or curriculum, confirming my sense that school is primarily a setting rather than a theme or topic in school stories.

<sup>3</sup>Diane Duane, in her novel *High Wizardry*, takes this idea to its logical conclusion when her young wizard Dairine Callahan takes in her wizarding manual via a computer download.

<sup>4</sup>The Alice Cooper reference may be lost on the child readers of the series, but not on their parents.

<sup>5</sup>Obviously, there are many other texts also concerned with the education of a wizard. I have chosen these three series because they have important differences as well as similarities, and all are roughly contemporaneous with each other. Other works to consider include Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* and its sequels (but especially the first book); Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series; Diane Duane's long-running *Young Wizards* series; Jonathan Stroud's Bartimeus trilogy (especially *The Amulet of Samarkand*); and Diana Wynne Jones's *Chronicles of Chrestomanci*, especially *Charmed Life*. See also Pinsent.

<sup>6</sup>See Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed": "I believe that education . . . is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (22).

<sup>7</sup>Laura Miller, writing on *Salon.com*, asked, "[M]uch as we may love Harry, Hermione, Ron, Hagrid, and Dumbledore, don't we all love Hogwarts just a little bit more?" before warning her readers that "hardly any of the latest and last book in the series . . . takes place at the school" ("Goodbye, Harry Potter").

<sup>8</sup>Steege notes the ways in which Hogwarts resembles Thomas Hughes's version of Rugby in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Phil Nel suggests that "Hogwarts under Dumbledore is very much like Rugby under Thomas Arnold (as depicted by Thomas Hughes): what the students learn outside of class is as important (or possibly more important) as what they learn inside of class" (personal correspondence).

<sup>9</sup>Sara E. Maier takes a similarly optimistic view of education at Hogwarts. For example, she notes, "It is more often than not to books and study that Harry, Ron, and Hermione turn for answers to their inquiries and crises: magic must be acquired through dedication and study in order for any natural 'talent' to flourish. . . . Each of Harry's three tasks in the Triwizard Tournament sends the trio to the library . . ." (16). While it clearly is true that the school's purpose is to train and even perhaps curb "natural talent," it's less clear how Hogwarts's curricular offerings actually might do that.

<sup>10</sup>I'm grateful to Phil Nel for expanding this insight. In many ways, the DADA classes work best when they are most like the flying or apparition lessons: practical, hands-on skills training.

<sup>11</sup>In a somewhat different context, Roberta Seelinger Trites notes that "the school teaches them, increasing their knowledge and therefore their power, while it simultaneously represses those powers . . . School is the institution that indoctrinates Harry and his friends into the social state in which they live. Hogwarts does so by simultaneously liberating and limiting the adolescents who live there" (475).

<sup>12</sup>Eskarina, in *Equal Rites*, does—with some difficulty—attend the Unseen University, but only because she is a wizard. Her real training as both witch and wizard is actually quite similar to Tiffany's.

<sup>13</sup>In their entry on “deschooling,” Winch and Gingell list this dictum as one of several “false picture[s] of knowledge and learning” that deschooling advocates like Ivan Illich attribute to institutional schooling.

<sup>14</sup>As Alison Lurie notes, “magic . . . often becomes a metaphor for the imagination” in certain kinds of fantasy for children; here, the metaphor is almost literalized, as Tiffany has trouble telling the difference (110–11).

<sup>15</sup>See McGillis for more on this crucial distinction.

<sup>16</sup>Amelia Rutledge identifies the many parental figures—Farder Coram, Lee Scoresby, Serafina Pekkala, Mary Malone, and others—who also operate as mentors for Lyra within the series. Millicent Lenz also—though somewhat reluctantly—identifies Iorek as a “teacher” (Hunt and Lenz 153).

<sup>17</sup>In this Lyra seems notably different from the adult readers of the alethiometer.

<sup>18</sup>Amelia Rutledge notes that “before Lyra can define herself in opposition to her parents, she must learn their true natures” (122).

<sup>19</sup>Although Lyra and Will function as co-protagonists in *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, I focus on Lyra because of her centrality to *The Golden Compass* and because her education receives more attention in the series.

<sup>20</sup>Or, as Rutledge puts it, “Lyra and Will’s ultimate return to adult protection in *The Amber Spyglass* is not depicted as a capitulation to established authority but rather as a recognition that their need for guidance remains even as they advance in self-determination” (120).

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