



Transcription of *Interview with a Harry Potter Scholar*

Participants: Maria Nilson (interviewer) and Malin Alkestrand

MN: Maria Nilson

MA: Malin Alkestrand

MN: Malin, in your PhD thesis you are focusing on fantasy literature, and a huge chunk of your thesis is about Harry Potter. How does one become a Harry Potter scholar?

MA: Well, it is an interesting story. I started writing my thesis in 2011, but in fact the story began ten years before. Me and my mom and my family were visiting a sunny place, and we started reading some books with quite a few strange names and words in them; words like Hermione, Quidditch, Dumbledore. And my mom, she was reading the three first Harry Potter books aloud for me and my brothers. And we fell in love with the books. And later on, I followed the series, I waited for every next book to come out. And finally, I was able to read the final part of the series. And then I started studying literary criticism, and we learned about gender studies and research on race and things like that. And I wanted to go back to my teenage favourites, with a new critical perspective. So, I started writing some shorter essays on Harry Potter. And when I started to train to become a teacher, I realized that perhaps you could use these books when you teach values such as democracy, human rights and multiculturalism. So, in short, my story began as a fan of Harry Potter. Later on, I became a scholar and a bit more critical, perhaps.

MN: But isn't that a difficult transition to do? From being a fan who loves the books and who get kind of an emotional response from the books, to being a scientist and a scholar that has to sort of pick the books apart. Do you feel that the allure of the books has been destroyed? Can

you still love Harry Potter as a Harry Potter scholar?

MA: Well, I think that I kind of love them in a much more critical way. I still think that they are very intriguing and very interesting. I think that they are future classics of Children's literature, to be sure. And they changed the field of fantasy literature. Many new books were published, and old books were reprinted. But of course, it is a transition. I think the reason why I wanted to do more research on the books, was that when I went back and took this critical look on them, I could still find new things in the books. And I am much more critical of the betrayal of Hermione now for example. In terms of gender, I don't think she is as empowering as she was to me as a teenager growing up, being the best of wizards who always raised her hand in class. So, I am much more critical now. But I still feel like that world has a magic, and I want to explore that magic but from a critical perspective. And I think that this is something I deal with every term now, because I have this course on Harry Potter called "Harry Potter from an intermedial perspective", and what I try to do with my students is to present research in different areas connected to Harry Potter. And there has been research on pretty much everything; from the debate whether or not the books are dangerous from a religious perspective, to the house-elves and how they can be seen as a betrayal of race and class inequalities and things like that. So, there are so much research going on. And I want to teach my students to perhaps still be fans of the series, but be critical about it. I try to find new perspectives to the books, comparing the books and the movies. And I also think that my experience last year when I went to see the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* sort of defines my new relationship to Harry Potter. Me and my friend went to London, we watched the play and it was a great experience in many ways. We wanted to see the eighth story nineteen years later. But then again, I was very critical to a few things in the story. I don't want to spoil the story for anyone. It was all about, well, the representation of a possible queer love relationship that was being destroyed at the end when everyone starts discussing who will have a girlfriend first for example. So, in short it was a great experience, I still have that fan experience but the scholar part of me was just like: "Oh, you should have gone a bit further here." I want much more empowered female characters. I want an updated story that fits 2016 in terms of the representation of diversity. I still have that sort of connection to Harry Potter, but it is a different one, but I still enjoy reading the books.

MN: We should point out that this course that you teach on Harry Potter is open for international students so you teach it in English.

MA: Exactly.

MN: And this maybe is a stupid question, because in a way you have already answered part of it: but why is it important to study Harry Potter?

MA: Well if we start with a more general question of why I wanted to study fantasy literature. To me, some people talk about fantasy literature as an escape from reality, an escape to a magical world where you can find dragons and magic and things that don't have anything to do with what happens in reality. To me, fantasy is about seeing yourself thru this sort of magical world being portrayed. So, for example in the Harry Potter books there are quite a few things that are very different from our world, such as the fact that you can practise different subjects in school connected to magic, for example defensive magic or potions. It's very different from our world. But then again there are so many things that have a clear connection to our world, such as the depiction of the Ministry of Magic, which is sort of an equivalent to the British government. And there are so many different political issues within this government that you can also see in contemporary society. And what I explore in my thesis is how we can use this distance that we get to the magical worlds, when magic is being introduced in order to see our own world but from a new more critical outsider perspective. But because when we talk about for example Voldemort's ideology of race, it has many connections to racism in our world. But then again it is not about the colour of your skin, it is about whether or not you have magical heritage. So, there are similarities but also differences. And I argue that the differences help us see this racism from a distant perspective; from a more critical perspective. And hopefully that is something we can use in schools when we teach values such as democracy, human rights and multiculturalism.

MN: I mean, that is one of the themes for this MOOC; the idea that we can see our reality through fantasy literature. Like fantasy literature is like a mirror, and then you see something interesting because of the genre itself.

MA: Or perhaps a refracted mirror? Because some people are a bit critical when you use the term allegory when you talk about for example *The Lord of the Rings* as an example, or as a direct allegory of the Second World War. So, I think it is important to say that it is not in that sense. It is not simple reflection, it is more about getting a new perspective. And you can see

your own world through this magical lens that sort of transform things. The transformation is what gives it the critical potential.

MN: In your thesis, you focus a lot on questions like democracy and diversity. Can you say a little bit about your results? What did you find?

MA: Yes! I can start with one example from Harry Potter and then we move on to a Swedish example. Because I explored three different fantasy series within my thesis: The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the Artemis Fowl series by Eoin Colfer and the series was supposed to be the next Harry Potter. It didn't really live up to that reputation, but it sold quite a lot. So, that is quite an interesting series as well. And then I explored the Swedish Engelsfors trilogy, which is available in English translation, by Mats Strandberg and Sara Bergmark Elfgren. But if we begin with an example of Harry Potter and the connection to democracy: We have a rebellion in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which I connect to questions of democracy. Harry and the other students find out that they are no longer allowed to practice defensive magic. They are only taught the theory, and Harry is very upset by this. He has just seen Cedric Diggory getting killed in front of his eyes by Voldemort, so he knows how important the skill is. And when they are being prevented to learn this in school by the Ministry of Magic and the "lovely" professor Umbridge – not lovely; horrible – they need to find a way of getting past this. So, Hermione she suggests that: Well if we don't get to learn everything like that in school, why don't we let Harry be our teacher? He has been confronting Voldemort several times. So, they start Dumbledore's army which is basically a student group trying to get all these magical skills and also using name which is sort of a pun because the Ministry suspects that Dumbledore is trying to turn the students into an army and turning them against the Ministry. So, they create this student group and Umbridge is trying to control them in several different ways. But they are using a very democratic way of choosing their leader. Harry is using the Quibbler, one of those not so very, well this newspaper does not have the best reputation, but it is not being censored by the ministry the way that the *Daily Prophet* is. By using this alternative way of expressing his message, he wants to come across telling everyone about the return of Voldemort. He is able to not be caught up in the censoring that the Ministry of Magic controls. So, in that way both the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech is being portrayed and supported in a very strong way. So, I look at this rebellion from the perspective of what it teaches us about democracy and democratic values. So that is one example. If we move on to multiculturalism, I have an example from the

Swedish Engelsfors trilogy which is quite interesting. We have five teenage girls switching bodies with each other. And they have to, not only try to understand each other, but actually play the part of the other, because otherwise people will find out that they are witches. And that's not a good thing in this society, the witches are hidden away from other people. So, they are trying to take on the role of a different person. So, for example we have one girl called Minoo. She has a teacher, or no... Her mom is a doctor and they are pretty wealthy; they have a good home and everything like that. And all of a sudden, she is playing the part of Linnéa, who is poor. Her parents are not a part of her life and the social services provide her with an apartment. So, at one moment Minoo has to attend a meeting at the social services and she realises that this part of reality is something that she has never been in contact with. She has walked past the sign saying "The Social Services" a million times, but she has never really seen it. So, in this way the body switch becomes sort of a cultural clash, but not in terms of different cultures/different nations, but within a small urban city in Sweden. So, it is quite interesting in that perspective; because when you become someone else, you don't have the opportunity to ignore other people's feelings or their intersectional power positions or how people can treat them because they are girls for example. They have to take on that position. So, I explore that and I connect it to the discussions in Sweden about the value of teaching multiculturalism to pupils.

MN: So, in a way it is about looking at the world thru another person's eyes.

MA: Exactly.

MN: If you find this at all sort of familiar; I'm thinking about the Buffy episode where Buffy and Faith switches bodies, and I know that Mats Strandberg at least is a huge Buffy fan.

MA: Yeah, that's a very interesting episode. I'm also a Buffy fan. I think it's a place of empowerment for me. The series is getting a bit old, quite a few funny things about computers are being said, where they are a bit like: "Yeah well the internet, that's not such a big thing, it will never be a hit." But I think that is an interesting example because in that case we have sort of two arch. Well, they are basically enemies at this point and they end up in each other's bodies and at one point, Buffy that is Faith, has sex with her boyfriend. Which is also a very intimate way of describing how someone else can take on that role in a very sort of intimate situation. So, there are examples within popular fiction of body switches. But what's

interesting in this case is that we have five different people. They are not switching bodies in pairs; they are switching bodies. For example: A ends up in b's body and b ends up in c's body, so it's a bit more complicated in that way. And also, the fact that body switched being focalized from all the different characters perspective, so we don't always see things from one-person perspective. And at some point, it feels a bit like they are almost becoming, the distinction between the different people are being blurred because we have one conscience, that we follow, that experience things, but they are in a different body. So, it is very interesting from the perspective of identities, to how they are kind of refracted or not as clearly defined. The difference between me and the other is not that solid anymore. So, it is very interesting from that perspective as well.

MN: And I have one last question. We don't know whether we are going to see another Harry Potter novel or not, as she is writing scripts now, isn't she?

MA: Supposedly.

MN: So, what should one read if one is an avid Harry Potter fan? And I know you read a lot of fantasy, what would you recommend?

MA: Well, I actually had one moment in class last week when we started discussing Philip Pullman and his book. Well the first book, *The Golden Compass*, was discussed when we were discussing Harry Potter and the critique from a religious perspective. So, if you have not read that trilogy, I think you should. I also like the Eragon books, they are not very similar to the Harry Potter books. They are more similar to *The Lord of the Rings* I think.

MN: And it is Christopher Paolini.

MA: Exactly. But I still think they are like traditional good fantasy with many interesting characters. But I think that both the Engelsfors trilogy and Artemis Fowl are very interesting examples of how you can use basic the ingredients of the fantasy genre and do something else. In the case of the Engelsfors trilogy we have different girls being the heroes. So, it is not one lonely male hero. We have these people trying to work together, having to combine different magical skills in order to defeat evil. I think that one is very interesting. And we also have this aspect of how the witches are hidden away from the rest of the population. In that

way, it is a bit similar to the Harry Potter series. And when it comes to Artemis Fowl it is interesting because we have someone who is very rich, has all the privileges in the world, and he is about twelve years old. And decides to, actually he is quite a bad person from the beginning, he tries to catch a fairy in order to get money, to save his father who disappeared. And he is a criminal and everything like that. But later on, he actually turns and becomes a saviour. So, this one is quite similar to the Harry Potter series in terms of how the magical worlds interact. So, I think that would be a few good examples of further reading.

MN: Thank you.

MA: Thank you.

Reference

Nilson, Maria (2017). *Transcription of Interview with a Harry Potter Scholar*. Växjö: Linnaeus University, [downloaded online] 2017-08-23. Available from: https://play.lnu.se/media/t/1_y61kl6q